

## **ENTER, COKAZE**

COKAZE. Richest patriarch of the Galactic Traders...and most avaricious.

At last the dread day: the discovery of the solar system by the Springers.

As if this problem were not enough, Perry Rhodan learns something that should have bitter consequences for Atlan, new leader of the Arkonide realm.

A bomb peril, intended to create chaos throughout the Solar Empire, is initiated on Venus and only one man can avert it.

Correction: Only one mousebeaver.

The result is—

## **PUCKY'S GREATEST HOUR**

### **1/ TROUBLE RAMPANT**

The square-built, thick-set, and red-haired man paced Perry Rhodan's workroom excitedly, waving a bulky newspaper called *The New World Press*.

With his left hand he tapped the article that completely filled the newspaper's first page. "This is scandalous!" he exclaimed. "It's just terrible! Words fail me!"

"So far you've been expressing yourself rather eloquently about the lead article in *The New World Press*," Rhodan answered gently. "Why don't you skip over the article and go on to the agenda for today?"

"Because I can't, Perry. Nobody can go against their own nature. Self-control is one thing but there's a limit to everything. And this cheap tabloid has—"

"*The New World Press* is recognized as the solar system's best newspaper," Rhodan told him.

Bell looked at him sharply. "What do you mean by being so calm and cool when I'm not?"

"So you've finally noticed, Reggie?" Rhodan asked with a slightly ironic undertone. "It's taken you awhile but now we can concern ourselves further with the lead article."

"What? You want me to read this crummy, lying piece of trash over and get myself all worked up

again?"

"If that's what happens, Reggie, then it'll only confirm my suspicion that you're about ready for a vacation..."

Bell gasped for breath. Slowly he sat down in the chair next to Rhodan. Even more slowly he overcame the shock his friend had given him. "Me... ready for a vacation? Me... now... in this bad year when nothing's gone right for us and everything has been a 100% failure? Perry, surely you weren't serious when you said that?"

The last question sounded a little helpless. Bell ran both hands through the bristles of his red hair.

"But I was" Rhodan responded tersely. "I wasn't joking at all, Reggie. I don't have any reason to be joking. Look here..." He indicated the lead article in the *New World Press*. "Of course you're aware of what will result from this? Not just one paper is attacking us, all of them are! They're accusing us of incompetence, treason and... of using our positions in our own self-interest. You've certainly read each of the charges against us detailed in the article. Are you able to prove to the man who wrote the article, Mr. Nicktown, that he was wrong?"

At that moment Reginald Bell leaped up. His face was dangerously red. He banged his fist on Rhodan's desk, roaring, "Why, that yellow journalist—!"

"Reggie," Rhodan interrupted sternly, "don't call Nicktown a yellow journalist. His article is very responsibly written. The man is right! He's right because he sees the situation the way we have described it to him and all the others. We're the guilty ones, Reggie! No one but ourselves..."

The thickset man had taken his seat again. He was not pleased with what Perry had said to him. "What? You're saying Nicktown's right? Does that mean you're also saying we're incapable of leading the Solar Imperium?"

Rhodan suddenly became angry, for he could see that Bell was being intentionally thick-headed. "What's wrong with you today? Did this article scare you?"

"Scare isn't the right word, Perry. I can't shake the awful feeling that there's a storm brewing for us but this time it's not out in space somewhere but right here at home. We're going to have some big trouble. Here... just listen to this sentence..." And before Perry could stop him, Bell was reading from the *New World Press* :

*"It is with much apprehension that we wonder what the First Administrator intends with the expanded Emergency Powers Act. Does he wish to have a free hand with which to make the Solar Imperium an Arkonide colony or to enter into an even closer alliance with the Galactic Traders under the patriarch Cokaze?"*

"And," Bell went on, "it's from this question alone that the internal political storm will come. In just these few words there's enough fuel for 10 revolutions..."

"Optimist!" Rhodan interrupted.

Surprised, Bell looked at him. He did not understand Rhodan at first, then he asked cautiously: "You see the danger as even worse than I see it?"

Rhodan only nodded. After a long pause, he spoke. "In the last years we've made some serious errors. Today the seeds we've sown are ready for harvest. Today we're no longer able to erase our mistakes. Today we've got to answer for our mistakes and I don't have to be a prophet to predict that very soon now the Solar Imperium is going to have its first parliamentary debate..."

"But the Emergency Powers Act..." Bell interrupted, immediately silenced by an expressive gesture on Rhodan's part.

"Even the Emergency Powers Act doesn't close down the Parliament and I'm the last person interested in making it a collection of obedient marionettes rubber-stamping my orders. If the representatives of the Upper House believe they should make their thoughts known to the administration, then I won't stop them..."

"Oh my stars and little comets!" Bell exclaimed. "A debate like that, going out over every radio transmitter, is only going to increase our troubles a hundred times over. We'll be setting off the bomb ourselves, Perry!"

"Is that bad, or would it be worse if someone else set the bomb off?"

"It's a good comparison," growled Bell, unsatisfied, "but it isn't very pretty. I'd just like to get my hands on that Nicktown..."

"Leave Nicktown out of this!" Rhodan told him sharply. "We are the ones who have only sketchily informed the citizens of our little realm of what's going on. How often have dangerous situations been kept secret from them for weeks or months? Have we ever let it be known what efforts we've undertaken to keep the Earth's galactic position a secret from the Robot Regent? We've published nothing about that. *We* are the ones who've kept mankind in the dark... and then the Druufs came into the solar system with almost 10,000 spacers... and then Arkon came with its robot fleet to help us and the Springer patriarch Cokaze with 4000 cylindrical spacers!"

"Reggie. what do you think that meant to all the people shocked out of their peaceful illusions? For many it was like the end of the world! Have you taken a look at the latest population statistics? No? Well, since the Druuf attack the suicide curve has soared by a huge percentage and it's still climbing!"

"From that perspective our actions have failed. It doesn't matter now what our motives were for those actions. Nicktown regards himself as a prosecutor. He's right to charge us with incompetence."

"Now listen to me," Bell rumbled. "You sound as if *everything* we've ever done has been a mistake!"

"Not even Nicktown is saying that. He may be charging us with treason but he isn't accusing me of trying to set up a dictatorship. He even points out that my co-workers and I have never misused the power we hold through the Emergency Powers Act. He doesn't shy away from charging treason but..."

"Treason...! Treason!" choked Bell angrily. "That's a lot of nonsense and for us the most dangerous kind of nonsense..."

"Yes, because we haven't informed the citizenry sufficiently even in that respect. And that's why I'll be grateful if the representatives should happen to remember that they have the right to summon us before parliament. On the other hand, I have a fear it might trigger the underground revolution into life..."

Bell stared at him. "Underground? Did I understand you correctly? The plotting and the conspiracies

have already started?"

"Here, see for yourself...!" With that Rhodan reached to the left and removed a newspaper from atop a stack of reports. He shoved some of the reports towards the surprised Bell.

The longer Bell read, the longer his face grew. "That's enough," he said finally. "And all these reports are for today. And they all concern Nicktown's article. But, you see, wasn't I right to fear something like this was in the works? Ever since last New Year's Eve, when I picked up a champagne glass that was made of guaranteed unbreakable glass but it broke anyway and—"

"Be quiet for once!" Rhodan snapped. But Bell was not to be stopped.

"Why? That's what happened! I cut my thumb tip on the pieces and if you think about it..."

"I think it would be better if you were to employ your mental efforts on the problems we're facing now, Reggie," Rhodan admonished him, his tone not very friendly. "Now, if you would, call Hank Donnell in the Information Department. Our news policies must be revised from the ground up or we'll only go through all this over again in the near future. And what could happen then, I don't dare try to imagine."

"Hasn't Nicktown prevented us from getting the expanded Emergency Powers Act passed with his article? Because if, besides the press, heavy industry protests, and the banks get cold feet because of it, the consumers will join in the outcry and then we'll have just what we don't need while that interstellar gypsy Cokaze and his people are cosily settled on Earth, Mars and Venus—Revolution!"

"Finally," Rhodan sighed, leaning back in his chair. He smiled at Bell. "Finally your thoughts are moving in the right direction. For that alone I can be grateful to Mr. Nicktown and his aggressive article..."

"Now wait a minute," said Bell, showing once again that he was confused. "Are you speaking in a foreign language today or is my mind going? What did you just say? That my thoughts are moving in the right direction and you have to be grateful to Nicktown...?"

"Right! We need that expanded Emergency Powers Act to have more freedom of action. If we publish a description now in the official bulletin of what the law will make possible, it would be tantamount to calling the citizens of the Solar System to the barricades. But if we have it passed by Parliament, then we'll have formally created a base on which we can move much more freely than up to now."

"But I still don't understand why you feel you have to be grateful to Nicktown," said Bell, shaking his head.

"His article will force Parliament to convene! He has made the representatives remember their rights, and even if it comes to a vote of confidence... Well, Reggie, it'll be far better to fight it out on the floor of Parliament than come under suspicion of being a dictator..."

The intercom loudspeaker crackled.

When Rhodan and Bell had met for their conference an hour before, Rhodan had expressly forbidden any disturbance. Only Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant, who directed the Solar Defence, or John Marshall, Chief of the Mutant Corps, were able to ignore the instruction.

The vidscreen flickered. The grey disappeared, colours showed up, flowed here and there and stabilized into Alan D. Mercant's face.

"Sir, some very important news has just come in. Unfortunately, the most important item is still just a rumour. Patrick O'Neil reports from Washington that the Euro-American bloc of representatives is negotiating with the Asiatic and African blocs to call the Parliament of the Solar Imperium into session in Terrania in three days.

"The rumours also say that the main topic will be the question of trust in the administration along with a vote of confidence but the Euro-American bloc is refusing to debate the expansion of the Emergency Powers Act!"

Rhodan had listened with a strained expression, then spoke into the intercom microphone. "Mercant, put all your available men into the field at once! Their job will be to help make sure that the representatives actually do convene in Terrania three days hence and..."

Allan D. Mercant, kept young because of the cell renewal treatment on the planet Wanderer, gave a start, looking astounded. Now he interrupted the administrator. "Sir," he said in an excited voice, "you aren't aware of the rest of the reports yet. They all refer to Nicktown's article in the *New World Press* and they all..."

"I'm referring to that article myself," Rhodan answered with the hint of a grin. "The political atmosphere is currently so polluted that only a drastic airing out will make it healthy again. Nicktown has made us aware that it's high time something was done. That's why I'll be glad to stand before Parliament in three days.

Mercant, the best informed man in the Solar Imperium with the exception of Bell and Rhodan, and a genius in the area of defence and related subjects. He shook his head doubtfully. "Sir, there'll be a hot debate. Public opinion in the Imperium is a cause for considerable concern. You've lost sympathy everywhere since the Battle of Terra..."

Rhodan did not let him finish. His tone sharper than before, he asked, "Mercant, are your men able to see to it that Parliament will convene in three days or not...?"

Not only the Defence chief was startled but Bell too. Rhodan's eyes once again had that steel-hard look that was always to be seen when he faced an important decision. It was not the look of someone betting more than he dared risk; it was a look that was indescribable and, to someone who had seen it before, unforgettable. It was also a look that inspired and filled with enthusiasm any—one toward whom it was directed.

Like Bell, Mercant felt himself addressed by it. The Solar Marshal sat up straight without consciously wanting to and declared: "Sir, I believe I can assure you that Parliament will convene in Terrania in three days."

"Thank you, Mercant," answered Rhodan. "I expected nothing less from you!"

\* \* \* \*

Millions of people witnessed on their vidscreens the debate of the Solar Parliament.

It was far worse than Bell had feared even in his worst imaginings. Again and again he turned to John Marshall, who by means of his excellent telepathic abilities was checking out the representatives.

"Unchanged, sir," said the mutant for the tenth time, "but I'm on the trail of something... Please!"

That meant: don't bother Marshall. Bell granted his wish immediately and listened to Perry Rhodan at the speaker's stand, answering a question from the floor.

Suddenly there came an interruption from the African delegation. "How much longer are we going to finance your private army with tax money? Not even the Emergency Powers Act gives you the right to add to your collection of freaks and mental cripples—the wonderful 'Mutant Corps' as you so grandly call it. What do you say to that, Administrator?"

For three long seconds one could have heard a pin drop in the gigantic parliamentary hall of Terrania. That question, put forth by the African representative Onablunanga, unintentionally drove a number of other representatives over to the Administrator's side at that moment.

Millions of home viewers watched as Rhodan's face froze and his mouth became a narrow line.

The television cameras showed Reginald Bell getting up, walking over to the speaker's stand and whispering to Rhodan. Then Rhodan stepped to one side and Bell took his place.

"Gentlemen of the Upper House!" cried Bell in a thunderous voice. "Ladies & gentlemen! In place of the Administrator of the Solar Imperium, I'd like to answer Onablunanga's question myself and, in the name of the Administrator and his aides, enter a protest against its wording and its insinuations."

"Mr. Onablunanga, we find ourselves here in the chambers of Parliament, not at the Kimberley Iron Mines. Is it necessary that I remind you of this fact?"

When Allan D. Mercant heard this reference to the Kimberley Iron Mines he sat up with a jolt. His fabulous memory called up all the facts concerning the scandal, a scandal whose chief figure could not be prosecuted because as a representative Onablunanga had immunity.

What had taken place in South Africa could not be euphemistically termed an 'affair'; even calling it a scandal was putting it mildly. And of all times, Reginald Bell had chosen this moment to take the bull by the horns.

Bell's voice, amplified by the intercom loudspeakers, was louder than the commotion within the African delegation. He spoke up enthusiastically for the men the representative has called freaks and mental cripples. Bell's temper, his blunt but accurate phrasing, and his detailing all the times the mutants had risked their lives in defence of the Solar Imperium, caused the Upper House to listen to his remarks with ever greater interest.

Rhodan, who meanwhile had returned to his seat, admired his friend and his speech for the defence. Then his microcom sounded. A signal of utmost urgency rang out.

He waved his arm, then brought his wrist to his ear. The motion had severed a microelectronic connection and the call sign died away. Now Rhodan listened to the important news coming in over the microcom on his wrist.

Seconds later, his face looked grey and old.

At that moment, the television cameras turned their lenses away from Bell and focussed on Perry Rhodan.

Millions of people saw the First Administrator in one of the worst moments of his life.

Rhodan was desperate! Internally, he felt as though he were collapsing. The desire to shut off the microcom was overpowering but the force of his will to hear the terrible news to the end was stronger.

Thomas Cardif, lieutenant of the Solar Fleet, stationed on Pluto, had secretly left the planet with a destroyer.

Thomas Cardif, Perry Rhodan's son, had deserted!

Thomas Cardif, transferred to Pluto for disciplinary reasons, had taken flight during the battle with the Druufs.

He had let his hate for his father take precedence over all else.

Only a few minutes before, his flight had been noticed on Pluto. Five days earlier than scheduled by routine, the garrison on Pluto had relieved the crew of Relay Station 3. It had come out then that with the help of a forged order, Cardif had deserted in a stolen destroyer.

"Destination of the deserter Lt. Cardif is unknown!"

These minutes were some of the few in his life in which Perry Rhodan was unable to act instantly.

First he had lost his wife, Thora. Now he had also lost his son.

Under the name of Thomas Cardif, he had grown up in the care of people who were not his parents so that he would not suffer the burden of being Perry Rhodan's son. But when as a newly-minted lieutenant he had learned on Siliko V who his parents really were, the Arkonide heredity on his mother's side broke through and with all the arrogance and pride of an Arkonide he hated his father from that second on. His love was reserved for his mother alone and even at her grave he felt only hate for Perry Rhodan.

How he must hate me, thought Rhodan, tiredly and bitterly.

Once more Perry Rhodan realized how lonely it can be to be a man so high above all others.

He did not know that a bitter smile was playing at his lips.

He did not know that millions of people were now watching him and that those people were reminded of the day on which Thora was laid to rest in the mausoleum on the moon.

"Perry..."

Bell had sat down next to him. Allan D. Mercant had replaced him at the speaker's stand. Mercant spoke to a breathlessly listening house, just then requesting that public coverage of the session be temporarily suspended. His request was not unusual and was well within the limits of parliamentary procedure. In the following minutes, Mercant would inform the Upper House that 21 representatives had

misused their high positions for their personal gain. All 21 MPs were members of the African delegation and were declared opponents of Rhodan.

Millions of television screens in the Solar System went grey. The Upper House was voting. It decided to suspend public coverage for as long as it took Allan D. Mercant as chief of Solar Defence to submit all the incriminating evidence and subject it to examination for proof of authenticity.

John Marshall leaned forward slightly and whispered into Bell's ear. "The excitement of the representatives over the Kimberley Iron scandal makes it clear that they've fallen for an organized propaganda campaign against the chief but their anger over the matter of insufficient information from the Administration is still outweighing everything else. At the moment, the African delegation is thoroughly at a loss."

Bell wanted to pass this news on to Rhodan. He gently nudged him again. Only then did he notice how paralysed the face of his friend was. "What's wrong?" Bell asked, not suspecting anything.

Rhodan turned his head like a robot. "Thomas has taken a destroyer and deserted, Reggie..."

"No..." gasped Bell. "That can't be..." But he knew it was. "Thomas..." he said, and then nothing more.

But duty took no consideration of their shock.

The Parliament had passed judgment on 21 representatives. Robots and guards led them out. The robots had been ordered to make sure that the 21 representatives could not leave Terrania. Then the remaining representatives returned to the matters at hand.

Nicktown's rousing article was still the subject of debate.

Public coverage of the session resumed.

The Administration had to suffer serious accusations.

Rhodan did not make an attempt to defend himself by speaking up during the debate. Only once did he call out, when the charge of treason had been raised yet again:

"The Druufs aren't bogeymen we've invented to scare people. They are perhaps an even greater danger for the Earth than the Robot Brain was. A danger like that can't be simply wished away. That is why the galactic position of the Earth had to be made known and that is why we were grateful that 4000 cylindrical spacers of the Galactic Traders fought on our side in the Battle of Terra. But no treason was committed, unless you would rather slave for the Druufs than live as free Terrans!"

"Free under the heel of the Springers!" someone called sharply.

"And why haven't the Arkonide robot spacers left yet, Administrator?" demanded someone else.

Rhodan had not completely informed the Terrans and now the chickens were coming home to roost. He tried to explain why Springer ships were still to be found at all the spaceports on Earth, Mars and Venus and why robotships still cruised within the Solar System. But the more he tried to explain, the less he was understood.

The representatives, who could not be faulted on this point, lacked the overall viewpoint necessary to



understand and made clear their anger.

Then came the turning-point that no one had expected.

Rhodan candidly admitted that he too had been stirred by Nicktown's article. He did not go into the sackcloth-and-ashes routine or otherwise blame himself unduly but he gave the reasons why he had given orders that not too much of the turbulent events in the Galaxy be made public in the Solar System.

"We didn't have time! That is not an excuse, as you'll see when I go into detail..." And for five minutes he recited facts and figures that soon had the heads of the distinguished delegates spinning. "We did not act out of carelessness or ineptitude..." And again he provided examples, then concluded his explanation. "Even an administration with enormous legal authority cannot long endure without the confidence of Parliament and therefore I as First Administrator of the Solar Imperium submit to you and all the other citizens of our small interplanetary realm this question: is my administration deserving of your confidence?"

Half an hour later, the result of the vote on that question was made known: it was by no means an overwhelming vote of confidence for Perry Rhodan but after several days of tremendous political turmoil what more could he expect?

He went to the speaker's stand and spoke briefly. "I thank the Upper House for the confidence it has signified in me and my aides." His words were followed by a thin applause coming from all directions, which Rhodan regarded more highly than he would have a larger majority.

The wall that had been built up against him was beginning to crumble from all sides. Yet only he was aware of that. Not even Bell had noticed.

When Rhodan returned to his seat, he found Bell thoughtfully regarding the tip of his right thumb. "If only this year were over..." he heard Bell say.

It was the 5th of June. 2044.

## **2/ CARDIF'S CHALLENGE**

Only when the session of the Parliament of the Solar Imperium was over did Cokaze leave his seat in front of the vidscreen.

The old patriarch, the last of his race who had witnessed Perry Rhodan's dizzying rise to power, nodded in satisfaction as the vidscreen went blank, then reached for a glass and took a deep drink.

"To us!" he said, looking around the room.

More than 20 clan members sat according to their rank behind him and applauded in agreement.

They all looked alike—not only in their uniform clothing and not only in their trimmed beards, which stood in crass counterpoint to the uncut hair hanging stringily from their scalps, but much more in their height, which in every case exceeded two meters.

The Cokaze clan recognized only one leader: the patriarch Cokaze. His orders were law, his opinions weighed heavily. He was not only the oldest of Springers, he was also the most experienced, and where they concerned Perry Rhodan, his experiences were unique. He was the only one left who had witnessed Perry Rhodan as a man without any power worth mentioning at the beginning of his rise.

Cokaze and his closest relatives had just seen on the vidscreen how much power the Administrator had now. Cokaze believed he had every right to drink to the future of his clan, for he was not only to some extent informed as to Rhodan's warmaking potential but had just learned first-hand how weak Rhodan's political position was.

The Springers reached for their own glasses and silently drank to their patriarch. Cokaze wiped the drops out of his beard, nodded cautiously, then turned to his oldest son, Olsge, who with his family lived aboard the cylindrical spacer *Cokaz 2*. "Tomorrow, Olsge," he said, "you'll fly to that planet they call Venus and call all the captains together." Then he turned to his favourite son, Oktag. "Tomorrow you'll land in Mars City and call all our men there together. There's not much to talk about but there's much for us to do.

"We're staying here! And we're going to stay here in Rhodan's system until he has signed a treaty giving us the trade monopoly for his Solar Imperium.

"It might well be possible that we'll withdraw from the Earth. If Rhodan asks me to... well, we Springers aren't inhuman brutes, after all, and we can be approached—when someone makes us a big enough offer." He laughed droningly and his eyes sparkled.

Cokaze had never yet been a poor businessman and his reputation among the Springer clans was the best. That was shown by the size of his spacefleet, about 4000 units strong and consisting almost entirely of modern ships. A small number of them lay damaged in the repair yards on Mars and Venus, for the battle against the Druufs had taken its toll. However, the cylindrical spacers that had searched out ports on Earth were without exception ready for action and were to be found in all of Terra's landing places.

That had not happened unintentionally. Cokaze was a tactician besides being a businessman who made deals only when at least 100 million items were involved, for maintaining 4000 spacers meant an expenditure of a small fortune every single day.

Yet, from one side came a remark that was polite and reserved in accordance with the strict customs of Springer society.

"Sire, will the Robot Regent cause us any difficulties? Its fleet is stronger than ours."

The old clan leader laughed hollowly and sympathetically at once. "Krako, you must have been asleep when the Terran representatives were making life miserable for Rhodan with their questions. I think Rhodan would give a great deal if the Regent were to show itself ready to call the robot spacers back to Arkon. When we..."

Just then the hypercom came on. The com-officer in the control room of the *Cokaz 1* had relayed the incoming transmission to Cokaze's cabin.

The screen flickered. Cokaze turned somewhat to the side so that he could sit directly in front. When the image had stabilized, Rhodan's face, life-size, looked out calmly at the Springer chief.

"Cokaze," Rhodan said after a brief greeting, "I assume that you and your captains watched the debate in the Terran parliament. That will save me the trouble of long explanations. I have just spoken with the Regent: the robot fleet now cruising within the Solar System will be leaving our sector in the next two hours to return to Arkon or to the Druuf Front. The Robot Regent did not refuse my request to withdraw its fleet. I'd like to submit the same request to you, Cokaze. May I inquire as to when you and your spacers on Earth, Mars, Venus and the individual ships on moons of the larger planets will be withdrawing?"

"Rhodan," replied the patriarch with much benevolence in his voice, trying to employ the same good Arkonese Rhodan had spoken, "it is with a heavy heart that I notice that gratitude is not characteristic of Terrans. I..."

At that moment, the com-officer of the *Cokaz 1* tip-toed through the ranks of intently listening captains and went up to the patriarch. He bent over to him and whispered into his ear, taking the precaution of holding his hand in front of his mouth. "Sire, Perry Rhodan's son is awaiting you aboard the *Cokaz 322* which is at the moment on Venus."

The cunning Cokaze did not allow any of his surprise to show. He only nodded briefly and then excused himself to Rhodan for the unexpected interruption, indicating with a gesture to the nearest clan members sitting behind him. "Rhodan, as you can see we are in the midst of a conference. If you will grant us three hours, Earth time, we will then let you know our decision."

"Cokaze, will you call back yourself, or should I call first?" Rhodan asked, still courteous.

"I'll call, Rhodan."

"Thank you, Springer. But I'd like to take this opportunity to reiterate that we Terrans have never lacked gratitude towards our friends."

"When it pays off, Terran," answered Cokaze smoothly and two-facedly, "then we Galactic Traders are the last not to know how to value gratitude. We could sign a treaty which would grant my clan the trading monopoly here, for after all, the Solar Imperium has my help to thank for the fact it still exists. However, we can always discuss that later, Terran. I'm switching off."

\* \* \* \*

"I really like that!" said Bell with a threatening undertone as Cokaze's face disappeared from the vidscreen. He sat to one side and had attentively followed the discussion between Rhodan and the Springer patriarch. "I don't think we have any other choice than to call Atlan once more so that we can have him make it clear to Cokaze we have no intention of being blackmailed like this. That reference to a trade monopoly was sheer effrontery."

"They aren't called Galactic Traders for nothing," Rhodan commented. "But that matter isn't what worries me at the moment. What I want to know is what news was whispered to the patriarch when he was answering me. I have seldom seen a Springer whose eyes lit up in such joy as Cokaze's did."

Intuitively, Bell caught the drift of Rhodan's thoughts. "Perry," he exclaimed, "you're crazy!"

Rhodan looked meaningfully at Bell. "I almost wish I were," he said. "You were always the one to protect Tom. It was you who kept him from being courtmartialled..."

He got no further.

Whenever Rhodan's son was the topic of discussion, the opinions of the two men collided violently. Bell believed devoutly in the good in Thomas Cardif and he simply could not understand why Rhodan was so hopeless and pessimistic in the matter.

Bell dragged Rhodan away from the hypercom. "If you don't do it, then I'll call Pluto. Thomas didn't run off with any destroyer just because he didn't have anything better to do that day." He clicked the switches into place. Terrania's hypercom central reported and Bell asked for a connection with the garrison chief on the far distant planet.

Three minutes went by before the major appeared on the vidscreen in Rhodan's workroom.

"Sir..." announced the major.

Bell got down to business at once. "Major, what do you know about Thomas Cardif's desertion? What was the reason for it?"

"Sir..." It could be clearly seen how much the major would have preferred to avoid answering that question. "Sir... there's a rumour going around... well, sir, you know how it is with soldiers..."

Bell was not in the mood for patience that day "Major, I've asked you a simple question and I request from you a just as simple answer. So..."

"Sir, I am only able to pass on rumours."

"Dammitall, then, pass them on!" Bell shouted at him.

On the ice planet, Pluto, some hundred million kilometres away from the Earth, the garrison chief withered under the blast from his superior and then automatically snapped to attention. "Sir," he declared, "in my garrison there's a rumour going around to the effect that the Administrator, against the advice of all doctors, assigned his wife the mission of flying to Arkon 3 for the purpose of purchasing 100 spacespheres..."

"*What?*" Bell screamed, face a brilliant red. "What's the Chief supposed to have done?"

"Sir," replied the major, "you asked to hear rumours and you have just heard a rumour."

Bell drummed his fingers on the counter top for a few moments. Then he glanced to the side. Three steps away, Rhodan stood in front of the window.

Rhodan showed no reaction.

He seemed to be paralysed.

He did not even react to Bell's questioning look.

Bell drummed his fingers for a few more moments, then spoke into the microphone. "Thanks, major. Over & out!" With that he broke off the connection.

"Perry..."

Rhodan did not stir.

"Damn!" cursed the heavysset man. "Has the whole Sol System gone to hell? I wish I'd never gotten mixed up in politics! *Against the advice of all doctors...* If I ever get my hands on the rat who started that filthy rumour..." The rest of what he said was lost in a fit of profane rage for Reginald Bell could not understand how such a rumour could have come to be.

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At the same moment, aboard the cylindrical spacer *Cokaz 322*, Thomas Cardif listened as the patriarch Cokaze announced his arrival for 0330 Venus local time the next day.

Tsathor, distantly related to the clan chieftain but strongly resembling him, sized up Thomas Cardif with interest.

He could not make up his mind about the young man who still wore the uniform of a lieutenant in the Solar Spacefleet. It was not the first time he had ever sat across from a traitor but he had never before encountered a traitor who struck him like this Thomas Cardif.

The destroyer lay in Hangar 8 of the *Cokaz 322*. An hour before it had been transferred under cover of darkness from the *Cokaz 505*.

"You can keep the destroyer if you like," Thomas Cardif had boredly declared. "I won't be needing it anymore."

Tsathor had nodded in agreement, not allowing his joy over it to show. "Cardif, you don't need to prove your identity. You look like the young Perry Rhodan..."

"I'm an Arkonide, Tsathor!" the lieutenant interrupted sharply. His voice was ice cold but his reddish shining eyes, the legacy of his mother, betrayed much of his internal excitement.

"As an Arkonide you will not be able to speak in the name the Terrans," Tsathor told him. "Or did I misunderstand you before?"

Thomas Cardif smiled wanly. "Who are these Terrans, really? There is only one race in the Galaxy and you belong to it as much as I do: the Arkonide! The Robot Regent will recognize me and together with it and the clan of Cokaze we'll put the Terra System where it belongs. We'll make it a colony of Arkon and its trade will be handled entirely by the Cokaze clan."

"Wonderful, if it comes to pass," said Tsathor, filled with apparent enthusiasm at the vision the young man had called up, "but what are you going to get out of it?"

"Rhodan's destruction! His death. That will be enough for me."

The Springer gave a start. The answer he had just heard had contained the most terrible words he had ever heard pronounced in his long life. The young man had spoken them without passion or the slightest trace of excitement, as Tsathor realized to his inner horror. "Isn't Perry Rhodan your father, Terran?"

"Springer, I am a Terran just as little as Rhodan's my father. The only thing I can't deny is that he was indeed one of my parents. I suggest that we drop the subject until Cokaze arrives..."

Tsathor's headshaking made Cardif's eyes gleam again. "What else is there to ask?" With that arrogantly spoken remark, Cardif had clearly identified himself as an Arkonide.

Tsathor was impressed by it against his will and, much less emphatically than he had intended, he asked in reply: "What reason do you have to hate Perry Rhodan that much, Cardif?"

Thomas Cardif laid his well-groomed hands on the table. It was a more than clear gesture that indicated he was ready to answer the question. "Going against the advice of the doctors and even though she was deathly sick, Rhodan sent my mother, the Arkonide Lady Thora, on a dangerous mission to Arkon 3! He wanted to be rid of her because she was suddenly aging. He wanted to be a widower so that he could marry a young woman. He sent my unsuspecting mother to Arkon, and that she was unsuspecting—both as to the state of her health as well as to how dangerous the mission was—was proven by the fact she did not say goodbye to me before she left."

"I saw her once more when she was dead, the only person who had ever loved me. And dead is how I'll see Rhodan again—the one person I've hated ever since the day I found out he was my parent!"

"There's room in space for only one of us. The universe is too small for both Perry Rhodan and Thomas Cardif!"

\* \* \* \*

A portion of the press in the Solar Imperium took sides with Rhodan and another portion came out as the irreconcilable enemy of the Administrator. The not very large majority in the vote of confidence was used as a take-off point for new attacks. The newspapers in the African sphere denounced Reginald Bell for having brought up the Kimberley Iron scandal in the middle of the debate. They were of the viewpoint that the results of the vote of confidence had been thereby nullified, for the 21 representatives who were soon to be brought to trial had been Rhodan's opponents.

The surprising withdrawal of the Arkonide robot fleet was noted with satisfaction. *The New World Press*, its star columnist Nicktown and his 30-line lead article leading the parade, poured oil on the still seriously troubled waters of internal politics, and the inevitable trend of events was that the majority of Terrans rather quickly lost all interest in the controversy. Yet, under the surface it was still boiling, and Allan D. Mercant's Solar Defence kept a very close watch on the currents of opinion.

Twenty-four hours after the debate there were still some political groups attempting to sow discord. They did not suspect that each of their steps was observed and that they were much less dangerous than they imagined.

Meanwhile Rhodan had carried on a long hypercom discussion with Atlan, who was disturbed by Rhodan's difficulties on Earth. He offered his friend every possible assistance.

"Admiral, I'm grateful for the offer but at the moment I need fewer demonstrations of power and more time!" Rhodan told him.

"Well, barbarian, then I'll let it be known through the Brain to the entire galaxy that the Solar Imperium stands under Arkonide protection. Do you agree to this formulation?"

Rhodan had considered for a moment, glancing back at Bell, Mercant and Freyt and observing their agreeing nods. Then he turned back to Atlan and said: "Agreed, Admiral. I think that the formulation 'under Arkonide protection' will give me the breathing space that we so desperately need right now. I won't hide from you the fact that my position has never been so weak as it's been these last 24 hours."

A bitter smile came to Earth over hypercom. "Then two powerless pretenders held out their hands to one another, Perry. By the immortal gods of Arkon, I tremble to think of the moment when the Great Imperium finds out that I hold the power instead of the Robot Regent. You are in the midst of an internal political struggle but I have all that yet to face and, setting our friendship aside, Terran... *I have* to help you so that you can help me when I need *your* help. I would much rather be Perry Rhodan than Atlan, because your name has weight throughout the globular cluster... throughout the entire galaxy. But who am I? Who has ever heard the name Atlan? I am nothing next to you, Terran, and I'm no more to the positronic Brain here. Do you see how closely our fates are bound?"

"Perry, it's wonderful to have you for a friend.

Before Rhodan was able to reply, Atlan, 34000 light-years away and under the cover of the positronic dome on Arkon 3, had switched off.

Rhodan did not look cheerful. "This move doesn't make me at all comfortable. Yes, I know," he said hastily, raising his hand defensively as Freyt, Mercant and even Bell offered protests at the same time, "we don't have any other choice, though I don't dare try to predict whether this stay of execution will help us overcome our internal difficulties or not. Frankly, the change of opinion in the press is a riddle to me."

"Not to me," rumbled Bell. "Everyone's afraid that the Battle of Terra could be fought all over again, and once people start asking themselves where the Druuf ships have gone we'll really be in for it. We'll be the scapegoats for having led the Earth into this latent danger and then not even Atlan could help us. Then we'll be swept away."

"What's bothering me is the Springer patriarch Cokaze," said Mercant, giving expression to his pessimistic opinion. "Cokaze has cleared all his ships out of the spaceports on Earth but now they're holed up on Venus and Mars. Are the Springers still hoping to force us into giving them a trading monopoly?"

"Who's the defence chief here, you or me?" demanded Rhodan sharply.

"Sir," Mercant replied, formally now, his features tightening, "Solar Defence has never before had so many tasks to fulfil as it does now. In places where I could use 10% of the men, I'm happy to have two or three percent available. It isn't Solar Defence that has failed or is failing and has not wanted to recognize the signs of a gathering internal political storm or has underestimated their meaning!"

"Thanks!" said Rhodan sarcastically. "It's refreshing to be able to hear the truth. What is the location of the deserter, Lt. Thomas Cardif. Solar Marshal Mer—"

"I don't like the way you put that!" Bell blustered but was interrupted brusquely by Rhodan.

Bell looked at him, startled. What Rhodan was thinking could he read on his face.

What's the matter with you? was the silent question.

But Rhodan's expression remained icy. "Please, Solar Marshal, I'm waiting for your answer!"

Bell gasped for breath. Freyt sat as stiff as a statue. Mercant breathed deeply. No one could remember ever having been in a similar situation. All three realized now that there was only one Chief: Perry Rhodan.

A father had not asked after the whereabouts of his son. The question had been posed by the Administrator responsible to the Solar Imperium.

"Sir, I am unable to supply you with any new information concerning Thomas Cardif. As of today it remains unknown to us where he went after leaving Pluto, nor do we know where he is now. For this case I recommend that the Mutant Corps be called into action."

\* \* \* \*

Thomas Cardif sat across from Cokaze.

The old, much-experienced Springer and the young, deserted lieutenant of the Solar Spacefleet dealt with one another like equal partners.

Cokaze's cabin in the *Cokaz 1*, which had landed on Venus and now stood next to the *Cokaz 322*, was the site where the first conferences were conducted, conferences aimed at wiping a small, independent interplanetary empire off the galactic map.

Cokaze regarded the young man again and again with astonishment and a slight touch of fear. He was fascinated by the lieutenant's ice cold logic but his hate for Rhodan frightened him.

"Cokaze, you will never get that trade monopoly from Rhodan as long as he is Administrator," Cardif stated. "And you won't get it from his successor if you don't do anything yourself to overthrow Rhodan. Any new Administrator will look at you and your clan as aliens but you would be regarded as Arkonides if the new Administrator happened to be Arkonide himself! Do you understand now what you have to do?"

Cokaze stroked his neatly-trimmed beard. "Give me some time to think about this, Cardif," he requested.

"What are you prepared to do to bring Rhodan down?" Cardif asked like a practiced negotiator.



"You're waiting for a treaty by which your clan is given the right to bring goods into the Solar System and to export the Earth's products. You've long known that such a treaty would make your clan the richest in the Milky Way. Something like that has its price. What are you willing to risk?"

For the first time the Springer showed surprise. "Cardif, you're as peevish as Rhodan and as arrogant as an Arkonide. And when I think of how young you still are, I could feel a twinge of horror if this business deal wasn't in progress..."

The hypercom loudspeaker crackled and the vidscreen flickered. Both Cokaze and Thomas Cardif were startled to recognize the wave pattern of the Robot Regent.

The Robot Brain on Arkon was announcing its decision.

The jumble of lines, whose pattern was known to the entire galaxy, now gave way to a view of the enormous dome on Arkon 3. At the same time, the metallic-sounding voice of the soulless positronicon could be heard.

Cokaze and Cardif looked at each other in triumph.

The mammoth positronicon on Arkon 3 had just announced that the Solar System had come under Arkonide protection!

Both interpreted the message from their own point of view. They read from it the annexation of the Solar Imperium by the positronicon on Arkon 3.

"Cardif, I'm ready to risk something, as you were saying earlier. My fleet will withdraw from neither Mars nor Venus. My ships will remain at battle readiness. Rhodan can't afford to confront me with his fleet, and having two planets of his Imperium in my hands will be a good position from which to negotiate that trade monopoly."

"But you, Cardif, you have something to do yourself."

"As an Arkonide and Perry Rhodan's son, you will be the logical choice to succeed Rhodan as Administrator, and judging from the latest message from the Robot Regent on Arkon 3 that we just heard, I'm convinced that the positronicon will name you the new Administrator of this small solar system."

"Springer, it ill becomes you to force me to assume a role I haven't yet decided to take on!"

All the arrogance of the degenerate Arkonide race came to the surface in that one statement. Thomas Cardif's eyes blazed at the Galactic Trader, and Cokaze, who was one of the richest private individuals in the galaxy with far more than a thousand cylindrical spacers at his disposal, shrank in fear before the young man's haughtiness, and once more he realized he was facing an Arkonide.

A process of development that spanned a period of time of more than 15000 years had left its mark on every Springer: to every Springer, even one in the position of patriarch, an Arkonide was *the master!*

Cokaze involuntarily backed down in the face of the reprimand, even to the extent of changing from Interkosmo to Arkonese, and said: "Lord, I don't believe you have any other alternative!"

"I have no intention of taking the matter of deciding who the next Administrator will be out of the

Regent's hands," Thomas Cardif answered testily. "Before I delve any deeper into the subject, Springer, I'll first get in touch with the Positronicon on Arkon 3!"

"When?" inquired Cokaze, who, now that he had decided to get involved with the internal political struggles of this solar system, was also anxious to get that desired monopoly treaty in his hands.

"Right now, Cokaze. Get me a connection on the Regent's hyper-frequency!"

\* \* \* \*

Atlan gave a start when the telecom loudspeaker announced Thomas Cardif's name.

The huge com centre of the gigantic computer was receiving half a thousand other messages at the time. Each was recorded, examined by the positronicon for its importance and then relayed to Atlan according to its urgency. But this telecom call from Venus, Allan was listening to directly.

Perry's son, he thought. O gods of Arkon, has the boy gone mad?

He listened with bated breath.

That was an Arkonide speaking, not any man of Earth! Only an Arkonide could be so arrogant and demanding.

And Atlan thought of Thora, the Arkonide woman from a noble family, and remembered what Perry had told him of his son. Thora was Thomas' mother. She had learned to master the unfortunate characteristics of her people but those characteristics had been passed on to the genes of her only child—and those characteristics now ruled him.

Thomas Cardif wanted to destroy his father!

He wanted to make an Arkonide colony out of the Solar Imperium!

He wanted to break the economic backbone of mankind and give a monopoly on trade to a Springer clan!

And now the Positronicon had to answer but it was no longer an independent identity. It was only an instrument for the power behind the throne, and Atlan remained silent.

He switched on the Positronicon's legal sector and fed into it Thomas Cardif's message. At the same time, the computer was instructed to advise Thomas Cardif to wait.

Atlan was clever enough not to rely on his personal feelings. The Milky Way was supposed to continue in the belief that Globular Cluster M-13 was ruled by the giant positronicon, and out of necessity not to complicate his situation any further, Atlan left the judgment to the decision of the legal sector.

The metallic voice was still telling Thomas Cardif to wait when the evaluation was delivered to Atlan.

Arkonide laws forbade any intervention by Arkon but at the same time it was stated that Cardif's actions were also contrary to Arkonide law.

"Hm..." said Atlan, dissatisfied. "Reggie would call this interpretation 'lawyers fog' but if I phrase it any more clearly some lawyer will soon realize the Positronicon has made an erroneous decision and I can't let it come to that. I can only explain things to Rhodan."

Cokaze gave the robot positronicon's answer to the best lawyers of his clan. Tension shone in his eyes. Cold as an iceberg, Thomas Cardif sat next to the patriarch.

The lawyer Zutre, a specialist in the legal profession, was able to comment at once. "Sire," he said with a grin, "may the gods grant that all the statute code paragraphs forbidding the Brain to intervene in internal affairs long remain in effect! But the most interesting part of this answer is in the comment that Thomas Cardif's actions stand in opposition to Arkonide law. This is only a phrase and what it really says is that Arkonide protection of this solar system is no more than a non-binding statement of intent."

Cokaze dismissed the lawyers. When he was alone with Cardif, he looked at him challengingly.

"Springer," said Thomas Cardif, his voice unchanged, "I need a room in which I can work out my proclamation to the Solar Imperium without being disturbed. Are your hypercom transmitters strong enough to drown out the most important stations on Earth?"

"Lord," answered Cokaze, stroking his trimmed beard, "the Earth will hear your proclamation very well, indeed!"

\* \* \* \*

When Thomas Cardif's proclamation came through, the personnel at the Terrania hypercom station thought at first it was some sort of practical joke in particularly bad taste but the alarmed station director had a different opinion and put through an alarm connection to Perry Rhodan. "Sir," he said excitedly, not even waiting for Rhodan's face to appear on the vidscreen, "Thomas Cardif is just now issuing a statement in which he names himself the new Administrator of the Solar Imperium."

Then Rhodan's face showed on the screen. The grey eyes looked at him calmly. "So why are you so wrought up?" he heard Rhodan ask. "Please relay the statement on to me when Thomas Cardif has finished giving it. I'll be waiting..."

Rhodan reached for the controls and switched off the television unit. He slowly turned towards Bell, Freyt and Mercant. "The opposing sides are finally beginning to clearly form up."

That was what he had to say about that.

**3/ END OF THE RHODAN ERA?**

The solar system experienced a double sensation!

First, Thomas Cardif's proclamation had exploded like a bomb, and hours later, when the first excitement had dissipated to some extent, the second sensation became apparent: the Administrator was not reacting!

The government of the Solar Imperium had taken no official notice of the changed conditions on Venus and Mars.

Eight hours and five minutes after Cardif had named himself the new Administrator, the huge Amazon River dam at Manaus blew up.

Twenty minutes after that, medium-weight TNT bombs exploded in power stations on the Niger, utterly destroying the installations.

Three minutes after that act of sabotage, two almost-completed rollband roads on the moon went up in flames.

From then on it went from blow to blow. Each new piece of news was worse than the previous one. The Earth, the moon and even the ice world Pluto and the moons of the larger planets seemed to have become witches' cauldrons of terrible catastrophes.

Solar Fleet installations were destroyed along with civil buildings. Private factories, power plants, publicly owned industries, small research institutes—nothing was safe from the indiscriminating blasts.

The press began to cry out.

Even the most comfortable and unconcerned of solid citizens was shocked out of his calm and shouted for defence while explosions detonated all around and the wave of destruction rolled over the worlds of the Solar Imperium.

Only on Venus and Mars was it relatively quiet, although bombs exploded on both planets, robbing thousands of their property. Nevertheless, the situation on these two planets could still be termed bearable in comparison with the others.

Fourteen hours after the Amazon dam had blown up, the hellish nightmare stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

Those 14 hours, however, had been enough to shake the Solar Imperium to its very foundations.

*The planets were rising up against Rhodan!*

*The mob was screaming for his head!*

*The masses were hailing Thomas Cardif!*

*The Rhodan Era had come to an end! The man who did not grow older had to leave!*

It could be heard everywhere... except in Terrania.

Terrania lay under a news blackout. No one came out of the city, no one went in.

The vast spaceport was empty. Not a single spacesphere was left.

Three hours earlier, the last ship had taken off: the *Drusus*. Now it circled the Earth in company of about 100 other ships. None of them flew higher than 10 kilometres. The State Class spacers, only 100 meters in diameter, could easily be seen from the ground at an altitude of 5000 meters.

That was Perry Rhodan's first answer to the remonstrations of the mob that had crawled out of a hole somewhere, sniffing its opportunity.

The Press, all but for a few papers on the side of the opposition, called the demonstration *Perry Rhodan's Dictatorship*.

Perry Rhodan, the man with the striking face and the indescribably impressive grey eyes, said nothing to the media.

He had been surprised by the wave of sabotage. It had hit him completely unexpectedly and when he was finally able to bring all means to bear to deal with it, it had suddenly ceased.

At 1430 hours, the Springer patriarch Cokaze called and demanded permission to land.

"He demands..." Bell had observed. "Nothing like subtlety—and this is nothing like it."

It was always suspicious when Reginald Bell expressed himself in moderate terms in situations like this one.

Rhodan sat at his desk, going through the flood of messages that had come in. He did not allow himself to be disturbed by Bell's nervous pacing back and forth. Only once did he say casually: "You ought to do some work on something yourself, Reggie. Don't feel like it today?"

Bell wanted to answer with a strong reply but understood what Rhodan had said to him in time. "What's new?" he asked instead. "Is there finally some good news?"

"Yes," answered Rhodan, giving Bell a report. "Read this..."

Bell's eyes went wide. He gasped audibly, reached for his collar as though it had suddenly become too tight, and then moaned: "You call this good news, Perry? Parliaments being called into a special session the day after tomorrow by the Senior Council?"

"Yes! And it doesn't interest me today, nor will it interest me the day after tomorrow if some representatives are toying with the idea of Thomas Cardif as new Administrator. Whatever happens, we have our duty, and that duty demands of us that we meet the challenge of even enormous internal difficulties. Above all, I'm going to see to it that the day after tomorrow the expanded Emergency Powers Act is passed!"

"You're joking!" said Bell.

"I'm not joking now," said Rhodan in return. "We need that EPA expansion and this time I want to get it from Parliament. And Reggie, I'm going to get it!"

Bell looked on in disbelief, deciding not to make any comments.

Rhodan was reminded that the time was 1430 hours. The Springer patriarch Cokaze and his three oldest sons were waiting out in the anteroom.

John Marshall, chief of the secret Mutant Corps and most capable telepath in the group, led the four Galactic Traders in.

With a gesture Rhodan had them sit down in the chairs around a circular table. The Springers took their seats hesitantly, staring at Rhodan. According to their information, he was the most important Terran. Bell hardly looked at them, and John Marshall, who read their thoughts like an open book, even less.

At the moment, Marshall was telepathically informing Rhodan, who had a weak telepathic ability himself, of what intentions Cokaze had in coming to Terrania from Venus. And it was only because of that visit that the Administrator learned his son Thomas was aboard the *Cokaz I*.

"Yes, Terran," said Cokaze, beginning the conference, "our way of life is not much different from yours. Sometimes we're lucky, sometimes we're not. It doesn't look especially good for the Solar System now and it looks even worse for the government but my clan would be glad to declare itself ready to do everything necessary to support the government if we could come to terms about the trade monopoly. About 5000 modern cylindrical spacers are standing on Mars and Venus, Rhodan. They are well-armed ships and their crews are well trained and experienced. Any government with us for friends need have no worry of being overthrown."

It was the most unabashed speech Rhodan and Bell had ever been required to listen to. Cokaze the Springer was tempting them with all manner of promises with no compunctions. He was even daring to threaten them, as indicated by his reference to the good armament of his cylindrical ships.

The sons of Cokaze had nodded in agreement to the words of their father. Not yet were they allowed to take part in the negotiations. The clan leader would have to give them permission first. No one paid stricter observance to old customs and rituals than the Galactic Traders.

"Springer," replied Rhodan, unmoved, while Bell drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair, "during my lifetime I've always tried to have friends everywhere and I'm happy to have friends in the clan of Cokaze. How highly you regard me has been shown by your promise of protecting my position as Administrator of the Solar Imperium from an overthrow by Parliament but haven't you yourself pointed out to me how weak my position is? For that reason alone I'm simply not able to discuss issuing any trade monopolies. Besides, that bloody and incomprehensible wave of sabotage has shaken my position as Administrator even more, for the government has not succeeded in capturing even a single saboteur. Springer, I regret not being able to tell you anything different."

Marshall took up telepathic contact with Rhodan. *The Springer is boiling in anger, sir. He has no intention of leaving this room without the monopoly in his pocket. Right now he's wondering if he should mention that Mars and Venus are for all practical purposes in his control.*

"Rhodan," began Cokaze, his tone somewhat sharper, "I'm going to overlook the fact your readiness to negotiate with us Galactic Traders leaves much to be desired. Only with our help will you be able to remain Administrator. It is no small danger that has risen against you in the person of Thomas Cardif..."

"A deserter..." Rhodan interrupted.

"Your son, Rhodan..." Cokaze corrected.

"My son, Springer?" A grim smile came to Rhodan's face. "I know that you are wrong, Cokaze! A Rhodan never deserts! Therefore Thomas Cardif can be no Rhodan but perhaps a degenerate Arkonide. That is something I don't care to dispute!"

"Wasn't your wife also an Arkonide?" the patriarch dared to ask.

Bell sat up in his chair with a start and Marshall had half risen to his feet; only Perry Rhodan showed no reaction. In a miracle of self-control, he smiled thinly. His grey eyes shone. Now Rhodan slowly leaned forward. Then came the surprising nod of his head. "Yes," he said in confirmation, "of course. My wife was Arkonide. How thoughtful of you to remind me, Cokaze!"

Four Galactic Traders simultaneously gave a start, as though struck by a whip. Rhodan did not allow them any time to even make an attempt at apology.

He stood up. "Springer, it is now 1448 hours. My robots will take you and your sons back to your ship. At 1510 you will be given permission to take off. The permit will remain in effect until 1515. Farewell, Cokaze!"

He watched them go, arms folded across his chest. They left in silence. The door closed behind them almost without a sound.

#### **4/ MOUSEBEAVER ON A MISSION**

Cokaze's agents were not idle.

The patriarch, now Rhodan's greatest enemy after his rebuff, knew only one goal: annexing the Solar Imperium with Arkon and making his clan sole proprietors of the export-import business.

Thomas Cardif was only a means to an end for him. As long as that young man was useful to him, he treated him with deference. In reality, everything he did was with his own advantage in mind.

After his brief parley with Rhodan, Cokaze had returned to Venus hurriedly. Then he mobilized all the agents he had at his disposal on Earth.

The sabotage wave on Terra was to be renewed, only 10 times more intensive.

Thomas Cardif warned him.

\* \* \* \*

Cokaze cut him short abruptly. "I know more about this than you, Terran!" He simply could not accustom himself to the young man continually giving voice to his unsolicited opinions.

Cardif laughed mockingly. He had never resembled his father more than he did now. "You mean you should know more than I, Cokaze, but unfortunately you don't. You don't even know why Rhodan has stationed about 100,000 battle-ready men in four different places on the Earth. Have your agents finally found out what Rhodan plans to do with that giant reserve?"

"Rhodan... Rhodan and still more Rhodan! I'm sick of hearing that name!" expostulated the patriarch. "Rhodan is the most dangerous vermin in the universe!"

"Why are you getting so worked up, Cokaze?" Cardif asked him calmly. "All it means for you is making a hypercom call and within two to four days there will be several thousand cylindrical spacers from other clans here, and the Solar Imperium will cease to exist. Why don't you call them?"

"Because only a Terran can ask such stupid questions!" sputtered the old clan chieftain, although he silently admitted Cardif was right. But if he called other Springer clans for help now, he would also have to share the booty with them, and that was something Cokaze did not want at all.

"Alright," said Thomas Cardif agreeably, sitting down across from the patriarch, "then I'm stupid. But instead of more sabotage, I would make an attempt to influence the parliamentary representatives and the media."

"They aren't all named Thomas Cardif!" exclaimed the Galactic Trader, uninhibited by self-control.

"You mean they aren't all traitors like I am, Springer? I've never said that but these days the press and the representatives are hard-put to say anything good about Rhodan. More can be accomplished with some careful and skilfully planted whispering campaigns than with mindless, brutal force. You've never asked me why I became a deserter. I'll tell you without being asked."

"In opposition to the advice of all the doctors, Perry Rhodan sent my mother on a mission to arrange with the Robot Regent the purchase of 100 warships. Already at death's door, my mother did not survive the mission.

"Spread*that* as a rumour across the face of the Earth, Cokaze...*that* will break Perry Rhodan's back. That will sweep him away. People will talk about it and take it to heart, especially the women, and the influence of women on Terra is much larger than you know."

"Only by this means can you fight Perry Rhodan. You hate to attack him where he has no defence."

"But surely your claim that Rhodan consciously sent his wife to her death is untrue, Cardif?"

"Untrue? Untrue, Springer? It was for that reason that I broke the oath I had sworn to the Solar Imperium. It was for that reason that I rose to destroy the murderer of my mother. I want no more than that. When I've succeeded, then my life will have had a purpose!"

The Springer brushed away the papers lying in front of him. He stared at the young man. Again and again he felt fear in the face of his ice-cold hatred. Never before had he encountered a man who was composed of nothing but hate. And this young man had just made one of the most terrible charges possible against his own father—he had accused him of the murder of his mother.



"No, Cardif, I can't believe that. I can't forget Rhodan's grey eyes. There isn't any sign of murder in them..." Then a repugnant grin flashed across his face. "... But the idea's a good one! Yes, it will finish him once and for all. Agreed, Cardif: 24 hours before Parliament convenes, my agents will spread this rumour all over the entire Earth."

"One more thing, Springer, which you seem to be intent on forgetting: Rhodan's mutants. Don't forget that these people have incredible abilities. Some are capable of going through walls, while others can disappear in one place and reappear at the same second some 100,000 kilometres farther away..."

"But no more than that?" mocked Cokaze with a disparaging wave of his hand. "I've heard of them but most of it is no doubt exaggeration."

"It isn't exaggeration at all, Cokaze. Here's my advice: don't stay on Venus with the *Cokaz I*. Take the ship out into open space. You won't be 100% safe there but you'll be much safer there from Rhodan's mutants than anywhere else!"

Once more Cokaze was impressed by Thomas Cardif's words. He silently conceded that this young deserter must have a better knowledge of conditions in this small star system than his own best experts. And what had been known about Rhodan's realm up to now? For as long as no one knew where the system could be found, unbelievable exaggerations brought disquiet to the galaxy and many persons went so far as to believe that Rhodan was even more powerful than the Arkonide Imperium.

"What about you, Cardif? Aren't you afraid of Rhodan's all-powerful mutants?"

"Look!" cried Cardif, and Cokaze leaped from his seat.

Like lightning, the young deserter had produced two impulse-beamers from some hiding-place or other and now held them aimed at the patriarch. "I'm ready for those mutants with these, Cokaze! Fortunately, I know some of them, and those I don't know I'll recognize when they show up. Then it'll be them or me! That's because Rhodan will do everything he can to get hold of me. I'm more important to him than you with your 4000 or more spacers..."

"Well, it's nice to see you don't have an inferiority complex..." said the patriarch, grinning.

Thomas Cardif did not follow up the insinuation but neither did he forget it. He looked at the floor, lost in thought. He felt the Springer watching him but he did not see it. "Cokaze," he went on, "we can't bring Rhodan down with just a whispering campaign. Why are you letting your ships rust away on Mars and Venus? Why don't you grab all the trade here and on Mars for yourself? The commerce between Mars and Venus alone ought to be enough to at least pay for the expenses this operation is costing your everyday."

"Arkonide...!" For the first time Cokaze had called the defected lieutenant from the Solar Fleet an Arkonide. This young man, whom he had wanted to use only as means to an end, was revealing himself more and more as an ice-cold, devious tactician who overlooked his own advantages no more than he failed to pinpoint his enemy's weak points.

Thomas Cardif paid no attention to the Springer's astonishment. "I'll contribute my share to Rhodan's downfall," he said calmly. "Two hours before Parliament convenes in Terrania, I'm going to speak to the earth by hypercom! Cokaze, will your hypercom unit be available to me for that purpose?"

"Of course, but I request that I be informed in advance of the content of your speech, Arkonide..."

Cardif's reddish eyes seemed to light up. Losing his self-control, he lashed out angrily at the patriarch. "I must have proven to you by this time that I'm not working against your interests—yet I can't rid myself of the suspicion that the Cokaze clan is only using me as means to an end!"

"Springer, don't confirm my suspicion. I am an Arkonide! I am certain the Robot Brain will recognize me as such. Take that fact into account and then act accordingly. Only then can we remain friends."

He whirled abruptly around and left Cokaze's large cabin before the surprised and slightly frightened Springer chief was able to reply to his words.

"O gods," Cokaze thought worriedly, "can that young traitor read my thoughts?"

\* \* \* \*

The Solar Fleet was no longer circling the Earth. It had taken up positions between Mars, Earth and Venus.

For the moment, Mars and Venus were lost. Whoever tried to deny the fact was only deceiving himself. The rulers of Mars and Venus were Galactic Traders from the clan of Cokaze. But the Earth did not belong to them and the Solar Fleet still existed as a battle force capable of bringing death to all enemies.

The order that had gone out to the Terran fleet expressly stated that space traffic between Mars and Venus was not to be interfered with but any attempt by a cylindrical ship to fly to Earth was to be blocked.

Perry Rhodan was as confident of his spacefleet as he was of his Solar Defence and Mutant Corps. The mutants had not forgotten what they had been called in the debate in Parliament. Their feelings for the representatives were hardly pleasant ones but, even so, no mutant had attempted to take matters into his own hands and avenge the insult.

After the Solar Defence had been put into motion by Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant, the mutants were next to take part in the dangerous struggle for the little solar empire.

The mutants' mission was to learn what Cokaze was intending for the next few days and to ascertain to what degree Thomas Cardif was involved.

Three mutants had been assigned by Rhodan to the special mission of seizing Thomas Cardif and bringing him to Earth.

Pucky the mousebeaver was also a member of the team detailed for the special mission. He was the only teleporter and telekin of the three: John Marshall's abilities were in the area of telepathy, and Fellmer Lloyd was a first class tracker.

Reginald Bell sat morosely in the corner and listened. He could not go along on the mission. The next day he, Perry Rhodan and their closest co-workers had to go before Parliament.

"Perry," Pucky said, interrupting the Administrator without any respect for his superior rank, "can't I take Fatty along on the mission until tomorrow? I promise to bring him back in time for the chopping-block."

"For what chopping-block, Pucky?" asked Rhodan, lightly surprised for he had been thinking intensively about the instructions he had yet to give and had not listened attentively to the mousebeaver's words.

"I don't know either, boss. Fatty's been thinking constantly about a chopping-block and he's been using such awful language in his mind. about it that it makes me blush just to listen in..."

At that moment Bell came out of his chair and started to go for the small mousebeaver but halfway there he suddenly stopped dead. It was as if he were welded to the floor, unable to even lift a foot.

Pucky was playing with his telekinetic abilities and once again had chosen Bell for his victim.

"Oh, Perry," squeaked the mousebeaver, now evidently stirred up over something, "now I understand what Fatty meant by a chopping block... he meant the parliamentary debate tomorrow and he's afraid that it's going to cost all of you your necks. Can it really be so bad as that?"

Rhodan looked into Pucky's loyal eyes. The little creature was not making one of his frequent jokes; he was in dead earnest; he was worried; he was unbelievably devoted to Rhodan just as much as he was to Bell. He would be ready to give up his life at any time for either. More than once he had proved how seriously he considered his devotion to them.

"No, Pucky," Rhodan answered, "you don't give up a labour of more than 70 years just like that. Instead you fight to be able to continue doing your duty. Already we have stood together through a lot of battles and we're going to stand together through this one in Parliament..."

Then one of the many alarm connections ending in Rhodan's office from various headquarters sounded.

From the loudspeaker came the voice of Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant. It trembled slightly. "Sir, similar reports are coming in from our agents in Berlin, Oslo, New York, Tokyo, Shanghai, Sidney, Calcutta and Capetown—there's been a sudden rash of rumours, a whispering campaign in effect, that claims you sent your wife to Arkon despite what the doctors advised... and so on, sir!"

Rhodan's face turned grey. For one long second his eyes were closed. "Thank you, Mercant. It's alright."

Suddenly Bell could move his feet once more. The mousebeaver had released him from the grip of his telekinetic power.

Bell slowly walked up to his friend. Rhodan was staring at the tabletop. Bell laid his hand on Rhodan's shoulder. "Listen to me," Bell said with emphatic slowness, his voice deliberately low and heavy. "We're still able to defend ourselves, and defend ourselves we shall, Perry. Leave answering this indescribable baseness to me. You don't need me for anything right now, do you? You can reach me at any time through Central. They'll know where I am in the coming hours. And you, Pucky, do a good job! Bring Thomas here, but to me. You can read my thoughts..."

Pucky interrupted the deeply shocked Bell. "If Cardif is really behind all this, Reggie, then I won't be able to bring him to you—because the deserter'll have to go to the hospital immediately after I get

through with him..."

At that Rhodan's head came up. "Nobody's doing anything to him! I'm cancelling the mission for capturing Thomas Cardif! I'm not even going to do anything about the whispering campaign he started."

"But I will," Bell retorted. "And on that point I'm not going to take any more orders from you, Perry. Up to now I've always tried to protect Thomas Cardif and I've always hoped and prayed he would change. Well, now, the same hand that tried to protect him is going to chase him where he belongs. And I'm going to make sure he gets there. Is that clear, Perry?"

Rhodan, still the most powerful man in the Solar System, gave no answer.

A father despaired.

No one paid any attention to Pucky. In his large eyes was uncomprehending astonishment. He, who exceeded almost all humans in intelligence, felt with his instinct that there was more here than met the eye. He could not say what disturbed him but his disquiet was so intense that he made a desperate decision. With Reginald Bell, John Marshal and Fellmer Lloyd he left Rhodan's workroom.

In the next room, he teleported. No one was unduly surprised, for Pucky's reluctance to walk was only too well known. But no one suspected that Pucky would rematerialise in the spaceport control tower.

His unexpected appearance terrified everyone there. In any other situation the mousebeaver would have cracked some jokes about it but now he thought of nothing in so unserious a vein.

"When does the next ship leave for Venus?" he asked.

"Mars and Venus are closed off to outgoing traffic," came the reply. In 21st Century spaceport terminology, 'outgoing' was away from Terra, and 'incoming' was towards it.

"Well, when does the next ship leave that's going in the direction of Venus?" Pucky responded.

"The *Don-4*, a freighter with a special medical shipment aboard, left eight minutes ago as the last ship in Venus' direction..."

"Where's the *Don-4* now?" Pucky interrupted the port official. "Quick, show me on the screen!"

A tiny point became visible on the panorama screen and as the port official switched on the enlargement the point grew into a disc. The computer spewed out figures by second, measuring precisely the distance between the *Don-4* and the Terranian spaceport.

The *Don-4* was just now climbing past the 15,000 kilometre limit.

"Where did he go?" exclaimed the official supplying the information as he turned around to look at the mouse-beaver. But the shimmering of the air in which Pucky had disappeared in a teleportation spring had also vanished.

The mousebeaver was suddenly standing in the control room of the *Don-4*, next to Capt. Eyk.

"Er... yes?" The captain was able to say no more. He breathed deeply and wiped from his forehead the sweat suddenly shining in small beads there.

"Where are you flying to, Captain?" Pucky was every inch a lieutenant in the secret Mutant Corps.

"To the *California*, Lieutenant. Do you want to..."

"How far away from Venus is the *California*?"

"Just a moment; I can't say for sure, Lieutenant... Brothers, put that question to the ship's positronicon. The Lieutenant wants to know!"

A very young officer programmed the question into the computer and at the same time held his hand by the printout slot. He had correctly estimated the time it would take for an answer to come. "Here, sir," he said with some pride in his voice, handing Pucky the results.

It was a strange and peculiar scene: a meter-tall mousebeaver in the uniform of the Solar Spacefleet standing in the control room of the *Don-4* and reading with his charming large eyes a strip of computer paper.

Pucky's single, much too large incisor tooth slowly came out of hiding. "This is going to be something!" the three officers in the control room heard him squeak. "It'll be a record" Then he looked up, shoved the print out in his pocket and asked: "When are we going into transition?"

"What!" exclaimed Eyk. "For just these few kilometres? And to go into transition here? It's forbidden this close in, Lieutenant!"

At that moment Pucky very literally risked his career. He tried to make himself appear large. His beavertail, on which he supported himself, helped him in the attempt but even so his size did not increase by any considerable amount. "Special mission, captain! I've got to get to Venus as quickly as possible! Go into transition. That's an order of a Lieutenant in the secret Mutant Corps. Do I have to prove to you who I am?"

If there was anyone who did not need to do that, it was the mousebeaver, who was one of a kind in more than a few ways.

And what he had just done was indeed a one of a kind event in the history of the Solar Imperium.

If he failed, not even his friendship with Rhodan and Bell would protect him from an immediate and dishonourable discharge from the Mutant Corps.

"You have to go to Venus, Lieutenant?" said Capt. Eyk in amazement. "But we won't be landing there, just approaching it..."

Pucky interrupted him with a grandiose gesture. "That doesn't matter. I'll just teleport myself on down to the surface..."

"But the distance is more than..."

"So what? But can I sit down in this seat here, Captain? I'd like to take a little nap beforehand."

And a nap he took, Pucky even slept through the transition.

The transition was recorded by all stations still in operation in the solar system.

Authorities on Earth fumed. On Pluto, on the moon Ganymede and in half a hundred spaceships of the Solar Fleet the fuming was no less. Coarse and unpleasant expressions were used. Some of them were even communicated by hypercom. The hypercom unit aboard the *Don-4* was in full operation.

"I knew it!" groaned Capt. Eyk and woke the lightly snoring mousebeaver rather roughly. "Hey, Lieutenant, just listen to the hypercom frequencies!"

Pucky listened briefly, then assumed a look of importance and piped up: "Special mission. That'll justify everything. Say, are you still cooking at the speed of light, Captain?" The last question's peculiar form was a result of listening a little too often to Reginald Bell. Pucky made frequent use of Bell's more colloquial expressions, especially in situations where they did not quite fit.

Capt. Eyk was unable to appreciate the humour of it.

He suspected complications were in the offing. What he heard on the hypercom made him fear the worst. "No, Lieutenant, we aren't flying at speol any longer. At this time we're braking sharply! But let me tell you this—if I get into trouble because of your order, you can go straight to the devil..."

And Pucky did. At least the place where he had been standing was suddenly empty. He could no longer hear Capt. Eyk's despairing groan.

From the ship's positronicon, Brothers asked: "The... the mousebeaver—he isn't on Venus already, is he?"

"Ask him yourself!" snapped Eyk angrily, then turned to the com-officer. "Would you turn that damned hypercom set off? I can't stand being screamed at from all sides. But tell me if Terrania should happen to call!"

\* \* \* \*

Pucky tried to get up but he succeeded only on the fourth attempt. Then he immediately let himself slide back to the ground, where he lay on all fours, moaning weakly: "I'm not going to try *that* again. It'll be my first and last record spring in the Interplanetary Teleportation Matches."

But Pucky possessed an astounding hale and hearty constitution. While the night rain pattered down on him and soaked his uniform to the last thread, he felt the strength that he had expended for his dangerously long teleportation spring slowly returning.

Half an hour after his arrival on Venus, he was back in the best of shape. He was not concerned about where he was at the moment: that was of secondary importance. He was trying by telepathic means to find Thomas Cardif, Perry Rhodan's son!

That was *his* special mission!

But no matter how intensively he searched, he could not find him.

"If only I had brought Harno with me," Pucky said ruefully, wishing that Harno, a living sphere able to project television-like images on its outer surface, was with him. However, Harno was still on Earth and did not hear Pucky's calls at that distance.

The rain still came down. Pucky glanced at his chronometer, reading from it the Venus time. It would be another four hours before dawn.

And when it slowly became light despite the streaming rain, Pucky was sitting under an expansive Glogaba tree whose broad meter-sized leaves offered him protection from the wet.

The mousebeaver was no longer one meter tall. Hunched up against the weather, he looked like a little ball of misery. "And I started out with such good intentions!"

He was well on the way to sinking in a morass of self-pity when he half-consciously put his telepathic powers on the search for Thomas Cardif's thoughts again. It was a completely undirected search.

And then Pucky gave a start, whistling shrilly in surprise.

"*Fix on it!*" he ordered himself and in the same second he became nothing more than a telepath. All his bodily functions and sensory perceptions were reduced to an absolute minimum. All his available strength was concentrated into his telepathic ability. He sensed that a gigantic distance separated him from Thomas Cardif and then he realized that he had not found him on Venus. Thomas Cardif must be somewhere in space high above the planet.

To an uninvolved bystander, it looked like child's play when a teleporter transmitted himself someplace else by means of his ability. Only a very few people knew what physical effort was required to teleport and what information the teleporter had to have to reach the desired destination and not to materialize in the wrong place.

Thomas Cardif was in a spaceship! It did not interest Pucky whether the ship was moving quickly or slowly but he had to have a mental image of the room in which Rhodan's son was in at the moment.

The mousebeaver was in luck for Thomas Cardif's thoughts were just then occupied with the scarceness of his cabin's furnishings and the fact the cabin did not even have any link to the ship's communications equipment.

And that was the second in which Pucky teleported himself to the cylindrical spaceship orbiting Venus.

\* \* \* \*

Allan D. Mercant, head of Solar Defence, was the first to learn of the *Don-4*'s short transition which, by taking place within the limits of the Solar System, had violated all regulations governing ship movement.

Before the *Don-4* had delivered the life-saving special medication for a sick crewman aboard the *California*, Capt. Eyk was called over the telecom.

"You've perhaps drunk a little too much?" Mercant addressed the captain. "Surely there can't be some other excuse for your negligent short-transition..."

Capt. Eyk cringed. The complications he had feared had arrived. His anger at the mousebeaver grew. "But sir," he blustered, trying to save his skin, "Pucky, the lieutenant in the Mutant Corps..."

An alarm went off in Allan D. Mercant's mind when he heard the name Pucky. "Excuse me, Captain," he interrupted in a much politer tone. "You mean to say that the mousebeaver is on board your ship and was the one who..."

"He *was* on board! He left the ship a long time ago... in that weird way of his, and if he did what he said he was going to, then he went to Venus..."

"To Venus...?" gasped Mercant. "How long ago was it that he left the *Don-4*?"

Capt. Eyk glanced at the chronometer in the ship's control room and then answered the question.

"Thank you!" said Solar Marshal Mercant and switched off.

"Well, what the...?" Capt. Eyk mumbled in surprise, inwardly happy that with Mercant's signoff the matter had been settled.

\* \* \* \*

With a single directive, Reginald Bell had interrupted the entire television schedule of the solar system, insofar as government stations were concerned. The powerful transmitters constituted almost 50% of the stations that supplied the Imperium day and night with news and entertaining and educational programs.

In answer to the vile rumour that Perry Rhodan had sent his wife Thora on a dangerous mission to Arkon against the advice of all the doctors in order to *get rid of her more quickly*, Bell had ordered the broadcast of the films showing Thora's internment in the mausoleum on the moon.

Whoever remembered that touching hour *had* to realize that the contemptible rumour was spread only for purposes of character assassination.

For Thomas Cardif, the rebroadcast every two hours of the funeral was a blow in the face, for the film showed in a gripping scene how Perry Rhodan, a man stricken with grief over the death of his wife, suddenly reached out his hand to his son standing next to him.

And the camerawork had been exceptional then. The cameramen had instinctively sensed the meaning in that gesture of Rhodan's and had zoomed in with their lenses as closely as possible.

They had shown millions of people how Thomas Cardif, outwardly the image of his father, had refused to take the offered hand. The cameramen had also recorded how the temperamental Reginald Bell had pulled Thomas Cardif away from Perry Rhodan's side to stand there next to his despairing friend himself. Meanwhile, Cardif, his expression defiant, had to stand one row deeper.



And now Bell personally received the reports of confirmation in which each single station reported the time the first repeat broadcast had been run.

While busy going through them, he was called by Allan D. Mercant. "I've already spoken with John Marshall. He's just as astonished as I am. Pucky must really be on Venus now!"

"So what does he want there?" asked Bell, who in that moment was not at all able to evaluate single bits of news for a general perspective.

"What can Pucky want on Venus? My guess is that he's got it in his head to lay hold of Thomas Cardif and bring him to Terrania," said Mercant.

Bell knew Pucky better than the Solar Marshal. The thickset, red-haired man shook his head. "No, I don't think so, Mercant, but..." Bell's sudden start could not be missed. "Would you tell me again just what distance Pucky had to spring across to get to the surface of Venus?"

The answer came. Bell responded with a counterquestion. "Are you sure you heard that figure correctly? And Pucky sprang without a spacesuit? Mercant, I don't want to cast doubt on your faculties but don't you think all this sounds a little fantastic?"

"Fantastic or not, sir, just ordering the captain of the *Don-4* to make a short-transition inside the system is unbelievable enough. The structural disturbances brought about such a confusion in any measurements being made then of time or distance that none of our figures for that period of time agree."

"The stations will take care of that," said Bell, brushing aside any concern for the side-effects. "Me, I'm more interested in what that darned rodent is really up to. Does the Chief know about Pucky's unauthorized little jaunt to Venus yet?"

"No, not yet. But I'm going to go give him a report now."

"I'll do that for you, Mercant," said Bell quickly. "Will you call me when you hear some more news, Solar Marshal?"

"Of course, sir," said Mercant, and switched off. He was convinced that for the time being Perry Rhodan would hear nothing from Bell about Pucky's actions. If there was anyone who could always be found trying to protect the mousebeaver, it was Reginald Bell.

\* \* \* \*

There was not even the slightest sound as the mouse-beaver rematerialised in the corridor leading to Cardif's cabin aboard the *Cokaz 1*. Swiftly he looked from right to left. The wide deck of the cylindrical ship was brightly lit but deserted. There was a door behind the mutant. Lettering on the door indicated it was an entrance to a storeroom.

Pucky was a classic example of laziness. He did not like to walk and instead preferred to use teleportation. Now he was even too lazy to open the door by muscle power. He brought his telekinesis into play and as if by magic the door came open slightly. Pucky disappeared with tripping steps into the

room.

The illumination was on here, too, but the room was an average-sized storeroom filled about two-thirds of the way with goods. Curious as the mousebeaver was, he was interested in the contents of the plastic containers. Teleportation brought him to the highest peak of the goods pile. From there he looked to the rear of the storeroom—and cried out in surprise. He shuddered at the site of the stack of bombs, hidden behind the cover of the plastic containers in the forward part of the room.

"And to think people say the Galactic Traders deal mainly in crepe rubber, shirt buttons, patent medicine and knee warmers—and when you finally do get a look at the way things really are, you find enough bombs to blow off half a planet! Just wait, Cokaze, you aren't going to get any fun out of these bombs!"

The mousebeaver stood like a small human on top of the high pile of wares. The movements of his forepaws imitated human gestures. Playacting was Pucky's delight; playing was his favourite activity, although in his view he had much too little chance to spend time in play. But here he had a fine opportunity offering itself to him.

He told himself: where there are bombs, detonators can't be far away. A bomb without a detonating mechanism was scrap iron.

The bombs would become scrap iron.

Then he heard a noise behind him. The door, which he had closed, was being opened from outside. At the same time, Pucky picked up the thoughts of two Springers. He also perceived brainwave patterns that at first left him at a loss to account for them. Then he realized they were distorted positronic vibrations emanating from robots.

Instantly, Pucky ducked down from his high lookout point behind a plastic container. He cared less about what the two Springers were saying and more about what he learned from reading their minds, and what he found out caused him to expose his incisor tooth in a grin.

Patriarch Cokaze had ordered his men to take a third of the bomb supply along with the appertaining detonators to the loading hatch so that the dangerous things could be divided in the next few hours among the ships of his fleet that would be flying alongside for loading one after the other.

Pucky now heard a Springer say in broad Interkosmo: "I think our master wants to force the Terrans into giving him the trading deal by threatening to drop fusion bombs everywhere."

The Galactic Traders' robots began to remove the bombs' camouflage by taking away the plastic containers that stood in front of them. Pucky saw that the time had come for him to leave before a Springer even suspected his presence.

Partly because of his playful nature, the mousebeaver was a daring but nonetheless wily strategist who was not inclined to run unnecessary risks. He had learned by reading the minds of the two Galactic Traders where the detonators were stored. Relationships and locations aboard Cokaze's cylindrical spacer were as familiar to him as the layout of an Arkon-type ship. The manufacture of these ships, mass production on a vast scale, made all ships look alike as peas in a pod.

When he teleported himself two decks below, Pucky minimised his risk by levitating himself to the ceiling as soon as he materialized.

There he hung while an unsuspecting Springer stood below him supervising the activity of three work-robots who were packing heavy detonators in special cushioned plastic holders.

While his telekinetic abilities held him floating near the ceiling, Pucky considered how the detonators might best be rendered harmless.

Force was a means he could not and did not want to make use of but wasn't the most primitive way usually the best way to success?

Pucky brought his hypnotic ability into play. It struck a completely unsuspecting Galactic Trader who was not at all surprised when he suddenly gave his three work robots the order to unpack the already peaked fusion-bomb detonators and put them back in the two large containers.

It was a labour requiring only a few minutes.

Pucky, hanging to the ceiling as though glued there, grinned with his single incisor tooth.

Then the hypnotized Springer received his second order.

Each robot picked up a box of detonators and left the room, which otherwise would have been sealed off by three barriers. Close behind followed the hypnotized Trader, while the third robot closed the door behind them and reactivated the barriers. No one took notice of a shadow about a meter long and shaped like a gigantic mouse.

Pucky rematerialised in front of the large loading hatch and waited for two robots carrying two boxes of detonators and for the Springer.

He was prepared for any eventuality, watching out constantly for other Springers on whom he would have to use his hypnotic power. However, there was not even the slightest disturbance. And then the Springer himself worked the hatch, opening the door into the airlock. The robots with their boxes made their way inside.

"Faster" Pucky ordered the Springer, who was completely under a hypnotic trance. The mousebeaver had not forgotten that the opening of the inner airlock hatch would be signalled up in the control room by a warning light or buzzer.

Pucky put his telepathy into action.

Control room checkout!

As yet, the warning signal had not been noticed.

Then, with all the air pumped out of the airlock, the outer hatch opened.

Looking at the video controls the Springer was holding, Pucky watched the robots hurtling the boxes of fusion detonators into open space.

But the containers and their dangerous contents were not completely free of the ship. The cylindrical ship *Cokaz I* was surrounded by field screens like any other spaceship.

Then Pucky learned by telepathic means that the alarm had been sounded in the *Cokaz I* control room.

The mousebeaver looked up at the Springer, who stood motionless next to him with a stupid expression on his face and reacted neither to the alarm nor to anything else.

The alarm had been the cue for the outer hatch to close at once. Pucky remained only for a few more seconds, the time he needed in which to carry relentlessly to its end his plan to destroy the fusion bomb detonators.

His powerful telekinetic energies extended themselves, reaching for the two boxes hurtling toward the *Cokaz 1*'s field screens, and threw them against the screens with unimaginable force.

The field screens, designed to protect the cylindrical ship from collision with asteroids of small dimensions, reacted normally to the impact of two containers. Only the fields could not know what was in the plastic boxes. The field screen started to convert the striking mass into gas and the detonators were set off in the process. The field screens, strong enough to bear up under the impact of tremendous thermorays and disintegrator beams, were strained to their limit by the atomic reaction suddenly unleashed in extremely confined space.

Two small, brilliantly shining masses of light appeared near the *Cokaz 1*, expanding wildly to all sides.

Confusion ran rampant in the *Cokaz 1* control room, taking with it even the patriarch who by chance happened to be present. From the radar came a fearful cry that the instruments were failing. Light from the panorama screen glared blindingly as the two containers outside met atomic destructions. No one had recognised what had been thrown out of the *Cokaz 1*. Alarms sounded throughout the entire ship.

One of the many storming their way to the control room was Thomas Cardif.

"Get out!" he heard the patriarch shout.

Four or five Springers left the control room in full flight But not Thomas Cardif.

"Get out of here, Terran!" the clan chieftain roared directly at Cardif.

In that second Thomas Cardif was an Arkonide. A hand gesture on his part was enough to remind the patriarch that Cardif's mother had been an Arkonide noble-woman.

"What's going on here?"

Cardif had asked the question, not Cokaze.

Pucky was no longer at the loading hatch. He was hiding in an out-of-the-way cabin aboard the *Cokaz 1* and listening telepathically to what was being said in the cylindrical spacer's control room.

"Are all Galactic Traders so nervous?" mocked Thomas Cardif when he had not been able to get a clear answer out of Cokaze. "In that case I can only recommend studying at the Solar Space Academy. There they would break you of your habit of running around like a khortli with its wings cut off when a catastrophe occurs. My God, how long will it take you to pull yourself back together?"

The patriarch stared at the young man in anger that bordered on hatred. He used an Arkonide insult that brought the blood into Cardif's face. In his first flush of anger, Cardif fully meant to draw his beamers and shoot Cokaze on the spot but then self-control and reason won out.

Pucky observed events almost first hand from his hiding place.

"Thanks for the insult, Springer!" said Thomas Cardif icily. "I can't expect anything else as a deserter. But have you reassembled your senses finally?"

"It was not an attack," declared the Springer on duty at the radar. "It wasn't even something that came from outside. I think I saw two boxes on the screen float past..."

"And you're only now telling me?" Cokaze stormed at him. "Two boxes, you say? Indeed two..."

"Yes, sire, two of them, and in my judgment they came from the big loading hatch."

"Come with me, Arkonide!" With that the old patriarch ran like a young man past Thomas Cardif and left the control room.

Pucky crouched unmoving in his hideout and grinned in contentment. His little game was becoming more enjoyable all the time and when he thought of the now harmless bombs stowed away in a storeroom three decks below he would have liked nothing better than to have whistled aloud in sheer joy.

But even so, he kept in close contact with Cokaze and Thomas Cardif. The patriarch's suspicion was the correct one: he was afraid for his fusion bomb detonators.

And then Springer and deserter had reached the thrice-protected room in which the detonators had been stored.

"Empty! Empty... by all the gods, empty! It can't be! Where are Fogggi and his three robots? Foggzi... Foggzi..."

But Foggzi was not able to hear the man calling for him. He was still in a state of hypnosis and stood motionless in front of the large loading hatch. His eyes stared unseeing at the inner hatchdoor. Behind it waited the two work robots, as stubbornly loyal to their orders as only positronic creations can be.

A few minutes later Foggzi and his odd state were discovered. The news reached the patriarch. Short of breath from his unaccustomed running, he went down to the loading hatch. Foggzi's condition was a mystery to him.

Then Thomas Cardif took the patriarch to one side.

The hidden Pucky lost his grin.

At that moment Thomas Cardif was informing the Springer clan chief that one of Perry Rhodan's mutants must be on board the *Cokaz 1*.

Cokaze did not even think of laughing at Thomas Cardif's suggestion. "Then we have to find him, Arkonide!" he said decisively.

"May I inquire as to what you had in mind with your fusion detonators, Springer?" Thomas Cardif asked quietly.

"I wanted to offer Rhodan a choice: either fusion bombs falling on Terra, Venus and Mars or my clan getting its trade monopoly. But that probably doesn't please you, does it, Terran?" Cokaze hissed at

Cardif when he saw his grim expression.

"No, Springer! Rhodan can't be gotten with such means. You Galactic Traders are fools when you turn your thoughts to the Terrans. You still don't know that race very well. The human race is the most tenacious and stubborn race in the entire universe!"

"So why don't you stay with them if you're going to praise them so highly?" demanded Cokaze, partly terrified and partly angry.

"Do you want me to tell you the whole story all over again, patriarch? Have you forgotten that Perry Rhodan is the murderer of my mother?"

"Oh, enough of that senseless rumour!" Cokaze told him irritably. "Which one of those mutants do you think is on board my *Cokaz I*?"

"Look for him yourself!" answered Thomas Cardif, greatly disappointed. "If you think I'm pursuing a figment of my imagination, why are you acting as if you're on my side? Don't forget who my mother was and remember that you're only a Galactic Trader, Cokaze!"

The Arkonide was again standing before the Springer. And once more the Galactic Trader bent to Arkonide arrogance. A young man born to lead others, only due to his youth not quite ready, now stood tall in front of the old and experienced Cokaze and looked at him as though he were looking at a servant.

"Don't pour more liquid than you can drink, Arkonide," warned the patriarch idiomatically.

All this Pucky learned directly with the help of his telepathy.

It could not frighten him to learn that people were searching for him. Venus was not far away. One spring would be enough to teleport him to Venus.

What else was there for him to do aboard the *Cokaz I*?

Nothing!

The Chief had forbidden bringing Thomas Cardif to Earth by force and Pucky was careful not to go against Rhodan's orders.

He concentrated and then sprang—back to Venus.

## 5/ MUTANTS IN ACTION

Materialising out of nothing, Pucky suddenly stood in front of Perry Rhodan four hours before the debate in Parliament.

"What do you want here, Pucky?" Rhodan asked in astonishment, for Bell had not informed him of Pucky's flight to Venus. "And why do you look like that? Are you sick?"

Pucky, who was informal with everyone and seemed not to be in awe of even Rhodan, slid into the nearest empty chair.

"I'm not sick, Perry, only a little tired and that'll go away soon. I just came back from Cokaze's ship. That guy was going to drop fusion bombs on the Earth, Mars and Venus if you didn't give him the trade monopoly.

"But I spoiled his fun. I got rid of all his detonators..."

That was the moment in which Perry Rhodan started to feel suspicious. "Who sent you to Venus and then to the *Cokaz I*, Pucky? Marshall, perhaps?"

"Nobody, chief. I..."

"What gave you the idea of going off on your own in a situation like the present, Lt. Puck?"

"Perry, please, don't use that tone of voice to me," Pucky said, beginning to beg. "When you drop the 'y', from my name, I know I'm in for it. It was all for you that I risked my neck and did everything I could..."

Rhodan's grey eyes began to light up dangerously. "Lt. Puck, it does not please me that recently you've been taking more and more liberties than belong to the rightful privileges of a lieutenant in the Mutant Corps..."

"Please, Perry," Pucky interrupted, driven on by the last ounce of desperation. "Can't you talk to me without being so formal? Chief, I've read Thomas' thoughts! The boy fully believes that you sent Thora to Arkon against the advice of the doctors even though she was deathly sick and..."

Pucky had no chance to finish the sentence.

Rhodan had suddenly reached out and pulled the little mousebeaver up close. "*Whatdid you say?What ...*"

Pucky did not even make an attempt to free himself. "Yes," he said fearlessly, "he believes just what that evil rumour says about you."

"Well?" asked Perry sharply, still holding tightly to the mousebeaver.

"Well...?" the mousebeaver echoed, his high-pitched voice sounding exasperated. "You can't judge someone who acts sincerely, even though his beliefs are wrong, the same way you judge somebody who acts out of evil intent!"

"I should let the deserter Thomas Cardif run free? So, you're a member too of that clique begging me not to condemn him just because he's my son..."

Then Pucky made use of his telekinesis, for the first time taking an almost hostile stand against Rhodan. What it cost him could be judged only by someone who knew that Perry Rhodan was the mousebeaver's best friend and that Pucky almost worshipped him.

Rhodan's arm was flung to one side by Pucky's telekinetic power. The mousebeaver scrambled to a

safe distance and there assumed a military posture.

"Administrator... Lt. Puck reporting back from self-appointed mission. In this action I have determined that your son has not gone to the Springer side out of malicious intent. The defected Lt. Thomas Cardif is convinced that you sent his mother to her death!"

"And no matter what happens now, Perry, even if you send me away, I have to ask a question: who is more to blame for what has happened, your son Thomas Cardif or you?"

"Perry, why is he named Cardif and not Rhodan?"

"I suppose you'll send me away now..."

The mousebeaver, still standing motionless at attention, supporting himself on his fat beavertail, looked at Rhodan loyally from his mouse-eyes. He waited for the decision. He looked at the man who sat without moving. He felt him considering what he was going to say.

Then Rhodan sat up a little straighter. The frozen look in his eyes gave way to a grateful shine. A smile toyed at his lips. He took a deep breath, then said: "Go about your business, Pucky. You're alright, little fellow. Just don't drink all of Reggie's..."

"I'm not thirsty, Chief!" Pucky squeaked, once more in the best of spirits. "Oh, Fattys on his way..."

He had picked up Bell's thoughts. A few seconds later, Reginald Bell came in. He looked worn out and somewhat affected by an inner excitement. Only as he went right by the mousebeaver did he notice Pucky.

"What? You...?" he said, staring at him with wide eyes.

Then Pucky showed his rather large incisor, revealing his pleased satisfaction. "What do you mean, 'me'? Are there two of me, Fatty? On Cokaze's ship I had to look out for myself. I could have used another one of me there..."

"What kind of nonsense are you talking about, Pucky" Bell demanded, not at all in a good humour. Then he felt a wave of conscience for not having told Rhodan about Pucky's unauthorized trip. But Pucky had read Bell's worry and allowed his own obstinacy to melt away.

"Fatty," Pucky broke in on him, "we're all easily tired but after what the Grand High Sheik Cokaze..."

"Pucky!" said Rhodan, reminding him to choose his words with more care.

The mousebeaver showed his incisor fully. "Boss, you don't know how good that sounds with a 'y'! But where was I? Oh yes... anyway, Cokaze was planning to drop fusion bombs on Earth, Mars and Venus if he didn't get our trade monopoly. What do you think happened to Cokaze's nerves when he found out all his fusion detonators had just gone poof in some lovely fireworks against the field screens of his *Cokaz I*? And then, just as he was almost ready to fall to the floor, Thomas Cardif finished him off. He and the Patriarch of the Galactic Traders of the Clan of..."

"I give up!" Perry tossed in. "Just call him 'shiek'—it's shorter! But you aren't telling us any fairy tales, are you, Pucky?"



Reginald Bell was staring at the mousebeaver only in surprise. He was much more astonished at Rhodans' relaxed composure. For the first time since Thomas Cardif's flight from the planet Pluto had become known, his friend was not stiffening when the subject of discussion was the lieutenant.

"Boss," Pucky told him emphatically, "there isn't an Arkonide alive, no matter how arrogant, who could have rebuked a Springer better than how Thomas Cardif did it. And beforehand in the *Cokaz* control room, when the Trader got scared over the fireworks, Thomas recommended that he go get an education in the Solar Fleet Academy. There he was guaranteed to have that habit of getting seared during catastrophes broken. Yes..." he was ending his report somewhat precociously, "Cokaze is going to be a hard mutt for us to crack."

"That's true," Rhodan agreed and handed Bell a hypergram message.

Bell's face became a grim mask as he read the text. "What? Cokaze is now demanding we give him the monopoly on the basis of the old galactic laws? Is this message also intended for Parliament?"

"No, Reggie, not this message. He sent Parliament a drastically altered version. Our station picked it up and decoded it. Here it is."

Bell's eyes flew over the lines of the text. "He may not be honest but he certainly is a sly old fox, trying to bait Parliament with Thomas Cardif as new Administrator. But *we're* still here!" He saw Rhodan's agreeing nod, not to mention the spark in his grey eyes showing that he was anxious for action. "Do we have any missions against the Springer fleet in progress, Perry?" he inquired with some caution.

"Yes, but only the Mutant Corps is active. It's going to provoke mass confusion among the Springers simultaneously on Mars and Venus..."

If there was anyone who knew how to get the most benefit from the least advantage, it was Perry Rhodan.

The Solar Spacefleet was in a state of alarm. Heavier units were suddenly orbiting Mars and Venus in free fall. Interceptors and destroyers approached each of the planets occupied by Traders to within 100,000 kilometres, disappearing at the approach of a cylindrical spacer back into the depths of space.

The Solar Spacefleet had been ordered to shoot only in case the Springer ships took off and made course for Earth.

Rhodan's commanders did not worry about politics and internal disputes. Their chief's name was Perry Rhodan. Their sole job was the Solar Spacefleet. So often he had led them personally into the most dangerous combats and so often he had proved that he was capable.

Common experience was the best cement for personal relations and Rhodan was as strong within the spacefleet as his political position was weak in the Solar Imperium.

Some of the messages exchanged between the heavy units were kept in simple code. Cokaze the patriarch should have been able to decipher them—and decipher them he did.

The messages indicated that Rhodan had ordered all his ships to open fire with all weapons at once on the cylindrical spacers should one Springer even dare to fly towards the Earth.

Numerically, Cokaze's fleet was much larger than the Earth's warship armada but he had nothing that

matched the superbattleships 1500 meters in diameter with their monstrous firepower, and such considerations at the moment hindered him from launching the main portion of his ships in a lightning attack to occupy all the tactically important points on Earth. Now it was clear that voluntarily evacuating his ships from the Earth and contenting himself with the occupation of Mars, Venus and the stations on the moons of the larger planets had been a serious error. The Springer fleet was also in a state of alarm now. The men on board the cylindrical spacers were used to it but they were also used to being able to force their will everywhere. That this ridiculously small onestar empire was resisting them was an almost unbelievable feat. Only a very few Traders understood why their patriarch was hesitating but not a struggle one dared to protest his tactics aloud.

For some time Cokaze had taken up contact with all the ships of his clan. Terse but clear directives told each captain what he was to do and what he was not to do but when a fire started in the tail portion of the *Cokaz 13*, Springer captain Solam ordered the evacuation of the ship in an oddly calm tone. His order also stated that the ship was to be left burning.

None of the 350 men aboard the ship wondered about Solam's order. With uncanny calmness each one packed his most important possessions and left the ship.

When they stepped out into the open, they saw another spaceship burning one kilometre away: one fire after the other! But they did not wonder about the duplication of events.

At the emergency landing field K-f3, even more mysterious things happened but only a small portion of Galactic Traders perceived them in their true meaning for the crews of 30 ships were in a state of panic.

Cokaze aboard the *Cokaz 1* was alarmed.

Zugan of the *Cokaz 505* stammered out an incoherent report over the telecom: "...Sire, and the *Cokaz 66* took off from this system altogether and isn't answering any calls. Captain Gudim and the entire crew got out in the lifeboats and now they're trying to plunge into the Venusian jungle. We attempted to keep them back by force but then they used their hypnobeamers. At this time..."

The *Cokaz 1*'s com centre interrupted the connection. The ship's com-officer reported with utmost excitement in his voice to his patriarch: "Sire, your grandson Kacozel is urgently demanding to speak to you from Mars. Uncanny things are happening there..."

"What? here too? Haven't you been listening to what's been going on there on Venus? Patch in Kacozel but get a better focus on his face than we had with Zugan's."

Cokaze, otherwise a perfect example of self-control, felt most clearly how his nerves were threatening to give way. He stood helpless before these uncanny, incomprehensible events. To him, a realist who had never before directly encountered paraphysical manifestations, they were monstrous and shocking things.

The hypercom vidscreen flickered, then showed the face of his grandson, who was at Mars City with part of the fleet.

"Sire," Kacozel began, his voice pleading, "please don't think I'm crazy if I..."

The clan chieftain no longer had the strength to listen to long-winded introductions. "What's going on with you? of course I want to hear what you have to say. How are things there?"

While he was still speaking into the microphone, Thomas Cardif entered his cabin. The deserter listened

to what Kacozel had to report about the weird events at the Mars City spaceport.

Eight ships there had either gone up in flames or had their propulsion systems mysteriously destroyed. "Machines have been torn from their moorings, hatch covers have been twisted out of shape and heavy pieces of metal equipment have been thrown like bombs against converters and transformers. Sire, four crews have simply deserted their ships and gone into the city. It's as if the star demons were loose among us and..."

Thomas Cardif interrupted: "Those star demons are Rhodan's mutants, Springer!"

On Mars, Kacozel, sitting at his hypercom, fell silent. High above Venus, orbiting the planet in a cylindrical spacer, the patriarch of the Cokaze clan stared in confusion at the young man at his side.

"Yes," Thomas Cardif repeated quietly, "this is Rhodan's counterblow, Springer. He has put his most powerful hypnos and telekins into action against your fleet and if you don't succeed in rendering this dangerous commando squad harmless... your *Cokaz I* will soon blow up just like the detonators did hours ago."

"Mutants... mutants!" gasped Cokaze. It was hard for him to imagine anything substantial from the term 'mutant' but when he remembered his grandson's description of the mysterious destruction of a propulsion-engine system, he became aware of a terrifying parallel to the explosion of his fusion detonators.

"Then... then there was a telekineticist here, too, Cardif?"

Cardif shrugged with an ironic laugh. Once more his Arkonide arrogance was evident. "The mutant who was on board the *Cokaz I* was not only a telekin but also a teleporter, Springer, and what's more, he was a hypno as well. And if there was only one mutant, Cokaze... we don't know, yet, for we haven't been able to find the slightest trace of him... then he didn't even look human because he was Pucky the mousebeaver!"

"A what...? A mousebeaver? A mousebeaver what is that?" demanded the patriarch in surprise.

"It looks like an animal and seems to be a mixture of mouse and beaver, only a meter long. Springer, if you should ever encounter such a creature and can't destroy it at once, then I advise you to avoid getting into a fight with it at all costs. You would certainly lose. This intelligence being, which speaks the Terran language English, Interkosmo and the best Arkonese, is a telekin, a hypno, a teleporter and a telepath. It..."

Suddenly, Thomas Cardif drew both his beamers and, making a wild leap, tried to bring them to bear. But an irresistible force pulled the beamers out of his hands and threw him up against the ceiling. A second thump was heard then: Cokaze the patriarch had come to keep him company.

From below, Pucky the mousebeaver piped up: "Thomas Cardif, you're the gabbiest newsmonger in the galaxy and when I consider you as such I'm really glad I'm not a member of the human race!"

"Hey, how do you like it up there, Grandpa Clan Sheik? Now do you know what a mutant is? But you don't know yet that in five minutes the *Cokaz I* is going to be a pile of scrap iron. Take a good look at the confusion going on right now all over your ship. I'd advise you Traders to go visit the Solar Space Academy before you start out on your next raid so that you don't get scared every time you turn around. As for you, Cardif, it's too bad that my hands are tied. and it's even more too bad I couldn't plead

amnesia to the Chief after I got through with you... Say, you two really look like a couple of clowns up there."

Cokaze, the patriarch of the wealthiest trading clan in the galaxy, was not even capable of praying to his star gods anymore. He was experiencing the worst and most horrifying minutes of his life. His reason was failing. There was simply no explanation for the air to shimmer and then for a meter-tall animal to emerge from it, or for being thrown to the ceiling in the same moment and hanging there unable to even move.

Eyes wide, he stared at the unholy animal below. He saw how it occasionally flicked out its tongue past its single large incisor tooth. The shining mouse-eyes looked up at him and Thomas Cardif and yet seemed to see past them.

One more terrifying minute went by.

Nothing happened, then the communicator sounded. The mouse-beaver disappeared, then rematerialised in a renewed shimmering of air behind the camera eye of the intercom.

"Sire..." the patriarch was addressed from the communicator, "power plants 11 and 14 have been torn loose from their moorings and..."

The rest was lost in a wild outcry and an infernal crashing.

Behind the communicator, Pucky, quite pleased with himself, chirped up at his two victims: "That was my first joke. Now for my second..." And then he was silent again.

Ever since being pinned to the ceiling by Pucky's telepathic power, Thomas Cardif had not even tried to move.

He knew that all resistance was useless. Not so the patriarch. He gasped and moaned. He continually attempted to reach one of his two beamers but it was not even possible for him to move a finger.

During that short span of time, Pucky turned the largest part of his telekinetic energies loose in the power plants and the transformer stations in the cylindrical spacer.

Nothing was spared. Everything was grist for the mill of destruction. Before the eyes of the Springers who were on duty in that area and could not move from the spot because of their fear, the huge antigravfield-generator smashed through a two-inch thick wall like a bomb.

A huge jet of concentrated energy-streams leaped to the ceiling with a satanic hissing, beginning to melt it.

The crashing and thunder released the last Springer left in the engine room from his paralysis. No longer was he forced to stand there and watch with eyes widened by terror the uncanny events.

Now he cried out, whirled around and driven on by panic, ran off.

Sirens howled in the *Cokaz I*, whining in an up and down rhythm that not even the hard-boiled Springers wished to hear.

The rhythm ordered everyone to get in the lifeboats. It said that the ship was lost.

Cokaze also heard the sirens' howl and their rise and fall in pitch, along with Thomas Cardif and Pucky.

Pucky's mouse-eyes sparkled with pleasure. "I'm going to let you two stew up there for awhile," he said contemptuously. "If I were a human I could easily worsen your fate but fortunately I'm not a human, as you were so clearly emphasizing earlier, Cardif, and therefore I'll allow you to get in the last lifeboat. However, that's going to be awhile, so you'll stay plastered up there until just before the lifeboat leaves!"

Just then, quick steps rang swiftly along the corridor outside. The Springers piling into the lifeboats had missed their chief and patriarch.

Three men stormed into Cokaze's cabin. "Not here, either...!" called the first of them after a hurried look around. That seemed to indicate they had been looking for their patriarch in other places already.

No one saw Pucky, who was hidden out of sight from the cabin doorway in a wall cupboard. But not a single one of the three Springers looked up at the ceiling. So Cokaze screamed down at them.

Three heads turned up.

Three Galactic Traders, young and powerfully-built men, froze—one cried out—and all three ran out as though the devil himself were after them.

"I've always pictured heroes as being something different from that..." said Pucky from his hiding place in the cabinet, a sarcastic undertone in his voice.

The howling of the sirens died but the roaring, crashing and explosion-like shaking of the *Cokaz I* were growing more violent. The mousebeaver climbed out of his hiding place. "Your ship will be leaving orbit in three minutes at most, Springer. At that time I think I'll permit myself to make a few adjustments in its course so that it reaches Venus as quickly as possible. But since I don't want to get the reputation of being a monster, I'm giving you the opportunity to climb into your spacesuit, patriarch. But don't forget I'm reading your mind and that a thermobeam from this beamer I'm holding can be pretty fast. Watch out... don't fall!"

Cokaze cried out because he felt himself falling but halfway down Pucky's telekinetic power caught him, pushed him a meter to the right, then let him go again.

Cokaze fell into a chair—which promptly broke under the impact.

"You...!" gasped the old Springer as he tried with some difficulty to collect himself. Next to the fear in his eyes burned irreconcilable hatred.

At that moment Pucky picked up the brainwave patterns of a half-dozen Springers running towards the cabin of their clan chieftain from the main hatch. The mouse-beaver did not care to be seen by them.

"Jump, Cardif!" he called to Rhodan's son on the ceiling. He let Cardif float down the first third of the way, allowing him to swing his feet down, then let him go.

"Trained even in how to fall at the Solar Space Academy, Thomas Cardif landed easily, doing so as though he took no notice of Pucky. The mousebeaver was reading his thoughts, however, and said: "There's still a trace of Terran left in you, Cardif, and even some signs of decency. It's too bad you think so little of your father..."

He had no time to say any more. The group of Springers on its way to get its patriarch down from the ceiling had almost arrived.

Closing the helmet of his spacesuit, Pucky concentrated and dematerialised in the moment that the first young man of the group stormed into the patriarch's cabin and found Cokaze standing in the middle of the room.

"Sire, does this mean the other three were imagining things...?"

"No!" exclaimed Cokaze loudly. "Nobody was imagining a thing! I was hanging on the ceiling with Cardif and... oh, if I ever get my hands on that mouse-beaver...!"

Cokaze saw how the men who had come to free him from an unbelievable situation drew back from him in fear, wanting to leave the cabin. In the same moment, he understood why they feared him.

They believed he had gone crazy.

He had spoken of a mousebeaver and they saw in that the first signs of madness.

Then Cokaze exercised his authority. He did not give any explanation. He was once more the highest official within this large clan. Gruffly he asked: "In what lifeboat is there still room for Cardif and me?"

"Boat six, sire," stuttered one of the men.

"Then wait there for us and..."

He got no further.

Something clearly perceptible happened to the partly destroyed *Cokaz 1*. The antigrav absorbers broke down and at the same time the *Cokaz 1* must have abruptly left orbit, accelerating as it went. The weight of each man doubled and movement became tortuous.

"What's this?" gasped Cokaze with the last of his strength. "Can the ship still be steered at all?"

But a deafening roar from the bow of his cylindrical spacer let him know that there the mousebeaver was at work again with his uncanny paranormal powers, carrying out his threat of turning the *Cokaz 1* into a scrap pile.

Thomas Cardif recognized the danger of the situation they were all in. He also knew that Pucky was not to be trifled with and, while the mousebeaver would certainly give them enough time to get to the lifeboats, he was not ready to allow them the slightest possibility of retaliation.

Cardif, closing the helmet of his spacesuit, energetically ordered Cokaze to leave the ship as quickly as possible... "Or do you want to wait until the force of acceleration is so much we won't be able to take another step?"

But Cokaze, gradually recovering from the shock, did not overlook the chance to pay Thomas Cardif back for his earlier remarks. "Terran," he said sarcastically, "You're afraid. I thought I heard you telling us that anyone who went to your space academy had their fear knocked out of them."

The *Cokaz 1*, formerly orbiting Venus about 15000 kilometres high, broke at that second from its

course one more time, again because of the telekinetic influence of the mousebeaver who, floating in space just 10 kilometres away from the cylindrical ship, now finally sent the ship on a path that would end in its crash-landing and at the same time he destroyed the rest of the intact impulse engines.

From that moment on Pucky did not concern himself any longer with the ship which, beyond all hope of rescue, raced towards the planet at a steadily increasing speed. He teleported and met John Marshall five minutes later than they had previously agreed to meet Marshall had been waiting impatiently at the edge of a Venusian spaceport for him so that they could go on to work over other Springer ships.

## **6/ COKAZE... CARDIF... CLIMAX!**

100,000 men, each a specialist in his own area of spaceflight, had boarded the superbattleship *Titan* and five gigantic transporters within three hours under the cover of darkness.

Though he had been informed by his agents of the 100,000 men stationed on the Earth. Cokaze had never been able to find out why Perry Rhodan had allowed the enormous number of trained men to waste their time in hermetically sealed bases.

Only Rhodan's closest confidantes knew what mission the men had before them, and as the six spacespheres took off under the strongest measures of secrecy and against detection, and made course out of the Sol system, only the commanders knew the destination of the flight. Receiving the captains in his cabin aboard the *Titan*, Solar Marshal Freyt had reminded them once more that they were to announce only after they had landed where they had gone.

Three hours after take-off, the five sphere-transporters had also reached the necessary speed for transition. Frequency-dampers in operation, the small fleet disappeared between the stars, emerging from hyperspace in Globular Cluster M-13.

An encoded hypercom message compressed to 1/5000th of a second and containing three important pieces of information let Perry Rhodan know that Solar Marshal Freyt stood with his 100,000 trained men on the verge of landing on Arkon 3.

He received the message an hour after the conclusion of the debate in Parliament which had ended with a vote.

Against all speculations, Rhodan had been reconfirmed as Administrator by a vote of 365 to 198, although there were a number of invalid votes and abstentions as well.

\* \* \* \*

Allan D. Mercant and John Marshall worked hand in hand.

The Solar Defence and the Mutant Corps did not leave the Springers, most of them settled in on Mars and Venus, a moment of rest. There had not been any large actions undertaken against the fleet of patriarch Cokaze but what was done was enough to give the Galactic Traders a sense of chronic insecurity. For the first time in the history of a Springer clan the power of the patriarch was no longer sufficient to keep order among his men.

Here and there and everywhere, cylindrical spacers were continuously being destroyed by mysterious means, although neither the Traders nor the members of their family came to grief. Again and again entire ships' crews were put under strong suggestive influences and often acted like harmless madmen.

Only when it was necessary to protect the huge robot brain on Venus from discovery by the Galactic Traders did Marshall's mutants and Mercant's men employ truly drastic measures. It was all in all a wonder that this colossal piece of machinery had not been immediately discovered by the Springers during the surprising occupation of Venus, and at the end of some nerve-wracking hours Rhodan had then quickly made arrangements to continue to protect the positronic installation from discovery.

After the destruction of the *Cokaz 1*, Cokaze and his men had landed on Venus in seven lifeboats. Meanwhile, his flagship burned up in the thick atmosphere of the planet. An hour after the landing, he had moved into the *Cokaz 2*. Now he was sitting for the third day in an almost uninterrupted conference with his closest relatives to work out a new battle plan for the conquest of the Earth.

This time he had followed Cardif's every suggestion and thus the *Cokaz 2* was resting on the bottom of the Venusian ocean, 3460 meters deep, in that manner rather well protected from an attack by mutants.

The results of the voting in the Solar Parliament had disappointed both Cokaze and Thomas Cardif. Both had been convinced that Rhodan would encounter so many difficulties as a result of the spreading rumour that he would be ready to make a treaty with Cokaze's clan. They hardly even considered Reginald Bell's countermove of having the film of Thora's funeral broadcast over all the government stations. So they had been all the more surprised by the results of the vote and the fact Rhodan had gotten passage of the expanded Emergency Powers Act left them completely confused.

"Springer, you've got to occupy the Earth!" again and again Thomas Cardif had brought up that counsel, his voice fairly trembling with hatred.

Thomas Cardif had become a devil's advocate, a constant goad and, at the same time, the patriarch's most important adviser. Cokaze was continually astounded at the young man's wide-reaching knowledge, his forceful logic and power of persuasion.

The plan they had devised together called for occupying the Earth in a sudden attack and leaving the capital, Terrania, a blazing ruin. And now they set to work-out the last details of their attack plan.

Cokaze was ready to lose a fifth of his fleet in the attack.

200 cylindrical spacers were not only to engage the Solar Warfleet in pitched battle but also to draw it far away from the Earth, keeping the fleet tied down in a long conflict.

In working out that part of the plan, tactician Thomas Cardif showed that he was Perry Rhodan's son. Rhodan himself could not have devised a better plan and the old and experienced Galactic Trader gave silent thanks that he had this deserted lieutenant as an adviser.

However Perry Rhodan suspected what the patriarch had in mind and 10 hours before he had issued an



order to the spacefleet that they were not to be frightened by a false attack nor by an attack of a small Springer fleet. Under no circumstances should they leave the Earth without a solid defence by heavy spacers.

Meanwhile the conversion of the Earth's moon into a weapon shop of planetary proportions continued with unabated urgency. The debate in Parliament was another problem and its solution had become urgent: what had become of the 3000 Druuf spacers? For them a return into their own space was no longer possible with 100% certainty.

Without consideration of his own interests, Rhodan had ordered with the greatest of initiative that a solution to this most difficult and complicated problem be found. Himself, he suspected that the Druufs were still within the Einstein Universe, and a number of experts in space-time affairs had identical opinions.

As before, those Druuf ships were a latent danger, not only for the small solar system but also for Arkon, which with its gigantic fleet still fought in murderous battles with terrific losses of men and material against the breakthrough of Druuf units at the overlapping front.

Not even the Great Imperium could tolerate an enemy warfleet of 3000 ships which struck like lightning here and there and then disappeared as quickly as it had come. And Atlan, Admiral and leader of the enormous empire, had not in the slightest reinforced his position, despite the unconditional support of the Robot Brain; he ruled anonymously while the entire galaxy continued to believe that Arkon was guided by a gigantic positronicon.

And in order to support and relieve of some of his burden his friend Atlan in this difficult task, it was from Rhodan's point of view a job of first priority to search for the location of the 3000 Druuf spacers.

\* \* \* \*

Tanaka Seiko, the Japanese radiopath, was enabled by his para-abilities to pick up radio transmissions, had been set down on Mars in order to monitor the Galactic Traders' hypercom traffic, which was all being beamed to Venus.

Before both of the large, still-intact tracking stations of the Solar Imperium had noticed, it occurred to him that since 1445 hours hypercom traffic with Venus had suddenly increased tenfold. But Tanaka Seiko was not able to decipher even a single message. The Galactic Traders were all of a sudden working with complicated codes so only a large selection of all kinds of specialized equipment would be able to handle the problem of decoding.

For 10 minutes Tanaka Seiko listened to the encoded hypercom messages while an uneasy feeling crept over him. Finally he switched on his small hypercom unit.

Mutant Corps headquarters in Terrania on the Earth answered at once. Tanaka recognized the face of Maj. Shenk on the tiny vidscreen of his device.

Shenk must have seen the face of the mutant as somewhat oblong on his own screen.

Tanaka Seiko reported neither with his name nor with a code name. "165 45-Lb-876/56!" he announced in Arkonese.

Whoever might have now picked the message up and recognized the sort of figure it was would have found under the same number the description of a gigantic star which the Arkonides had been expecting to go nova any day now for the last 6000 years.

For the Earth that number and letter combination meant the highest alarm level.

Almost simultaneously, John Marshall, who was leading the mutant operation on Venus, also received alarming information. A poorly disguised activity could be observed among the Springers. The mutants had determined several times that the Galactic Traders were suddenly no longer concerning themselves about the mysterious happenings involving neighbouring ships. It was evident that they had received an order from the patriarch not to bother themselves about them and that could only mean that something very meaningful was developing.

John Marshall, who with two men from Solar Defence had set up his headquarters at the edge of the jungle, transmitted his observations via encoded hypercom message to Earth. His report arrived just seconds after Tanaka Seiko's.

But the Earthly spacefleet had also made unusual observations.

All the cylindrical spacers had dropped out of orbit over the space of half an hour and were landing on Venus and Mars.

Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell sat in conference, studying the reports that had just come in.

"These are the final signs of an imminent attack," Bell declared, sticking out his right thumb and looking at the tip, which he had cut on a broken piece of guaranteed unbreakable glass.

"Put that thumb away, Reggie!" Rhodan told him, smiling. "Cokaze will have every reason in the coming hour to rack his brains. Now let me have the hypercom."

"Be my guest, Perry, but what do you have in mind?"

"You'll hear it. Ah, the screen's lighting up. Thanks, Reggie."

Perry Rhodan spoke into the microphone.

Bell's eyes grew still larger.

Rhodan had spoken 10 sentences but each sentence carried weight. His telecom message was directed at Cokaze, patriarch of the Cokaze clan. Rhodan had issued an ultimatum. The Galactic Traders had 5 hours in which to evacuate Mars and Venus completely and disappear into space.

In the last sentence, Perry Rhodan threatened the relentless destruction of the Cokaze clan, "...because as of this minute all the ships of the Solar Imperium have been ordered to open fire with all weapons as soon as any Springer ship is detected."

A switch clicked. The connection between Rhodan's office and Terrania's hypercom station had been broken. Bell laughed heartily, then shook his head in all earnestness. "Thomas is with Cokaze, Perry.

Thomas knows your tricks."

"So much the worse for Cokaze and his clan," Rhodan answered laconically, not following up Bell's well-founded warning. "If the patriarch dares attempt an attack, or if in five hours he is still..."

"Perry..." Bell interrupted excitedly, "you don't need to practice your tricks and dodges on me first! And what happens if in the next half hour the Springers and their entire fleet attack? What then? Then Cokaze and his spacers will be over the Earth two hours later, making a torch out of this planet that'll burn for thousands of years! Blast it all, we both know better than anybody that our fleet doesn't have a chance against an attack by 4000 cylinder ships! You still want to tell me you weren't bluffing with your ultimatum?"

Bell was quite angry. Several times he had emphasized his words by a hefty blow of his fist on Rhodan's desk but not even that had any effect on the Administrator. He only looked at Bell thoughtfully, pushing some reports towards him.

Hell grabbed for them almost greedily and read them. His eyes began to beam. Excitedly he stroked his hair with both hands, then said, smirking: "Watch out, Cokaze—you may not believe your own eyes! Oh, what I'd give to see your ugly face!"

Without warning, the alarm connection with the hypercom station suddenly clicked on.

"Sir, our fleet has had hostile contact with the Springers at five places over Mars and three over Venus. It's certain we've lost a destroyer from the space pursuit squadron. Three of the attacking cylinder ships have suffered such heavy damage that they are no longer capable of movement. The rest have drawn back to the surface of Mars and Venus!"

"Thank you!" said Rhodan tersely.

Next to him was Bell, softly (and terribly) whistling. The overweight gentleman's exuberance had disappeared. "Perry, your time-table isn't quite right and I'll bet that behind Cokaze's answer to your ultimatum stands Thomas..."

"You don't have to bet. I'm already convinced that Thomas Cardif influenced the patriarch into attacking at once!" His voice would have sounded the same had he said "The sun is shining outside."

Bell gasped. "Perry, you often exhaust me. I'd like to believe we'll come out of this smiling myself but when I think of my cut thumb and the bad luck that's been dogging our tail ever since January 1st, 2044..."

"So why didn't you become an astrologer, Reggie? You have the trustworthy appearance necessary to be one, don't you?" It could have been a joke but Rhodan's flashing grey eyes nullified all humour. He had been irritated by Bell's doom and gloom. Ever since last New Year's Eve, Bell had been making everyone jittery with his cut thumb and the bad luck it supposedly meant for the Solar Imperium. Bell was not at all superstitious but in this case he had been so impressed by what had happened that he could not be calmed down or reassured.

Like now.

He made nothing of Rhodan's irritated response. "Perry, Thomas is ruining your time-table..."

Again the emergency circuits of the hypercom unit switched on.

John Marshall was calling from Venus. "Impulse engines of all cylinder ships are beginning to run. All hatches on Springer ships are closed. Takeoff of all spacers from Venus will most likely follow in 30 minutes at most. Over & out. Marshall."

"He's an optimist, that Marshall," muttered Bell. "Those ships will be in space in 10 minutes. Perry, you have a devilishly clever son. Thomas seems to know you better than I do. No, I'm not betting now that Thomas is behind all the rush that's seized the entire Cokaze clan."

Yes, it was true. Perry Rhodan's timetable had really been completely ruined!

Rhodan now seemed rather worried.

Then there was a knock.

Rhodan's team of four legal experts came in. They were the best specialists Earth had in Arkonide law. Their knowledge in that area was more encompassing than that possessed by all the positronicons on Earth.

"Please," said Rhodan, "make it brief, gentlemen!"

It seldom happened that he failed to offer seats to his visitors. But now was such a case.

They had in fact little to say and the little they did say offered Rhodan little cheer.

It concerned the answer to the question whether or not the positronicon on Arkon, still ruling as Regent, was able to order in no uncertain terms the Cokaze clan to leave the solar system and in the future trouble it no more with any demands.

The legal staff said no!

"...If Admiral Atlan as Emperor of the Arkonide Empire does not want to be found out too soon, then he must give the patriarch Cokaze an entirely free hand. The laws force the Positronicon to do so, and Atlan with it, and logic demands that..."

Then Rhodan dismissed the experts. Bell had been standing in silence at the window and had not expressed himself on the subject. Then, when the legal staff had closed the door after going out, he said: "Now we've got one hope less! I'm sick! Perry, why were you so quick with your five-hour ultimatum? If my thumb had..."

"Will you shut up about your thumb!" Perry shouted at his friend, banging his fist on the desk.

For Rhodan, such a primitive outburst of emotion was an extremely rare event. He, the otherwise always so self-controlled man, had lost the war against his nerves but the real reason lay in the fact that he had boxed himself in by his ultimatum and now had no way at all to win time.

Then from Mars came the report that—

*"Galactic Traders taking off!"*

Two minutes later, a hypercom message from Venus came in:

"*Springer Fleet has taken off!*"

Bell noted sarcastically: "And our iron broom can't get here before another three hours have gone by to sweep this corner of space clear of Springers. Ye stars and little comets, why has the year 2044 been so bad for us?"

Then the hypercom loudly reported: "After undecipherable hypercom message exchange, Springer fleet has suddenly stopped between 3000 and 15000 kilometres above Venus!"

Before Bell could say anything, the agent headquarters on Mars also called in. There too Cokaze's spacers had suddenly come to a stop at the edge of space after a lightning takeoff.

Rhodan and Bell looked at each other questioningly. The red-haired, stockily-built Bell shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "If only our telepaths could read Cokaze's mind..."

"Have you forgotten or are you trying to forget that our people have so far not found out where Cokaze and Thomas Cardif have been hiding out since their emergency landing on Venus?"

"Neither," Bell answered with conspicuous calm. "They aren't in space; that's as good as certain. They couldn't be running around on Venus or they would long since been located. We should get over the idea as fast as possible that Thomas Cardif is only a deserter. The little devil is your son, Perry, and I don't think you've ever been accused of being stupid. So your boy and Cokaze might have taken a spacer underwater and are holing up a few thousand meters down on the bottom of an ocean. Where else could they be relatively safe from our mutants?"

"That still doesn't explain why the Springer fleet suddenly aborted its takeoff over Mars and Venus!"

"I'd like to know myself, Perry," answered Bell, once more shrugging his shoulders in helplessness.

\* \* \* \*

Eyes flashing a little, Cokaze had received Rhodan's five-hour ultimatum. He looked around in a circle. His gaze hung longest on Thomas Cardif, who was the only one to say anything with Cokaze's eyes on him.

"Occupy the Earth *now*, Springer! Attack immediately! I know Rhodan's time-winning ploys all too well. He's only trying to win time with this ultimatum. Springer, you won't have any chance left once this ultimatum runs out. That I can foresee. It's now or never!"

Thomas Cardif's manner of speaking both fascinated and terrified. He had spoken without showing any sign of emotion. His tone had not been urgent—more calm and unnaturally quiet; But his voice had rung like ice. This young man knew only one goal. destroying the man he thought had murdered his mother!

He was interested in nothing else. It was all the same to him if he became administrator of this new Arkonide colony himself after Rhodan's destruction or not. His Political ambition had not yet been

awakened. In that respect, he did not fully know himself.

He calmly endured the sharp, penetrating gaze of the patriarch. After his brief demands were made, he wrapped himself in silence. He did not suspect what the other Springers were thinking.

They thought they saw the young Perry Rhodan sitting among them! The son had never before been as much like his great father as now.

"Springer, have you forgotten that Rhodan has meted out one defeat after the other to the Springers and the Aras right up to the present? You were always the stronger ones; Rhodan has never been strong and you know yourself how powerful his spacefleet is now but he always manages to outwit you every time. And again today, Cokaze!"

Thomas Cardif's Arkonide eyes looked at the patriarch with all the arrogance of an Arkonide of noble descent.

"Good," said Cokaze heavily after awhile. "I'm going to give the signal to all my ships for takeoff. But you, Terran..." And in his eyes was a threatening gleam, "you will experience all the tortures of hell until you draw your last breath if it turns out Rhodan sent you to me as a secret agent!"

"You old fool!" Thomas Cardif exclaimed, ignoring the shocked gasps of the other Springers. He stood up slowly. He drew his two beamers and threw them on the table. "Now are you at least half-way content, Springer?" he asked, his voice filled with biting irony and a thin smile playing at his mouth. "Go on with the conference without me. You all seem to know everything better than I do. For my part, I want to interrogate the two Terrans you were able to rescue from the destroyer you shot down!"

He strode across the main deck and took an antigrav lift three decks lower down. A combatrobot stood in front of the cabin door behind which the two captured men from the Solar Spacefleet were confined. Thomas Cardif identified himself and the robot allowed him to go into the room.

"Sir..." A young man sitting on his bed had leaped up with a surprised cry. Only then did he realize that it was not Perry Rhodan who had come in but his son.

The second Terran, also clad in the unornamented spacefleet uniform, stood behind the simple table and had only a contemptuous smile for Cardif.

"Gentlemen," began Cardif. But he got no further.

The young man who had leaped up at his entrance, Val Douglas, interrupted him sharply. "We won't talk to any deserters! Make tracks, you traitor!"

Thomas Cardif was not at all fazed and his glance went from man to man.

"Go away, you son of a..." snarled the other contemptuously.

Cardif did not let him finish. His reddish eyes began to flash. "For that you two will be the first to be forced by the Robot Regent to follow *my* orders and..."

"The Robot Regent!" Val Douglas laughed aloud. "That thing is happy that it still exists. Atlan will turn you over to the Chief as a traitor!"

As fate would have it, that young man had been one of the 150 who had been involved with Rhodan, Atlan and Bell in the operation on Arkon 2 against the Regent.

Thomas Cardif not only resembled his father outwardly but also in personal characteristics. He did not let his boundless surprise show. "Atlan cannot act against the will of the Positronicon," he declared boldly.

The young man of the Terran spacefleet did not realize the purpose of Cardif's statement was to lure him into giving more explanation. Now he laughed hollowly. "Atlan will show us what he can and can't do, just wait. Traitors like you'll be especially impressed. The Positronicon has nothing more to say. It went *click* when we were on Arkon and that was it for the Robot Regent! And I can guarantee you this, deserter, that Atlan will take care of you but good!"

Thomas Cardif's thoughts raced. Without a word he turned and left the cabin on his way to his own quarters. He was not yet ready to share this astonishing bit of news with Cokaze. He had to mull it over first.

Meanwhile, Cokaze had sent out two hypercom signal's from the *Cokaz 2* at the bottom of the Venusian ocean. They would be the sign for the spacers waiting on Mars and Venus to take off. It was also the order for the main part of the fleet to attack the Earth while a detachment of about 2000 ships engaged the Solar Fleet in space and kept it occupied.

Driven on by a sense of disquiet such as he had never before felt, Cardif stormed into Cokaze's cabin. While it had been quiet in the *Cokaz 2* for many hours, now it was filled with the rumbling of transformers and running engines.

The *Cokaz 2* was preparing to leave its submarine hiding place.

Thomas Cardif threw open the door to the patriarch's cabin. Cokaze sat there with his nearest relatives at the hypercom receiver. They were listening to the incoming reports from Mars and Venus.

Both parts of the fleet had just taken off!

"What's going on?" demanded Cokaze, turning around and looking into the agitated face of the deserted Solar Spacefleet lieutenant.

Behind Cokaze was a free seat and Cardif sat down in it.

"What is it, Terran?" the patriarch demanded once more, giving free rein to his unease.

Thomas Cardif tossed his head disdainfully. He laughed restrainedly. His nervousness had suddenly vanished.

"Springer, we've won! The Robot Regent on Arkon has been replaced by Admiral Atlan! The giant Positronicon is only outwardly continuing to play its old role and..."

"You're mad, Terran!" the old clan leader interrupted imperiously. He grabbed Cardif by the shoulders and shook him.

"Then ask one of the captured Terrans! He was there when Atlan shut down the Robot Brain on Arkon 3!"

Cokaze whirled around and shouted without restraint into the microphone that was fled in with the com centre aboard the *Cokaz 2*. "To all ships! Abort takeoffs! Remain in standby positions until further orders are issued. But send that alarm message coded and scrambled!"

Half an hour later, Val Douglas was under the influence of an Ara truth serum and was relating all that he had experienced on Arkon 3 with 150 Terrans and Atlan.

More than 30 Springers listened breathlessly to the halting, often incoherent report of Val Douglas. Again and again Cokaze plied him with questions. It was becoming more and more clear what had happened when Atlan had disconnected the Robot Regent.

None of the Springers paid any attention to the passage of time. But then Val Douglas collapsed under the fearful Ara drug with a shrill scream. The patriarch still had enough humanity to order the ship's physician to look after the Terran and administer an antidote to him.

And then Cokaze the patriarch realized how late it had become!

With a curse he hurried back to his cabin.

There Thomas Cardif was sitting at the hypercom.

"Anything new?" Cokaze asked.

"Nothing important, Springer. Your ships are waiting for your orders to move out. The *Cokaz 2* is standing at an altitude of 10 kilometres over..."

"That's fine," rumbled the old man and pushed Cardif out of his seat for Cardif hadn't been getting up fast enough for him on his own. "You young fool!" he exclaimed, seemingly unmotivated. Cardif stirred, wanting to ask a question, but Cokaze spoke before he could say anything. "All of you see only as far as today—you never think of tomorrow!"

"The Robot Regent is dead, so this Atlan believes he can make himself Imperator. O gods of space, the time of the Galactic Traders has come!" The old man had folded his hands as though in prayer; reached his arms up skyward and seemed in fact to be pronouncing a prayer of thanks.

Thomas Cardif understood nothing.

Cokaze observed the Terran's lack of comprehension.

"You young fool!" he crowed triumphantly once more. "*Our* day has dawned, the day of the Galactic Traders! What more do I care for this ridiculously small solar system and Perry Rhodan? Yes, I'll let him have his peace. I'm withdrawing unconditionally to... well, what would you rather do, Terran? Do you think I'd keep on trying to obtain a simple little trade monopoly and pass up the chance to combine with my brothers and the Aras and conquer Arkon? Who is this Atlan, after all?"

"Sire," a voice rang from the communicator's loudspeaker, "we're registering uncountable structural disturbances. A gigantic fleet is emerging from hyperspace! We've already counted more than 2000 ships!"

"Shut up!" roared the patriarch in an attempt to shout his com-officer. "Send a message to Rhodan



telling him that I'm accepting his ultimatum and order our ships to make a transition to 45 GH 32! Pull yourself together and don't make any mistakes!"

But to Cardif he spoke in a commanding voice: "Come with me!"

They raced to the control room.

The *Cokaz 2* had left its undersea hiding place and now hovered 10 miles above the surface of Venus.

The Springers at the structural sensor were pushed aside by their patriarch. Cardif looked over Cokaze's shoulder at the screen. Its surface swarmed with diagrams. The number at the edge, which registered even simultaneous or overlapping structural disturbances separately, sprang from 2185 to 2318 even as they watched! That meant that in the last five minutes, from the first detected disturbance onwards, 2318 ships had emerged from hyperspace into the solar system!

"That's Atlan's help for Rhodan!" Cardif hissed behind Cokaze's back.

The patriarch wiped the sweat from his brow. "O gods of space," he said hoarsely, "for this I thank you! And you, too, Cardif!" He had whirled around and clapped the young man on the shoulder. "If you hadn't had the idea of interrogating the two prisoners, we would have learned too late that there isn't any Robot Regent anymore. We would have attacked Terra and then been wiped out to the last ship by this gigantic new fleet. Thank you, Terran, and you will never find the Clan of Cokaze ungrateful."

The number on the structure sensor had stopped at exactly 2500.

2500 ships had appeared within a few minutes to stand by the Solar Fleet in defending the solar system.

"Send out the two prisoners in a lifeboat!" That was Cokaze's last order before the *Cokaz 2* began to accelerate prior to going into transition out of the solar system along with the rest of the Springer fleet.

About 4000 cylinder ships had only one goal: going into transition to 45 GH 32. And 45 GH 32 was a code that was not to be deciphered.

One hour and 45 minutes before the ultimatum expired, space near the solar system was hit by an enormous disturbance into which Cokaze's cylinder ships disappeared.

\* \* \* \*

100,000 trained men who had secretly left the Earth in five gigantic freighters and the *Titan* had returned with 1000 brand new Arkonide warships of all types and had also brought with them a fleet of 1500 robot-ships.

It was the maximum of help that Atlan could extend to the Earth. But it was also a technical miracle that 100,000 men trained in spaceflight had nothing more to do on Arkon than climb into the new spacers and immediately start for Earth. The 100,000 had felt immediately at home in the 1000 ships and except for three almost meaningless incidents the transition to Terra had taken place as a matter of routine.

Their appearance had given the impression that Cokaze had changed his plans upon seeing them but Rhodan and Bell had not forgotten that the old Springer had aborted the takeoff of his ships long before the appearance of the new warships.

"Perry," said Bell, "my right thumb tip is itching. I think we have some more unpleasant surprises before us. I wish this year 2044 was over..."

"Tell me why Cokaze stopped the takeoff of his ships instead, Reggie, and spare me hearing about your thumb," Rhodan told him.

"I've been thinking about that the whole time, Perry, and that reminds me—my thumb..."

"Reggie," Rhodan groaned, "we're friends, aren't we?"

"Naturally," Bell replied, unsuspecting, "but I must say that your question was a bit..."

Rhodan gestured quickly. "Then let us stay friends in the future, too, OK? Reggie, muffle yourself every time you think about talking about your thumb. Promise?"

"Alright, but at the moment my thumb is itching something awful!"

Perry Rhodan sighed and shook his head hopelessly.

## **ORDER OF THE ACTION**

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6/ COKAZE... CARDIF... CLIMAX!

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

PUCKY'S GREATEST HOUR

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THOMAS CARDIF strikes again!

The son of Rhodan, dangerous enemy of the Peacelord, lashes out in hatred against the Administrator of the Solar System. But his attack is one of indirection for on the surface the threat is to Atlan, the Immortal Arkonide, and the realm he now rules, replacing the Robot Regent.

The Crystal Prince faces an unprecedented emergency and Thomas Cardif proves more powerful than before.

When the stellar power keg explodes, the terrifying result is—

ATLAN IN DANGER

by

Kurt Brand