



**This Poster is a full-colour
reproduction of the PERRY portrait
especially commissioned
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1/ OF THOMAS & A THUMB

THE STARS in Globular Cluster M-13 shone and sparkled as they always did, compressed into a space of 100 light-years in diameter. To all the ships coming in from other parts of the Galaxy, they presented the configuration of a single gigantic and glistening sphere.

M-13 was not a conglomeration of colours—it was a composition in colour set against the black background of the universe. To the people flying towards M-13 and Arkon, the first impression was that of warm luminosity.

Globular Cluster M-13 was also the Great Imperium, the Stellar Empire of the Arkonides—an empire of wildly different races—an Imperium in which billions upon billions of intelligences lived and, to some extent, had grown great, strong, powerful and wealthy along with the Arkonides.

M-13 was a display of almost unreal beauty, but also, in its concentration of stars in the narrowest possible space, a demonstration of power.

As a globular cluster, M-13 seemed to be an organic unity; but the aspect was deceiving. Like the Great Imperium, it was badly torn—a stellar empire whose political structure threatened to break up into a multitude of separate parts at any moment.

For 15,000 years it had been growing, always led by Arkonides. And then came the day when Arkonide spaceships left the confines of M-13 and extended their Imperium deeper into the Galaxy. But the day also came in which the all but inexhaustible vitality of the Arkonide people began to go dry like a spring and signs of oncoming downfall encroached from all sides.

The Robot Regent the mightiest positronic brain that had ever been constructed, had been able to hold Arkon's crumbling power together only by means of brutal force.

Now the Brain existed only as a programmed mouthpiece. Atlan the Timeless had assumed the squandered heritage of his race and, if he did not want to go down in history as a bloody dictator, had to observe political earthquakes almost with indifference.

But the stars themselves took no notice of all this, and the blue-white radiance from the centre of the M-13 system shone as warmly and softly as ever.

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Peter Breucken stood with his friend Carl Vertieden in the pole-hatch of the *Burma*, a spacesphere of the State Class with a diameter of 100 meters and an optimum crew of 150. Both men had been watching for some time what was going on at the edge of their spacefield and the longer they watched, the more concerned their expressions became.

"There, Peter... robots again," said Carl Vertieden, who, like his friend, came from Hilversum. "Have you seen any of those legendary 100,000 hibernating Arkonides? I haven't seen one yet!"

The 100,000 people on Arkon 1, 2 and 3 are nothing more than a drop of water in the ocean. That's why you see only robots here. Without the mechanical men, Arkon would have had to give up a long time ago."

"It's not far from that now. This morning, I heard the Commander talking with the Chief on the radio. Not only did they say that we would be soon leaving this horrible robot planet and its giant brain but the Chief also said that the whole Imperium was nothing but a lot of rebellious good-for-nothings..."

"Perry Rhodan certainly didn't phrase it like that, Carl. Hey, look! Here comes a car out of the mammoth positronic dome. I wonder if it's coming over here?"

The huge domed structure of the positronicon extended over 100 square kilometres, dominating this part of Arkon 3. It stood out against the sky like a mountain and was flanked on the right and left by industrial structures.

The two young men watched the car coming towards them at high speed. Then it suddenly swerved to the right and—flipped over! A bright column of fire flashed from the wreck and then, with a furious crash of thunder, the vehicle, still turning on its own axis, exploded like a tiny blazing red sun.

Carl Vertieden and Peter Breucken had no time to cry out. As they were about to run over to the scene or the accident, the ultra-swift vehicles of Arkon 3's robot-police were already racing to it and had soon sealed off the area.

"Good heavens!" said Carl Vertieden impressed, even though just a few minutes before he had spoken rather critically of the robot world of Arkon 3.

"The police don't react that quickly even on Earth," Peter commented. "But perhaps we Terrans are better off for it than these Arkonides. You ought to take a look at the assembly lines, Carl! The robots manufacture spacespheres the way we do cars! Do you know what I've done a few times? I've been looking at the ground and to this minute I haven't seen a single bit of open soil. Sometimes I'm on the point of believing the old Arkonides built this world out of iron and steel so that they could make it into one gigantic factory. Our lunar factories are as nothing compared with this planetary industrial giant."

"Make us look bad, will you!" demanded Carl. "'As nothing', you call us! What are we here for then. Because Atlan needs help. Atlan is at his wits' end."

"Carl, you're often just a babbler!" Peter interrupted. "Are you forgetting Perry Rhodan's son, the miserable traitor! It was Thomas Cardif who first put Atlan in this exposed position, and what, do you suppose I would think of you if you didn't come to my aid in a desperate situation? After all, the Chief and Atlan are friends."

Then the pole-hatch intercom loudspeaker sounded. "Please report one at a time to First Officer Pasgin about the accident!"

With one step Peter Breucken stood before the communicator and switched on the vidscreen as well. "Petty officer Breucken of Gunpost 2, reporting as ordered to the First Officer..."

"Come to me in person," Joe Pasgin interrupted tersely. "Who else is with you?"

"Petty officer Vertieden from the transformer section!"

"I'll be expecting you at once in my cabin. To encourage your haste, I ask you to keep in mind that the Chief is interested in the accident."

The screen went dark. Vertieden and Breucken stared at it in surprise.

"Perry Rhodan is interested in it?" repeated Carl Vertieden. "Now I'd like to know who was sitting in that car when it blew up!"

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"Now these fellows are working with murder and assassination attempts," said Perry Rhodan, who, though otherwise a self-controlled man, was pacing the floor before Atlan and Reginald Bell in the room within the gigantic positronicon. Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant, the defence specialist genius and director of Solar Defence, had just left the room, which was furnished in Arkonide style. Only the left

wall, which was a control panel 10 meters high, showed that the room, despite the great comfort it offered, allowed its occupants little time for leisure.

Perry Rhodan shook his head again and again as he walked restlessly to and fro. Now he was looking at Atlan, who returned his gaze with extraordinary calmness. "He's forgotten nothing of what he learned at the Space Academy. He knows the inner structure of the Solar System like the back of his hand. In fact, it was all crammed into him. Cold-blooded, unscrupulous..."

"Perry, come over here and sit down!" Bell interrupted, all but ordering him to do so. When he saw Rhodan's hesitation, he indicated the empty seat with a motion of his arm.

Atlan pushed a glass toward him.

Rhodan sat down and took a drink.

"Barbarian," Atlan said to him, leaning slightly forward as he spoke, "we have to wait. The positronicon is now in the process of working out somewhat more than 4 million possibilities. We won't know anything for certain for some hours yet."

"But you know the result of the evaluation already, Admiral!" Rhodan replied, evidently depressed.

At that Bell snorted so loudly that Atlan and Rhodan looked at him. He showed them his right thumb tip and before one of the two men could say anything the heavyset red-haired man was already talking. "Now let me speak and don't let my thumb scare you!"

"I've been superstitious ever since last New Years Eve! In the whole Milky Way there's never been another case of unbreakable glass breaking and causing an injury."

"I broke the champagne glass and cut my thumb on the shards; since that moment, I've been deathly afraid of what the year 2644 would bring. Well, we've gotten through all but 40 days of it by the skin of our teeth. Our position... and that includes yours, Atlan, just like Perry's... is that, to put it broadly, of a tightrope walker performing at a height of 100 meters without a net. Only instead of an audience down below of people who hardly dare breathe because of their tension, there's a bunch of fellows trying to shoot you down!"

"But the man named Thomas Cardif is not among the onlookers!"

"I'm telling you this in spite of my cut thumb and my superstition! Thomas Cardif can't be so rotten or so traitorously inclined: after all, his father is Perry Rhodan!"

That had been typical for Reginald Bell; he had not expressed himself very tactfully but there was no misunderstanding what he had said and he was utterly convinced of the truth of it. He was still displaying his right thumb to Rhodan and Atlan.

"Mr. Bell!" said Admiral Atlan sharply. "Put your thumb away! Half the Galaxy is talking about your oddity. We..."

"Oddity, is it?" interrupted Bell energetically. "You call it an oddity when we're all sitting at the lowest point of our career in the Universe—only I can't yet believe that Thomas Cardif is guilty of this murderous attack. And besides, it doesn't fit the facts!"

"I'm not kicking a dead horse. Nothing is accomplished for us that way. Our purposes can be served only by seeing a 24- or 25-year-old man in the role he is now playing! These tricky interstellar gypsies, these Galactic Traders, have long ago driven the little upstart Cardif up against the wall!"

"That is what I'm trying to tell you!"

"And even if Thomas had carried out a hundred jobs like the one that led to the car blowing up two hours ago, the boy was not aware that you, Perry, were to have been blown up too!"

"Where do you get your information?" asked Atlan ironically.

Bell sized up Perry, who was listening to the emphatically spoken words of his friend. Then his gaze moved away and settled on the Admiral. "Atlan, my knowledge doesn't come from here!" And Reginald Bell pointed to his head. Then his hand sank and rested against his heart. "It comes from here. You certainly know us romantically-inclined Terrans well enough—probably better than you know yourself. My heart—crazy as it may sound—has told me that Thomas Cardif is not capable of any murder, and if your positronic monster claims the opposite is so, then I'll furnish the proof that I'm right and this thing is wrong!"

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Atlan laughed. "Mr. Bell, if only we Arkonides were also somewhat romantically inclined and. listened to what our heart tells us. But I'm afraid that an Arkonide heart can't say much of anything these days."

In his usual manner, Bell fended off Atlan's openness. "Now don't you get started pouring out your feelings, Admiral! I'd rather have you tell me how a Springer could get to Arkon 3. It must surely have been one of those star-gypsies who..."

"Couldn't it have also been someone from the Solar System, Mr. Bell?"

To that, Bell had only one word in reply. "Huh!"

Perry Rhodan's commentary was longer. "Allan D. Mercant believes that in a few hours he'll be able to tell us if Atlan's suspicion is justified."

"Then I'll have to prepare myself for some surprises," growled Bell and it was plain to see that he too suspected someone from the Solar System in the bombing. "Yeah, yeah... It's a blessing that today is November 21st and the year 2044 will be over in 40 days!"

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The three of them stood in the evaluation wing of the mammoth Brain, waiting out the last few minutes. Ten minutes before, they had been notified that the calculation of somewhat more than 4,000,000 possibilities would shortly be completed.

Each of them, whether Atlan, Rhodan or Bell, was accustomed to submitting complicated questions to the positronic but seldom was a computer given a problem with such ramifications and fateful importance as this one. It had resulted in a mind-wrenching number of possibilities having to be weighed

against one another. Only Arkonide hyper-mathematics and logic could even attempt such a task.

The room in which the three men now found themselves was dominated by Spartan practicality but the Arkonide scientists, who thousands of years before had built and programmed the gigantic computer, had imparted a style even to technology in its naked form that gave the feeling that, at the time of its construction, the Arkonides were masters of technology and not its slaves.

From that feeling generated Reginald Bell's hostility to that unequalled masterpiece of Arkonide advancement because the reverse had been true for so long.

He had never been able to get used to the idea that a positronicon was ruling a stellar empire the size of the Arkonide Imperium, and Atlan knew Bell's feeling better than anyone.

Such were the Admiral's thoughts as a feeling of emptiness overcame him along with something akin to fear of the future.

He had his cell activator once more. His life seemed to be assured for centuries, perhaps even for millenniums to come, but he had lived on Earth for too long to think only of himself.

100,000 Arkonides, active and filled with vitality, stemming from the Golden Age of the Arkonide people, now stood at his side. In two or three years each of them would be a leader at the place to which he had been assigned. But what were 100,000 active and energetic Arkonides when the mass of people was growing increasingly degenerate and its undesirable characteristics were multiplying? The race's sole concern now seemed to be avoiding all challenges so that it could lead an indolent and duty free existence.

Atlan felt a hand on his shoulder. Bell was standing next to him with something to say. "Admiral! We've overlooked a small trifle! All 100,000 able Arkonides!"

"Overlooked? When?" demanded Atlan, irritated that he understood neither Bell's first—nor his second inference.

"We've overlooked the fact that of the 100,000 time-sleepers, some are on Arkon 3. Couldn't one of them have put the bomb under the car? Why should the black sheep be found only among us Terrans?" Reginald Bell's face was earnest. He had pronounced his last question emphatically, looking at the Admiral penetratingly.

"Let's wait to see what the positronicon has to say about it," answered the Arkonide, now evasive.

Bell pounced on the evasion at once. "That doesn't sound very good, Arkonide! Lame answers like that one don't become you."

"Mr. Bell, I must be the last person who would make any effort to defend Thomas Cardif and..."

"Oh my stars and long-tailed comets!" interrupted Bell angrily. "Who said anything about defending Thomas? To defend someone means that he's been accused, and we haven't gotten to that point yet! The only thing lacking now is for that positronic*thing* to blame the boy for the murder attempt too." His gaze shifted back and forth between Atlan and Rhodan but neither said anything.

At that moment, almost unexpectedly, the metallic-sounding voice of the gigantic positronic Brain spoke.

This unimaginably complicated complex of switches and relays understood only objectivity, fulfilling the task asked of it and, when called for, reaching logical conclusions.

The monotonous voice continued. "The political upheavals which at this time put into question the existence of the Great Imperium are a sign that he exists."

Bell grumbled with a critical look at the place from which the voice came. "No more than splitting hairs!"

The Robot Brain went on: "It is thus of secondary importance, the matter of who is stirring up unrest. Furthermore, the influence of Thomas Cardif is so slight that its effect cannot even be measured."

"For as long as Arkon is not able to extend its full power to all reaches of the realm, any action against the disrupters is ultimately a useless waste of strength because force inevitably leads to counter-force. . ."

Bell muttered to himself but loudly enough that Perry Rhodan and Atlan could understand him. "For all the light this is shedding on the matter, the black hole in the Milky Way is a brightly lit parking place next to it!" But in the next moment he listened attentively.

"...Since the unsuccessful attack on Emperor Gonozal VIII, Thomas Cardif is no longer the guiding spirit among the Galactic Traders. The logical conclusion states with 99.5% probability that Thomas Cardif's influence on the overthrow movement has become unimportant. All actions undertaken since the attempted theft of the cell activator lack the distinguishing characteristics that indicate the involvement of Thomas Cardif. However, the danger of overthrow by force is not any less for it because the historical development of the Great Imperium itself is in that direction."

"The explosion of the courier car, to which one Terran fell victim, is, according to the results of the investigation by the robot-police and our evaluation of those results, an attack by the *New Arkonides*. It is suspected, with a probability of 67.45%, that about one-thousandth of the *New Arkonides* suffered brain damage as a result of the long-term sleep. The attack itself is regarded as a single act with no purpose or goal. The consequences of the attack are only slight in nature."

"As to the question of which planet is the source of ever-new impulses leading toward economic collapse and the attempts at political overthrow by various movements, all the information so far programmed has been evaluated and, taking as a basis the great number of inhabited planets, there can be only one answer:"

"The planet Archetz in the Resuma System!"

Then the great machine was silent.

Two Terrans and one Arkonide looked mutely at one another.

Archetz—the main world of the Springers.

Archetz—the world that had been half melted under the firestorm from 3000 Druuf spacers.

Archetz—was it still the headquarters of the plotters?

Perry Rhodan chose not to ridicule the gigantic positronicon's assertion; he was much readier to admit that he was not so well informed on this Springer planet Archetz to allow himself the privilege of rejecting the positronicon's statement out of hand.

"Archetz?" he said thoughtfully, and at the same time it was a silent request for Atlan to express himself on the subject of what the positronicon had concluded.

However, Bell spoke before the new Emperor of the Great Imperium could get a word out. "Perry!" Reginald Bell laid both hands on his friend's shoulders and his face was marked by an expression of imploring earnestness. He paused and the pause forced Rhodan and Atlan to listen to what came next. "Now you've heard it straight from the mouth of this giant tin-can:"

"All actions undertaken since the attempted theft of the cell activator lack the distinguishing characteristics that indicate the involvement of Thomas Cardif."

"Right now I'm not trying to gloss over anything, Perry! Your son has deserted! He has broken his oath! Even you as First Administrator of the Solar Imperium can't change that. One day Thomas will have to take the responsibility for it but as his father you have to find a way to reach him so that he takes the responsibility for it on his own!"

"Perry, you and Thora both failed to do so once. Who blamed you for it? Only your consciences!"

"But does that take care of everything, old man? Isn't it the easy way out? Should Thomas really bear the full weight of the punishment?"

"Perry, I don't agree with that—I don't want to agree with that and I can't agree with that!"

"Do something for your boy! Should your son, who is just as gifted as you are, *simply go to the dogs...*?"

There, was an echo in the large, Spartan room within the giant dome.

It was an echo with ghostly effect.

It rang Reginald Bell's excited words back, only hollowly, making them all the more stirring: "...simply go to the dogs?"

Atlan stepped between the two men, cutting them off from one another. In his eyes stood the uncomprehending astonishment of a man shaken by emotion. "Mr. Bell," he said, his voice sounding pleading. He nodded understandingly to the excited, heavyset man, and took hold of Perry Rhodan's arm. "Perry, you've dealt successfully with us Arkonides and the Springers, Aras, Druufs, Topides and all the rest, and you'll deal successfully with your son too! After all, as the old Arkonide proverb has it, when is the egg smarter than the hen?"

"What do you want?" Rhodan's question was sharp. Suddenly the steely look was again in his grey eyes but Atlan did not let him pose a second question.

"Perry, you're right in the middle of things with your dispute with your son! Bell and I are watching from the edges! You must come over to us and stand in our position and then you'll find a way to build a bridge that will lead you to Thomas. You're the older man, the man with experience, but I've been watching you over the years and I admire your ability to lead men. Let your ability come into play, Barbarian... Search and find a way. But the way must leave a chance open for your son!"

An enormous stellar empire threatened to collapse after more than 15,000 years of existence but those

three men in whose hands the fate of the Imperium lay were conversing in an excited manner about a lieutenant who had deserted from the Solar Fleet!

Atlan and Bell knew how heavy a load Rhodan carried because his only son was at once his bitterest and most dangerous enemy. They were the only ones either in M-13 or in the Solar System who saw the full extent of the tragedy.

Perry Rhodan was not a superman: he needed inner peace and calmness to return to his old self. He now had neither. But he still had his admirable self-control.

He breathed heavily and then said: "Yes, I want to do it!"

2/ SURPRISING DISCLOSURE

The inner gardens of the conical palaces on the *Crystal World* were enchantingly lovely.

Perry Rhodan looked down on this world from a luxurious suite of rooms whose sole purpose was to keep the cares of day-in and day-out routine far away.

Behind him, Atlan—Gonozal VIII, Emperor of the Great Imperium—cleared his throat. Perry turned to him and spoke. A thin smile played on his lips. "The Crystal World is poison, Atlan. It produces sickness and—"

"I agree with your opinion, Barbarian," Atlan interrupted, "and that's why I'm seeing to it that as few New Arkonides as possible become familiar with this planet. I think that here on Arkon I'll be overwhelmed by homesickness for the Earth."

"What? You? An arch-Arkonide? You speak of homesickness? You, who grew up between the stars?"

Atlan nodded. "Each world has its own poison or causes sickness. Terra causes homesickness *for* Terra. And if there's anything that I'll never regret, my friend, it's living among you for 10,000 years. That's why I don't find it particularly difficult to understand Thomas Cardif. That's also why I think I know why he conceived the idea of having my cell activator stolen. And if I were a Terran, then according to your mentality I would have to hate him. Fortunately I've remained an Arkonide and in spite of his scheme to put me out of action with one blow through the theft of the cell activator, I admire him. Only the Galactic Traders don't seem to find anything admirable about him anymore. Please, friend, this is our latest news. That's why I had you called."

Rhodan sat down across from him. The adapto-chair, an example of a way of living devoted entirely to pleasure, conformed automatically to the contours of Rhodan's body.

Rhodan was not in the mood today to tolerate such a chair. Ever since dawn, one conference had been followed by another. He had spoken with Terrania for over two hours and in three instances had to reach crucial decisions even though far from Earth on Arkon 1.

Now something that seldom happened took place.

Rhodan sprang up with a curse. "This chair! You ought to take it out and burn it!"

Rhodan overlooked Atlan's amused smile.

He read.

He sat down again.

He remained seated, letting the latest report sink in before he looked sharply at the Emperor.

Atlan bent forward, a single sheet of paper in his hand. "This is the very latest. It arrived when you came in, Perry."

"Should I read it, too?"

Atlan nodded and Rhodan saved himself any further words.

The Arkonide Secret Service seemed to be in full operation. All reports had come from that source. Each report concerned the Springer world Archetz in the Resuma System.

The very last report contained no mention of Thomas Cardif. The Emperor's information gatherers had not been able to find out anything about him. However, there was the day-old report of the Springer Sulok, who worked for Solar Defence. According to a conversation overheard in a tavern, Rhodan's son was on Archetz. The First Administrator thought of that as he put the report down.

"Atlan, I'm amazed that our information about the Springer world isn't up to date."

The Emperor shook his head in contradiction. "The information you and I had was good, it's just that we didn't take into account the Galactic Traders' activity. In the past decade they must have hollowed out a vast system of caverns in the planet Archetz, and installed the major portion of their industry and more than four-fifths of their population there. The heavy damage caused by the Druufs on the surface, which includes the annihilation of the city Titon and its 12,000,000 people as well as three other large cities, is being used by the crafty Springers as camouflage. From the outside, a destroyed world; but beneath the surface, it has fully intact heavy industry with the most modern assembly lines for mass production of cylindrical spacers. The economic collapse within the realm of the Galactic Traders and the Aras has not affected this centre of power! As Bell would say, Perry—dammit all, anyway! If this state of affairs is Cardif's doing... then he merits all our respect!"

Rhodan's grey eyes flashed. "What is the meaning of all this constant praise for him, Arkonide?"

"I want nothing more than to help you, Perry. You shouldn't see only Cardif's bad sides. By the gods, Barbarian, I'm not enthusiastic that Cardif stands on the other side and has tried to destroy you through my downfall! However, I can't escape the fact that if you had been planning these actions yourself you could not have done any better. Perry, my friend, do you disagree with me that Cardif is a tactical genius? Do you know any other Terran who is his equal in that ability? I don't. You and I have need of people with such talent!"

Rhodan flared up. "Atlan, what are you trying to force me to do?"

Emperor Gonozal VIII laughed bitterly. "If I could force you, I would do it. But no one can force you!"

At this moment you stand alone once more! That is the price we both have to pay for standing on the summit! This summit is so small that no more than one person can ever find room on it—so small that it doesn't even allow one to stand comfortably. Will we be able to continue balancing ourselves there forever?"

"Sometimes it's hard to believe that you're an Arkonide."

"Thank you, Perry!" Joy lit up in Atlan's eyes. "You put it very well and I'm proud to be so. Often I find myself thinking I'd like to see you in my place. I envy you, the First Administrator of an improbable planetary system."

"So?" Rhodan said nothing more. His glance now took in Atlan's face. "In one respect I don't understand you, Atlan. Why aren't you doing everything possible to force me to put Thomas Cardif out of action? Or why don't you deal with him yourself? After all, he's threatening the existence of *your* Imperium!"

Imperator Gonozal VIII slowly stood up. He went around the long narrow table and stopped in front of Rhodan. He laid his hand on his friend's arm. "Friend, do we suddenly no longer understand one another? I can get involved only at the price of our friendship! As Imperator of the Great Imperium I would have the duty to do so but is my stellar empire served if you and I must one day face one another as enemies? And we must become enemies if I intervene now and confront Thomas Cardif with the strict laws of Arkon according to which he deserves the death penalty. You would have to hold that act against me... or you were never a father and Thomas was never your soul But then you could never be my friend any longer, Perry..."

Atlan's yellowish Arkonide eyes sparkled. Great, excitement had seized him.

Perry Rhodan had laid his head back and looked at his friend. Then he got up and stood before the Arkonide. "I'll make the arrangements now since my men and I take off for Earth in an hour. If you should receive new reports concerning Archetz or Cardif, please relay them to me."

"Then we'll be seeing each other again in a few days, Perry?" Atlan had understood him precisely. The surprising disclosure of plans to return to Earth within the hour was nothing other than the first step in a move to remove Thomas Cardif from the conflict between worlds.

"Yes, Atlan. I'll be back in M-13 in a few days..."

3/ PERENNIAL PREVARICATORS

An alert was broadcast for Terrania's scientists!

Perry Rhodan had returned a few hours before from the Arkonide Imperium and this was not the first time that his return had triggered frantic activity.

More than 5,000 collaborators, each a top-grade specialist in his area, were informed by their department heads of their new assignment.

When the ethnologists set to their work, they were very quickly astonished. Then dismayed.

Dr. Orge Olundson was the first to express it. "If we dare go to the Chief with this, there'll be hell to pay!"

No one disputed that. They looked at each other in puzzlement. The material that they had was terribly scanty. They had requested permission to make use of the positronicon aboard the *Drusus*, Rhodan's flagship, but when the gigantic positronicon of the superbattleship emptied its memory banks for them, they found they knew no more than they did before.

Their assignment was as follows:

248 light-years from Arkon is the planetary system of Forit, a small reddish star which includes four planets. The second planet is called Solten and is inhabited.

Detailed ethnic, ethnographic and ethnological information about the Soltenites is requested.

But judged by Arkonide standards, the Soltenites must have been such an unimportant people that the Great Imperium and its ethnological catalogue believed everything essential was covered in just a few sentences:

Soltenites: Former Arkonides, degenerate, average height of 1.7 meters, humpback-like spinal curvature, bulging forehead.

Matriarchy, demonism.

Liars.

Dr. Orge Olundson, head of the Ethnic Studies Department and someone who had become an expert on Arkonide Ethnology in the course of two decades, played with his penzel for a moment, then, with a gesture of helplessness, drew one circle after the other through the third sentence of the sparse information, which consisted solely of the word *Liar*.

"One of our Arkonide colleagues must have allowed himself a joke once," he told himself. "Such a thing can't be possible. Surely not all Soltenites are liars!" He looked up, tossed the penzel away and looked around at the men. "Well, gentlemen, what are we going to do now? Does anyone have any ideas how we can get information about the Soltenites?"

In the medical Bioplastic Department, they were puzzled, too. There existed only a few unsatisfactory shreds of information about the Soltenites' appearance. No information could be found in any of the archives.

"If I go to the Chief and tell him the assignment can't be carried out," Dr. Alfo Alvarez prophesied, "he'll fire us all! And you, gentlemen, what do you have to say to that?"

No less displeased, Jean de Canin, economic expert for intragalactic trade, grumbled: "Good heavens, where am I going to get any information about the licensing treaty between the Soltenites and the Springer boss Cokaze? Never heard of it! Have you, Townless?"

No, he had not heard a word about it, either; he shook his head mutely and chewed further on his

penzel. The morale in that department sank well below zero.

"The Chief won't be happy if I report to him empty-handed, Townless," de Canin ventured.

"Well, I can't pull the data out of the empty air, either, de Canin," Townless replied calmly. "I'll call the Ethnic Studies people. Maybe they'll know more. A people's business characteristics are significant. Let's see if our colleagues know any more..."

Intercom Central came on the circuit. Townless requested a connection with Dr. Olundson.

The screen stabilized in front of Townless Olundson's discontented face appeared. He saw Townless on his screen. Neither knew one another personally.

Townless introduced himself. "Perhaps you can help us, Doctor. We urgently need information about the Soltenites."

"About the liars?" demanded Olundson.

"About whom...?" It was Jean de Canin who had blurted out the question and with one step stood next to Townless. "Who are liars, Doctor?"

Unruffled, Dr. Orge Olundson replied. "The Soltenites are liars! Or at least that's what the Arkonide ethnological catalogue says about them. But we don't know anything, either. We're drifting right now..."

"And about to run into something hard and stable, no doubt," de Canin replied. "But wait! I've got it! I'll call Solar Defence. They ought to have data on file. Doctor, I'll let you in on what they tell me immediately. That's a promise!"

They were grasping at straws now but Dr. Olundson nodded in relief.

The connection with the Archives of the Solar Defence was quickly made.

A vision of feminine loveliness appeared on the vidscreen. Jean de Canin's French heritage came suddenly to life. He made no secret of his admiration for such beauty but he did not let it become offensive, it merely flattered the radiant young woman in the archives of Solar Defence. Nevertheless, de Canin's voice was businesslike as he requested information about the Soltenites in Forit's four-planet system. "Please give us all the information you have on it. We have an assignment from the Chief with utmost urgency and we can't fulfil it because we don't have the material. But surely you'll help us, *non*?"

She promised to do so, then her image disappeared, although the connection remained. Townless looked at de Canin and commented: "I ought to get a transfer to Archives! Glord, I had no idea that there were such beauties in Terrania!"

"So?" answered de Canin and was then silent.

They waited. The time ticked by slowly. Then the image of the young woman appeared once more. Her enchanting smile had vanished. Her voice had lost its bell-like clarity. "I'm sorry," she began, "but we don't have any information about the Forit System except for the Arkonide listings, which I'm sure you have yourselves."

"Yes," Jean de Canin replied, "we have that much. Only there isn't enough to go on. Aren't there any of

our people on Solten?"

"On that unimportant world? Either you overestimate the capabilities of the Solar Defence or you underestimate the size of the Arkonide Imperium," she said with a slight reproving tone.

Jean de Canin grinned. "Suppose you and I talk about it in greater detail—say, tonight over dinner...?"

He got no further. Her charming smile had returned as she interrupted: "What a lovely suggestion! Do you mind if my husband and 8-month-old baby come along, too?"

Her smile was the last thing to be seen as the vidscreen image faded.

* * * *

At 14:20 hours, Standard Time, Dr. Orge Olundson had mustered his courage and requested a connection with Reginald Bell.

"Yes, of course it's urgent!" he insisted. "It is very important. It concerns work of utmost urgency and..."

"The Solten business?" he was interrupted.

Olundson was aware of the security regulations. "Please, connect me at once with Mr. Bell!"

Shortly thereafter, Bell's face appeared on the vidscreen. Rhodan's friend possessed an excellent memory for faces and names. Sometime once before he had met Dr. Olundson. Now he recognized him at once and addressed him by name. He noticed Olundson's sigh of relief.

"Well, Doc, what's working?" he inquired.

While the doctor explained, Bell interjected an occasional "Hmmm" or "I see" but did not interrupt. He spoke only when the ethnologist had finished his report and had also added which departments in Terrania were at that moment pulling their hair out over the problem.

"I'll put it before the Chief and call you back afterwards, Doc. I'm glad that you, at least, had the guts to report this to me or we would have lost even more time!"

With that, Bell switched off.

"We've got to get hold of Atlan, Perry!" he said as he entered Rhodan's workroom.

"Whatever for?" asked Rhodan. "We just left Arkon 1 a couple of hours ago."

"We don't have any info, about the planet Solten and its friendly natives, that's whatever for! The ethnologist Dr. Olundson just called me up and ticked off a list of all the departments that don't have any info about this world in the Forit System. Even Defence can't give us any! Atlan's got to help us now!"

Then Perry Rhodan asked a question that surprised Bell. "Who was it that brought up the Soltenite idea

in the first place, Reggie?"

"You did! I'd never even heard of these people before!" He paused, looking sharply at his friend. "Perry, don't you remember it, anymore?"

Bell himself recalled only too well how a sharply defined region of his memory had been cut off by a strong suggestive block—caused by a normally gifted person who had been made into an unusually strong suggestor by the injection of an Ara toxin.

Perry suddenly smiled at him. He had read his thoughts. "Don't worry, Reggie! But even so, it's odd that I don't know who or what brought the Soltenites to my attention. That bothers me but suggestion or hypnosis are out of the question!"

"I hope you're right. What about calling Atlan?"

"Let Atlan be. He has enough to worry about, being Emperor of the Arkonides. But thanks to him we can call on the Giant Brain directly. Get a hold of Mercant... I mean, go see him. He'll tell you everything you need to know. Then you'll have to go over to the big hypercom station. There you send everyone outside for the time being and take the controls yourself. Negative Telecom procedure!"

Bell whistled, and rubbed his hands in glee. "Oh, those poor Springer decoders!" He broke out in laughter. He imagined how desperately they would watch the hypercom sine waves on the oscillograph, utterly unable to understand why they could not get any rational sounds although they had determined the pulse-bursts and scrambler timing to the fifth decimal place. "Well, Perry," he said, still smiling, "at least during this Negative Telecom Procedure I certainly won't be thinking about my poor kaput thumb and..."

"Get out, Reggie! Rhodan exclaimed but it was not meant as earnestly as it sounded.

Bell grinned broadly. "I'm gradually beginning to like you again, Perry..."

Rhodan thought for a moment, then said: "It's not enough, just saying yes—you have to want to do it."

I understand!" Bell was suddenly serious. "Thomas should have had my father as his parent for awhile. He was a high official in the police department but when he laid me over his knee... Boyoboy that was a painful lesson for me! Well, that's yesterday's meal. I'm going to see Mercant now."

"But don't forget the conference with the mutants at 16:10!"

"So you're sticking with Project Solten even though you don't know who gave you the idea?" Bell asked, penetratingly once more.

"For the time being, anyway!"

Not long after, Bell was sitting across from Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant, Chief of Solar Defence. The technical side of calling the gigantic positronicon on Arkon 3 was being discussed; just then, Bell was explaining his observations to the attentively listening Mercant: "Perry rules hypnotic or suggestive influence out. But I can't forget my case, Mercant, and I just remembered..."

"Hmm... Thora and the recommendation she made long ago of flying to the planet Honor. I understand you, Reggie. You have no objections if I inform John Marshall so that he can undertake some security

measures?"

Mercant expressed himself very hesitantly; Bell was of quite a different mind.

"I agree completely. Perry will blow up if he finds out we're having him watched but better safe than sorry. If he wants to kick up a row about it, let him! All that, Mercant, simply because of—"

Mercant suddenly groaned and raised his arms in defence. "Bell, put that thumb away! You'll make the entire Milky Way go crazy by New Year's!"

Reginald Bell looked at the tip of his right thumb with some interest. "Atlan is someone else who gets nervous when I show him my thumb tip. It's nice that there are such simple ways to warn people so effectively."

With that, Bell left, leaving the thoughtful Defence Chief behind. Half aloud, Mercant wondered: "What did Tubby mean by that? Does he believe in this hocus-pocus himself or is it simply his way of making sure we aren't asleep at the switch? He's perfectly normal otherwise but he's had this pea in his pod, ever since last New Year's..."

He was not being quite fair to Bell: Rhodan's second-in-command was simply afraid of the year 2044, now coming to an end, and was showing his fear in a manner characteristic for him.

* * * *

Enre, a giant more than two meters tall with a pockmarked face and uncombed hair and clad only in a simple robe, stared at the sine curves on the oscillograph.

Enre was Archetz' best hypercom specialist and along with his clan he had become rich over the past decades by way of various inventions in the field of hypercommunications.

Now he turned his head and looked mistrustfully at Olgall. "There's a constant hypercom sine curve on the screen and you mean to tell me you can't get anything intelligible out of it?"

Olgall's expression was reminiscent of someone with a toothache. "Intelligible?" he demanded. "Intelligible? What we're getting doesn't exist—it's never existed! It's the howl of star devils! Listen...!"

Angrily he set the switch to High.

At the same time an unimaginable noise was suddenly to be heard. It was not a whining, nor a rustling of magnetic field disturbance, nor crackling, nor howling of heterodyning, mutually interfering waves; nor was it a distorted impulse, nor even a distorted radiating effect, which appeared only rarely in hypercom traffic but which for unexplained reasons broadcast the telecom signal in all directions except the one into which it was supposed to be sent.

In the large subterranean hypercom station on the planet Archetz, the star devils seemed to be really having a get together and were loudly shouting in their own language.

"Turn it off! Turn it off!" screamed Enre, holding his ears.

Olgall smiled in self-satisfaction. He turned the hypercom speaker off and asked ironically: "Well now, was I lying to you?"

Enre was boiling. "Give me that entire tape!" he rasped.

The tape was a short punched strip taken out of the receiving positronicon. Enre shoved it into the telecom evaluator more quickly than he needed to. The evaluator transformed the impulses into a visible diagram on its positronic optical system. Only an expert could make sense of the apparent confusion of symbols showing countless relationships.

Enre concentrated on it. Then he made it visible again, went from there to the wave-oscillographs, saw again the typical telecom amplitudes, and said, helplessly and not at all sure of himself: "But it's all normal, Olgall."

"My earache isn't at all normal, Enre," Olgall answered bitingly. "I wouldn't be very much concerned by all this, except for the fact that it's an exchange between the Robot Regent and Terra."

Enre drew the robe more closely around him. Olgall's alarm had torn him out of his sleep. Now only his tangled hair testified to that. He was now more awake than he had ever been in his entire life; he was on the alert now and he watched his own thoughts carefully.

"One more time..."

But even that offered no points of reference.

"Should I play again?" asked Olgall. "But I'm leaving once it starts!"

Enre showed no signs of wanting to strain his sense of hearing again. He looked thoughtfully at Olgall. Now he said, hesitantly: "I wonder if we'd get any further if we had the Terran brought in?"

"Rhodan's son?" asked Olgall, astonished.

"Yes. Perhaps he can give us some idea what kind of new encoding technique the Terrans are using. Of course, if it's something on the Robot Brain's part, then he won't be able to tell us anything."

Olgall cradled his head. "Patriarch Cokaze supposedly doesn't think too highly of this Cardif any more, Enre. I doubt if he'd let Cardif out for this purpose..."

"Let out?" echoed the astounded hypercom expert. "Does that mean...?"

"So I've heard. If it's true..." Olgall shrugged.

Enre was undecided. "Olgall, for the purpose of comparison, give me another strip of tape of about the same length..."

Olgall grinned. "Already did, Enre! But here it is, anyway!"

Olgall had been right. Neither on the wave oscillograph nor on the telecom evaluator did the two simultaneously examined hypercom messages show any difference. An idea suddenly shot through Enre's

mind. "Olgall, these Terrans have been covering their messages with a phono-variabler! An old, old trick!"

Olgall was by now past being surprised. Exhausted by this intercepted telecom transmission, he had given up all hope of being able to decipher similar hypercom messages in the foreseeable future. "What is a phono-variabler? Never heard of it!"

"A device that alters sounds. For example, it might change an A to a deep bass U, or the same consonant could go to a high-pitched treble one second and be changed to a croaking sound the next."

Olgall simply had no desire to waste any more time with the undecipherable message. "I'll leave that to you, Enre! I'm not familiar with the phono-variabler and if the Terrans are letting it work according to the positronic laws of random factors... Well, have fun, Enre, with 123,000,000 possibilities. I..."

Olgall grabbed Enre by the arm and pointed to the receiver, which was still tuned to the Robot Brain's hyper-frequency.

Their station was just then intercepting a new exchange between Terra and Arkon 3.

Enre tore himself free and stood before the control panel, looking at three instruments. It was as if his eyes were burning holes into them. Satisfaction grew in his eyes. At the same time, the computer was operating silently, searching for the pulse-burst and scrambler timing of the telecom transmission. "But no figures for a phono-variabler..." Olgall heard the expert say in disappointment.

Then came comparisons of figures. The pulse-burst and scrambler timing were calculated again to the 5th decimal place. A small device stretched the brief short-impulse to its normal length; at the same time, the scrambling was compensated for. Now the wave-oscillograph needed only to be switched on. Then—

"Stop!" cried Olgall, hitting the main power switch with his fist. "This isn't at all easy to bear. What have these Terrans invented this time?"

"Or the Arkonides!" added Enre.

At that, Olgall had to object. "Them? Never! But now I'm also in favour of bringing Rhodan's son here. If anyone can point us in the right direction, he's the one. Will you go to Cokaze, Enre?"

* * * *

At the same time, Reginald Bell's capacity for premonition was working unusually well. After his second hypercom exchange with Arkon 3, he had himself taken back to the administration skyscraper. In his pocket was a mass of information about the Soltenites but he was not thinking of it. His thoughts instead revolved around the Springers, whom he called space gypsies when he was disposed to speaking unkindly of them.

Evidently they amused him now for he was laughing silently to himself. He was so pleased that he was even rubbing his hands together and nodding, but even so, he did not dare give free rein to his fantasies.

How was he to have known that both his hypercom messages to Arkon 3, beamed in Negative Procedure, had caused the Revolutionary Consortium on Archetz to be thrown into most extreme agitation?

* * * *

Enre stood before a 12-member assembly of patriarchs, 145 kilometres beneath the surface of Archetz. It was two o'clock in the morning, Standard Time. All 12 patriarchs had been called from their warm beds but not one of them wanted to go back to sleep now.

Their gaze was trained on Enre's lips. The most important hypercom expert of the Galactic Traders did not understand in the first place why the revolutionary council had been alarmed nor did he understand in the second place why his report caused such excitement among the experienced patriarchs.

Atual and Ortece, the two proprietors of the Bank of Galactic Traders in Titon on Archetz, whispered with each other. Patriarch Cokaze, who had not been able to tolerate the two men ever since the day he had to put pressure on them, watched their whispered conversation with steadily growing discomfort but still listened to what Enre had to say.

Cokaze nudged Gatru, who sat to his right. Patriarch Gatru was owner of the most modern underground factories, in which from 10 to 30 cylindrical spacers were mass-produced daily.

"The bankers..." was all Cokaze whispered.

Gatru muttered grimly and also began to covertly watch the two bankers.

The leadership of the overthrow movement consisted of 12 patriarchs who had not given up their plan of destroying the power of the Arkonides and replacing the Arkon Imperium with a Springer empire.

But 12 men did not sit at the horseshoe-shaped table: there were 13. The 13th was Perry Rhodan's son, Thomas Cardif, an officer of the Solar Fleet who had deserted and become Rhodan's most dangerous enemy.

For his father he had only deadly hate. He saw in him the murderer of his mother, Thora! A vile rumour that had suddenly turned up on Pluto had found its way even to Rhodan's son, and when the Druuf battle was in progress around the Earth, he had taken advantage of the opportunity to leave the iceworld of Pluto and make contact with the patriarch Cokaze.

He had only one goal: to destroy Rhodan!

And he had the ability to reach his goal because he was Rhodan's son!

Cokaze had been the first Galactic Trader to recognize Thomas Cardif's value. The bankers had sensed it when Cardif forced them to suddenly unleash the inflation and economic collapse within the Imperium. The *Bank*, as the Springers called it, was in relation to its capital and influence 100 times stronger than the State Bank of Arkon.

The first blow against the Imperium had seemed to be right on target but then came the completely unexpected attack of a Druuf fleet of 3,000 ships over Archetz, which had turned the surface of this important planet into an expanse of rubble.

Only one had not been deterred by it: Thomas Cardif! He had put his entire being into action by driving the Springers on to the next blow but out of his total plan they had decided to implement only the part about the cell activator. The cell activator was the capsule-sized wonder device from the planet Wanderer and its power had not allowed Atlan, now the newly named Emperor Gonozal VIII, to age in 10,000 years. The Springers planned to attack Atlan and steal the activator.

The attack had failed. Segno Kaata, the Anti, had had to give up Atlan's cell activator in a life-and-death battle.

The attack's misfire had resulted in Cardif's falling out of favour with the patriarchs. His current presence at Enre's report was due solely to the expert's request to question Cardif about the Terrans' new coding procedure.

Today it was Gatru who was chairman. "Cardif, what do you have to say to that?" he demanded, referring to Enre's revelations.

Thomas Cardif was the exact double of his great father, identical in his facial features, identical in his movements and identical in his ability to look at something in its totality and make the correct judgments about it but he lacked the maturity of character, that self-mastery that had marked the young Perry Rhodan even in the US Space Force before he had entered the *Stardust* and flown to the Moon with Bell, Fletcher and Dr. Manoli.

Cardif stood up. His Arkonide eyes, an inheritance from his mother Thora, looked calmly around the group.

"Terra's new coding method is unknown to me. In my opinion, it is not a world-shaking event. But utmost attention should be paid to the fact that Terra was speaking directly to the Brain although Atlan was on the Crystal World at the time..."

"Thank you! Gatru interrupted him sharply. "We did not ask you to give us your suggestions. We only wanted to hear what you know about the new coding method."

Thomas Cardif smiled. His reddish eyes flashed briefly. His mouth was open for a sharp retort, then he closed it quickly and sat down again. He continued to look at Gatru long after he had sat but in an indescribable manner—in a mixture of mockery, anger and pity.

Gatru, a king among the Springer clans and one of the *Bank's* best customers, ice-cold, a businessman and heavy-industrialist, did not long tolerate Cardif's stare. While Fugir, a patriarch of the united Alton-Fugir clans, asked questions of Enre, Gatru turned to one of the robots and ordered in a harsh voice: "Take him out of here!"

Ortece and Atual, heads of the Bank, brought forth thin, reserved grins as Thomas Cardif was pulled out of his seat by two steel robot arms and dragged out.

Cokaze, torn between conflicting emotions, was the only one who did not agree with this development. The false grins of the bankers irritated him so much that he became angry and in that condition he turned

to Gatru. "Was that necessary? Don't you really know this Terran yet?"

Gatru answered shamelessly: "If you want to make us think you're a fool, Cokaze, go right ahead! But we've stopped being fools a long time ago! Didn't your stay on Terra agree with you?"

Cokaze's trimmed beard trembled. He balled his fists. In his eyes blazed the fire of anger but the old patriarch did not explode.

"Blind mole!" and with that he leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. He had allowed himself to insult the richest patriarch on Archetz and he knew that he was able to allow himself to do so. Behind him stood all the patriarchs who spent their lives flying between the stars on their clanships, and every single Galactic Springer saw his fellow Springer who lived on Archetz as *abundant mole*. It was the worst insult that could be applied to an inhabitant of Archetz.

Gatru whirled about in his seat. His eyes became slits. His hands prepared to reach for Cokaze but then the mocking, superior look in the eyes of the old Springer forced him to withdraw them.

"Try it, Gatru!" Cokaze warned. "Dare to do it and in a week you can shut your factories down. No Springer will buy any more spacers from you! Don't forget that you are dependent upon us but we are not dependent on you! And getting into a fight with you—why, that would be worth the Terran to me! Put him on ice! Eliminate him! Do what you can't help doing!"

In the small room, 145 kilometres below the surface of Archetz, there was suddenly silence. Everyone was listening to what Cokaze had to say to Gatru. The old clan chief looked around in astonishment; everyone was staring at him. That brought a mocking smile to his lips. Yes, listen well to this!

"Gatru had the Terran dragged out! I didn't agree with that! And why not?"

"Because the Terran was the only one who recognized the important thing about Enre's report: Terra's direct contact with the Robot Brain on Arkon 3 without any communication with this... this Atlan!"

"Don't you understand yet what that means for us? This Perry Rhodan is the second Emperor of the Arkonide Empire! He who can make use of the power and the knowledge of the giant positronicon is somewhat stronger than we are... or do we Springers want to sit on a burning pile of rubble, saying triumphantly: this is the new Springer Imperium? Can't we think of something else besides suggesting an attack on Arkon with all our spaceships? What would come of that? A pile of rubble! And the only one who could have shown us other ways which would lead us to our goal more safely and less bloodily—we've just had him dragged out of the room!"

"One more thing."

"Take care that someday Perry Rhodan doesn't knock on the door here and we can do nothing more than put our hands up and surrender!"

Enre, who had been listening entranced to the old clan chief's words, cursed the moment in which he had been pulled out of his sleep by Olgall to devote himself to an undecipherable transmission.

He had imagined that the men who pulled all the strings of the revolution would form a brain trust of clever minds working in harmony but now he had to admit without reservation that quite the opposite was true.

Only one patriarch impressed him: Cokaze!

And he was just then leaving the small chamber.

* * * *

With the help of his co-workers, Dr. Orge Olundson had sifted the most important information out of the comprehensive report concerning the unimportant Soltenite people and put it together to form a general, rounded picture. But one point still made him uncomfortable.

There it was; the fact came from the giant positronicon: the Soltenites are a race of liars!

Dr. Orge Olundson looked at his watch in concern. It was high time to send the report to the Chief. Hesitantly, he signed his name to it, the last person to do so.

"A race of liars..." he said as he wrote, shaking his head. "If that's so—which I still can't quite believe—then I hope the Chief isn't seeking the Soltenites out to make friends of them. A race of liars... unbelievable!"

* * * *

The ethnologists' report was the last thing to come in to Perry Rhodan. It was the first thing the Administrator picked up.

In the second paragraph, first sentence, it read: *The Soltenites are a race of liars.*

Perry Rhodan read the sentence twice. "Reggie, come here and read this!"

Reginald Bell bent unsuspectingly forward. Perry's finger indicated the line. "This is certainly a bad joke," Bell commented. "Who did the report come from? From the ethnologists? I'll call them up. I'll give this Olundson a piece of my mind!"

Bell was angry, a frame of mind in which he was often to be seen. Grumbling, cursing, expressing himself sloppily—with him that was a daily routine. He was already reaching for the intercom to call Dr. Olundson when Rhodan suggested: "Let's look quickly at the other reports. Perhaps they'll explain this unbelievable statement."

But 10 minutes before the scheduled conference with the mutants, Dr. Olundson entered Perry Rhodan's workroom for the first time in his life. Bell had summoned him in his most thunderous voice.

"My dear Dr. Olundson," Bell began, "aren't we a comedian today! Do you think we have time to waste with rotten jokes? The Soltenites are a race Of LIARS!?!"

Bell had not spoken so loud even during the debate with the members of the Parliament of the Solar Imperium when he and Rhodan had been reproached.

Dr. Orge Olundson gave, a visible start, swallowed, then, quite unexpectedly, came toward Reginald Bell. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Bell!" He held out three strips of tape in a pointed gesture.

"What am I to do with them?" demanded Bell.

"Read them... and then shout!"

At that moment Bell realized he had gone too far. "Who was shouting, Doc? Perhaps I was speaking more clearly than usual but..." And then came his gasping for breath, and after that, rather plaintively: "Perry, it's true! The Soltenites are liars! Read this!"

While Rhodan familiarized himself with the content of the printed tape, Bell looked at the ethnologist as though seeking help. Suddenly he laid his hand on his shoulder. "No hard feelings, eh, Doc? I have to apologize..."

The ethnologist hastily interrupted. "For what? I would have been willing to pay a higher price for the knowledge that Terra's demigods are still human after all, Mr. Bell!"

Rhodan looked up, too. "Demigods?" asked Bell.

"Yes, because you don't age any. Haven't you ever considered that you might seem uncanny to the masses? People take you for demigods, so to speak."

"Doctor..." Rhodan's eyes were fixed in earnest on him. "We have to thank you because you've brought to our attention something that we haven't realized. Demigods! Us!" He laughed but it was not a laugh of amusement. "Demigods live a life of ease and comfort but in these last few years Mr. Bell and I have had a total of one weeks worth of vacation time. And, Doctor, in your opinion are demigods so moderate?"

He did not want to hear an answer. He stepped before the ethnologist and pressed his hand. "We are grateful for your sharing that bit of knowledge with us but nevertheless that does not free you from your task of explaining to us why the Soltenites are supposed to be a race of liars."

"Sir, if I could answer that, I would feel much better. I don't know. In our information there was only the word *Liars* and in the Arkonide information it was expressed in a sentence: *The Soltenites are a race of liars*. But why this is supposed to be so isn't given anywhere."

When Dr. Olundson left them, Rhodan and Bell still had a few minutes until the conference.

The overfed second-in-command had something on his mind. He paced back and forth in front of Rhodan's desk. Suddenly he stopped in front of his friend, took a deep breath and asked: "Perry, have you been able to remember yet what gave you the idea about the Soltenites?"

At that moment, Perry read his thoughts.

"What? You're having me watched?" he exclaimed.

"For some hours now, Perry! And you will be under surveillance for as long as it takes you to remember

what gave you the Soltenite ideal Perry, we understand each other, right?"

"I understand your words very well but I don't understand why you've done this behind my back!" Perry's grey eyes looked penetratingly at his friend.

"You've used an ugly expression, Perry! Bell sat down casually in front of Rhodan but his loose posture did not disguise the seriousness of the situation. "What I arranged several hours ago, after consultation with Mercant, I did for you and *not against* you!"

"Do I seem suspicious to you, Reggie?"

"Yes! Or can you answer my question now?"

"No."

"Then nothing's changed."

"What if I order that the surveillance on me be ceased at once?"

Bell smiled weakly. "You would never do that, Perry. As Administrator, of course..." He shrugged and let the rest of the sentence remain unsaid.

"Good! But something else has occurred to me. I'll conduct the conference with the Mutant Corps by myself. You go call the Positronicon on Arkon 3 again and inquire about the reason for the Soltenites being called a race of liars. If the Brain can't give any information about it, then contact Atlan. I need the information by 06:00 hours tomorrow morning, Standard Time."

"Not much time, if Atlan has to get his bored intelligence service going on the matter. I'm curious to see what kind of results will come out of this."

"I'm more than a little disturbed, Reggie, because this claim about the Soltenites is monstrous. Press Atlan for the answer and explain to him that I have to know by the time we take off!"

Bell left and made his way to the big hypercom transmitter, stopping off in Allan D. Mercant's office in mid-trip.

"Mercant, he knows already!" exclaimed Bell as he stormed into the Chief of Solar Defence's workroom.

The Solar Marshal looked up in surprise. "Already? And how did Perry take it?"

"Coldly, Mercant! More coldly than he's ever been to me before!" By the way, did you know that the Soltenites are a race of liars?"

Bell was already standing at the door.

"What are they supposed to be?"

With a feeling of satisfaction, Reginald Bell proved that even an Allan D. Mercant could be disconcerted.

"Close your mouth, Mercant! As it happens, I can't give you the answer to that until I call the computer on Arkon 3, and if it doesn't know, until I get hold of his Eminence, Atlan the Emperor!"

"Stop, Reggie! Stay here!" Mercant called to him as he was about to go. "I want a report, if you please!"

"Is it that serious?" Now it was Bell's turn to be astonished, for when the Defence Chief himself got involved in something, it usually turned out to be much more complex and much less pleasant than had been thought. Mercant had what would be called an 'instinct for intrigue'.

Bell explained and Mercant listened silently. When Bell came to the end, the Solar Marshal stood up. "I'm coming along."

In the hyper-frequency control room of the great transmitter, Bell first saw to it that he and Mercant were alone. Soon the negative-message went out over the Brain's wavelength with the question: *Why are the Soltenites supposed to be liars? Request justification. Signed Rhodan.*

Mercant noticed Bell's smirk. "Why are you laughing, Reggie?"

I was just picturing the Springers listening in, Mercant. They'll be tearing their hair out over our transmission. I'd love to hear the curses of these space gypsies, because—"

"Isn't your own supply of curses large enough already?" Mercant interrupted. "What does the expression *Trobbel* mean, anyway?"

"Good lord, where did you hear that word?" asked Bell in surprise.

"From whom? From Pucky! Yesterday!" the meter-tall mousebeaver was scolding a Mutant Corps member and in conclusion called him a Trobbel. What does it mean?"

"The little guy's been reading my mind again!" Bell said dryly.

"That should often make good reading for Pucky," answered Mercant with more than one meaning, "but I still don't understand..."

"Finally! The answer from Arkon 3 is here, Mercant! With incredible eagerness Bell fell upon it, pulled out the printed tape containing the gigantic Brain's answer and went with it to a small device that was not connected with the general transmission station equipment.

The small box into which the tape disappeared made a positive out of the received negative while at the same time destroying the negative tape bit by bit in the translation process.

"Nothin'!" said Bell.

"That's putting it plainly enough!" mocked Mercant.

The giant Brain had answered that it could not furnish any reasons as to why the Soltenites were supposed to be a race of liars.

"Now Atlan has to get into the act!"

Once the tape for the brief impulse was ready, the small, encapsulated device made a negative.

Mercant looked on. Suddenly he said: "This idea should be obvious to anyone who understands anything about hypercommunications, Bell!"

Bell also had great abilities, only he seldom made a point of using them. And in the area of hypercommunications, he was a first class specialist.

The negative in hand, he looked sympathetically at Mercant. "Solar Marshal," and with his hand he made a motion that took in everything, "there isn't anything here which is over my head—but this blasted box, which one of our engineers put together, is a total mystery to me! Even the expression *Hypercom Negative* is completely wrong, just as wrong and misleading as if I were to say... uh, *black* when I meant *round*, for example. Do you understand me?"

"For God's sake, Reggie, send that short impulse off already! I don't want to hear anything more about it. What I want to know is the meaning of the word Trobbel."

"Then I'll have to explain some things about Negative Hypercom Procedure beforehand. OK, Mercant?"

"You blackmailer, Reggie!" answered Mercant with a slight grin. "But I'll find out what the word means anyway..."

"And I'll wring Pucky's neck if I'm blamed because of him!" Reginald Bell promised as he sent the query to Atlan.

"Wait," was Atlan's answer. "*I'll have to make inquiries. Signed: Gonozal VIII.*"

"Well," sighed Bell in resignation, "at the rate those Arkonide sleepyheads move, we'll have to wait a long time!"

4/ DANGEROUS MISSION

The infernal howling of the impulse engines of the *Drusus* increased the further the superbattleship left the Earth behind and the faster the ship shot into space.

The flagship of the Solar Fleet had taken off into special action: *Commando Operation Solten*, it was called.

John Marshall, the best telepath in the Mutant Corps and at the same time the leader of that one-of-a-kind squad, went to see Reginald Bell.

"Come in, Marshall," Bell told him, bringing forth a champagne glass. "We have a few minutes before transition, lees toast..."

"What?" asked John Marshall, stroking his dark hair.

"Let's say to the Soltenites—the liars!" Bell exclaimed, revealing with that that the cardinal question of why the Soltenites were supposed to be liars had still not been answered.

"Or to Pucky, Mr. Bell?" asked the mutant.

An alarm went off in Bell's mind. Marshall seldom changed the subject of a discussion without a reason. "What's he been up to this time, John?"

"The mousebeaver was the one who gave the Chief the idea about the Soltenites!"

Bell suddenly went off like a bomb. "Oh no! Oh no!" he groaned. "Oh, Pucky, you're lucky you aren't here right now!" he said, staring into his glass. "*Him!* And I had Perry spied on and then had to live through the worst minute in my life. I had to let myself tell him that I would work behind his back... and all that because of that flop-eared carrot-chomper! Does the Chief know about it yet?"

"Not yet. I'll tell him after the transition."

"Not necessary. I'll gladly take care of that for you, John. Now, quick... Cheers!"

Thirty seconds later, the ship went into transition. All persons aboard the ship felt that stabbing pain that followed every dematerialisation. The whispering and rustling of fifth dimensional hyperspace broke into the interior of the giant sphere and...

Groaning, Reginald Bell rubbed his neck, which was where he always felt the pain of transition most strongly. John Marshall cautiously straightened up from his limp position and took a loud and deep breath. His exhalation was accompanied by a sigh of relief.

"Oh, that blasted mousebeaver, that little imp!"

The fact that they had just put 34,000 light-years behind them in nulltime meant nothing to the two men. They had already experienced it a thousand times, just like they had experienced the pain of dematerialisation and rematerialisation a thousand times before. It was a part of their life. Much more important to them was the prank that the mousebeaver had pulled on the Chief.

"But there's a hitch in all this, Marshall," said Bell, cocking his head. "I'm not going to accuse the oversized mouse of boundless stupidity without learning more. Up to now he's always avoided mixing it up with Perry or pulling his bad jokes on him. Do you know anything more, John?"

"No more than what I've told you. I was on the way here when I saw Pucky scooting across the deck. Almost unconsciously I tuned in on his thoughts and overheard what he was thinking just then: *Perry, how can I tell you that I was the one who gave you the idea about the Soltenites?* And then Pucky must have noticed that someone was listening in on his thoughts because he suddenly disappeared in a teleportation spring. That's all."

Wordlessly Bell filled both glasses again. He sealed the bottle, pushed his glass to the side and shook his head. "Marshall, I didn't think that there was anyone on Earth who knew anything about the Soltenites—even that there was such a race—three days ago. That's why. I wonder how Pucky could have known of that small race in the Arkonide Imperium and where he found out about it? And then, to make the story all the crazier, these Soltenites are supposed to be a race of liars."

At that moment, Perry Rhodan called via the ship's internal communications system. He saw that John

Marshall was with Bell. "I'd like to speak with both of you, Reggie."

A few minutes later, they entered Rhodan's cabin. By chance, Bell's glance fell on the couch where Pucky was making himself most comfortable.

At the same time, anger flared up in Reginald Bell's eyes. The air over the couch had shimmered and Pucky had disappeared from Rhodan's cabin.

"What th—where's Pucky gone to?" asked Rhodan in astonishment, looking at the empty couch.

That was Bell's cue.

The alarm sounded in the *Drusus* .

Pucky was being sought! He was ordered to report at once to the First Administrator. Again and again the loudspeakers repeated the order.

"You've been tattling to the boss about me!" said a voice from the couch as Pucky crouched there once again, looking like a wilted flower, and concealed his incisor tooth. His mouse eyes found no peace. Rhodan's silence must have seemed uncanny to him. Now the mousebeaver certainly did not dare use his telepathic abilities to read Perry's thoughts. "And giving the alarm just on my account, Chief... Am I really so necessary to this conference?"

Rhodan was silent. But his grey eyes said enough.

"Well, then..." Pucky crawled down from the couch and tried to stand before Rhodan at attention. Then he chirped: "It wasn't my idea. I got it from that Springer gypsy... uh, Patriarch Cokaze..."

"Now the plot thickens!" Bell said, gasping for breath and raising his brows.

"Not quite!" Pucky turned toward him, an unmistakable sign that he did not feel especially guilty. "During my visit to the *Cokaz 1* , when the patriarch's cylindrical spacer was still in orbit around Venus, I caught Cokaze thinking about the Forit System and its second planet, Solten. The old boy can think about nothing but money, you know, and so quite in passing he was calculating what the Soltenites owed him in license fees. He figured that he could buy three new cylindrical spacers with the take..."

"Make your point, Pucky!" Bell demanded of him sharply.

"OK! Gotcha! Won't forget. Meanwhile, some other things were being taken care of. Chief was wondering how I got to Cardif. I sensed. While thinking about Cokaze's lovely source of income. Thought out the details... and because you want to know precisely what's going on, Fatty, I'll tell you very precisely:

"The plan of Operation Solten came in every detail from me!"

"So you might as well line me up against the wall, Perry, and have me shot..."

Rhodan glared penetratingly at the mousebeaver. "You say you planted this whole plan in my mind, Pucky? That's post-suggestion—I can't believe you'd do it!"

"But this time you'll have to believe it, Perry. Of course, I didn't know until now how much of an

impression I can make on you. I even didn't want to, actually. It's only that... well, you know me when I get something going, even by accident. I had picked up just a teensy bit from your mind and saw how worried you were... how you were wondering what the best means of getting to Archetz might be so that you could find Thomas. Before I knew it I was in there scheming and figuring, and when I was in the full swing of it, all of a sudden I seemed to see that you were thinking *my* way.

"Perry, I swear it to you, that scared me—but I was too afraid by then to tell you what I'd done. But this thing about the Soltenites being liars—don't blame me for that. I didn't know it, myself!"

Bell was nearest to him and he whispered: "I could wring your little neck!"

"Just try it!" Pucky warned him coldly, "Maybe you'd like me to explain the meaning of Trobbel to good old Mercant—right, buddy?"

"What was that?" asked Rhodan, distracted by this side conversation.

"Oh nothing—nothing at all" Bell answered hastily. "But do you see any weak spots in Pucky's Solten brainstorm?"

Rhodan glanced at him suspiciously. Bell's sudden turnabout didn't sit well with him. When he looked at Marshall he was met with closed-mouth inscrutability. Pucky was smart enough to let himself be down-staged. He had no desire now to be the centre of attention.

"Nothing wrong with the plan—it's excellent—but what Pucky did is a shock. That's all. Pucky, explain just how you meant to plant this idea in me."

The mousebeaver was inwardly triumphant. Rhodan had addressed him as Pucky instead of Lt. Puck. It was a sign that the threatening stormclouds were slowly drifting away.

"Perry, I wasn't even trying to influence you, at least not deliberately. The only reason I drifted that way was because I suddenly saw that you were thinking along those lines anyway, and all my very weak power of suggestion did maybe was to filter in a sense of confidence in the idea. Please, I don't want to swear it a third time... you have to take my word for it! The only wrong thing about it was that I didn't have the nerve to tell you. But the more I mulled it over the more I thought: Pucky, it's a top-flight plan. It'll help the Boss to kill 2 birds with one stun. First, he can pick up a beautiful source of revenue from Cokaze; and second, it will enable him to get to Archetz without risk, through the Soltenites... So Perry, do you think maybe, I came up with something good?"

"What's this about a source of revenue?" asked Rhodan in some surprise.

Pucky appeared to grow a notch taller. "Well, you see this Cokaze seems to have a little side arrangement with the chieftesses of Solten—you know, the men there don't have much to say about things. The way the deal works is that the Solten spaceships operate under commission of the Springer clans, and if I see through Cokaze the way *I think* I do, in return for that license he's picking up a 10% take from the operation.

"It shouldn't be too difficult to watch for a chance where we can just sort of rap our gypsy friend Cokaze over the knuckles a little and convince him to knock off his whip cream machine. That way we could maybe pick up a few extra friends in the Arkon Empire..."

"Hm-m-m," grumbled Bell. "You're monkeying around with a race of liars!"

"That's left field just now, Bell. Anyway, Pucky, I'll keep that idea on the griddle for a while. But I hope you understand that this whole business isn't going to exactly speed up your promotion!"

Pucky laughed and his incisor gleamed like polished chrome. "Come on now, Boss!" he exclaimed magnanimously. "What do you think I care about that? Promotion or demotion... it makes no difference the main thing is you didn't boot me out of here."

He disappeared from the spot where he had been standing. The air was still shimmering from his passage as Rhodan turned to Marshall.

"John, do you believe Pucky's explanation?"

"Yessir but only because it came from Pucky. I wouldn't swallow such a yarn if it came from anybody else."

* * * *

Enre the hypercom specialist for the Galactic Traders was steadily driving his colleagues on Archetz out of their minds—and he wasn't far from that stage himself. There had been 4 hypercom communications from Terra to Arkon—three of them to the war planet and one to the Crystal World. All of them had resisted every attempt to decode them.

"Those aren't intelligible messages," asserted one assistant, "they're just a bunch of band jamming—ECM, interference!"

Enre informed everybody that they nevertheless were hypercom messages and not electronic countermeasures but that was as far as his knowledge went. Still, he did not give up. He ordered all other developmental work to be held in abeyance. The deciphering task took top priority.

Toward evening the first clue was uncovered.

"Enre!" his senior assistant called to him. "There's something wrong about these waveform positions..."

Yes, they seemed somehow displaced, in fact they had to be. That much appeared to be certain by the time midnight rolled around. Enre had sent everybody home except for his senior man. Nearby the positronicon was humming almost inaudibly. The two of them waited anxiously for the vital readout. The computer should now be able to give them some information as to what was wrong with the hyper-frequency waveforms. It had to tell them why every one of the mysterious messages from Terra consisted of displaced amplitudes.

The plastic-foil readout chucked into the receiver tray. Enre and his chief assistant both stared at it nonplussed. The positronic machine insisted that the wave peaks of the 4-hypercom dispatches were not displaced.

"I'm going to get some sleep!" Enre blurted out disappointedly and he threw the punched strip on the table.

"Not I!" said his second in command. "I'm curious to know what trick these Terrans are trying to play on us this time!"

"Do you know the Terrans?"

"No."

"But I do. One of them! Perry Rhodan's son. By the gods I tell you that if all Terrans are like him then we're going to hear a lot more about them!"

"He appears to have caused you a bit of trouble."

Enre flared up. "Why just me? The Revolutionary Council is in disagreement on account of him. And why? Because Rhodan's son looked strangely at Patriarch Gatru. Don't ask me how he looked at him. Gatru had him taken away by a robot but it didn't phase the youngster at all. He's a wild one, that fellow..."

"So now he's locked up?"

"Who?"

"Rhodan's son."

"Yes, it looks as if they've taken him far, far below somewhere. Maybe even as deep as I went today. It's hard to imagine what's going on down there. I've never seen such tremendous industrial installations as I've seen in the past few days—at least what I saw of them as the grav-lift passed through various cavern tracts, I don't know what good it will do us. Well, good luck. Try to figure out those hypertransmissions. Good night..."

* * * *

Under a massive counter-detection screen, Col. Baldur Sikerman flew the flagship *Drusus* deeper into the Forit System. He finally took up a holding position between the orbits of the 3rd and 4th planets. The 5-D mass sensors were doubly manned and there were triple crews on the hypersensors and all tracking, range and bearing instrument consoles plus anything else that could affect the existence or non-existence of the 1,500-meter diameter spacesphere. All gun turret hatches were open and the crews sat behind their weapons in fire readiness. The battle-stations condition meant that all hands wore spacesuits. Only their helmets were flipped back for the time being.

On the great panoramic screens gleamed the fascinating spectacle of star cluster M-13. In spite of the panob gallery's great visual capacity the screens were not large enough to encompass the entire star system at this range. But no one in the Control Central was concerned about it. Nobody was stunned by its incredible splendour because they were all occupied with their work tasks, and nobody had time to stop and admire a scene upon which they had often looked with wonder.

The Forit solar system revolved at a distance of 248 light-years from the central world of the star cluster

which placed it well out in the 'thinner' zone where the stellar density was light. There was a small reddish sun—Forit—four small, insignificant planets, two of them barren rocks. Only the second planet supported humanoid life. Here the race of some 50 million Soltenites made their home. These were the people the Arkonide catalogues had referred to as a race of liars. On the planet closest to the sun there was only animal life. Having originated from the Arkonide race the Soltenites had not only gone through a physical degeneration but also their social order had been reversed. Out of an original patriarchal system an extreme form of matriarchy had developed. The woman was everything; the man was merely a beast of burden and even though he was the father of his children it was only biologically significant.

The same reversals and deterioration had affected the religion of the race. The Soltenites' forefathers had still believed in Arkon's pantheon of gods many millennia before but now the Soltenites were immersed in demonism and paid homage to hideous spirit ogres, considering them to be deities worthy of worship—and all such demonic gods were without exception of the masculine gender.

Rhodan's 'exo-ethnologists' had not been able to explain the strange paradox. On the one hand there was a strict matriarchy and on the other an exclusive patriarchy among the demon gods. The Arkonides were normally very careful and detailed concerning records of all peoples within the Imperium but in the case of the Soltenites their data was astonishingly sparse and uninformative. The question arose as to whether the race on Solten might have impressed the Arkonides of the past as being either too weird or sinister.

"This could be a long wait," said Sikerman to his copilot and with a note of derision he added: "Maybe the Soltenite men have been confined to their rooms by their women and don't dare go out on the streets."

The *Drusus* was circling the 3rd planet in freefall. Its mighty impulse engines were idling with an occasional sputtering rumble. The greater portion of its power plant capacity lay dormant with energy banks held in battle reserve. The only 100% power loads were connected to the gun positions.

The Forit System's planet 3 moved slowly across the panob screens, an airless world of stone without even any recognizable surface features. It was 2,460 km in diameter but its gravity was a heavy 2.3 on the scale. The *Drusus*'s supersensitive hypersensor was indicating a steady stream of warp disturbances but they were all at such remote distances that they were practically disregarded.

Somebody spoke up with a question: "Actually, how big is the Soltenites' fleet, anyway?"

"About 5,000 ships," answered an operator at the positronic console.

Which explained, of course, why Terrans and Soltenites hadn't run into each other so far. By comparison with the average size of other major fleets this minuscule force was like a dust mote.

There was a sudden gurgling outburst of laughter from a nearly white-skinned Swahili named Dando. Everyone in the Control Central knew who it was because Dando's rich laughter was inimitable. The only mystery was what he was laughing about—until Col. Sikerman became too distracted by it.

"All right, Dando, when are you going to knock it off?" he asked from his pilot seat without turning around.

There were a few more gurgling ripples of laughter before Dando could answer. "OK, Colonel—but I get a kick out of these Soltenites!"

Sikerman became interested. "You mean that's what the ruckus was all about?"

"Sure, Colonel!" Dando's gleaming white smile appeared. "Man, if I was a Soltenite I'd be a liar, too! I'd lie right up to the rafters! The poor devils have to lie when they're out anywhere in the Empire—they have to cover up how ridiculous they must feel, being tied to 'mama's' apron strings like they are!"

"Gyrating galaxies...!" Sikerman sought to scratch his head but was blocked by his helmet which was back on his neck. He turned quickly to his co-pilot. "Take over!" he said, getting up. Still standing next to the flight console he turned to the Swahili. "Dando, how did you come across that idea?"

The latter burred again with his laughter. "Excuse me, Colonel, but it gets to me when I think that a Soltenite has to ask his wife for permission to even go beddy-by! Don't you see? They'd have to lie like troopers when they're on any other world where menfolks are at the helm! They have to play the big man and come on strong like the others and they probably overdo it so in the end they get made out to be liars. And if the poor guys luck runs bad it gets back to the Squaw Command that he's been struttin' high as cock o' the walk, man, and those Arkon records show that he's in for a real strappin' session back home! 'Course that there last part's no laughin' matter, Colonel!"

Sikerman's face reflected bewilderment as he shook his head.

"Colonel," Dando added, "I was just thinking, that's all!"

Rhodan, Bell and Marshall had been waiting in Rhodan's cabin with mounting impatience, wondering when they'd have their first contact with a Soltenite spaceship. When the intercom rang, Bell showed his relief.

"At last!" he exclaimed.

Sikerman's face on the video screen seemed to confirm his thought but Bell looked flabbergasted when the commander proceeded to relate to Rhodan what Dando had told him.

"Thanks, Sikerman," Rhodan replied. "And you may give my compliments to Lt. Dando. I think he may have solved the puzzle. Those poor devils," he added, shaking his head in commiseration.

"I'd become a liar, too..." Bell started, not realizing at first he was speaking aloud. He stared at Rhodan. "Are you sticking with the plan?"

"Of course," answered Rhodan.

"Terrific!" said Bell, derisively. "That confounded mousebeaver really hatched out a lulu for us! To the devil with him!"

"Pucky... Pucky... Pucky!" muttered Marshall resignedly.

"What's so bad about it?" asked Rhodan by way of rebuttal. There was a twinkle of amusement in his grey eyes. "Wouldn't you say we might at least learn a lot here? Maybe well just learn what it's like to be a Soltenite. Only thing is, of course, I don't think I'd like to be under the thumb of a... how did Dando express it? Under a Squaw Command." He laughed. "I can see it now—a Wig Warm Council!" And he raised a brow at Bell. "I don't know, though, Tubby—don't you think it might do you some good?"

Reginald Bell was never one to be subtle. His answer was close to being an eruption. "Perry, if you ever

go through with another original pipe dream again that that misplaced midget cooks up—"

"My chubby chum, either you're suffering lately from a chronic case of indecision or you're the victim of extortion by said misplaced midget. Would you care to explain the meaning of the expression, Trobbel?"

Before Rhodan had finished his question Bell was on his feet and headed toward the door without looking back. "I'd better get to the Control Central and check things out!" As he exited he slammed the door rather heavily.

"Careful, Chief!" There was an amused smile on John Marshall's face. "Mr. Bell is about ready to explode."

"I know, John, but I'm curious to know what Trobbel means. Do you happen to, by any chance...?"

"I don't know, either, sir. Solar Marshal Mercant has already questioned me about..."

"Me too..."

* * * *

On board the *Drusus* it was the beginning of the 5th hour of waiting. The operators at the hypersensors were yawning as their alertness gradually wavered. Suddenly, however, they came alive. Their tracking instruments flashed a proximity alarm.

Lt. Brack at range control beat them to the punch: "Spaceship! Distance is 2.4 million km., Colonel!"

"The course...?"

Then the data began to rattle out like a hailstorm. The ship's computer automatically registered all indicator inputs and proceeded to process them. The *Drusus*' power stations instantly switched the reserve energy banks into full-load distribution. A siren whined in the Fire Control Central and 3 eerily glowing red lights came on.

Top alert!

The *Drusus*' impulse engines groaned aloud as though pausing for an instant to take a deep breath and then they blasted forth with all their thundering power. The vast ship came out of freefall and picked up speed. At the same time the antigrav generators set up their deep-throated rumbling. Power plants 11 through 14 were feeding their total outputs into the anti-detection screens. Only ships of the Stardust and Imperium class were able to generate anti-screens of this magnitude and hold them stable.

"Alien ship undercuts our course at..." And again came the readouts, degrees, timing factors and all other pertinent data.

With the flip of a switch Sikerman ordered the positronic nav-computer to regulate the *Drusus*' course. The distance of the alien vessel narrowed perceptibly.

"Ship class? Gentlemen, what's holding up the show?" urged the Colonel.

"Still need 2 more inputs... It looks like... Colonel, it's a Solten type! Zep-shaped—no mistake!"

"Thank you! Baldur Sikerman leaned slightly toward his panel microphone. "Fire Control! By order 1, you're free to fire!"

The confirmation was like an echo: "By order 1, free to fire!"

But the guns of the *Drusus* still remained silent. Order 1 required the superbattleship to make a closer approach to the target vessel.

The compartments of the *Drusus* began to set up a rumble. This effect was characteristic of all spherical spaceships when their engines were under full power. Even the Arkonides had so far been unable to eliminate these resonance effects which under sustained full-power flight could be fatiguing to both men and machines.

The Fire Control officer was oblivious to the hull rumble. He was reading the range data coming from the ship's computer and he could see by his panel scopes that his gun positions were aligned with the tiny target blip.

Then the range indicators flashed green!

It appeared that the positronicon was as familiar with Order 1 as Col. Sikerman or the Fire Control officer.

Green-fire free... The signal came through to pulsator cannon 4.

Sustained fire, 3 seconds. Energy consumption 10, the minimum amount for this duration and range. The energy consoles of power station 2 only registered the emission on their pen graphs but the main gauges did not move.

The Fire Control officer reported laconically to Col. Sikerman in Control Central: "Direct hit, by order 1."

Nobody in Control Central was surprised that the small zep-shaped ship continued on its course unhindered. Also, under full magnification of the special observation screen the Soltenite ship revealed no damage.

In the mutants' Operations Room, the tall lean teleporter Ras Tschubai was looking at the same scene on his screen. An optical counter flashed the range numbers at him from the upper edge of the viewplate. When the alien ship was 300,000 km distant, Ras Tschubai closed his space helmet. At 250,000 km, suddenly his seat was empty.

"He's gone!" announced the telekinetic mutant Tama Yokida matter-of-factly.

* * * *

Ras Tschubai rematerialised in the Control Central of the zep-shaped Soltenite ship, which couldn't have measured quite 80 meters in length. When he became visible he was holding an impulse beamer in one hand and a hypno-gun in the other but he didn't need either of the hand weapons.

Four paralysed Soltenites were there, two in the flight seats and two on the deck, but they were not in a condition to take notice of his presence. Tschubai quickly inspected these strange-looking men, noting that their eyes were almost hidden under the unusual bulge of their foreheads. They wore their black hair in a fringed style but when Ras looked at their beards a slight smile touched his tense face. They were neatly braided into pigtailed and stiffened with a fixative so that they stood out like so many porcupine quills.

Ras did not spend much time in the primitive-looking control room. He searched through one cabin after the other. After locating 15 crewmen he still had not encountered a female Soltenite. He found no one in the 4 cargo holds which were stacked to the ceiling with smelly hides, and the odour emanating from them was almost anaesthetizing. But in the engine and power rooms he found the 16th and 17th aliens, both of who had also been paralysed into unconsciousness by the pulsator shot from the *Drusus* .

While in a narrow passageway of the ship the teleporter turned on the telecom of his special suit. "To the *Drusus* : the crew here consists of 17 men; no women among them. Effect of pulsator beam is 100%. Will now attempt to shut down the propulsion. Over and out!"

Then he went back into the control room and removed one of the Soltenites from a flight seat. After placing the alien on the deck he turned to the console to familiarize himself with the controls. Meanwhile the *Drusus* was approaching the small freighter at greatly diminished speed. Suddenly in the superbattleship's giant power section the typical high whine of the tractor-beam generators was heard. Before Ras Tschubai had a chance to deactivate the smaller ship's synchro-system the Soltenite vessel was slowed in its course as though grasped by an invisible giant hand.

A half-hour later the small alien ship lay in one of the *Drusus* ' main hangar bays. Two members of the medico team removed all of the paralysed 'bumpheads' to the ship's hospital. By comparison with the greater ship the cabins of the *Lorch-Arto* now seemed to be oppressively small and narrow.

With an increasing velocity the *Drusus* left the Forit System under full coverage of its anti-screens and withdrew to a seldom-travelled area of space in one of the stellar arms of the cluster. Meanwhile Rhodan's specialists were going over the specifications and construction of the captured ship and other experts were delving into the pertinent language and ethnological data. At the moment the main positronicon was exclusively restricted to the use of these specialists. The super computer made a quick analysis of the Soltenites' planetary language. Within an hour it had organized the grammar, vocabulary and syntax.

"So we even come to that," grumbled Bell when he heard that hypno-training was to be used. The only way he was going to quickly learn the alien's language was through this process of suggestion which had been developed by the Arkonides.

The hypno-course was also given to Rhodan, Marshall, Pucky, the two teleporters Tako Kakuta and Ras Tschubai, also to the telepathic hypnotist Ishibashi as well as the telekinetic mutant Yokida. A half-hour later they all came out of the hypno-training room with a fluent capability in the Soltenite language, both in speech and the written word. A second group to undergo the treatment consisted of Fellmer Lloyd, mental tracker and telepath, André Noir the mutant hypnotist, and three others. There was still a third group waiting for processing.

The bio-plastic surgeons and makeup men were already waiting for Rhodan and the rest who had come through the speed training. Of course nothing could be done to Pucky. He was—and remained—Pucky the mousebeaver. But the humans were turned into Soltenites. Earthmen were converted into characteristic ‘humpbeads’.

Under direction of Dr. Tschai Toung, the Chinese plastic surgeon and clinical makeup expert, the bioplastic specialists strove to prove that they were connoisseurs of their art.

Tschai Toung was preparing the Deputy First Administrator for the next phase of the procedure. "And now for the spike beard—the porcupine special..."

Bell's retort did not reflect the finer side of his nature, probably because Pucky was ribbing him to the core. The mousebeaver kept grinning at him relentlessly with his gleaming incisor tooth.

In the *Drusus* 'Operation Detail' department, everything was going at a fever pitch. Here the connotation 'detail' was actually an understatement. Next to the Centre in Terrania it was the most ingenious camouflage plant in the galaxy and even the Greater Imperium had nothing to compare with it. Here the watchword was: nothing impossible! Which was not an overstatement. They were so good at imitation that their creations could withstand the most intensive Arkonide inspection—and little more than that could be asked for.

At present there were only 16 Soltenites in the ship's clinic. Through application of Ara-type medication the Terranian doctors had removed the aliens from the paralysis induced by the pulsator beam. However they took precautions to prevent the therapy from leading to a condition that might get out of control. A state of hypnosis was built into the regeneration process. This was calculated to hold the Soltenites in a submissive state for at least 30 hours.

The 17th 'humpy' was in the bioplastic section under control of three physicians and was serving as a model for the makeup artists. By this means, from Rhodan on down, every last man of the combat commando team was changed into a 'genuine' Soltenite.

* * * *

Three hours after the hypno-processing the Solten Commando Team was ready for its mission. Seventeen 'Soltenites' boarded the *Lorch-Arto*. At the moment since Pucky was playing the role of himself with nothing to hide, he did nothing to conceal his special faculties. Instead of carrying his odd-looking supply case he let it float ahead of him supported by his telekinetic powers.

Rhodan and Bell did not find it difficult to become familiar with the somewhat unusual design features of the *Lorch-Arto* because in spite of its zep shape it followed basic Arkonide concepts. It required a number of hours for all hands to become accustomed to it but finally Rhodan signalled the *Drusus* Control Central that he was ready to launch from the hangar.

Once more the alien vessel was gripped by the mighty tractor beam and was removed into outer space at a considerable distance beyond the anti-detection screens.

Slowly the *Lorch-Arto* began to pick up speed. The men in the superbattleship's Control Central watched silently as the elongated little ship dropped away into the blackness of the void. It looked as if it was about to make a wide loop around star cluster M-13 but the infallible tracking system of the *Drusus* was not to be deceived. It revealed that the *Lorch-Arto* was taking a direct course for Archetz, the Springers' most important planet.

However there were few men on board the *Drusus* who knew the real reason Rhodan and his best mutants had undertaken this dangerous mission. And those who did know kept asking themselves: would the Chief find Thomas Cardif and would it finally result in a reconciliation between father and son?

5/ MYSTERIOUS DESTRUCTION

On the Springer world of Archetz the spaceport at Lus had suffered little damage from the Druuf attack. It had remained operable as the only port on the planet that had not required extensive repairs.

The *Lorch-Arto* had been hailed by telecom and directed to land at Lus where for 2 hours it had been sitting at pad number 2005. As soon as it had set down it was surrounded by the Springer port police.

"Nobody leaves the ship! Open your cargo ports—let's have your IDs and the manifest!" The Springer inspection detail came on board with 5 combat robots. The mechanical guards posted themselves at the airlocks while 11 Galactic Traders went through every nook and corner of the *Lorch-Arto* .

The Soltenite commander made a weak attempt to protest. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

One of the Springers retorted scornfully: "Ask your wife when you get back home, Maixpe! Maybe she'll be in a good mood and will only give you a light spanking for your stupid questions."

Three other Springers burst out laughing as they looked down derisively at the two stooped 'hump-heads' in the Control Central. "Get out of the way!" said a Springer in harsh tones and he pushed one of the Soltenites roughly out of the way although this one seemed to be rather ruggedly built in comparison to the rest of his people."

"*Trobbel!*" exclaimed the Soltenite angrily as he was shoved aside but at the same moment he had to duck a menacing blow from the port official.

"Lousy liar!" growled the latter and he turned to an inspection of the freight documents.

The *Lorch-Arto* carried a cargo of 'od' pelts which were aromatic animal hides from the innermost Forit planet. Each good skin was worth a fortune. The so-called ods were fur-bearing animals about 5 feet long with snake-like 6-footed bodies but with heads that reminded Terrans of bulldogs. For centuries they had been hunted almost to extinction and during the last 5 decades or so they had become so rare that the price of od-pelts had increased 800%.

"Who's getting these furs? Naturally, Cokaze... The Old Man has his fingers in the game no matter where you look," commented the Springer grumpily as he continued to go through the manifest.

In an obsequious tone of voice the commander of the freighter asked: "Gentlemen, am I permitted to put in a call to Patriarch Cokaze?"

The leader of the policing force turned on him angrily. "Here you are permitted even less than at home, hump-head! Hold your tongue! That terrible Intercosmo of yours is a pain in my ears! Now you just wait till we've finished the inspection!"

"Yessir—just as you say, gentlemen!" said the commandant with a humble bow—but he attempted to ignore the furiously clenched fists of his first officer, the Soltenite with the thicker than average build.

"Hey, Soltenite, what kind of a course do you call this—the one you came in on?"

Almost with too much zeal, Maixpe bent over the course indicator stylus. "Oh—ah—you see, my Lord, we encountered a ship from the fleet of the Mounder Onkto and we were forced to change course and fly to his headquarters. It cost us 30 pelts as a toll charge for passing through. May the demon gods favour me with a good excuse for this loss before the Council of the Great Mothers..."

"Out of my sight!" The Soltenite's obsequious affectations were repugnant to the Springer. "Both of you get out of here—come on, make it fast...!" He shouted several curses after them and was still muttering to himself as he returned to inspect other papers.

On the lower deck the two supposed Soltenites—Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell—were alone and the latter was giving vent to his rage.

"I tell you I can't put up with all this fawning and cringing very much longer! And what was that nonsense about the Big Mother Council?"

They didn't have a chance to converse. A Springer came out of the parts storeroom and when he saw them he shouted to them.

"Come here and open up this air-regenerator case!" he ordered. "Make it snappy!"

It was the odd-looking supply case that Pucky had floated on board with his telekinesis. And it was also his new home for the duration of their stay because no Springer must catch sight of him. Pucky could claim the dubious reputation of being even better known in the Arkonide Empire than Perry Rhodan! So here he was hiding inside the pseudo-air-regenerator box.

Rhodan sought to connect with the mousebeaver's thoughts but did not detect the slightest impulse.

"Open that cover, you lump-headed liars!" the Springer snarled at them and aimed his impulse beamer at them.

This even stirred Bell to a faster pace, although he still trembled with rage. The cover was lifted up and placed to one side. The Springer pushed forward roughly and stepped on Bell's foot in the process. The Earthman pulled back his foot but it caused him to fall on top of a portable current generator. With great effort he held back a curse and raised up to see the Springer's scornful grin, which he also had to swallow.

As Bell got up he swelled with anger but controlled himself. He scraped and bowed and spoke in the worst possible Intercosmo "My Lord, you are so kind..."

The Springer shuddered in revulsion at such servility. When he turned to inspect the inside of the regenerator case, however, he failed to note that a considerable number of circuits and components were missing.

But of Pucky there was not a trace. He had made himself scarce.

The Springer finally stomped out of the parts supply room and slammed the door behind him.

"Perry," Bell whispered, "I'm not going to put up with this treatment much longer!"

Pucky appeared between them out of nothingness. "Boss, do I have to go back into that cramped case again?"

When Perry only nodded, Pucky crawled into the box. Rhodan and Bell put the cover back on and secured it.

"We'd better let ourselves be seen in the Control Central, Reggie."

They entered the control room just as the leader of the inspection detail completed a connection with the clan of Cokaze. The patriarch's oldest son was visible on the viewscreen.

"We've been notified of the shipment," they heard the future clan chief say. "There's no security involved here at all. You should know the Soltenites are flying under our license. What's all this time-consuming red tape?"

From his own standpoint Cokaze's elder son spoke the truth but he did not suspect that the shipment notice had not come from the second planet of the Forit System. Instead it had come from the *Drusus*. So far Rhodan's espionage system was working perfectly.

It was then that Cokaze's son spied the two Soltenites. He knew Commander Maixpe and the *Lorch-Arto*'s First Officer Trexca. Under their bioplastic makeup Rhodan and Bell sensed a flush of anxiety.

"Alright, Springer," replied the port control inspector, "but you know there's been a tighter security on Archetz because of all the upheavals going on in the Greater Imperium. This ship and crew are cleared. They're all yours, Springer!"

* * * *

The precious od-pelts had just about all been removed from the last hold of the *Lorch-Arto* when a tremendous explosion occurred in the old freighter's engine room and strained every rib in its hull. The force of the explosion ripped a hole in the stern section that was 5 meters by 7 in extent and suddenly flames shot out and roared into the air. A radiation alarm howled through the *Lorch-Arto*.

Although back home the 17 Soltenites would have been confused and helpless under the tyranny of their wives, here they displayed an amazing cool composure in the face of the catastrophe. However, the *Lorch-Arto* would have melted into ruins if it hadn't been for the help of neighbouring vessels and their

fire-fighting equipment.

The battle went on for 10 minutes against bursts of energy, new explosions and thousands of degrees of heat but finally the ancient tramp ship was removed from danger. However, it was no longer capable of taking off. It would be necessary to move it to a Springer repair dock where a new propulsion unit would have to be installed.

"How do I explain that to the Council of the Great Mothers?" said Maixpe whiningly to the eldest son of the Cokaze clan. But in the next moment he straightened defensively and put on a noble air. "Oh well, I'll just tell the Council that they don't know about such things and to kindly mind their own business! That's what I'll tell them—right, Trexca?"

The Springer cut him short. "Quit bragging, Maixpe, and don't be so anxious to brand yourself as a liar! You know you won't dare contradict anybody back home and you'll take your punishment in silence! Anyway, you Soltenites aren't men... you're—well, Soltenites. But getting back to this, you know our engineers still can't figure out what caused that engine explosion, Maixpe. Strange... a very puzzling case."

"That's right," echoed Maixpe. "A very puzzling case it is for us, too. Do you think the Springer police played a dirty trick on us?"

"Don't be insane, Soltenite!" said Cokaze's eldest son. "Your ship's going to be held up for about 14 days so we'll straighten out our accounts after my clan has paid for the docking and repair costs. Otherwise you and your crew are liable to squander all the proceeds."

"But we still need money!" interjected Trexca/Bell. "On Archetz there's still plenty going on!" He made the universally recognizable motion of lifting a glass to his lips.

"You lush!" Maixpe remonstrated. But he immediately backed up his request for an advance allowance.

"Good!" the Springer agreed. "First I'll arrange to have your freighter moved to a repair dock. Then I'll give you an advance payment on our account. Does that satisfy you?"

* * * *

Like its spaceport, the city of Lus had come through the Druuf attack almost without damage. The amusement centres lured the spacemen to squander their hard-earned pay the same as ever and the enterprising Springers had built up a lively business from these seductions. In the matter of money shuffling they were quite unscrupulous.

Unobtrusively the 17 disguised Terranians submerged themselves in the riotous atmosphere of entertainment. They embraced the attractions of the alien bazaars with open arms and pockets full of money, although with the inflation their funds might not reach too far.

"Ho there; liars, come and have a drink with us!"

"Well, does mamma's boy want to take a chance on a game today?"

Everywhere they were abused in this manner but at the same time they were looked upon with a sort of sarcastic commiseration. The half-drunken Springers who usually travelled all year from world to world found themselves suddenly on a few days of leave on Archetz where the ground felt a little more solid under their feet, so they invited the Soltenites to drink with them.

Perry Rhodan and Bell were sitting together with 3 dedicated gamblers.

"Hold your bids down!" Perry warned his heavysset friend in the Soltenite language. But Bell raised the ante the instant the cards were dealt. With his slight telepathic capacity and his ability to read much in alien faces, Rhodan was able to see through his playing partners almost constantly.

After several hours the others stared in amazement at the Soltenite and were forced to pass because they had lost all their money to him.

Maixpe/Rhodan made a friendly offer: "Tomorrow I'll let you have your revenge."

"Thanks but no thanks!" grumbled one of the Springers. "That kind of revenge is too expensive!"

It was the same at another wild gaming table where more than 30 Springers, Aras and Ekhonides sat with a single Soltenite and watched in a fevered pitch of excitement as the darting numbers flew beneath the indirectly lighted prism squares. The Soltenite was having an uninterrupted winning streak.

The croupier was slowly breaking into a sweat as he secretly switched the positronic circuits a third time so that the bank could recoup its losses during the next 20 plays.

Meanwhile John Marshall had grown accustomed to his braided beard and he had finally stopped squinting under the visor-like bulge of his false forehead. He was having a splendid time here. Just you wait, my friend—he thought. Even that trick won't help you! There's no way you can fool me!

At the last instant he chose prism 4, green 3. It was one of 133 possibilities. As was typical for a Springer croupier the banker had folded his arms but by means of a foolproof remote system he had given the game positronic control a signal—which Marshall read in his mind: prism 4, green 3. Within a fraction of a second prior to the fixing impulse, Marshall shoved a stack of banknotes to the spot that had been free until now.

The men roared with surprise; women shrieked. In all eyes there was greed for the money and envy over the Soltenites' uncanny luck. The 'hump-head' was paid off at 133/1 odds. The croupier had had to break out a new supply of money and now he shelled out countless bundles of banknotes onto the table in front of Marshall. But his face had turned an ashen colour. His hands trembled visibly. This weird streak of luck for the Soltenite was filling him with anxiety. And suddenly the Soltenite was no longer alone. Three other hump-heads had joined him. One of them had been clearly overheard to say that he had freshly loaded his impulse beamer that morning.

When John Marshall left the gaming table with his 3 companions he walked away with a fortune.

By 30:30 hours, standard time, not one of the 17 Soltenites remained in the amusement district. They had assembled elsewhere in a tavern frequented by spacemen and now sat conversing quietly in the Solten language at a long table. They did not have to worry much about being overheard. Aside from themselves there were few linguists in the Arkonide Empire who had a command of their language.

"Nothing so far," announced Maixpe/Rhodan. "Of course I hadn't counted on running across a clue this soon, anyway. Tomorrow Bell and I and Tschubai will have a look at the subterranean portion of the city. Marshall, you select the men who are to be assigned to Titon..."

Trexca/Bell interrupted. "But that's the planet's capital city—it's a rubbish heap!"

"Only the surface portion," Rhodan advised him. "Other than the toll in lives, the Druuf attack had no more effect on Archetz than a pinprick. This planet is another Arkon 3. And Lloyd, you know what you have to do—right?"

The tracking mutant nodded.

"And I suppose our little garden gnome Pucky can just sleep through it all!" pouted Bell.

"That he may!" declared Rhodan curtly, abruptly ending the conference.

At 31:45 standard time a message came in to the subterranean headquarters of the police in charge of controlling aliens on Archetz: all 17 Soltenites had chosen their hotel and were in their rooms.

But the information was not quite accurate now.

The two teleporters Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta had taken André Noir and Fellmer Lloyd with them in a teleport jump to Titon, where they made a joint reconnaissance to determine whether or not the amusement district of the capital city was still intact.

On their way back to their hotel, André Noir expressed himself to the others. "The Chief is moving too slowly for me. And this town of Lus is also the wrong place to look for Thomas Cardif. If he's anywhere to be found on Archetz it will be in the subterranean sections of Titon. Would anybody care to join me on that trip?"

* * * *

Rhodan's bioplastic disguise concealed his vexation but the almost complete disappearance of his eyes under the bulge of his forehead said enough. The more André Noir reported to him the worse his mood became. During this they moved normally with the press of pedestrian traffic and were occasionally separated for brief moments. But when they rejoined each other Noir continued to tell him about his nocturnal excursion into the subterranean areas of Titon.

"So..." Rhodan had nothing more to say.

They were again making use of the Soltenite language, which did not contain the word 'sir'.

"My Lord," Ras Tschubai addressed him from the other side, "last night we only attempted to anticipate what would have to be done today..."

Rhodan interrupted him and came to a stop near an airco taxi stand. He was surrounded by Noir, Tschubai, Kakuta and Lloyd. Bell was already getting into a hover-glider carrier with the other 11 men as

they intended to pay a visit to the repair dock where their freighter was located.

"I don't understand any of you!" he remonstrated in a sharp tone of voice. "I just don't get your careless and negligent attitude. I'm not interested in your motive but it's incredible that you could place us all in this deadly danger while we were lying asleep in our hotel rooms, completely unsuspecting. When we return to Earth we'll discuss this incident much more thoroughly. At the moment I have nothing more to say to you!"

Rhodan approached the next hover-glider. The four reprimanded mutants followed him in silence. Nor was any word exchanged as the carrier picked up speed and brought them to the outskirts of Lus where one moving conveyor channel after the other could be seen, separated only by extensive lines of industrial buildings.

They were looking down at this centre of heavy industry from an altitude of 1,200 meters. It stretched away to the horizon and in fact widened out like the rays of a searchlight until about 10 km beyond the farthest suburb it spread to right and left and joined with other industrial districts.

They searched in vain for any traces of damage which might have resulted from the Druuf spaceships' raid. This sector of the planet had survived the unexpected attack of the monsters without impairment. The 5 men in their bulging facial disguises were all thinking the same thing at the moment: there was nothing like this except on Arkon 3. Even with the most strenuous efforts the Earth was not able to show anything comparable, although the day was not too far off when the Earth's moon would be a single industrial plant, since it had been hollowed out many hundreds of km deep.

The automatic pilot of their air vehicle brought them down to the shipyard area where the *Lorch-Arto* was still waiting for the Springers' work robots to install a new propulsion unit in its stern. Two engineers from Cokaze's clan were just leaving the *Lorch-Arto*. Still shaking their heads they told Rhodan that it was simply incomprehensible. They had no idea what could have exploded in the freighter's engine room.

In garbled Intercosmo Rhodan told them that the explosions were the work of Terranian counter-espionage experts but that he and his men were in no great hurry to leave Archetz again. In so doing, he played his Soltenite role all the more convincingly.

Maixpe/Rhodan's hair-raising account proved to be too much for the Springer engineers. One of them interrupted him good-naturedly. "Why don't you give up, Soltenite? You don't have to lie to us about it. Save it for when you get back home. That's what you're afraid of, isn't it? Having to account for this to the Great Mothers?"

Rhodan pretended excitement. "But my Lords, last night the demon gods looked with favour on us!" He bowed and scraped before them in such a servile manner that Bell had to turn away with a half-muttered oath. "In the casino I won a fortune playing cards and at the tol-game table my engineer won 20 fortunes. We..."

"Sure, sure—that's fine!" said the other Springer exasperatedly and turned away. He didn't believe a word of the Soltenite captain's story. He knew only too well how brazenly the amusement places singled out spacemen as suckers.

The Terranians boarded their captured ship in order to change their clothes. Soltenite garb was not suitable for the action which was to transpire in the next few hours. The overall type of jumpsuits worn principally by the Ekhonides during space travel were more applicable for their purpose.

Bell was grumbling about the inconvenient hindrance of his braided beard and was just referring to himself as a caricature when he was interrupted by a shout from Rhodan.

"Pucky isn't here!"

The air-regenerator case that was his hiding place turned out to be empty. Rhodan called Marshall and cephalopath Fellmer Lloyd into the spares storeroom. He explained the situation in about three words and then gave an order.

"Try to find out where Pucky is located!"

Marshall was the first to give up. With only his telepathic capability he could not discover the mousebeaver's whereabouts. Shortly thereafter Lloyd also confessed he was not able to trace him down.

"It's for sure he's screened off his thought emanations again. Nobody can do it as well as..." Fellmer Lloyd fell silent, raising his head to look upward in surprise. "My Lord," he said, still using Soltenite speech like all the others, "Springer police are going to board us. They'll land here in 3 minutes. What's gone wrong?"

Rhodan, Bell and Marshall looked at him tensely. Lloyd was not only capable of identifying brain-wave patterns, he could also track people's approach, tell who they were, why they were coming and whether with good or bad intentions. The approaching police contingent was scanned by him to see what was on their minds.

"It has something to do with Pucky. There've been unexplained happenings everywhere—here in Lus, in Titon, in Mold and Fror, down below in the underground areas and also here at the space docks! Early this morning. Three robots were whizzed through the air in a high loop and they crashed against a steel converter plant 5 km away... No, they don't suspect us directly but they want to check us over to see if we're all accounted for."

Mold and Fror were two other cities of this most important of all Springer worlds.

Rhodan was somewhat at a loss. "Marshall, just what is going on with your mutants? Last night Tschubai, Lloyd, Noir and Kakuta made a side excursion on their own... and now it's Pucky. He knows very well that he must not be seen under any circumstances!"

"There's my thumb again!" muttered Bell. "And this lousy year of 2044..."

"To the devil with your ridiculous thumb!" interrupted Rhodan frigidly. "I can't take any more of that, so spare me that nonsense!"

"The Springer police are coming on board," announced Lloyd.

The authorities came in and started interrogating them. When had they left the city of Lus? What route had they followed to get here?

The 17 men were besieged by a hundred questions. Each was interviewed by another Springer, always in another cabin. For Rhodan and his men the situation was becoming critical. Marshall asked him telepathically if he should put the mutants into action but Rhodan did not think it was dangerous enough yet for such a manoeuvre.

Hold off, Marshall.

As Capt. Maixpe, Rhodan was interrogated by two Springer police officers. The two men from the alien control section knew their work well.

"We ought to send off a hypercom dispatch to Solten," one of the Springers was suggesting to his colleague. "That way we can get some further information about this freighter's crew."

This was of course something that must not happen.

Marshall, Rhodan called telepathically to his mutant chief, alert André Noir! The two Springers questioning me want to send a hypercom message to Solten and obtain information about us. Do you understand?

Got you, Chief!

"Yes, that's something I'd attend to right away," said the other Springer. "You can get in touch with the main hypercom station by radio. The answer should tell us... Soltenite, I'd like to know where you learned how to play our card game Bando-Bando!"

The change of subject indicated that their thoughts had ceased concerning a hypercom message to Solten. Although he was being questioned down in hold #2, Noir the hypno-mutant was nevertheless able to concentrate with such incredible intensity that the two Alien Control officers up in Control Central received a hypnotic block. It was so strong that it was going to require several weeks before it gradually faded and would permit them to remember that they had ever wanted to put in a call to Solten.

Meanwhile Rhodan, acting the role of Capt. Maixpe, was vociferously explaining where he had learned Bando-Bando, stating that since he always won a lot he was feared everywhere as a formidable player.

"Ye gods!" growled the taller of the two Springers. "Why have you created such liars?! Hey, Soltenite... you humphead! Why don't you try just once to quit telling lies? Did you bring that pack of cards with you, Anxga?"

Apparently the men in the Alien Control service occasionally permitted themselves a relaxation from their line of duty. The cards were dealt, the ante was set and Rhodan immediately raised it. The complicated game with its many variables began. And Rhodan played his worst card.

"Dealer!" snapped the tall Springer.

Anxga grinned his satisfaction. He won the first play. He also won the next one. The Soltenite appeared to have lost but then he showed the Springers his final card.

"I win, gentlemen—forgive me." There was a note of impudence in his servility. "Care for another game?"

"Continue!" Anxga demanded.

But by the fourth game Anxga cursed and threw down the cards. "These liars use their reputation for hustling, too! You think they're always handing you a line and suddenly they're not—so they take you in!"

"My Lords," said Maixpe obsequiously, "I didn't quite understand that last part. But this particular pot is mine. You threw away your cards. At least that's what the rules say, isn't it, my Lords?"

An hour later 23 Springers from Alien Control left the *Lorch-Arto*. As they got into their police carrier and took off from the dock landing, Anxga and his colleague were still fuming about the mendacious race of Soltenites.

Rhodan gave his men no time to discuss the incident. "Where's Pucky? What's that little devil been up to?"

No one could answer his questions. Only fragments had been picked up from the thoughts of the interrogating officers concerning the mysterious and supernatural-seeming events that had occurred in Titon, Lus, Mold and Fror. It gave them a picture which they were only later able to piece together.

* * * *

It had started when Pucky heard two Springer robots enter the *Lorch-Arto*. They even entered the spares storage room of the freighter. Pucky had gone back into his hiding place in the air-regenerator case and he waited. He hadn't ever been able to make much out of the distorted positronic impulses of these mechanical men but nevertheless he determined that one of these two was a specialist because his radiations were noticeably different from the other's emanations.

That's when the trouble began for Pucky.

This special robot which had been built by the Springers for use in the space wharf and repair dock area was nothing more than a device for taking inventories. It went through every freighter in the docks, room by room, taking a complete inventory of everything in the cabins and holds. This was so that later if any claims were made by a ship's crew it would be possible to determine whether or not a theft had occurred during the docking time.

The special robot was already aware that something wasn't right about the air-regenerator case. And Pucky was aware on his part that this robot's radically different X-ray vision spelled danger, so he teleported. But the hound of misfortune seemed to be at his heels. He rematerialised in the stern section where three work robots spotted him at once.

Pucky reacted with quick decision. He knew that nobody was supposed to see him under any circumstances, not even robots. But they had seen him and that's why they had to be destroyed, because their positronic memory registers would be able to betray him.

Suddenly the machine men felt themselves floating in the air. Their antigrav fields had little effect against the mousebeaver's telekinetic attack. They moved inexorably to the big cargo unloading lock, sailed through it and then rose vertically into the air. Pucky gave them sufficient velocity to enable him to release them for a second. He teleported outside onto the slightly arched roof of the wharf building where he was able to bring the robots under his control again. In the distance he saw a hemispherical structure that was apparently made of steel.

He made the two robots fall toward this metal structure on a collision course and the force of impact

was such that their sensitive positronic brains were completely demolished. After all, Pucky was an old hand at the art of deactivating such mechanical monsters.

The mousebeaver was not yet concerned with the fact that the flight of the 3 ponderous work robots had not gone unnoticed. He disappeared from the roof and rematerialised and a few kilometres below in one of the subterranean industrial sections of Lus.

He found himself between gigantic, roaring power presses. When he raised his mousebeaver paws to protect his ears from the noise he heard the blaring sound of alarms. The great presses which had been stamping out sections of cylindrical spaceships all became silent at once.

I caused the alarm, thought Pucky in sudden fright, and his incisor tooth disappeared. This was nothing to laugh about. The situation was far too serious.

How was I detected? he asked himself. Optically? By a mass detector? Did I cut through a signal beam?

He concentrated swiftly. He determined the direction from which most of the thought impulses were coming and in the next moment he disappeared from between the presses only to reappear behind a humming magnetic regulator in the main control station of this kilometre-long press assembly line.

"What?" Pucky heard an excited Springer shouting. "No further meter response? Doesn't the mass detector still mark the spot between 217 and 218?"

"Vanished!" replied another Galactic Trader. "As though snatched away! I don't understand it?"

When these two Springers were interrogated 10 minutes later by a security team they would not admit that a trespasser had been involved in the incident. They had been present when the positronic surveillance equipment had signalled the presence of somebody between presses 217 and 218—but what was reported, even gave the security detail second thoughts. The mass indicated only represented the bodily weight of a 5 or 6-year-old Springer child!

The mystery remained unsolved.

By the time he'd made his 6th goof, Pucky began to become desperate. He found himself in the subterranean part of the city of Mold. The entire city on the surface had been completely destroyed under the ray bombardment of the Druuf ships. When he materialized here he set off his 6th alarm!

He swore like Reginald Bell and with good reason because he also had reason to give his ungrudging admiration to the Galactic Traders' security system. No alien intruder could penetrate this gigantic underground industrial empire without being seen or detected.

He listened to the howling of the alarms without knowing whether or not he might have also set off a planet-wide system of alerts. Ever since Archetz had become the central world for the Springers there had not been as many alerts and arrests as on this day!

Three times Pucky had been forced to flee from Springers and three times the Galactic Traders had to be locked up. Pucky had also been forced to use his telekinetic powers to demolish two control stations, which had incapacitated several staging lines of production, the magnitude of which he had no idea.

214 km beneath the surface of the demolished city of Mold he was spotted by the optical surveillance system but in spite of it he had a stroke of luck. In the main security central for a total of 28 cavern

systems, 3 out of 20 super-sized viewscreens revealed the figure of an animal.

8 Springers were on duty in the Security Central; 7 of them were not able to recognize the mousebeaver. The 8th crewmember had once observed his likeness in an intelligence transmission but without paying much attention. This man was about to recall who or what this animal was, since it struck a familiar note. At the moment he couldn't remember where he had seen it before.

But the other excited Galactic Traders didn't give him a chance to think. For this reason the observation was not transmitted immediately to the planet's Central Security.

That was Pucky's stroke of luck.

He made an unobserved appearance in the local Security Central. Using his Arkonide hypno-beam weapon he erased the memory of his image from the brains of the 8 Springers. And then Pucky began to play. He had no other recourse. The positronicon had registered his picture. Eight strangely lethargic Springers looked on apathetically as the multi-ton positronic computer was ripped out of its deck-bolt anchorage. It floated toward the compact but super-powerful power plant and with a swiftness that was incongruous in view of its weight it finally crashed down into it.

Within seconds the positronicon was melted in the ravaging short-circuit fires of unleashed energies but Pucky fled it all in a teleport jump.

Only to rematerialise in the main exhaust channel of the giant cavern system! Completely immersed in every imaginable filth and with dust and fine metallic particles penetrating his throat and lungs, Pucky felt himself in the grasp of a tremendous warm air-stream and carried upward like a wilted leaf through the giant suction shaft. He thought his last hour had arrived and he would suffocate in his own indescribable odour. He only knew one goal: back to the *Lorch-Arto*. There he thought he would be safer than in this inferno of dusty, stinking filth in spite of the inventory robot.

* * * *

But what a sight Pucky was! And where was that awful stench coming from?

"Pucky!" yelled Rhodan, jumping away from the dust cloud that the mousebeaver shook from his fur.

Pucky rubbed his eyes with his paws. The dust particles irritated his tear ducts and water ran from his eyes like little brooks. He was coughing incessantly.

"Water!"

Tako Kakuta teleported aft and came back with water, which Pucky downed like a man dying of thirst.

"Oh that terrible taste! What kind of rubbish have I swallowed?" But his seizure of coughing subsided considerably as well as the watering of his eyes. "Is that stink coming from me?" he asked suddenly.

"It's not coming from us!" bellowed Bell.

Pucky disappeared but Marshall was able to trace him telepathically.

"He's taking a shower," he reported.

Dripping wet the mousebeaver emerged again out of nowhere. "Now Perry!" he began. "This time I'm innocent of everything! That's for sure. I was not on any side excursion."

"So? Then make your report, Lt. Puck! You probably know that we have you to thank for the fact that we've been questioned by the Alien Control police again?"

Pucky normally began to tremble whenever Rhodan left the "y" off his name. He was never reassured by being addressed by his rank. But all he could say in response to Rhodan's reproachful question was: "It's no wonder I brought the tourist police on the run!"

"Listen, Lt. Puck," Perry uncharacteristically exploded, "I want your report and I want it now!" And without any of your famous remarks. Dunk this donking around if you want to see another carrot before you're a year older!"

To everyone's surprise, Pucky did not appear to be the least bit shaken by this rebuke. In fact, he showed Perry Rhodan his incisor tooth!

Then he began his report. "A nude born baby could not be more innocent than I. But why should I go into all these affirmations when it's not necessary? I'll let the facts speak for themselves, First Administrator..."

Bell howled at him and bellowed. Pucky let him go on and paid no attention to him. He had turned toward Marshall and while Bell was still raging he spoke to his Corps Chief. "Just now there'll be no reading my mind, John. You'll have to wait for my report the same as the non-telepaths here. Is Fatso still raving...?"

And then finally he made his report in which he not only depicted his daring exploits but also furnished detailed information concerning the Springers' security system.

The mousebeaver felt that he was well in control of the situation. "Well, Perry, am I still Lt. Puck, you First Administrator of the..."

"Pucky, don't you think you should cough a little more?" Rhodan asked him. "It may be the only thing to keep that mouth of yours shut!" And he laughed at him with his ugly Soltenite face, every quill of his false beard shaking visibly.

* * * *

At the 274th km level under the destroyed capital of the planet, Patriarch Cokaze was being driven through the manufacturing sector. He hardly looked to his right or left nor did he seem to marvel at the expertise of his people who had settled here and artificially created a pleasant living environment. The naked grey stone of the cavern's ceiling could only be seen occasionally. Everywhere else an almost clear blue sky appeared to arch above the residential communities. At the same time the synthetic sky emitted

a diffused light so that the eternal cavernous night was transformed into a bright summer day such as one would expect on the surface of Archetz.

After a swift journey the small high-speed car suddenly slowed down. It came to a stop and its door opened automatically for the patriarch. His destination was this large open space or plaza which was paved with a blue-tinted plastic material. Only a northern semicircle was enclosed by houses. Toward the South began the realm of Patriarch Gatrú, the king of heavy industry on Archetz.

Cokaze had to use 3 different antigrav lifts to reach Gatrú's administrative headquarters. He had not been down here before but he had soon given up marvelling at this great concentration of monitoring and security installations.

He finally stood before Gatrú.

Since their recent altercation they hadn't seen each other. They eyed each other almost with hostility.

"Gatrú," requested Cokaze, "I have to see Thomas Cardif."

"He's in isolation, Cokaze—nobody talks to him!" replied Gatrú curtly.

"That's interesting, Gatrú." The big Springer remained calm. Silently he handed Gatrú an official permit, entitling him to speak to Cardif.

Gatrú didn't look at it.

Cokaze smiled thinly. "Has Cardif perhaps died on your hands because he couldn't assimilate Ara drug treatments?"

Even this insinuation failed to get a reaction out of Gatrú.

"Alright." Cokaze gave the appearance of having been defeated. As he started to leave the luxuriously furnished office he paused at the door. He smiled and said: "For your information, Gatrú-bankers Atual and Ortece are more impressed with Cardif's tactical advice than they are with your dilettante operations. You've no doubt been informed that the uprising on Hoond's Planet was crushed by Arkon's robot fleet. It was specifically your idea to renew the flare-ups there. And it was your idea to pick a quarrel with me. But it is my idea to boycott you into bankruptcy and you know old Cokaze doesn't just whistle in the wind, Gatrú. You can believe it."

Cokaze had threatened this once before but now Gatrú felt that he would follow it through. He knew the influence Cokaze had with the other space-faring Springer clans.

"What do you wish to discuss with Cardif? The uncanny happenings that have taken place in our factory areas? Is this arrogant Terran supposed to be clairvoyant, too?" Gatrú had fired off 3 questions and to all three Cokaze had laughed almost scornfully. But he didn't answer them.

"I want to be present when you speak with the Terran, Cokaze!" There was too much evidence now of Gatrú's overbearing attitude. Cokaze's boycott threat had shaken him severely.

"You can be with me when I question him, Gatrú—why not? All I'm going to ask him is if he thinks Terrans are wandering around loose on Archetz!"

"Terrans on Archetz? In the midst of us? Down here? Are you in your right mind, Cokaze?"

But once more the Springer patriarch declined to answer these questions.

A half hour later he asked: "How deep are we here, Gatru?"

"539 kilometres."

"And what's the meaning of this raybeam security barricade—perhaps a prison?"

"What does it look like?" growled Gatru.

They passed through one more security gate that was positronically controlled and then they were facing Thomas Cardif.

"Cokaze?" There was both surprise and scorn in the single word. Thomas Cardif did not get up. During the few days of his imprisonment he had come to look more like Perry Rhodan than ever.

"Cardif..."

"Patriarch Cokaze, you are a traitor!" Cardif interrupted him sharply. His yellowish Arkonide eyes flashed indignation. "I've deserted, broken my oath. That too, is treason, but it's not based on any cheap and underhanded motive. You know, Cokaze, why I am Rhodan's enemy and why it must be so if I want to hang onto one last spark of self-respect and honour. I have one goal: to avenge the murder of my mother, Thora. To achieve that goal, all means are justified. You could have profited by that, you greedy Springers! The Solar Empire would have dropped into your laps like a ripe fruit, along with the Arkon Imperium. But you weren't big enough to swallow just one reversal. You want the prize in your money-hungry hands instantly. Patriarch, I thought that in you I had an ally. But what did you do when you and I lost the first round? You betrayed me to this petty miser! You permitted me to sit here in prison! Protective custody—don't make me laugh! Put on ice so that one day I might take Perry Rhodan's place as a phantom Administrator of the Solar Imperium—a puppet to you! How often do I have to insist that I have no political ambitions? I want to see my mother's murderer pay, and after that I want nothing, nothing more at all, and I also don't want to be the Administrator! Get that through your head, once and for all! I just don't have a merchant's soul like yours, Cokaze. What do you want from me now?"

Neither Cokaze nor Gatru had been able to interrupt him. The words had gushed from his lips like a torrent.

Forcing himself to remain calm, Cokaze finally spoke. "Cardif, later we'll go more into detail as to whether or not I'm a traitor. Then you will realize that I did not betray you. But the reason for our visit here..." And he proceeded to describe the mysterious acts of destruction which had gone on incessantly during the past 5 days in the underground industrial installations. He ended his report with a question: "Cardif, based on these observations would you say that Terrans are on Archetz and that this destruction may be attributed to them?"

When Cokaze had first begun his account, Cardif had started inwardly, realizing that this must be the work of Rhodan's mutants. But the same cold calmness came over him that Perry Rhodan himself had always demonstrated when in dangerous situations.

"So all of a sudden, Cokaze, you have need of me again! Now I'm supposed to play the traitor and

voluntarily put a noose around my neck? No, I like it here very well, Cokaze. Thanks for the visit!"

He did not reveal by word or action what he knew now: Rhodan's mutants were on Archetz! They were looking for him! And Thomas Cardif was certain that they would track him down.

This was the end for him—at least for now...

6/ THE DREAD DECISION

It was now 8 days since Pucky's first excursion into the underground industrial complex of Archetz and since his first acts of destruction which had been forced upon him as the only means of saving his mousebeaver skin. But now suddenly the sharply increased surveillance of the tourist police seemed to be tapering off.

Fellmer Lloyd, the mental tracker, was the first to notice it, and soon the other telepaths confirmed his observation. After that the Galactic Traders' Allen Control police excluded the 17-man Soltenite crew of the *Lorch-Arto* from the area of suspicion because on the entire planet there were no intelligent beings who acted more harmless than these 17 Soltenites. They were a simple lot who could expect to be punished when they returned to Solten and their stern, tyrannical wives. On the other hand, the unknown 18th member, who was actually Lt. Puck of the Mutant Corps, became more active than ever.

But Pucky had changed considerably. Having been placed strictly on his own resources he was driven now by the heavy weight of responsibility that rested in his hands—for the fate of his best friends and the Solar System itself. Thus he had put aside his usual impishness and turned to his work in earnest. Before each of his self-ordered missions he planned how he might cause these agitated Galactic Traders the greatest trouble with the least effort.

His operations increased from day to day. And from day to day he became more familiar with the hollowed-out planet of Archetz and its labyrinth system of caverns. But the overview he obtained of the security arrangements was of inestimable importance. However—there was no trace of Thomas Cardif and this worried him greatly because for Rhodan and his men the time was running out in which they could legitimately remain on Archetz. The freighter in the repair dock would soon be ready for flight.

Today as every day before, Pucky reported to Rhodan by means of telepathy. He was crouched inside the air-regeneration case and was gnawing on a giant carrot. While pleasantly chewing his favourite food he beamed his thoughts out to the Chief.

Nothing again, Perry! I don't understand it but I can't find a single clue that would point to Thomas' whereabouts. Of course I can't demolish every industrial plant that's underneath Titon. That would be beyond my telekinetic powers.

From his hotel room Rhodan answered by the same means: *They've advised us the fighter will be ready by early tomorrow, Pucky. Do you still advise against putting the mutants into action? Pucky, think carefully what your answer means—for me and all of us and also for Thomas!*

Boss, the way you put that—the best carrot in the world wouldn't taste good anymore. Give me

time for the answer. I'm making one more jump now into Titon. I'm going down deeper and I'll be back in about an hour. OK, Perry?

OK, little friend. That's it!

The carrot fell out of Pucky's paws. Perry Rhodan had called him his little friend! Touched by emotion, he wiped his big beautiful mouse eyes.

Before teleporting he removed all traces from the air-regenerator case that might have betrayed his presence. When he rematerialised he found himself at the 270th km level of Titon and his landing spot was in the main security central of this system of caverns.

During his raids Pucky had found out how to infiltrate these places without setting off the alarms. In all levels there was only one location where one could enter undetected—in the security centres themselves.

4 Springers were on duty. Two of them were half dozing while the other two conversed. Pucky hid behind a synchronous switching cabinet and listened.

"Can you figure that, Lonk?" he heard one of them ask.

He used his telepathy to scan their thoughts and came within a hair of letting out a whistle. They were thinking and conversing about a certain prison and they grumbled about the five-fold security setup that had been ordered for the prison since yesterday. Excitedly, Pucky maintained contact, with the two Springers but then they began to talk about the mysterious catastrophes, 8 of which had already occurred in various places today.

Pucky suddenly had an urge to contact Perry Rhodan. He succeeded in his first attempt. In a matter of seconds he reported what he had found out.

Rhodan sent back a telepathic question:*But didn't you tell me just 3 days ago that you had inspected the prison, Pucky?*

Sure I did, Chief, but I didn't know that these star gypsies had two of them around here. I don't know yet whether the second one is—but Perry, do you think those beefed up security controls mean anything?

Try to find out but you're going to have to be very careful now. A half-hour ago Bell told me his thumb was starting to throb again.

Pucky was amazed.*Perry, do you still believe in that nonsense?*

I don't want to lose you, Pucky. That's why I'm telling you to watch out! Keep your eyes open and don't take any chances!

* * * *

The *Lorch-Arto* was equipped with a new propulsion unit and the damages to the outer hull of the old

Soltenite freighter had been expertly repaired. The spacer had been flown from the dock to the port by a robot crew and was just being handed over to Capt. Maixpe.

The takeoff had been scheduled by the port control for 7:30 standard time. It was such short notice that it allowed no time even to make a test flight with the new engines. It was obvious to Rhodan and his men that the Alien Control police were behind the order.

But it made little difference to them now.

The Solten Commando Mission had met with no success. They had not found a trace of Thomas Cardif. All 17 of the men knew what would come next. Now Arkon would begin to search for Thomas Cardif. The mighty legal machinery of the Greater Empire would begin to operate and agitator Cardif would be crushed by its wheels sooner or later.

Bell watched the last of the Springers leave the *Lorch-Arto*. Under his bioplastic forehead hump he gazed after them grimly. Unconsciously he rubbed the tip of his right thumb.

"Do you have to do that even now?" Rhodan asked him in mild reproach. Those who knew Perry Rhodan could understand what was going on inside him at the moment.

Thomas Cardif, his rebellious son, had finally slipped from his hands and was now marching blindly to his doom. Rhodan was thinking of what Atlan had told him concerning Cardif and the laws of Arkon. Even the Emperor had to abide by the laws and his hands would be tied if an Arkon court should sentence Cardif to death.

"What am I doing, anyway?" asked Bell in Soltenite. It was only then he became aware of what he was doing. "Oh this lousy thumb—what's wrong with it? Tell me, Perry, is Pucky actually on board?"

"Pucky?"

In every cabin and hold of the *Lorch-Arto* the intercom speakers rang out with an urgent call for the mousebeaver. Pucky had been on board but at present he was nowhere to be found on the freighter. Nor was he hiding in the air-regenerator unit.

Fellmer Lloyd, Marshall and the other telepaths were called into the control room. Find Puck! This was Rhodan's order. But if Pucky did not wish to be found he simply screened off his thoughts and then all the mutants including the mental tracker Lloyd could only reach out into emptiness.

Such was the case now...

Yet the *Lorch-Arto* was to take off within 5 minute! The new propulsion unit was in its final stages of warm-up, the power equipment was humming in idling mode. The ship was ready for takeoff.

Bell saw Rhodan step to the small hypercom transceiver. "What are you going to do?" he asked apprehensively.

Without turning, Rhodan answered: "To lose Pucky as well as Thomas is just too much. I'm sending off the code signal on pulse-burst transmission."

"And the main hypercom station on this lovely planet will intercept it and know that we're here!" warned Bell.

"The Springers can also assume that we've signalled Solten concerning our departure. Anyway, there's no sense to be made of the message. All it carries is the number 13."

"Oh that's nice!" said Bell sarcastically as he shook his head in desperation. He looked questioningly at Fellmer Lloyd.

"Nothing, sir," replied the latter in English. "Not a trace of Pucky."

At that moment the prearranged code signal went out to Atlan.

"So now what happens, Perry?" Bell wanted to know.

"We *do not* take off! We'll report a malfunction in the engines to tower control. That will gain us half an hour which is about the time Atlan will need to make a transition to Archetz and put things in order."

Perry! groaned Bell and his head sank in resignation.

* * * *

"This is spaceport control. Why don't you take off, Capt. Maixpe?"

The harsh voice of a Springer sounded from the loudspeaker.

Rhodan leaned toward the microphone. "Malfunction in the new propulsion unit. We have a delayed reaction in 3 of the impulse engines. Maybe I should break my neck in a takeoff, my Lord? What will our women say if we end up being buried on Archetz and..."

The Galactic Trader lost his patience. "You fools!" he roared, causing the loudspeaker to crackle. "Shut down those engines. We are sending you... What?" He must have been interrupted by someone at the control station because his face disappeared from the screen.

Bell could almost physically sense the approach of disaster. He kept thinking of what might be happening at the main hypercom station of this enemy planet.

And it was from that source that calamity struck.

The Galactic Trader's face reappeared on the screen. "A few minutes ago, where did you send a hypercom message, you liar? You are hereby grounded! Do not try to take off or we'll turn your ship into a gas cloud!"

"My Lord!" replied Rhodan humbly. "We wish neither to take off nor to die. We wish to return in good health to our wives. We have announced our departure to them and..."

"But perhaps also to Arkon, liar?" raged the Springer. "Would you like to contradict our hypersensor? Do not forget you are grounded-no takeoff! Over and out!" The Springer disappeared from the screen.

"And the Solar Fleet, Perry?" Bell ventured to ask.

"It remains in the Solar System, gentlemen. And just so that you get this straight—I am fully aware of the action I'm risking here together with Atlan. My son and Pucky are both at stake but what's most important of all is to give final proof to these Springers that Emperor Gonozal VIII can even handle the Galactic Traders' main planet—and also to show that the friendship treaty between Arkon and the Solar System is not a worthless scrap of paper. There is nothing more..."

He was abruptly interrupted by startled gasps from everyone as Pucky suddenly appeared in their mid-stand he was not alone. Perry Rhodan stood there unexpectedly facing his son Thomas Cardif!

The mousebeaver had obviously used his telekinesis to force him to come with him on his teleport jump back to the freighter.

Thomas Cardif's albino-like red Arkonide eyes gleamed with hatred at his father, his lips tightly compressed and the corners of his mouth curled downward in scorn. It was a moment in which Rhodan realized that the path to another's heart was often longer than the path to the stars.

John Marshall had an uneasy feeling. He scanned the room telepathically but it yielded nothing to explain his apprehension. It was only by chance that he glanced at the hypercom screen and happened to see the wave-oscillograph. It showed a constant waveform which was typical of a tracing signal. It was so strong and steady that it seemed the transmitter had to be right here in the control room of the *Lorch-Arto*.

"Chief!" He pointed wordlessly to the oscillograph and its hypercom wave-pattern.

In the next moment Rhodan sent out a signal beam on the hypercom—three times, wide open, without pulse coding or scrambling. It was the special Mayday signal 13 to Atlan. Then he turned calmly to everyone and announced: "Whether he knows it or not, Thomas Cardif is carrying a locator transmitter either on him or within his body. The Galactic Traders must know by now where he is. Gentlemen, our role as a Soltenite crew has been played out. We can drop the masquerade now and prepare ourselves for something unpleasant!"

* * * *

Pucky wasn't in a mood to report how he had found Thomas nor was he given any time to do so.

"They're coming!" announced Rhodan crisply. "If we make a move the Traders will use all their energy weapons without compunction. Lt. Cardif, I hope that you've correctly evaluated your situation. Don't try anything now because it would be quite imprudent of you. Pucky, you will know what to do to restrain him, won't you?" He looked at the mousebeaver but there was little enthusiasm in his answering nod. He did not like this episode with Thomas Cardif. Again he had the feeling that Rhodan had not handled his son correctly.

Cardif answered Rhodan's warning with silence.

Rhodan glanced at the viewscreens. "Two heavy cylindrical cruisers!" he confirmed.

Within a matter of minutes the Springers had brought into action everything they could muster on such short notice, yet their surrender ultimatum had not been given. Then—

"Unconditional surrender, Perry Rhodan!" it blared from the speaker. "Otherwise we will destroy you!" The ultimatum could not have been more tersely stated.

Somebody laughed. Thomas Cardif. "It seems that my goal will be reached after all! I thank you, mousebeaver, for bringing me here!" His Arkonide eyes gleamed irreconcilable hate at Rhodan.

The father cast a pensive glance at his son. Any path to his heart was doomed to destruction under this tidal wave of hate.

The freighter's loudspeakers rang again with the hard voice of the enemy. "We'll give you 5 minutes to leave the *Lorch-Arto* ! This is our last warning!"

The teleporter Tako Kakuta was standing by the hypersensor console. Other than a few inconsequential warp patterns, the entire Resuma system appeared to be unusually quiet. Atlan's fleet—the one last straw they were pinning their hopes on—was apparently going to be too late.

By now the small freighter had been surrounded by two heavy cruisers, 19 light cruisers and half a hundred heavily armed police craft.

"Four minutes yet," said Rhodan calmly. "Gentlemen, I am also afraid that Atlan won't make it in that short length of time. So we're going into action. Let me have a look there, Kakuta."

The teleporter made room at the sensor panel but Rhodan was more interested in the wave-oscillograph beyond it. He adjusted the telecom dial to the same frequency as the microtransmitter that was apparently planted in Thomas Cardif's body.

"The time, please?" His reassuring calmness was contagious.

"3 minutes, 20 seconds," answered John Marshall.

"OK! Teleporter action. The target: radio central of the port control tower. Hypnosis at once for Cardif! On the double, teleporters!"

There were 3 teleporters on hand: Pucky, Tako Kakuta and Ras Tschubai. Fifteen men would have to be teleported. There were slightly more than 180 seconds available for the task. They'd have to double up on their jumps but it still left only 36 seconds for each turnaround. It was excruciatingly little time.

"Mr. Bell, Mr. Cardif and myself will be last," Rhodan ordered.

Kitai Ishibashi processed Rhodan's son with his most intensive suggestive powers. He gave him a command to make no attempt against his father or the other men during the next hour nor to do anything to interfere with their actions. Cardif was powerless against this attack and unknowingly fell under the sway of the suggestions.

"It's going to be tight!" said Bell as the 3 teleporters returned from their first 2-way jump, having taken 40 seconds for it.

"There're 18 Springers in the radio central!" chirped Pucky. His incisor tooth flashed brilliantly as he

grabbed his next passenger and disappeared.

However the teleporters made up for their lost time. They were on their 4th jump.

Tako Kakuta reached for Kitai Ishibashi. "All Hell's broken loose in the radio central!" he cried out. As the other Japanese clung to him, they both disappeared.

Bell had his eye on the digital countdown. "42 seconds to go," he said calmly.

"Hey Tubby, it's your turn!" chirped Pucky beside him.

As the mousebeaver made off with Bell, the tall black figure of Ras Tschubai was seen to grasp Thomas Cardif about the waist. Then Tako Kakuta reached for Rhodan.

"Hold it, Tako!" Rhodan paused to turn on the telecom and in that moment there were two tracer transmitters on Archez: the one in Cardif's body and, the other on the *Lorch-Arto*, set at the same frequency.

When Rhodan and Tako Kakuta rematerialised in the control tower's radio room they were just in time to see Bell knock out the last of the Galactic Traders with a right hay-maker.

Pucky sat at the master panel and reached out with his left paw to a red button. He pressed it and activated a continuous alert for space attack.

"Pucky!" Rhodan was about to shout at him in anger but caught himself at the last moment. Then all he could do was to shake his head over the mousebeaver's ingenious inspiration.

The whole planet of Archez was placed on alert. Space alarm! Attack from the void!

Added to that were two tracer signals on the same frequency.

Already thunderstruck by the mere fact that Rhodan and a commando team were on their world at all, the Galactic Traders were now strained to their limits of containment and had to hold onto their nerves to keep from losing control. But then Rhodan's mutants met the next attack. Springers came at them from other sections of the port control building. Attempting to storm the radio central they ran into a crossfire of a half-dozen hypno-blasters.

Out on the spaceport the *Lorch-Arto* dissolved into a reddish-yellow gas cloud. Losing their heads, the Galactic Traders had opened fire on the small and ancient freighter from the Forit System, using the heaviest weapons at their command.

But then the entire planet of Archez was struck by an earthquake. The vast port control building was shaken to its foundations.

Bell pointed skyward and roared: "There they are!"

Atlan had arrived!

Arkon had arrived!

Power had arrived!

In its 18-world systems, Archetz was surrounded by a formidable ring of planetary fortresses, yet not one of them dared to fire a shot at the superbattleship fleet of Emperor Gonozal VIII. More than 300 *Drusus* -sized space monsters made a high-speed entry into the Archetz atmosphere with all retro-engines thundering at full power. Unleashing hurricane forces that shook every building on the planet, they hurtled downward, darkening the sky in a massive formation that finally hovered at an altitude of 3,000 meters-ship next to ship—an overwhelming demonstration of might!

* * * *

"This should make a lasting impression on the Galactic Traders," observed Rhodan. "May they never forget us for it!

With Thomas Cardif between them, he and Bell left the port control building and now without any hindrance approached Atlan's flagship, which was the only one that had landed.

Thousands of Springers watched in helpless rage as the hated figure of Perry Rhodan marched across the plastic pavement and disappeared into the groundlock of the Arkon ship along with his handful of men.

Cardif was assigned to his own cabin, which was guarded by two combat robots. The first thing that Rhodan and his mutants attended to, however, was to remove their Soltenite disguises. Each of them was relieved to no longer have the appearance of those pitiable men of the Soltenite race. But while the bioplastic experts were carefully removing their makeup, Rhodan gave Bell, who was lying next to him, an order.

"I want you to go to Solten and arrange for a replacement of the *Lorch-Arto* and also take care of the 17 Soltenites who are still on board the *Drusus*. I don't want them to be punished by the Council of the Great Mothers on our account and I don't want them to suffer any financial losses."

"Perry, why don't you send Pucky there? This whole brainstorm was his idea in the first place!" Bell exclaimed defensively. He had no desire to be reminded of the Soltenites in the next 20 years.

"I might have sent Pucky, Bell, under other circumstances. But for one thing you've taught him the uncouth expletive *Trobbel* and then you've also allowed yourself to be blackmailed by it! Now what do you suppose Mercant would think of you if Pucky were to tell him what this word from the Olgetz language..."

"I'll wring his neck if he spills that!" threatened Bell.

"Alright, then you fly to Solten and straighten things out with the Big Mother Council, my friend, and I'll butter up Pucky to refrain from telling anything to Mercant!"

"If that isn't blackmail on your part," muttered Bell, "then I don't know what else I can call it! But I'm hollering Uncle. So I'll fly to Solten!"

"Just watch out that you don't get taken to any woodsheds by the womenfolk there."

Reginald Bell could only let out a very deep sigh of resignation.

* * * *

Rhodan stood facing Rhodan—father to son.

Ishibashi's hypnotic mind-block had been lifted from Cardif and he was again himself. He was the same young man who was obsessed by an irreconcilable hatred, who blamed his father for his mother's death.

Rhodan made a last attempt to get across to him. "Thomas... not long ago John Marshall said to me: 'By the mausoleum on the Moon, if I were Thomas Cardif I would not take your hand either.' That hurt me to the core, son, but he explained it this way: 'You were caught in the dilemma of being both Administrator and his father. Thus you reached out to him as the Administrator and not as his father. This you were forced to do because to show partiality on the grounds of parenthood would have been to betray your official responsibilities.'"

"But this time, Thomas... yes, for the first time in the many decades of my administrative position, I have used my power to bypass laws which I myself have established—so that I could find my way to you and you to me..."

"Rubbish!"

That was Thomas Cardif's answer. Rhodan felt as though he had been struck in the face.

"Thomas, please think carefully about what you're saying."

"And who murdered my mother, Administrator? For whom had she become too old and who sent her to Arkon so that she could come back a corpse to Terra? *You!* You were the one! You alone! You wanted to get rid of a woman who'd grown a little too old for you, you rotten, callous..."

There was the sound of a sharp slap. Thomas Cardif's left cheek turned red under the blow.

"I'm sorry I struck you..." The words came tonelessly from Rhodan's lips. And he staggered slightly as he went to the door.

* * * *

"Yes!" said the First Administrator of the Solar Empire and with that word he buried his hope. It had decided the fate of Thomas Cardif.

Atlan placed an arm around his shoulders. "Friend... what can we do with power while we are still human? To use it effectively one would have to become a machine-cold, heartless, ruthless. Then it

would be a simple matter to sentence one's own son to death. Under such a condition... one might think the world would fly apart and crush everything in its dissolution. But that doesn't happen, friend! The world forces us onward into our mightiness. That is the price of power, friend Perry!

They stood inside the giant dome of the Brain on Arkon 3 while Thomas Cardif lay under control of the hypnotron and appeared to be asleep.

The hypnotic instrument processed this Terran with greater care than usual. The hypno-block laid back layer after layer of his mind. More and more, Thomas Cardif forgot who he was, where he had come from and who his parents were. Yet everything else remained untouched: his intelligence, his knowledge, his talents and natural tendencies. And hours later he was also unaware of having emerged from an abyss and stepped into the midst of a new life.

His mind never asked: where have I come from or what has caused me to be what I am?

When confronted by questions pertaining to his past he would always remain without an answer. Such questions failed to disturb him anymore. He would shake his head and smile distantly.

Thomas Cardif, the smiling dreamer!

He had forgotten why he had once been consumed by a coruscating hate.

And, mercifully, for whom he had held that blind, destructive hatred.

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

Save them! Save them! Save them!

This was the only thought that found room in Pucky's brain.

I must save them from that flaming inferno. At least I owe them that.

Who has made this attack on my home world? The Druufs?

The Springers?

The Aras?

Oh, Perry, you must help me destroy those scoundrels! Pucky was blindly determined to get to Vagabond as soon as possible. He kept thinking desperately about the heat there: It was going higher than 135 Fahrenheit in some areas! For his own kind, the mousebeavers, he knew this would be like the fires of Hell!

* * * *

All Hell breaks loose in next issue's mighty drama—

UNLEASHED POWERS

By Kurt Brand