

Perry Rhodan 096 Mystery Of The Anti #88 by K. H. Scheer PROLOG PERRY RHODAN'S DISCOVERY Of the Moon-stranded Arkonide exploration ship became the cornerstone for the political unity of Mankind as well as a "launch-pad" for the growth of the Solar Empire. But not even Rhodan himself could perceive the magnitude of effort & nerve stamina that would be required over the ensuing course of years in order to preserve this empire against attacks from the outside as well as from within. Perry Rhodan has recognized one fact for certain: the safety & further development of humanity could not be assured until peace was established in the entire galaxy! Even the undying Atlan seeks such a peace, having recently taken the place of the robot Regent, that mighty positronic brain that had previously employed the merciless forces of its robot fleets to smash every revolution against the central Arkonide power. Atlan, who is now Imperator Gonozal VIII, and Perry Rhodan, Administrator of the Solar Empire, have made a mutual assistance pact which, as a matter of practicality, is based on the instinct of self-preservation. This pact between Arkon & Terra has already resulted in several supporting actions on both sides. Now after Perry Rhodan has returned to Earth from his second "Flight to Eternity", he takes Atlan's precarious political situation into account by sending off his Mutant Corps Chief John Marshall to Arkon as a liaison officer to the Imperator himself. However, when Rhodan issued this order he was unprepared for THE MYSTERY OF THE ANTI... 1/ THE HALLS OF ENVY "His all-seeing Omniscient Eminence, Lord of Arkon and the worlds of the galaxy, his Imperial Magnificence, Gonozal the Eighth, godhead of our most ancient dynastic royalty, hereby declares the Supreme Council of Arkon to be in session!" This solemn announcement was partially drowned in the low thunder of marching metallic feet as my special combat robots advanced with fire-ready weapons. The Chief of Protocol had exerted every effort to open the ceremonies according to the ancient ritual. The scientists of the Supreme Council had risen from their seats. Tradition dictated that each ruler of the stellar empire should be accompanied by a bodyguard, for more than one Imperator had fallen prey to insidious intrigues of the Court. However, in direct violation of protocol I had formed my guard unit of modern special robots. I was not ready to expose myself to the raybeam fire of some Naat guard who might have been bribed or otherwise influenced. I knew they hated me. They hated me with all the intensity of which they were capable. I was an outsider, a leftover from a past era who had suddenly appeared among them and who towered above the present descendants of the formerly dynamic race of Arkonides by virtue of the superior mental and physical fitness that had characterized their ancestors. They knew that with the help of a Terranian commando force I had succeeded in overthrowing the once omnipotent-seeming robot Brain and that I had finally taken over the ruling power of the Greater Imperium. Perhaps they might have forgiven me for a prodigal return that was about 10,000 years too late, or in spite of my claim to power they would probably not have been either malevolent or envious-if I had permitted myself to be pressed into the general mould of their present decadence. Since I had no intention of allowing the empire to continue its current degenerate course, ruptured as it was by widespread revolutionary upheavals and countless colonial wars, I had made high direct demands on these weak-willed and morally psychically decadent dreamers who had felt more comfortable under the sham rulership of psychopaths and neurotics for the past 7 decades. The actual power of the Empire had been wielded for them by a giant positronic robot which had been programmed against the inevitable by the clear-sighted scientists of my venerable race. The present populace had already grown accustomed to the merciless dictatorship of a machine in the tri-planet core of Arkon-and then I had arrived. I came to a halt at the edge of the curved amphitheatre. Before me was the gigantic hall where in earlier times the Supreme Council of Arkon had founded the Empire, decided on its expansion and developed us into the mightiest and most affluent civilization of the galaxy. Now the variously coloured pneumatic seats of these pioneers had been taken

over by their descendants; but what had become of the representatives of my people? Certainly these faces before me did not appear to be stupid, yet I thought I perceived in their eyes a kind of yawning emptiness and general lack of interest. I realized that their attitude was one of indignant questioning as to why they had been disturbed from their normal repose. After all, there was still a robot Regent whose programming had so far not proved to be of any personal detriment to the representatives of the realm. The men in these comfortable seats had become so indolent that I could not hope for their collaboration. Probably they would no longer be of any help at all. Various scientific experts from Terrania had made it quite clear to me that the members of the Supreme Council were undergoing a process of degeneration-and not alone the men of the Council! Everywhere on Arkon 1, the renowned Crystal World of the Arkonides, this mental and spiritual dissolution was evident. They took pleasure in senseless amusements, simultan games and unrealistic philosophies which were unparalleled in the 20,000-year history of the stellar empire. They kept themselves thus occupied in order to avoid the much-needed labour of leadership. The representatives of my people had come to the end of their road. They had lost everything that had been considered of value by the Arkonide statesmen, scientists and fleet officers of my era. Once more the Chief of Protocol was expounding his ceremonious phrases in which I was extolled as a so-called 'million-eyed divinity and all-seeing eminence'. These words which at one time had been significant and perhaps deserved were only repelling to me. And in the present surroundings they were senseless. The 20 combat robots took up positions on either side of the imperial couch or throne that floated before me on an antigrav screen. Their energy screens which protected me were silent proof that I meant business. A much more impressive demonstration of my intentions was evident in the elongated remote control apparatus that I carried prominently on my left forearm. Responsive only to my bodily frequency, the pulse transceiver enabled me at any time to contact the robot brain on Arkon 3. They knew very well what power was connected to this. No one other than myself was able to give commands to the Regent. It was our 4th session in the Hall of Ancestors. During the three previous conferences I had presented explanations and proofs to the effect that I, as Admiral Atlan of the ruling dynasty of Gonozal, had been detained on an alien world due to, adverse circumstances. I had further described how I had managed to escape the catastrophe of Atlantis and how I had been able to return home some 10,000 years after my departure from the Arkon System. Perry Rhodan and Terranian liaison officers had personally confirmed my credentials. However this would have been of little use to me if the robot Brain had not fully supported my arguments and made them irrefutable. The Regent had ascertained that I was Atlan of the ruling house of Gonozal and that therefore I had every claim to the title of Emperor. I had moved into the Crystal Palace of Arkon 1 only four days before. Refusing to submit to the week-long coronation ceremonies I had immediately sought to locate the widely dispersed members of the Supreme Council. During the ensuing days they had been in session with me, the old and the young, aristocrats and noblemen, all of them thinking and acting in the same pattern. Shortly prior to this the transport ships had arrived which I had dispatched into a distant solar system. Rhodan's enormously capable men had succeeded in tracing down one of the forgotten emigrant ships of my people and they had managed to rescue these so-called 'sleepers'. They numbered about 100,000 Arkonides who had started out thousands of years ago but had fallen into a biological deepsleep or state of aestivation owing to an accident and certain unusual circumstances. Although they had departed long ago in my own time, these people were still unimpaired and in possession of their full faculties of mind and reason. But I was not yet able to demand the help of the returned emigrants because of their state of exhaustion and their need for rest and recuperation. Nevertheless, in them a ray of hope had appeared. With 100,000 unimpaired Arkonides I hoped to rebuild the Empire. And if I took pains to rescue the still unborn generations from the general delirium of decadence

through proper educational measures, then it should be possible to renew the Imperium within a shorter number of decades. However, these were future dreams which could not be realized very well without the assistance of the Terranians. I slowly sat down on the wide throne couch and was borne upward with it on the antigrav field. It stopped at a height of 3 meters above the floor of the amphitheatre, which gave me a splendid view of everything. The members of the Council had seated themselves again. What I did not permit myself to do they took for granted. They stretched out comfortably, crossed their legs and waited lethargically for what was to come. In some dismay I looked across at the liaison officer whom Rhodan had just recently assigned to Arkon. This was the slender and likable Chief of the Terranian Mutant Corps, John Marshall, whose superior telepathic faculties were at my disposal. He noticed my imploring look. I opened my parapsychic mono-screen so that I could receive Marshall's telepathic signals. A slightly painful pressure in the back of my head made me aware of my extra-brain which had become activated thousands of years ago. "That's fine, sir." I had just received Marshall's conscious thought. It was as though he had actually spoken, and once again I regretted that I had not also been endowed with such a natural gift. I could only understand John when he concentrated on me directly. On the other hand it was not possible for me to call him mentally unless he willed it. Only when he concentrated on me as he was doing now was I able to establish a telepathic communication. "What are they thinking?" I asked. "Not much of anything, sir. The usual, I should say." "Probably why I'm still alive-right?" "Exactly. It's inconceivable to them that you, sir, could have left the Arkon System 10,000 years ago and now return, home without any noticeable signs of aging. Some of the scientists have gone to the trouble of doing some research in the government library. They have discovered the record of your ancestral lineage, sir. From that they know that you are actually Atlan." I suppressed a grim chuckle. No one knew anything about my cell activator. Even if I had revealed my secret the function of the small device would have been unimaginable to these people. I myself only knew that my natural cellular decay and the consequent signs of aging were suspended continuously by mysterious stimuli. So it had been for many millenniums. Without being obvious I touched the upper part of my simple uniform jacket and felt the contours of the activator underneath. On a biophysical basis it had endowed me with an eternal life—a life which day by day and year after year had been filled with a burning homesickness for Arkon. Now I was back home but I had encountered conditions that had both filled me with shame and shaken me to the point of action. Something had to be done to salvage Arkon's greatness. The mighty robot fleet was not enough to do it with. I opened the Council meeting. It didn't take them 10 minutes before they mustered enough courage to start making protests, which I parried at first patiently but finally rejected openly, having to resort to very obvious threats. After an hour I gave it up. It was completely futile to try forcing these men into useful channels. Marshall informed me that the overall aspiration of those present was focussed exclusively on one subject: how to get rid of me, the undesirable meddler and mischief-maker. They were angry and indignant and were all pondering over what means might be used to rid themselves of the rulership of an Emperor who had suddenly appeared in their midst. There were no straightforward and sensible suggestions for strengthening the stellar empire. The few proposals that were presented were a clear indication that they didn't have any conception of the overall picture. The situation along the Druuf battlefield was an unknown subject to the members of the Council. As for the Terranian liaison officer, they almost disregarded him entirely. Marshall was somewhat amused to inform me that they considered him to be the representative of some insignificant, colonial people, although he stood among them as a highly capable telepath. I lowered the regal couch to the floor and ended the meeting. Ignoring the fawning words and gestures of nearby courtiers, I walked away in the midst of my robot escort. Even though the Crystal Palace of Arkon languished in decadence, the court society did not neglect its banquets and

celebrations. In such matters they were highly skilled, since it was the chief means of surrounding an Emperor with flattery and obtaining special privileges. I was detained by all sorts of spongers and parasites who praised me with flowery phrases and showered me with such ridiculously convoluted titles that I almost became ill. One of these persons who had been introduced to me as the greatest living philosopher and simultan-game composer was troubled over the fact that the robot Regent had cut off his honorary monthly stipend. Since I was familiar with the gentleman's line of chatter, I bluntly rejected his petition and ordered him to apply his abilities to more useful purposes. I began to go against their grain, apparently offending everyone and never making a friend. They would retreat from me with polite and courtly words yet in their eyes I saw the sparks of hatred. I had countermanded the plans for the coronation celebration and it had caused a wave of indignation. The Chief of Protocol whispered to me imploringly: "If I may take the liberty of reminding Your Eminence that the leading artists of the Empire have already accepted invitations... Your Excellence will surely be gracious enough to consider how important..." I turned on my heel to him with such abruptness that he drew back in fright. We had arrived in the foyer of the Hall of Wisdom. "In my opinion these extravagant and carousing festivities are intolerable in the present situation," I countered with unconcealed annoyance. "I request you urgently to invite the responsible officers of the Fleet to the palace. I shall accept no excuses. If any of them fail to appear at the appointed time, I'll relieve them of their command." My robot guards pressed the courtiers back. John Marshall followed close behind me. His face remained unmoved and expressionless but as a telepath he was undoubtedly more aware than I of the hatred that my arrival had aroused. My dreams of a homecoming were being scattered more and more by such winds of contention. Naturally I was not against the idea of celebrations per se; I would have gladly sponsored the greatest festival of the millennium. The Imperium was rich. During the regency of the robot Brain, commerce had flourished again with the countless colonial worlds, even though the former private enterprise of the merchants had become more stereotyped than ever. But now the state of affairs had changed. I could not take it upon myself to assume my high station with all the pomp and ceremony that everyone had expected. I was disappointed and embittered. In front of the private elevator to the upper palace chambers there was a guard detail made up of triple-eyed creatures from the planet Naat. I instructed the giant Triclopeans to keep me from being disturbed. 20 minutes later I reached the royal apartments which had been occupied by the Emperors before me. Here I had refrained from using the larger and more ostentatious chambers. Having become frugal and unpretentious over the course of many thousands of years, I had furnished a small apartment which gave me a view of the inner palace court. I felt the most at home in the large combination office and operations room where the switching consoles put me in direct contact with the Brain and thus connected me with the true administrative centres of the Imperium. I removed the magnificent shoulder cape bearing the imperial insignia and handed it to a waiting robot valet, who soundlessly vanished into an opening in the floor which quietly closed behind it. Beneath my workroom was the control central of the imperial private guard. It was a practical impossibility for anyone to penetrate my selected portion of the Crystal Palace against my will. John Marshall had entered here with me. He merely stood by until I should have occasion to speak to him. I walked over to the transparent defence screen that had replaced the gallery of windows facing the inner court. The circular courtyard, measuring 1,500 meters across, lay 800 meters below me. In keeping with our architectural tradition, the Crystal Palace was also in the form of a large cone. Resting on its trunk-like foundation, it towered upward and extended far out over the magnificent park-like landscape. The circular area enclosed by the inner walls of the funnel-like structure was formed into descending terraces which finally terminated far below in the gardens. I enjoyed the splendid view that my apartment afforded me. The base of the building was 500 meters in diameter.

Within its foundations were all the machines and control stations which had made the Crystal Palace a phenomenon of the galaxy. The former Emperors had claimed it for their royal dwelling. It contained an incredible number of rooms where at one time all the leading intelligences of the known galaxy had been housed during a great reception. Marshall had stepped to my side. He seemed to guess my mood although he was not able to perceive my actual thoughts because my mono-screen was up again. "I keep asking myself if I'm still a true Arkonide," I said abruptly. "John, other rulers before me would not have bypassed a coronation ceremony under any circumstances." As he only nodded I strove to compose myself. "I don't know, John, if Perry Rhodan did me any favour by pushing my proclamation as Emperor. In my opinion it would have been better to continue working in secret." "The circumstances were against it, sir." Although I had long dreamed of being addressed by the highest title of the empire, his simpler usage was welcome to me now. The others referred to me as 'Your Eminence' but it failed to impart any sense of pride. "Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?" inquired Marshall. "No, thanks very much. I must try to carry on by myself. You look tired, John." He only smiled, and then I suddenly wished that I could once more be living and working with men like him. I looked down at the other terraces whose windows brightly reflected the white light of the Arkon sun. In spite of all this splendour it seemed to me that I was displaced. Even the very thought of it was an irony of fate. During my long years of wandering and witnessing the various cultural epochs of the planet Earth, I had always attempted to advance the humans in their technologies and sciences, Long after the sinking of Atlantis when they finally discovered space flight, Rhodan had brought me back to Arkon. My time had come. The secret security circuits of the robot Brain had responded to my brainwave pattern. Apparently I was the only living Arkonide in the stellar empire to whom the giant machine could actually pass the sceptre of power. The Emperors prior to my advent had only been marionettes under the forced dictatorship of the Regent. Marshall knew what was on my mind. In his modest way he held back until he saw it necessary to tear me away from my self-torturing contemplation. "Sir, you should try to get a few hours of rest. I wouldn't be happy to see you get sick. The past few months have been very strenuous." I pulled myself together. It was senseless to cling so much to the past. Ahead of me lay a great task which I could only accomplish while in full possession of my mental and physical strengths. I looked at my watch. It was slightly before sundown. The crystalline composition of the palace walls flashed to life. Blinding splinters of light seemed to cascade downward over the wide inner court, splashing from the monumental works of art and across the cultured gardens like a fountain of glory. From somewhere came the shrill lament of an animal that was not of Arkon. The wide-sweeping antigrav highways began to gleam with an inner light. Arkon 1 was beautiful. It was my home world. A new calmness settled upon me. I relished the spectacle of the sunset until the last streak of light disappeared behind the horizon. Everywhere the lights came on. The numerous buildings adjoining the Crystal Palace appeared to develop a phantom life of their own. Here were the many ministries of the Empire, gigantic building complexes in which nobody had done any serious work in many a decade. Their infallible robot Regent had always been so convenient. I shuddered to think of having to entrust the fighting Fleet's supply of reinforcements to the exhausted officials and staff officers. Now as before, these things were taken care of by the Brain. And I was thankful for it. I would never have been able to handle the millions of logistical problems that came up continually. Without this newly docile super robot I would have been justified in giving up my position as Emperor. I stepped over to the horseshoe curve of the large operations table and turned on the energy barrier that protected my personal portion of the palace. Now no one could come through the broad corridors that approached my location. Marshall looked at me with a puzzled frown but he became still more uneasy when I checked my energy weapon. "Best to be on the safe side," I told him. "John, go get some sleep. If you want to do something

for Arkon, then try to keep those para-senses of yours on guard, even while you're resting." "Sir, what is it you fear?" I shrugged. "Everything and nothing. It's just that I'm fairly convinced there are still a few active heads among that sleepy-looking bunch in the Supreme Council-men who are only concerned about the good life and feathering their own nests. They could be dangerous." "You are uniquely secured in here." "At least it looks that way. But I seem to remember a time many years ago when it was amazingly simple for Rhodan to surprise the Emperor then in his sleeping chamber." "I was with him, sir. It was all based on a carefully planned mutant raid." "Which doesn't eliminate the possibility of some Arkonide also making an entry if he is especially familiar with these premises." John Marshall excused himself. His sleeping chamber was right next to my workroom and office. It was comforting to know that this friend was nearby. Without availing myself of any help from the servant robot, I also prepared myself for sleep. I chose a comfortable contour couch near the transparent energy screen. My ostentatiously furnished bedroom was uncomfortable for me. Before I fell asleep it became clear to me that I was no longer as united with my home world as I had been long ago, prior to my departure toward the Terran solar system, which at that time had been both insignificant and unknown. My last conscious movement was to feel the cell activator attached to my chest. The egg-sized apparatus was pulsing as reliably as ever. 10 ADVENTURES FROM NOW You'll encounter The Idol from Passa 2/ 60 HOURS TO LIVE I was awakened by a strong feeling of nausea. When I sat up abruptly on the pneumo-couch I thought I was going to have to throw up. Close beside the curved control desk in the middle of the room, I saw John Marshall lying on the floor. The disintegrator had fallen from his hand. The Terranian was lying in a twisted position on the floor. His uniform over the left shoulder had been burned. In spite of the air-conditioning the odour of parched synthetic material was noticeable. The sight of the dried blood on him revealed that he had been seriously wounded. I fought back my momentary weakness. Without a word I staggered over to the wounded man and then sank down weakly beside him. "John!" I called to him. "John, wake up!" He did not stir but his breathing sounded normal. Probably he would soon regain consciousness. I remained sitting on the pleasantly heated floor until I could more or less bring my senses back into working order. "Gas!" A slightly painful throbbing advertised the activity of my extra-brain. "Someone has anaesthetized you." I fought for my self-control. My logic sector had not yet ever failed me. Activated by some involuntary centre in my brain, it functioned more clearly and effectively than my own conscious reasoning. I inspected John's weapon. The molecular disintegrator had not been fired. The charge marker was set on 'full'. The meter scale did not indicate any energy discharge. All of which revealed that the telepath had not been able to carry out what he had intended. I was also wondering what I could do to suppress my nausea. Since Marshall was here in my workroom, in contrast to myself he must have heard something. Apparently I had been narcotized while fast asleep by the incoming vapours. But where had the poisonous gases come from? I looked about me cautiously until my extra-brain again penetrated my consciousness. "Air-conditioning, you fool! You have followed the Terranian custom of switching to fresh air from the outside!" Which was of course a fact. Over the course of many centuries on the distant Earth, I had accustomed myself to sleeping by open windows. A native Arkonide in my position would never think of switching the ventilators to this kind of setup. It was true that the regular air-conditioning channels also utilized the external air but on that hookup there were excellent automatic controls which processed all fresh air, analysed it and removed any harmful ingredients of its composition. I realized then that in very fact I had ceased to be a true Arkonide. I had taken on too many human habits. I pondered the matter further. Someone was familiar with the conditionings of my past and had logically arrived at a correct conclusion. He had been able to introduce the gas somewhere outside of my security screens, thus causing me to be drugged. This was obvious even though I did not know whom to hold

responsible for the act. The primary question was why he had done this. Moreover, Marshall's wounded condition clearly indicated that some unwelcome visitor had gotten into my operations room. But why and how? It could not have been some mere cutthroat or paid assassin or at least I was not yet convinced of this possibility. Had it been some thief or perhaps several of them? What was there here to steal? Besides, the living standards on the Crystal World had been so high that there had been no such thing as robbery for many centuries. The whole idea was false and impractical. So what had been the purpose of incapacitating me with gas? A true assassin would not have used this method or-if anything-he would have used a deadlier narcotic and been done with it. A groan from Marshall startled me from my lethargy. It served to shake off the last effects of the anaesthetic and even the pressure from my extra-brain subsided. I tore away the burned material of his uniform and found that his shoulder wound was not as serious as I had expected. Apparently he had been grazed by the needle beam of a thermo-gun. Above my control console I finally saw the impact point. A valuable drapery had been burned. In the wall behind it gaped a hole the size of a fist which had been glazed by heat. I waited until Marshall's vision became clear. At last he sat up as abruptly as I had, myself, but then he sank back with another groan. I supported his head and attempted to reassure him. "OK, John, it's alright now. Do you hear me? We did it again-still all in one piece. In 24 hours we'll have that shoulder back in shape again. John, get with it, boy! Wake up! If you feel nauseated, let go. Apparently we were knocked out by some kind of gas. John, do you hear me...?" After a few moments his brain began to function. I could see it in his eyes, which had become bright and clear. With an effort he stammered: "Atlan... I-I got here too late. There were two of them. Men in white smocks or cloaks. Their brain impulses woke me up but by the time I came and opened the door I had already absorbed too much of the gas. I-Atlan, what happened?" I smiled at him and braced him up to a sitting position. As I did so, the movement brought his head to rest against my chest. According to Arkonide custom I was only wearing a loose nightgown. I had my first intimation of calamity when his expression appeared to become rigid with alarm. He slowly turned his head up to me so that I could gaze directly into his widened eyes. "What is it?" I asked quickly. "Sir, where-where is your cell activator?" I pushed him from me in order to feel of my chest. Where the egg-shaped activator had hung before there was nothing. It was then I knew why I had been gassed. I had a sudden impression of falling into an abyss. The sense of nausea came back. Weak and helpless, no longer in possession of myself, I yielded to the sickness and collapsed. I lay there for some time on the gleaming mosaic of the floor covering until I felt John's hand on my shoulder. All feeling seemed to have left me. I could not accept the reality that my life-supporting device was gone from me. "Don't lose control of yourself, sir," I heard him say. "You have to calm down, sir. We won't rest till we've found the activator again. The criminals can't have gotten very far. Contact the robot Brain at once and find out what spaceships may have taken off in the past few hours. We were unconscious about 3 hours. Before I was wounded I managed to check my watch. By that I can pinpoint the time of the raid exactly. Ask the Regent what ships left the planet in the last 3 hours. If none have left then the device must still be here. Issue an order to freeze all takeoffs and landings. That way we'll practically have the crooks in our hands." John Marshall appeared to be an expert psychologist. He realized that my state of collapse could not be remedied by ordinary words of consolation. So he had applied another and much more effective method. His quick analysis and cogent consideration of events did more for me than I at first realized. Hope surged back into me. If nothing else could be done I could at least take the initiative. I straightened up and noted that John had by now recovered from his queasiness. "Thanks, John," I said in a voice that was hoarse with excitement. "That's the answer. I don't know if you're aware of it or not but without the cell activator I'll only have about 60 hours at the most before the aging process will suddenly start and within a few days

I'll be dead of old age. John, somebody was well aware that I didn't have to be assassinated directly. The theft of that device was an absolute guarantee that I would be eliminated in the shortest possible time." He studied me with narrowed eyes for awhile before he spoke again with a slow deliberation. "Who could have known that you possess such a device? Nobody on Arkon had any intimation of it. But that's beside the main point, sir. If anybody was informed about the vital function of the activator, which its theft now seems to indicate, then it wouldn't have been stolen without a good reason. I think we'll soon be receiving an ultimatum. Atlan, the Greater Imperium is at stake!" "An ultimatum?" "As sure as my name is Marshall. Sir, contact the robot Brain!" Five minutes later I knew that fully 9 spaceships had left the planet during the 3 hours in question. The activator could have been on any one of them. I issued a command to the Brain to the effect that a thorough investigation should be made, using every means available, in order to determine the destination of each ship. There was nothing more that I could do at the moment. While we continued to ponder the situation and extrapolate every possible clue, I proceeded to take care of Marshall's shoulder wound. There were plenty of medications in an adjacent room. My medical knowledge was quite sufficient to enable me to clean the wound properly and spray it with the necessary amount of cell-regenerating plasma. Finally, a high-pressure injection relieved him of his pain. Before the Regent's new findings began to come in, the telepath had already put on a fresh uniform. I had also gotten dressed. We refrained from sounding an alarm because I knew very well that the dull officers of the palace guard wouldn't be able to help me anyway. Three minutes later the Regent contacted me over the special channel of the Emperor. There was nothing on the big viewscreen but a confused line tracing. I listened calmly. Five of the piloted ships were scheduled passenger vessels with distant destinations beyond the Arkon System. Fast cruisers of the robot fleet had already gone into transition in order to overtake the transports. The four other spacecraft were privately owned. All of them had since landed on Arkon 2, the planet of intercosmic commerce and private industry. "Do you wish further investigations to be initiated, Your Excellency?" inquired the greatest robot machine of the universe. I declined the offer, which brought a smile to John Marshall's face. He had guessed my thoughts this, time. I switched off the connection and turned around. Everything was quiet in the palace. It appeared that no one had any inkling of what had occurred. If there were any accomplices of the assassins here they would be able to detect any signs of rising unrest. I was sure that they had not counted on my typically Terranian method of handling the situation. Any normal Arkonide, at least any of those in the present era, would have panicked immediately and sounded the alarm. I went over to a regulating switch and dimmed the lights further. My panoramic energy screen could block reflections so that no glimmering of light from the inside could be seen beyond it, anyway. "Somewhere in the palace somebody's going to be on pins and needles, waiting for my call for help," I said. "So we won't do any favours for whoever it may be. It would be an absolute mess if I were to authorize the guards to start investigating. At least I've learned that much in the meantime!" "My sentiments exactly, sir." "Hm-m... so in view of all this, John, what would you advise?" I looked straight into his intelligent eyes until he calmly replied. "Sir, after Perry Rhodan sent me here from the planet Wanderer as your liaison officer, he returned to Earth where he has been for the past few days. I would urgently advise you to put in an immediate request for help from the Mutant Corps. We are the only ones who can find the activator again." "Do you mean that I should invoke the treaty that I signed with Rhodan? Everybody helps everybody?" "No sir, I wasn't referring to that. I mean that you should turn to Perry Rhodan as your friend, not as the Administrator of the Solar Empire." "Friend... How good that sounds!" I said to myself, deeply moved. "John, I'll do it. If I don't find that device again within the next 60 hours, my long life will be at an end. Perhaps I should let it come to that." "And the Imperium, Admiral Atlan?" There was a sharp sound to the remark. Also, he



had addressed me as Admiral. I looked at him ironically. "Don't be so self-effacing, Marshall! You know very well that with my death the Earth would be lost. Or do you perhaps assume that with my demise the fully reactivated robot Brain will overlook such an obvious threat as Terra once proved to be? If I cease to exist, within a matter of days you would see 10,000 or more battleships emerging from hyperspace, intent upon subjugating humanity or destroying it entirely. On that point I think we are in agreement, wouldn't you say?" "Completely, sir," replied Marshall, somewhat crestfallen. "Good! I value your frankness, John. That's something I don't seem to find on Arkon any more. To be even more candid, I might add that I have no particular desire to die, at least not with the present situation as it is. So let's put in a call to Rhodan. He will appreciate at once that in his own interests he had better show up with all his mutants. Terra isn't strong enough yet to face up to a major space attack. That is why I have nothing against the further development of humanity. When and as I can, I'll still continue to be your protecting shield." "We know that, sir." I had finally recovered from my shock over the theft. A few moments later I contacted the giant positronic Brain and ordered it to establish communication with the interstellar radio station in Terrania. Ever since the unsuccessful attack by a Druuf fleet against the Solar System, the Regent had known where to locate the Earth, which had previously been so enshrouded in secrecy. On Arkon 3, the war planet and home of the Fleet, I knew that by now the mightiest directional beams of the galaxy would be swinging toward a certain sector of space. Terra was about 34,000 light-years distant. In spite of this the hypercom transmission was accomplished without difficulty. In a short space of time my largest viewscreen lighted up to reveal the face of a Terranian officer. He switched the contact to the office of the First Administrator. When Perry Rhodan's lean but weary-looking face appeared, I started speaking without any preamble. "Hello, little barbarian. What time is it there on Earth?" He laughed. His stern face relaxed somewhat. It seemed to me that I was looking directly into his mocking grey eyes. The translight radio connection was working almost perfectly. Only the picture transmission was marred here and there by some slight interference distortions. "Thanks for the kind regards, Arkonide. I was just sitting down to lunch." "Sorry about that. I have a question, Perry: can you imagine what would happen if somebody were to steal my cell activator?" I waited tensely for his reaction. It was as I expected: his face became an expressionless mask. "The answer to that is yes! But now don't tell me that somebody has actually..." "You guessed it—three and a half hours ago. Marshall and I were knocked out by gas. I have not yet put out an alarm here. Some fast information from the Regent has put us onto some clues but that's about as far as we can go. Marshall alone won't be able to handle this case. Do you have any good suggestions?" His lips twisted into an impersonal smile. He would not have been Perry Rhodan if he had gone into questions now. This shrewd, self-possessed Terranian had comprehended exactly what had happened and had already extrapolated the potential consequences. Instead of launching into prolonged explanations he said: "Alright, no comment. I'm taking off in 2 hours with the entire Mutant Corps. Hold onto your nerves until then and clear the way for me. I don't want to be held up by patrol ships or directed to Arkon 3 for inspection. I'll land on the Emperor's spaceport with the Drusus and two State class cruisers. Just take care that those local donk sleepyheads don't get in my way and hold me up with a bunch of donkish questions, Once more—hang onto your nerves. Over & out!" In this infinitely vital situation, that was all Perry Rhodan had to say to me. I was already uneasy again as the screen faded. Immediately, however, the symbol of the Regent appeared there. "The communication has ended, Your Excellence," came the sharply accentuated words from the loudspeaker. I nodded and turned off the connection. Marshall looked at me pensively. "That was fast. He can be here in a day. Did you ever mention the fact to him that you're only good for 60 hours without the activator?" "He's known that ever since our second encounter. At that time we were still enemies—or at least we assumed that we

were. Let's see how that shoulder is coming along." I inspected the transparent bioplastic bandage. Obviously the healing process had already begun. "Have the pains returned?" John shook his head. "Thank you, no. I'll let you know if it gets rough again. Why don't you lie down again, sir? We've had enough conversation for one night." I went over to my couch and sat down. Who could have known how irreplaceable the activator was? But above all: who had given this knowledge to Arkonide traitors? To me this was the most important question. Once more I succeeded in overcoming my heavy case of nerves over the loss I had suffered. Deep in thought, I ran my fingers over the broad ugly scar on my stomach. During my long sojourn on Earth I had been forced more than once to swallow the small device in menacing situations. Often it had been necessary to be operated on under conditions that caused me to shudder when I thought about them. Unfortunately there had been no other way to extract the activator from my stomach. I could vividly recall the field surgeon of the Roman legion. Without any anaesthetic and with totally unsterilized instruments he was about to attack my body. I had taken precautions, however, and was able to fight my way to my hidden flight suit. At the last moment I was able to get away and return to my undersea dome, where the operation was at last performed by specialized robots. On other occasions it had no longer been possible for me to fly to my stronghold. This time, however, I had not been forced to swallow the device in order to preserve it from the hands of slow-witted barbarians. This time they had stolen it from me. "How did they get in here?" The voice startled me. Marshall sat in a form-chair, having turned off its automatic couch conversion feature. "What did you say?" "I was wondering how the thieves got in here. While I was present, you locked off all access routes with the energy screens." I laughed bitterly. "John, you don't know Arkon! This palace was built at a time when attempted assassinations were the order of the day. Here there are probably numerous secret passages which the Emperors in power may have used as a means of escape. Such access routes were camouflaged by every trick of the most modern Arkonide technology, so it's out of the question to discover them. Not even hollow space sensors and all similar detection devices would help. The thieves must have known of at least one of those passages. Otherwise they could never have gotten past the robot guards and the energy screens." "Hm-m-m... so that's the way it is! Well, you can rest assured that my colleagues will find something. You know, you ought to have your own house constructed somewhere in the neighbourhood." I laughed again. I looked at him almost pityingly. "My young friend, your thinking is too Terranian. For an Emperor it is unthinkable to leave the palace. Just the problem of reinstalling all the concentrated control boards is insurmountable in itself. And as for duplicating all this in another location, do you have any idea of what it would take? Forget it!" "That's a terrible way to live, sir. Frankly, I wouldn't care to be in your shoes." "Unfortunately, I have to comb it. John, get some sleep now. That shoulder wound needs rest." "Where did you get all those medical supplies?" "In the palace alone there are three operating rooms which are reserved exclusively for the Emperor. Every main suite of rooms has its own first-aid station. Spoiled or stale-dated medications are regularly replaced by the medo-robots. So you can see how much my predecessors were concerned about their own safety and well-being." Marshall said no more. He shook his head and turned on the auto-control of his form-chair. It immediately lowered for sleeping and reshaped itself to accommodate his body. It became very quiet in the large room. The many videoscreens on the walls and the console desk were like huge insidious eyes, glaring at me with a mixture of menace and scorn. After John Marshall had fallen asleep I began to pace restlessly back and forth. What was the purpose of stealing the activator? Who was behind the theft? Who had organized and commissioned the thieves to accomplish this crime? Why hadn't they simply assassinated me? There could not have been a better opportunity for getting rid of their new Emperor. Before my logic sector could come into play, I found the answer by myself. There was a reason the perpetrators had not taken the risk of

murdering me in my sleep. The Robot Regent had been personally reprogrammed by me, which had required a number of weeks of intensive work. In case of my sudden demise the Brain would have taken over the power immediately and would have once more established the undesirable form of totalitarian rule which had existed prior to my appearance. Apparently the machinators behind the scenes had no desire to have to live again under the dictatorship of a machine. All of which went to prove that Marshall's premonition was well founded. Evidently the mastermind behind this was calculating that I placed as much value on my life as millions of others. So whoever it was figured that I could be blackmailed. I was the only one who had access to the Brain through its otherwise impenetrable energy screens and only I could reprogram it so that it would obey the commands of an outsider. As I began to speak out loud to myself, Marshall opened his eyes. "Now you should be resting, sir," he said reproachfully. "Everything is going to work out. You Arkonides can't hang onto your nerves." "Which I suppose I should have outgrown during 10,000 nerve-wracking years while I was putting up with you Earth people," I said sarcastically. "OK, I'll go lie down." And with that began the period of waiting for Perry Rhodan. But it was strange how suddenly I had been forced to lean on my Terranian friend for help. I caught myself smiling as I recalled our sword fight in the Earth Museum on Venus. I even remembered the girl, Marlis Gentner. She had been pretty, in fact very pretty indeed... 25

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VISITOR FROM A SMALL, PLANET The spaceport for the exclusive use of the Emperor and other authorized special personages lay a few kilometres beyond the rambling range of hills on which the various government palaces had been built. I had cordoned off the area with heavily armed robot units in addition to an entire division of Naat guards. The clumsy looking 3-eyed giants with their big round heads stood at an average height of 9 to 10 feet and were battle-experienced. They were more alert and reliable than the countless Arkonide armies of land and space, since the latter might as well have existed on paper only. John Marshall had used his paranormal abilities on the officers of the Naat contingent and had also made a similar probe of the thought contents of every member of their command. Through this it became certain that the Naat Imperial Guards had had nothing to do with the robbery. The triclops knew nothing about it. The extensive spaceport had been hermetically sealed off by 15,000 of these allied troops from the 5th planet of the Arkon System. They were equipped with the most modern armaments including special flying combat suits and individual defence screen units. All of this represented an unusually heavy concentration of troops and was even more emphasized by the presence of robot tanks and the special reinforcement of mobile energy screen projectors. Naturally it had aroused the excitement of everyone in the locality. I was besieged by questions from concerned courtiers and sycophants alike but I only smiled. Let them think what they pleased. The overbearing arrogance of the so-called upper class Arkonides was far too lofty to permit them to think of a man named Perry Rhodan. But certainly great consternation must have broken out in the ranks of the conspirators. Marshall guessed that the perpetrators had probably presumed by now that I possessed an extra activator, which would explain my apparent calmness. Meanwhile the case evaluation of the robot Regent had come through the machine had confirmed my deliberations on the matter to the fullest extent. No one would have dared to assassinate me. Therefore an extortion attempt was much more probable. I stood beside the mobile division command post, which was also capable of flight. The Naat officers appeared to be racking their ponderous brains in an attempt to figure out what all this meant. My robot bodyguards formed a semicircle around me. The muzzles of their weapons glowed with ready energy charges. 10 minutes after my arrival at the spaceport the tracking reports began to increase. By means of equipment in the command post vehicle I was in constant contact with the brain on Arkon 3. Three alien spaceships had emerged from hyperspace within the confines of the Arkon System: 2 light-cruisers and one superbattleship of the Imperium Class.

The 11th planet had been heavily shaken by a warp shockwave. There were reports from there of structural quakes on the surface and great hurricanes were said to be raging there at present as a result. This was immaterial to me since Arkon 11 was uninhabited. Where I was concerned, Rhodan was doing the right thing. The distance between Arkon and Terra was too vast to be spanned by a single transition. Even at the most unsparing maximum output of their power plants and propulsion equipment the ships would have required at least 4 hyperjumps to cross the tremendous intervening gulf. Thus I was able to observe the almost 1-mile sphere of the Drusus, the mighty flagship of the Solar Fleet, as it came in for a landing. The space giant settled down precisely on its widespread landing struts. Shortly in its wake came the two fast cruisers of the Terranian State Class, whose tremendous speed and acceleration capacity had yet to be outdone by any other type of ship. A superheated pressure wave rolled across the whole area. Then the rumbling engines of the Drusus were silenced. The huge mountain of steel dominated our field of vision to such an extent that the visible hemisphere of the hull facing us could not be encompassed at a single glance. I knew only too well the fighting power that was represented by this Imperium-type colossus. But my thoughts were much more concerned with the men who sat behind the controls than they were with the machinery, weapons and complex electronic installations on board. Even in an age of 98% automation, in the final analysis everything depended upon the minds and abilities of the living crewmen. A bitterness welled up within me. Here I was, the Emperor of the Arkonide stellar empire, with over 2,000 superbattleships of this unprecedented size. One command from me would be sufficient to send every one of the Titans hurtling into the outer void. Yet I realized that a Terranian fleet of only 500 similar ships would be able to wipe them out very swiftly because, I did not have the highly qualified fleet personnel whom Perry Rhodan had at his disposal. We made a short flight in the command vehicle to the area where the battleship had landed. As the big exit hatch opened and the airlock guard detail appeared under command of a young officer I began to feel much better. Here were the old familiar faces and uniforms. These were men whom one could rely on unconditionally in any situation. They were veteran specialists who knew how to use their initiative—soldiers and crewmen who could make their own decisions in any unforeseen eventuality. In that moment I completely forgot my new dignified station. Throwing convention to the winds I rushed to the troops of the guard command and greeted them. In accordance with their strict Terranian discipline they stood there stiffly at attention but I noticed a welcome gleam in their eyes and the barely suppressed smiles on their lips. I'd have given a great deal right then to climb aboard and fly away with them. The C.O. here was Lt. Fron Wroma, a big wiry Terranian from the centralized confederacy of Africa. Strangely at the moment I recalled his wonderful baritone voice. Once he had brought me out of a severe case of nerves with his singing. Memory after memory came rushing into my mind. I paid no attention to the speechless staff officers of the Naat division and I was concerned even less about the mortified expressions of my court officials. While I was still talking to Wroma the air directly in front of me began to shimmer. The mere outlines of a figure appeared at first which was about 3 feet tall, finally to become materially stabilized. I found myself staring at a pair of large sharp eyes and an even sharper, white-gleaming incisor tooth of respectable size. It was Pucky the mousebeaver from the planet known as Vagabond. He waved at me with his dainty little hands. He greeted me in his unmistakable shrill voice. "Hello, old Ironhead, how goes it?" My ancestral house steward and major-domo, a highly conservative Arkonide of the old but deteriorated bloodline, appeared to be visibly shaken. Scandalized by such a seemingly gross insult, he sought to keep his balance and was supported by a grinning Terranian. "The air may be bad for you, old fellow, don't you think?" asked the sergeant pleasantly. He kindly patted the narrow back of the court dignitary, who had the rank of a Minister. I had to struggle hard in order not to burst out laughing. Pucky was again wearing his

custom-designed special uniform with the hole in the rear portion of it, and now he waddled up to me. The spoon-shaped terminus of his prodigious tail was raised stiffly upward. I was bound to the little fellow by a peculiar sort of friendship which had always been amply laced with mutual taunts and affectionate gibes. To the horror of my Arkonide escorts I picked him up in my arms and stroked his soft fur just under his ludicrous-seeming helmet. "Class!" sighed Pucky, rolling his eyes with pleasure, and his mouse face fairly beamed. "Real first class! A real soft touch-not all scrabbly like some I know!" "Perhaps I should bear down on you a little harder, my little informer?" I laughed. "You brute! Oh well, but what can one expect from such an Emperor? I've read in books that such people usually execute their subjects. Did you ever know an emperor named Nero?" "Of course! I was even in his Praetorian Guard." Pucky wrinkled his dark nose as he looked up at me sharply. I kept stroking the fur at the nape of his neck. A few steps away from us, Fron Wroma had his hands full trying to make a Naat officer comprehend that the mousebeaver was neither a monster nor something edible. I whispered swiftly to Pucky: "Don't get any ideas about making anybody fly through the air. It's very important to me that no one knows about your unusual abilities." He giggled. "Who's that guy in the snobby uniform?" I turned around. Toward the rear of the reception group was an older man with remarkably alert eyes. "That's Admiral Tara. He's Commander-in-Chief of the 22nd Battlecruiser Flotilla. Why do you ask?" "He hates you. Just now he was thinking of his own family, which also seems to have a claim to the job." "Job?" "Of course-your job! He's enraged over your comportment. What the devil-he's even thinking about me! Fishy-eyed moron! That's what he's thinking! Imagine that! Fishy-eyed moron!" squealed Pucky in a transport of rage. Before the deeply insulted little fellow could do anything rash, however, a familiar voice rang out. Its tone was decisive and demanded respect. "Take it easy down there. Control yourself, Pucky. My orders are to be clearly understood." I lowered the squirming and flailing mousebeaver to the ground. It appeared to cost him a supreme effort to forego his revenge. Fortunately he had blurted out his reaction to his telepathic probing in English, which prevented Admiral Tara and my Arkonide entourage from understanding a single word. Perry Rhodan came up to me. His lean, angular face with its fathomless grey eyes presented a mask of inscrutability. These were the eyes of a man who was born to command and rule and who demanded of everyone no less than he demanded of himself. He was tall, sinewy and powerfully built with a light and elastic stride. He wore the pastel green uniform of the Solar Empire and in spite of its simple design it became him very well. Perhaps it was his somewhat distant reserve that set him apart from other men. He was one of those figures whom even the most casual observer would have to look at twice. He wore no orders of merit or striking insignia of rank. Actually it was his hand-worked impulse blaster that did most to hold the attention of those who saw him. He touched a finger to his battered helmet visor. The narrow gold fringe was faded and worn thin from long usage. . . . I could not suppress a faint smirk. How easily one could underestimate this Terranian! Those who had made that mistake in the past had been taught swiftly to change their minds. The big man used very few words. His first glance took in my special wristwatch. "Greetings come later, Old Boy," he said with a quick smile. "How much time do we still have?" Which was a typical Rhodan approach, under the circumstances. He never wasted valuable time. I checked my watch. "Exactly 30 hours and 2 minutes. Give or take an hour or two for tolerance." "OK, that's what I wanted to know. Have you made arrangements for quartering my men?" "They'll be staying in the palace guest rooms." "Good. The battle crew will remain on board under Bell's command. Is it necessary to greet all these court dandies?" "They know who you are. Of course with gross underestimation. They consider you to be a small barbarian chieftain who happened by chance to get hold of a battleship of the Imperium class." He simply laughed in my face and I felt better for it. My reassurance was complete when I saw the mutants of the Corps appear in the small manlock

nearby. The two-headed giant Goratschin caused more commotion than Pucky, who apparently was still trying to figure out what he should do about the Admiral. Short shrift was made of the greeting ceremonies. Rhodan thanked them for their 'invitation' and intimated that he intended to visit the Arkonide universities and colleges. Admiral Tara was the only one who took a closer look at the tall Terranian. He even went so far as to use a polite form of address as he spoke to him. "That's a first class ship you have there, Excellency," he said courteously. "Of course it's of Arkonide design?" Rhodan gave him his most impersonal smile. "Terranian design and built on Terra, sir," he reported. "In fact, already in mass production. The situation along the Druuf front has demanded a rapid expansion of our shipbuilding capacity." The Commander-in-Chief of the 22nd battlecruiser Flotilla glanced at me quickly. Tara appeared to be surprised. "In the future," I told him reprovingly, "you should become more familiar with the military armaments of non-Arkonide races. While you preferred to rest on your previous laurels in battle I have been making treaties of alliance with powerful rulers. This seems to me to be more in the interests of the Empire than to carry on daily with gala festivities." Tara controlled himself. He was among the few still active scientists and officers of the Supreme Council. He bowed slightly with a touch of irony. "With powerful rulers, Your Eminence?" He turned his gaze to Rhodan, for whom the innuendo was meant. "Quite powerful indeed, Admiral," I confirmed coldly. "Just take a close look at the crew members of this superbattleship and you will know the rest." "Barbarians, Your Grace!" "Wrong! They are highly qualified fighting troops, technicians and scientists who have recently succeeded in destroying a far superior Druuf fleet. But you've heard nothing of that, have you? You see I take care of all such minor details through the robot Regent." I had spoken plainly enough to cause him to pale. The surrounding court officials and commanding officers drew back cautiously. Rhodan passed them in pokerfaced solemnity. He considered it superfluous to return the hesitant salutes which followed him. His highly arrogant comportment amused me. We climbed into the waiting imperial aircar and flew toward the distant palace. The mutants of the Corps followed us in a larger personnel carrier. When we were finally alone, he breathed a sigh of relief. But I was alerted by his dry burst of laughter. "Atlan, you're not going to be able to do much with a completely decadent social gathering like that bunch! Here's a good piece of advice: kick them out, pension them off or do something to squeeze those nincompoops out of important positions! You still, possess the absolute authority. How are things going with the 100,000 sleepers I brought back for you? Can they be put to work yet?" "That state of affairs is more difficult than what was at first assumed. Only a few among them have the requisite knowledge and experience. Don't forget that they were colonists. That means that about 99% of them came from the masses of the people. However, I've already started the training program for them. The hypno-stations on Arkon 3 are working day and night. The Regent has been carefully programmed by me personally in this regard." Rhodan nodded thoughtfully. "You won't be able to use them yet for at least a year. You'll have to try to get through that period of time." "If I'm still alive by then!" He leaned back in his upholstered flight seat and gazed at me searchingly. "OK, let's talk about the unavoidable. I didn't want to go into it immediately. How did this raid happen?" I briefed him on it quickly. By the time the robot-guided aircar climbed at a steep angle to come up over the top of the huge, funnel-shaped palace, the Terranian was informed. Over radio I ordered the Naat Division Commander to still keep the spaceport closed off. When we landed on the broad cantilevered terrace before my private suite of rooms, and the large personnel carrier with the mutants came in behind us, I received a message from the robot Regent. The cold, mechanical voice rang from the loudspeaker of the, command transceiver on my wrist. The gist of it was that intercosmic commercial traffic had been stopped. Arkon 2 had been declared a restricted zone; 5,000 fast robot cruisers were on picket lines in outer space for the purpose of diverting the incoming merchant ships to other

worlds and to intercept any vessels that might take off in violation of the grounding edict. There had been a short interchange of fire between one of the Regent's heavy cruisers and an armed freighter of the Galactic Traders, which had resulted in incapacitating the Trader ship. An investigation was already in progress but so far there had been nothing discovered on board the merchant vessel that could provide a clue to the stolen activator. Rhodan waited until the report had ended. Finally he expressed approval: "A good piece of work. With its present circuit programming the Brain is indispensable. Without our robot friend there'd be chaos here." My robot bodyguards flanked the light-pulsing path around the observation terrace. Far below we could see the gardens of the inner courtyard. Here we were 800 meters above the ground. Rhodan leaned far out over the balustrade until he was gently held back by the invisible grid of the energy screen. "Splendid!" he said appreciatively. "Just splendid! Actually it's not surprising that some people begrudge your having such absolute power as this. But they'll be the ones to be worrying now over my sudden arrival on such short notice following the robbery. The reception was a bit too unconventional--no parade, no long speeches, in fact nothing! The masterminds behind this will be starting to put two and two together. How much do you think they know about the capabilities of my mutants? After all, we've operated here often enough in the past." "The Regent of course knows you well but these lame brains here were never in contact with the giant robot. They don't even know how my recognition by the security circuits came about." "But Pucky and Goratschin are conspicuous in their appearance alone!" I waved a hand as though to dismiss the problem while I looked over at the two-headed mutant. "I've dropped a few appropriate remarks around. Everybody takes the little fellow for a kind of house pet, and as for Ivan..." "What was that?!" cried Pucky, wrinkling his mouse snout angrily. "Relax!" said Rhodan appealingly. "That's just a cover-up." "Well, it's a lousy one!" he said almost venomously. "I will not put up with being continuously insulted." And the small inhabitant of Vagabond waddled away indignantly on his short legs. We postponed further discussion until we had arrived in the large reception foyer, where I sent away the Arkonide chief of the robot serving staff. Only then did I give my greetings to the members of the Mutant Corps. Betty Toufry was the only female member that Rhodan could reach on such short notice. I was pleased to know that the capable telepath and telekinetic operator was present on Arkon 1. After I had reactivated the security screens around my part of the palace, we began with our first strategy talks. I described the pertinent events once more and asked for suggestions, which were soon in coming. After we had eaten I learned still more. The passenger ships which had taken off during the critical time period had been overtaken by units of the Fleet and ordered back. They had since landed on Arkon 2. The pilots of the four small private vessels had also been identified and detained. But that was all the Regent had done so far on the basis of my instructions. As a result of swift action, all prospective suspects were now collected in one group on the world of commerce and industry. "Excellent!" commented Rhodan finally. "What I like is that this way we don't have to be scattered out too much. For the time being the Drusus will remain here. We'll take off in the California. And we'll keep the Togo in a wide orbit around Arkon 2." I looked at the docket at the dial of my watch. Since the theft of the activator, 32.06 hours had passed

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SOLAR INTELLIGENCE  
STEPS IN One man whose name was not widely known on Earth, let alone in the galaxy, was the one who pulled the threads together: Allan D. Mercant, Chief of the famous Solar Intelligence, half mutant, Marshal of the Empire. He had listened quietly, asked only a few questions and had finally taken over the internal operations. It proved to me once more that empires can be conquered by quite other means than the mere might of weapons. What Mercant demonstrated in his taciturnity and quiet reserve was a masterful play using the facilities of a mammoth organization. Three hours after the Terranian fleet contingent had landed, I had begun to enact a new role in accordance with Mercant's

directions. First I convened the Supreme Council again but before I made my appearance there Mercant personally handed me a marvellous facsimile of my stolen cell activator. He advised me to wear it on top of my uniform in plain view. When I finally arrived in the Hall of Ancestors, I found it very difficult to look down in triumph at these top officials and officers of the realm. They say it is not an easy thing for a dying man to maintain his self-composure-and at that moment I was actually the man who was dying! During a discussion of questions pertaining to provisions and appointments-again in accordance with Mercant's advice-I casually made a remark to the effect that some thieves had stolen a very vital apparatus from me. At the same time it enabled me to establish a reason for the thorough measures presently being taken on Arkon 2. After the session was ended, Mercant had nodded his approval. "That was the first stroke, sir," he smiled. "I'm sure it will cause certain people to start banging heads and blaming each other. Have you provided for an exact duplication of your cell-wave frequencies?" And again an hour later I learned that this master of intrigue of Solar Intelligence had even taken some advance action prior to the departure of the Drusus from Earth. During the flight itself the most capable micro-technicians of the galaxy had started to work-the Swoon who were otherwise known as the Cucumber People. They converted a pulse sensor device used for measuring hyper-short-wave frequencies of individuals and finally by means of a tremendously complex adjustment process they had set it to my personal wave pattern. Mercant's strategies suddenly appeared to be simple, except that I had to confess that I probably wouldn't have thought of the whole idea myself! He reasoned that my stolen device had no doubt been exactly tuned to me. Therefore it should be traceable, provided that one were equipped with a perfectly aligned tracking device which would also be sensitive to my bodily vibrations in the hyper-short-wave frequency range. Such had been the preparations. After they had been tested and checked out, the fast State-class cruisers California and Togo took off. The mighty Drusus remained behind on the Crystal World under command of Reginald Bell, who held the vessel in full battle-readiness. I landed with the California on Arkon 2, the most sumptuous world in the known galaxy. Here the Arkonide style of architecture had not been adhered to because it would have prohibited the accommodation of such a highly concentrated population. Arkon 2 was a planet of metropoli which were centres for the most gigantic industrial concerns throughout the Milky Way. For some 10,000 years the famous avenues of the various cities with their prestigious stores and shopping centres and merchandise warehouse districts had been visited by every known type of intelligent beings from the farthest stars. On Arkon 2 there was everything to be purchased that had ever been found, invented or cultivated anywhere in the known universe. A billion Solar businesses and transactions were the order of the day; exchanges as high as 200 billion Solars were customary and the closure of deals bordering even into the quadrillions was not particularly astonishing. The most important city of the planet was Torgona, so named in commemoration of the first Arkonide merchant who had taken off from here in an armed freighter to barter with his goods on alien worlds. But of course that had been some 18,000 years ago by Earthly reckoning. Immediately after our landing Mercant went into operation again. And again something was produced that I had not expected. A special robot of Terranian design put on my uniform with its imperial insignia. During the short trip between the two Arkon planets the machine was tuned to my voice frequency so, that finally the robot could imitate me perfectly. Mercant explained matter-of-factly that these machines were occasionally used on Terra to act as doubles of important people. On the other hand I myself was swiftly disguised. My white-blond Arkonide hair was concealed by a wig and several alterations of my facial features were made. This was why Mercant had brought along the makeup and camouflage experts. So it was that I finally disembarked as a Terranian captain and the robot strode along the lines of the honour guard that had hastily appeared, giving his proper greetings. He spoke as I did and he acted



like me. In this case he acted with an unusually cool reserve and from time to time made a biting remark. I could not have done better myself. . . .

. Since landing on Arkon 2, nine hours had gone by. During 7 of them I had been lying in a leaden slumber which had not particularly refreshed me. When I awoke my first glance was at my timepiece. The dial knew no mercy: 43 hours and 37 minutes had already passed since the robbery. The port commander of Torgona, following my advance instructions, had assigned the Terranian visitors to an excellent section of the city which was close to the downtown area. We had free movement and there was no one to question us as to our direction or intention. Non-Arkonide visitors were too commonplace to attract much attention. On the wide, luxurious boulevards of the merchant city all the intelligent beings of the galaxy met. One did not even turn around to stare if some methane-breathing monster puffed its way across the street under protection of his grotesque and clumsy-seeming spacesuit. Nonetheless, Rhodan had gone along with Mercant's instructions. Since he had arrived as an official visitor he had been forced to take part in a number of receptions for him. This was just as well with me because anyway he couldn't have contributed much in the present situation. Of prime importance were the mutants who had been active without pause since the landing. Officers and crew members of the California who were not engaged in our investigation were sent to visit all those places which Rhodan had pretended he was interested in. And so began the grand tour of colleges and industrial plants. In recognition of his rank the officials of the Ministry of Alien Race Studies greeted Rhodan with the appropriate form of address. As far back as my forefathers the ground rules and procedures had been worked out for the proper handling of aliens. So Rhodan went through one stereotyped reception after another. Everywhere they spoke just those words which had long been prescribed for the situation. The magnitude of compliments and tributes he received were proportional to the level 6 classification they had given him, which however was noteworthy by its peculiar definition. Level 6 was applied to so-called 'absolutist imitative rulers with a sphere of influence embracing at least one solar system containing a minimum of 8 planets...' No one on Arkon 2 could suspect how much Perry Rhodan was amused by this classification. By now I felt too weak to joke with him about it. The absence of the stimulus impulses was being felt. For the present it made me nervous but in about 45 more hours the effects of physical debility would be appearing abruptly and with little previous warning. I knew the gathering symptoms, though, from bitter past experience. More than once I had been forced to wait until the last moment. My robot double was working excellently. Since the machine was equipped with a micro-video transmitter we could follow its steps from our quarters. At this time, however, my 'proxy' had retired to sleep. He lay in the luxurious bed of the Emperor in the palace on Arkon 2 and was storing the data into his brain, which were being radio-transmitted to him by Dr. Ali el Jagat, the chief mathematician of the Drusus. By this means the activities of the false Emperor could be programmed for the following day. A few minutes prior to this observation, Perry Rhodan had just returned from a cultural event. He had been trapped into suffering through the recital of a simultan music composer and was forced to pretend that he was enthusiastic about it. He neglected however to tell me just how bad it was. The interweaving and swirling light symbols had always been too lofty and abstract for me at such performances and the terrible howling and shrieking that was generated and modulated by the artist's nerve reflexes as he lay under a mono-transmitter were always too much to endure. In an adjacent room the teleporters of the Corps were coming and going. At two in the morning when the activity had subsided in the main thoroughfares of the city, Allan D. Mercant made an appearance in our comfortably furnished rooms. He had asked to be allowed to carry out the preliminary investigations on his own, so I had kept out of the action so far. Rhodan had removed his dress uniform and slipped into his service outfit when John Marshall followed Mercant into the room. The slightly built and usually smiling Intelligence Chief of the Solar Empire sat down with some

ceremony on a convertible form-chair. He seemed to sense my inner tension. "Well, speak up!" Rhodan told him impatiently. "Do you have a clue?" "Presumably, sir," he replied in his deliberate way. "It has proved advisable to bypass the large number of passengers and crew members on those 5 spaceliners for the present. The vessels have been thoroughly scanned and the activator was not found on board. Which we expected." He looked at me thoughtfully and I had to clench my fists to keep control of myself. Mercant could often be very pedantic. "We're evidently dealing with pretty high-class criminals, so I don't think they'll try shipping out such a priceless item on a normal vessel. Actually, there's no logical reason why the activator should be smuggled out of the Arkon system. There might be a need for proving it's in their possession when the extortion threats begin. Then, when and if we pay, they can back up their threat-or deliver." Atlan, I think he has a binary computer for a brain!" quipped Rhodan, desperately trying to relax the tension in the room. The remark failed in its purpose. Mercant did not smile. I nodded for him to continue and without any change of tone in his voice, the man with the golden crown of gleaming blond hair continued: "By temporarily bypassing the passengers and crew of the spaceliners I was not jeopardizing the success of the search. Perhaps it gained us time. To me the important people to watch were: first, those who blasted off in private ships from Arkon 1 during the critical time period; then, second, those who landed on the middle world of this tri-planet innersystem of yours. All told, 17 men have already been detained and just minutes ago I received some information that more or less took a load off my back." I could hear Rhodan breathing heavily. Although he glared darkly at Mercant, the Intelligence Chief did not notice. He seemed lost in thought. "My one great worry had been that the activator was still on Arkon 1. The loss of time would be fatal for Atlan..." "Thanks a lot," I muttered tonelessly. "On the other hand there was another weak spot in this picture. If the thieves evaded the takeoff clearance requirement-" "Will you please get to the point?" I urged. "I'm getting to it, sir," Mercant replied stiffly. "The 17 people detained by the Regent were secretly scanned telepathically. No one seemed to possess knowledge linking them with the theft. However-and here was a curious point-the pilot of the small interplanetary ship Heter-Kon complained about a severe headache." I impatiently tried to control myself. It was only when I glanced into John Marshall's knowing eyes that I guessed something important was involved here. "A headache?" whispered Rhodan pointedly. "No-that's just the point," Mercant continued. "The pilot had been put under an illegal hypno-block by means of electronic equipment." Rhodan's gaze grew blacker. "It's been determined that he received orders from a high personage to bring two Arkonide Fleet Officers here to Arkon 2. Officially, those two officers never arrived. Nevertheless the pilot knows that they were on board the vessel when he took off and when he entered the atmosphere for a landing. From that point on an amnesia gap begins. We assume that the two mysterious officers jumped ship prior to the landing." Weakly but fiercely, I raised myself from the couch. I glared angrily into the Intelligence Chief's strangely smiling face. "Who is this very high personage who gave that order to the pilot?" I demanded to know. Mercant returned my gaze without expression. "You, sir. It was a personal order from the Emperor." "I gave the order? Are you insane, Mercant?" "No sir. I am merely telling you what the pilot himself actually knows, as determined by a complete telepathic exam. Naturally there's a trick to it. The man truly believes that he was personally commissioned by you to carry out the mission. We'll soon be breaking through his hypno-block. Pucky and Betty Toufry are already working on it. It can be assumed that traitors in the Crystal Palace managed to issue the order in your name, sir. We will trace down whoever it was when we obtain the information. But just now there's no time. Our focal point at the moment is the two unknown officers. The pilot must have seen them." "How can that help us?" asked Rhodan after he pondered over this. "A personal description would be completely useless." "Presumably, sir. But we will find out what area of the planet they were over when they

dropped from the ship. The pilot followed the Torgona landing instructions to the letter. Then when, he checked through customs at the spaceport he stated that he had taken off alone and that he had landed alone. The Regent checked back on this and found that the Crystal Palace's flight control station confirmed the pilot's story." "Unbelievable! How can that be possible?" I cried. "The robots in charge there have been programmed accordingly by authorized Arkonides, sir. This was a shrewdly planned manoeuvre and even if you had put the Arkonide Secret Police to work on it they would never have seen through it." I looked at my watch again. The hands moved inexorably onward. Naturally Mercant was right. But, after all, this was why I had called Rhodan for help. I had a sudden thought. Had Mercant overlooked it? "Somebody should be making contact with me soon," I interjected. "They know I can't live long without the activator. Why haven't I heard from them?" Perry Rhodan lowered his gaze from me. He seemed to know more than I did. My uneasiness increased even more. "Mercant!" I said sharply. But he only examined the tips of his fingers. "Sir, in the course of our planning I have deliberately discounted that possibility. You'll recall you appeared in the Council with the false activator. You gave everyone to understand-quite tersely-that you had a replacement device in reserve. As a result of your amazing self-control they believed you without question. No one doubted that a spare activator existed. Your whole appearance and composure indicated that you apparently did. Anyone practically sentenced to death by the loss of such a vital apparatus would normally take pains to retrieve it. Instead of doing anything of the kind you even appeared to be sneering at the thieves. In my judgment, the thieves will not expose themselves in a useless attempt to blackmail you... so nobody is going to contact you, sir." I sank slowly back onto my pneumo-couch as pinwheels shot into my skull. My thought processes seemed to stop without my extra-brain intervening-which was in itself a verification of the logic behind Mercant's explanation. The man was like a computer. He seemed to overlook nothing. It was some minutes before the seizure passed and I was able to collect myself again. When I straightened up, Rhodan was sitting at the foot of my couch. His face was ashen and his lips quivered faintly as we looked at each other. Without any preamble he said: "There's something we haven't talked about, Atlan, but I know you must have been harbouring the same suspicion as I-as we all have. Only one person knows what the activator means to you and would use it against you." I forced a wan smile. Naturally it had long been obvious to me. I had not thought it necessary to discuss the matter. It would not have brought back the activator. Rhodan remained stubborn, however, as though in a mood to turn an angry whip upon himself. "Forget it," I pleaded. "It is useless to mention his name." "There was only one besides my closest confidants who knew," he persisted. "It was my son, Atlan! MY SON! The same man who betrayed the Earth and the Arkonide Empire to make a treacherous alliance with the Galactic Traders. I was hoping to find him here. But not like this! There can be no leniency now. Thomas Cardif!" He spat the name like a curse. "I thank God that Thora has not lived to see this day." Rhodan got up and solemnly walked over to the row of windows. He stood there quietly looking out. Marshall left the room. There was a clamour of voices in the adjacent chamber. Allan D. Mercant also got up. He looked at me somewhat undecidedly for a moment before he spoke. "Sir, you should know that this is the only possibility. Not one word has slipped from the other people who know of your activator." "I believe you're wanted in the other room," I said crisply. With a sick smile, Mercant went out. By contrast, Rhodan's face was an emotionless mask. Only through the windows of his eyes could I see the play of emotions which tormented him. "Someday we'll get him. Perhaps a solution will be found to his problem. Perhaps-but you should forget in the meantime that you have a son." "Forget?" he repeated dully. "How easy it is to say." I bit my lip remorsefully. Seconds later the hypno-suggestor, Kitai Ishibashi, entered the room. The tall, lean mutant from the federal state of Japan said simply: "We have a picture, sir! The block has been lifted-do you wish to look at the synthesizer picture? It might help us to recognize the two

missing officers." I forgot my concern for Thomas Cardiff, who had not even been disposed to bear the name of Rhodan. Perry visibly tore himself out of his dark mood. When he looked at me I saw a thin, dangerous-looking smile play on his lips. I could see that he shared mutual responsibility. "Let's go, Arkonide! How much time do we have left?" I looked at my watch. The counter dial showed 45 hours and 58 minutes. "Still about 15 hours, Barbarian." Our eyes met in silence. Ishibashi handed me the Terranian weapons belt which I strapped to my captain's uniform. There was a hushed silence-I had pronounced my own death sentence! 100 ADVENTURES FROM NOW K.-H.Scheer will pilot you to the Planet of the Last Hope 5/ THE CULT OF BAALOL The Synthesis Projector, a machine used commonly on the Arkon worlds, made it possible to synthesize emotions and thought impressions into a holograph of 'symbolization'. Its detector 'feeler' converted brainwaves into visible swirls of colour and symbolic iridescent forms onto a large screen. The quality of the picture elements, of course, varied according to the mental capacities of the sender. In this case the ship pilot, Ikort, lay inert upon a table with the apparatus humming around him. Ikort wore the uniform of a lieutenant of the Fleet with the special insignia on his chest which revealed that he was a pilot of the Palace Guard. So there could be no doubt that he was a member of my inner staff and of aristocratic origin. Nevertheless, I did not recall having ever seen his face, which was now expressionless and lifeless-looking. He lay on his back beneath the hood of the detector pickup. The large screen was mounted into the wall as a standard part of the equipment in our quarters. Pucky and Betty Toufry, who had lifted the hypno-block, sat near the unconscious officer-exhausted as a result of their efforts. Marshall took charge of the further interrogation. The 1st signs of success appeared within 10 minutes. A current of powerful suggestive force from Kitai finally forced Lt. Ikort to pour out his knowledge in an unbroken torrent of symbols. I peered tensely at the screen where colourful, patterns began to form. Apparently Ikort was highly skilled in this kind of thought play, which confirmed my guess concerning his background. It would have been surprising had a young man from a well-to-do family not been familiar with the popular rage of Organic Synthesis Composing. The composition of images by emotion was the ultimate extension of oneself in an effort toward artistic expression. I had been aware of the interrogation but as Marshall's voice became more insistent and Ishibashi leaned still closer to the prostrate man, my eyes continued to scrutinize the viewscreen. The colour patterns soon faded and were replaced by the scene of a spaceport. The private port of the Emperor on Arkon 1. Two men appeared. Although it was night, their faces became recognizable in the airlock light as they boarded the small ship. A camera hummed and clicked. The Terranian specialists captured the pictures as they occurred. The next scene revealed outer space between the three Arkon worlds which my father had caused to circle the sun in a single orbit, thus forming an isosceles triangle-known to Terran astrophysicists as the LaGrange effect. Shortly thereafter we witnessed the re-entry manoeuvre into the atmospheric envelope of Arkon 2. "Watch this!" said Mercant swiftly. A second camera began to hum. On the screen we saw the flight controls of the spacecraft. A green line indicated the route on a relief map. Suddenly the synthesizer pictures became indistinct. At this juncture in the events the hypno-block must have become effective. Nevertheless we made out the figures of two men as they passed through the control cabin with antigrav backpacks and opened the inner airlock door. This time the faces were quite distinct. They leapt from the forward hatch and disappeared, after which both batches closed automatically. Shortly thereafter we witnessed the landing. The pictures which followed were essentially of no interest to us. Marshall concluded the synthesizer-aided part of the interrogation and started direct questioning. The pilot knew where his two passengers had jumped from the ship shortly before the metropolis of Torgona. A half-hour later the young officer was released by Mercant. He stood there in the middle of the room looking stupefied and still staring vacantly. Ishibashi provided him with a hypno-block which permitted him to

forget that he had ever been removed from his hotel room. Rhodan looked at his watch. Ras Tschubai, the tall, slim Afroterranean, stepped up to him. "Ras, were you the one who brought the officer out of his quarters?" As the capable teleporter nodded, he went on: "OK, then take him back to where you collected him." Ras laughed. "He was lying on his bed with his clothes on, sir. He had a headache." Rhodan merely nodded, Activities of this nature were minor miracles and yet to these Terranians they were commonplace. It seemed to me that Rhodan was not aware of the instrument of tremendous power he had in his mutant allies. Two men lifted the seemingly drugged pilot onto Tschubai's back. I watched the mutant as he concentrated. As he jumped-which was the casual term applied to the phenomenon-there was a brief shimmering in the air. Then the teleporter and his passenger were gone. When he returned 10 minutes later, just as suddenly as he had disappeared, the films were ready to examine. The mutant commandos each received coloured photos of the two strangers. Using my command transceiver I called the robot Regent, and with the help of the video pickup he was able to copy the prints. "Done, Your Eminence. Do you have any additional instructions?" the mechanical voice inquired. "Yes," I answered into the tiny microphone. "Find out if you know either one or both of these men. If so, contact me at once." "Understood. Over & out." The robot brain on the neighbouring world cut off the connection. Rhodan had a gaunt look when he said: "Now I'm getting a feeling that this thing is starting to roll. Ras, did you take that pilot back?" "Yes sir. He's sleeping. When he wakes up he'll think he never left his room-and by that time his headache will be gone!" "Good work! Pucky, is something wrong?" The mousebeaver had curled up on another form-couch with his head in Betty Toufry's lap. The female mutant seemed lost in thought as she stroked the soft fur at the nape of his neck. "Don't bother me, please! I'm meditating," chirped the mousebeaver in his high-pitched little voice. "You little fake!" laughed the left head of Goratschin. "You've just gone sissy, that's all. Meditating, he says!" Pucky straightened up and his large eyes flashed. "Who's a sissy?" I sprang aside just in time to avoid the hurtling giant body of the 2-headed mutant as he flew past me through the air. Seconds later the green-scaled colossus was dangling from the ceiling. Pucky emitted a shrill laugh. His telekinetic powers were incredible. "I didn't say a word!" cried the right head of the monster, known as Ivanovich the Younger. "How come?" "I'll explode that silly incisor tooth of yours!" threatened Ivan the Elder. "You fishy-eyed moron, you!" "Let him down!" said Rhodan irritably. Pucky waved his delicate hands in resignation and allowed the 8-foot giant to sink slowly to the floor, where the 2 heads immediately began to argue with each other. Ivan the Elder maintained that Ivanovich had indirectly given in too soon. I watched in fascination as their 2 separate brains struggled in the course of the argument to gain power over the giant body. It was a silent duel until Ivan finally succeeded in raising the left arm, contrary to the second head's will, and delivering the latter a punch in the ear. It was an audible blow, landing sharply enough to make Ivanovich gasp. With that the fight was ended. The 2 heads made an agreement to rest their mutual body on a nearby couch. No one other than myself had paid much attention to this minor event. For these Terranians such things were quite ordinary. Goratschin's particular gift was among the most dangerous of all mutant powers. The superhuman force-flow from both brains could produce a nuclear fission at the centre of any chosen target area without any mechanical equipment. Goratschin could excite nuclear reactions in all calcium-carbon compounds and calcium and carbon materials were universally abundant. Thus, the capability of the ungainly, scaly-green giant was the most frightening. I looked at the other mutants. I knew them all and I also knew how Rhodan had recruited them and won their support. Practically speaking, I found myself in a group of relative immortals, because Rhodan had been able to win for each of his super-capable and indispensable people the cell-preserving rejuvenation treatments. I had come to realize that these beings could conquer the galaxy if they wished. It seemed to me that Rhodan employed their powers a bit too

casually-and in this there were certain hazards. It was quite amazing that the mutants did not become intoxicated with their own power. In fact, at one time there had been a small revolt which Rhodan had been able to quell with the help of the other mutants. If they should ever decide to make a united uprising it would certainly lead to an awesome situation. Betty Toufry, the sensitive telepath, was watching me with obvious penetration. Apparently I had relaxed my thought screen. I chuckled and her tension subsided. In spite of her gift she had evidently only been able to catch a few fragments of my thoughts. Pucky was sleeping with his mouth open and occasionally his short little legs would jerk like those of a dreaming puppy. Rhodan was engaged in a new mission briefing with Mercant and some scientists from the Drusus. They talked about using an inconspicuous ship in order to search for the area where the conspirators had landed with their antigrav packs. Perhaps the strangers' objective was close to that point. At least we could think of no logical reason they would have preferred jumping from the Arkonide craft thousands of miles away from the spaceport. In view of the clever strategy of the theft and because of the hypno-block on the pilot, thinking themselves safe, they logically had sped for a secret rendezvous. Mercant was hoping to pick up a clue very soon. A few minutes later at the nearby spaceport the commander of the California received an order to launch a modern interplanetary 'Space Jet' and fly over the jump zone at an altitude between 10 and 20 kilometres. The special frequency detector was highly sensitive. My cell activator, of course, would be radiating a continuous series of stimulus pulses which were meant for the use of my body. We would track them down shortly but the short amount of time might be more than I could afford. Col. Sikerman, was normally the commander of the Fleet for the duration of this special mission, while Reginald Bell had taken his place on board the superbattleship. Everything was well organized but it was now high time for them to find the device that was so essential to my existence. I looked again at my watch. Since the theft, 48 hours and 36 minutes had passed. I had only about 11 1/2 hours left. When Sikerman reported the takeoff of the space-jet I contacted the Robot Regent and instructed him to give free rein to the small Terranian spacecraft. Otherwise it would surely have been forced down-or even shot down-by the automatic airspace traffic control installations. It was not easy to go pleasure flying over Arkon 2. The Brain confirmed and shut off but only a second later the green signal light blinked again on my command transceiver. Rhodan noticed it and his face grew tense. I looked in some surprise at the device strapped to my forearm. Why was the Robot calling back almost in the same moment that it had shut off? When I pressed the contact button and raised the micro-lens of the video device to look at it more closely I realized that this was a message from another section of the Robot's circuits. It consisted of millions of circuits and registers which all had their specific purpose. In that moment no one as yet suspected that all of our planning had become useless. Something had come up which not even Mercant had foreseen. "Regent to His Eminence," came the metallicly brittle voice from the microspeaker. "Results of data request 122-A, reference unknown persons who jumped from spacecraft Heter-Kon. The photo prints I copied were sent to the memory bank section. One of the men could be identified. There are photographic and personal data available concerning this man because of his conviction 18 years ago for having unlawfully operated a private biophysical laboratory. "Personal data: name, Segno Kaata; age unknown. He is a high priest of the local Baalol Temple and chief of the Baalol cult within the Arkon System. "The Baalol cult is the wealthiest and most powerful sect in the known galaxy. In the Arkon System alone the number of adherents reaches 200 million Arkonides! This includes Naats and other intelligences of local origin. The cult does not worship any deity. I repeat: they worship no deity! The purposes of the sect are obscure. My data indicate, with a 100% factor of probability, that the various high priests of the Baalol cult have never made an attempt to gain political or military power. On the other hand, it has been determined also with the same factor of certainty that the leading members of

the cult play decisive roles in economic and business spheres. From all appearances they are closely associated with the Galactic Traders and the Aras. The teachings of the sect include the scientific preservation of mental and physical health. Knowledge of their secret sciences has only come by hearsay and rumour but they are estimated to be of vast significance. "Attention-important item: the actual origin of the Baalols, as their high priests are called, cannot be determined. It is assumed that they are descendants of early Arkonide emigrants and colonists. Though the Baalols have never themselves colonized a planet, they are to be found on all known planets of the galaxy. . . . "The following data pertains to the structure of the cult: persons who are not the offspring of marriages between Baalols cannot become priests of the sect. The logical inference from this is that the offspring possess definite mental and physical characteristics. It is known that the priests of the cult seem to produce the best and most powerful bodily defence screens. With regard to the aforementioned arrest of the local high priest Segno Kaata, my investigation of the legendary energy screen did not at the time yield any positive results. The equipment was in standard usage; however with others it could never generate the impenetrable fields of force which it could when being worn by a Baalol. "The assumption is made that the Baalols have faculties or capacities which may be the result of some unknown form of mutation. The greatest caution is advised. Their priests are considered to be invulnerable. End of communication, Your Eminence." The loudspeaker crackled but the Robot held its reception channel open. Rhodan looked at me nonplussed. Allan D. Mercant smiled enigmatically. The mutants who were present exchanged significant glances. They seemed to be the first to realize that something of a menacing nature had been uncovered. "Baalol Cult...?" said John Marshall pointedly. "Well!" I hastily instructed the Regent to stand by for further orders. Then I shut off the connection. The Robot had reported simply what was stored in its memory banks. I did not expect to learn anything further from the positronicon. The Chief of Solar Intelligence turned to me. "Do you know of these mysterious priests, sir?" There was a note in his voice which caused me to grow pale. Yes, I had heard of the Baalols. "I don't have much else to add to the Regent's statement," I confessed. "The cult has been in existence for more than 10,000 years, so if a mutation is involved it must have happened in recent history. Since my assumption of office as Imperator, I have heard little about them." Mercant nodded. Rhodan stood deep in thought before the darkened screen of the synthesis projector as though searching for something that had eluded him. "There are some things about this I can't figure out, Atlan. How can a normal defence screen generator operate in an ordinary manner with ordinary Arkonides and yet build up an impenetrable personal shield for one of these priests? There's a crass contradiction here somewhere! Those microprojectors can't just put out a thousand times more energy just because a Baalol is wearing one. But if something like that happens, then it can't be the device itself-it has something to do with some special capacity of these people. If we accept that as the most likely explanation, then it's fairly certain that a recent mutation has occurred. Why wasn't this change in them noticed before now?" He turned his head to stare at me but I could only shrug my shoulders. "Hm-m," he mumbled to himself. His grey eyes flashed mockingly. "So we can probably lay the blame for this, too, on the frightening negligence of the Arkonide administrative offices, right? 10,000 years ago they were sharper, though, so why has all this time passed without any deeper investigation into this situation?" This question I could answer. "In those days they apparently kept pretty much under cover. During the time of my service as a squadron chief of the Fleet, I don't recall having come across any mysterious or disturbing incidents of this nature. Had such been the case, we would have looked into the matter... The Arkonides of my day were capable of acting swiftly and effectively." Mercant was polite but incisive when he spoke. "These considerations are immaterial at present. We know where we have to strike. Let's not lose time. The pilot's mental impression of the culprit

turned out to be valid, after all. Let's see what the Temple has to offer us." There was suddenly a storm of activity in the camouflaged headquarters of the Terranians. Orders flew thick and fast. The forces Rhodan was mobilizing would have been sufficient to subjugate the populace of an entire planet. Reginald Bell received a takeoff order by radio. Rhodan wanted the mighty Drusus close at hand. Five minutes later the activator was traced down. It was indeed in the Baalol Temple of Arkon 2. One possibility had not been evident from the available data. There was never more than one temple on any planet. But there seemed to be a deeper significance behind it. One hour later the Drusus was with us. The commando troops received definite instructions. I mobilized the robot units under control of the Regent. The planet was ringed by mighty ships of war. Heavy flying tank units were held on standby at their deployment depots. As a first move, we were going to attempt an occupation of the Temple with a small commando unit. As we entered the personnel aircraft for the first thrust, I noted that 51 hours and 3 minutes had passed since the theft. My period of grace was running out fast. We did not know if the priests were equipped with modern tracking devices. Just in case, however, we planned to approach the temple as inconspicuously as possible. It lay outside the metropolis of Torgona on a flat hilltop but was easily accessible by the main roads and arterial highways. Behind us came special Terranian commando units which could be reinforced at any time with robot troops. The long night period of Arkon 2 came to our aid. Still it was questionable whether or not we could surround the temple grounds without being detected beforehand. 150 ADVENTURES FROM NOW H.G. Ewers will show you around Control Station Modul 6/ PUCKY MEETS THE ANTI-FORCE Arkon 2 had no moons. When my forefathers forced what were then planets 2 and 4 from their natural orbits to incorporate them by a protracted process into a single orbit with number 3, they refrained from adding moons to what was already the most complex system in the galaxy. Nevertheless it was not entirely dark. The next period of rain, controlled by the Robot Brain, was not due until the following night; thus the skies were cloudless—and the light of the countless stars came through unhindered. This was another kind of glittering and gleaming than was known to the distant Earth. Here we were in the centre of a star cluster whose density of suns was sufficient to also illumine the landscape by night and we could see well enough to be able to dispense with our infra-red equipment. As we made our approach, the temple buildings transmitted a depressing impression to us. Far from being related to the inverted cone-type of architecture of the Arkonides, the structures reflected an alien concept of design. The Baalol Temple almost resembled a fortress. Concentric outer walls and out-thrusting bastions with narrow accessways gave the buildings, visible within the walls, a foreboding appearance. Mostly spherical in shape, supported by spires inlaid with precious metals, the buildings towered high into the sky. And, from the highest roof, a blood-red light cast its rays far over the surrounding terrain. According to plan, the extensive gardens outside the building complex were surrounded within minutes. Three thousand men of the Terranian landing force waited in the deeper darkness for Rhodan's command to attack. Special robots with this unit started sounding a wide strip of land around the temple in search of secret subterranean passages. It did not take long for the precision sensors to locate 8 tunnels at varying depths below. When Rhodan received this information, he smiled grimly. Then he issued his orders which soon indicated that he was taking no chances. Heavy armoured gun carriers descended out of the night on their antigrav beams. They landed precisely in those areas where the sounding sensors had discovered the underground passages. At once these battle vehicles swept their impulse beams downward at a sharp angle. Suddenly an inferno was unleashed! Having discovered the escape tunnels, we gave the enemy no quarter. Under no circumstances, would they be allowed to escape. Starburst energy beams bored into the ground which at first glowed with molten white light and then vaporized entirely. The tunnels were reached by cannon-created shafts which caused the passages to partially melt. The cave-ins were completed by vibration bombs which were then thrown



into the shafts. The highly specialized technical crews who guided the operation worked swiftly and reliably, fully cognizant of the stakes involved. By the time the temple lights flared up, the subterranean channels had all been effectively sealed. In the temple nothing moved. Only the blazing lights gave testimony that someone had been alerted inside. We waited until the Regent's heavily armed robot troops joined the rear lines. The flight-capable combat robots formed a second blockade ring. And with this we felt certain that we had the high priests in a trap. Rhodan listened for sounds within the temple itself but nothing could be heard there. Mercant spoke suddenly: "It's too quiet over there for me." We were standing beside the landed space-jet which contained the converted detector. The sharp beeps coming from its speaker indicated that my cell activator was still located inside the temple. When I looked at Rhodan I noted sharp furrows on his brow. "This is a sticky situation," he muttered grumpily. "It would be no problem to make a massive attack but what might happen to your ticker device in there?" Before I could say anything, there was a commotion to our left. John Marshall and mutant Wuriu Sengu were coming toward us. The stocky, broad-shouldered Japanese gave an impression of being exhausted. He could hardly stand on his feet. A soldier jumped forward and snapped open a field chair for him. Wuriu sat down heavily. Rhodan and I moved toward him. Our mood of victory had suddenly changed. I felt a sense of uneasiness creeping upon me. "Sengu, what's the matter with you?" asked Rhodan sharply, shaking the mutant by the shoulders. Wuriu looked up slowly, his eyes shining in the starlight like smouldering embers. "Sir, something is there that I can't figure out!" he stammered. "What do you, mean-what is there? Speak up, man!" "Sir, I cannot see through the walls. Either there's some kind of unknown defence screen around the place or... something else. Sir, my powers never failed me before! But here-they just have no effect!" I sensed a painful pulling at the back of my head. For the first time in many hours my extra-brain came to life. "Think in terms of the Baalols' mutational capabilities!" came the soundless voice from my logic sector. I drew in my breath sharply. Rhodan was silent. He looked down tensely at the benumbed 'seer' whose paranormal gifts enabled him to see through solid matter as through a transparent wall. Sengu had never been vanquished before. He had always been able to tell us what lay behind any obstacle. The delicate, narrow-hipped figure of our 'frequency seer' Son Okura emerged from the starlit darkness. His special faculty lay in the ability to see radiations invisible to normal eyes, including the farthest extremes of the radiation spectrum in the deepest darkness. He stopped next to me. I could see that his face was also weary and drawn. Rhodan was strangely slow in turning toward him, as though he were almost afraid to see his face. "Son... you too?" asked Rhodan rather hoarsely. "Yes sir! Something's going on there that's uncanny! I picked up a radiation that's like our shortest hyper-dimensional wavebands. And yet it's something else. It gave me a terrible headache!" "Headache," Rhodan repeated dully. The look on his face made me more uneasy than before. Then suddenly we received the awaited explanation. Betty Toufry spoke up from behind the other mutants. "I can't make out anything either, sir. Not a single thought pulse, not even a fragment of a brainwave. But I can tell you for certain that this is not a defence screen. Hardly any machinery is operating over there. Tanaka Seiko isn't picking up any energy soundings." "That coincides with our findings," said an officer of the tracking detail. "The temple reactor is running at minimum level. At the most, 500 kilowatts, sir. That's just enough for the lights, the air-conditioning and the elevators but it could never feed a forcefield like that. Miss Toufry's report is reliable, sir." Rhodan asked furiously: "Betty, is there anything else you can tell us?" The young woman came closer. In the starlight her face had an ashen hue. She spoke waveringly with an undertone of fear in her voice, "Sir, these people... they are the Antis! They are intelligences who are capable of completely neutralizing our special faculties! They are the anti-mutants, sir! I encountered one of them once on Velogra 7 but he wasn't

aware then of his ability to counter-absorb our forces. Put those over there, sir-they're well aware of it. They are exulting in triumph over us!" Suddenly I sensed my physical weakness. I felt sick. The outlines of the temple building began to blur before my vision. When I came to my senses I found myself lying on a stretcher. The ship's surgeon from the California was just removing a pressure hypodermic from my neck. "Parastimulus, sir," he said quietly. "I guess you know what's going on. That was the first attack of debility. Your actual age is starting to come into evidence." "How long will that shot last me?" I asked, somewhat composed. I felt strong again. "Normally 8 to 10 hours. In your case, slightly less since you have become accustomed to the continuous stimuli of your activator. Clinically speaking you are a dangerously sick man." "Thanks very much," I growled at him. "Unfortunately there's nothing I can do about it." The doctor laughed, which seemed to me a warped sense of humour. I glanced at my watch: 52 hours and 14 minutes had passed since the theft of the activator. Rhodan bent down close to me but I surprised him by raising up. I sat rigidly on the stretcher and looked around. My physical strength seemed to have returned to me completely. The parastimulus shot was really quite effective. "He's going to go bandanas!" said somebody with a chirping high voice. Pucky sat down beside me. The stretcher rack was just at the right level for him. I almost wanted to laugh. Sometimes the mousebeaver was priceless. "Alright, Perry," I told Rhodan, "let's not hold off any longer. I only have 8 hours left. Either I risk everything or nothing." "Attack?" he queried curtly. "Yes, and with everything we've got. I hereby declare a state of emergency on Arkon 2. The necessary orders will be given to the Regent at once. We can sit here doing nothing or we can take action-one way or the other. I have nothing more to lose." Rhodan hesitated. "This Segno Kaata character will probably meet any battle threat with a counter-threat to destroy the activator. Practically speaking, he has our hands tied." "We'll see about that! Maybe these so-called Antis can neutralize your mutants but I'd like to see what they can do against the nuclear hurricanes that my portable robot guns can dish out to them! Their super capacities will be of little use to them then!" My life was on the line. The high priest had me in his hands. Yet he might still be fooled. If I could succeed in making him think that I still had a spare activator, everything would work out. But if he saw through the deception-and our present manoeuvre gave him enough of a clue for it-then I was as good as dead. I raised my left arm, ready to contact the Brain. But then Pucky stood up and his delicate hands grasped my wrist. "Don't do it yet," said the little fellow in an unusually gentle tone of voice. His big hound-dog eyes gleamed faithfully in the starlight. "Atlan, let me try first. I'm the best teleporter in the Corps. Wait until I've made a jump. If I get into that temple the high priest will be done for!" "No, little one, not this time," I replied in equally gentle tones. "You heard what your colleagues said. Those are the Antis! You'll run into a disaster. Before I have to go, I'm not about to lose another friend. And if I go, well-I've lived long enough in violation of the laws of Nature. I resorted to trickery in order to swindle a few extra millenniums of time. Now the end has come. But don't you jump now-you hear me?" The mousebeaver snuggled closer to me. "Friend? Did you say friend?" he chirped softly. "Of course," I nodded, somewhat embarrassed. Pucky turned and took up a battle stance before Rhodan's tall figure. It was ludicrously funny to see the little fellow standing there with his small arms akimbo. "I'm going, Chief. Please don't try to stop me or I'll disobey the order. I have a chance." Rhodan hesitated slightly before he finally nodded. "Alright, then give it a try. The latest signal tracings indicate that the activator is in the tallest of those conical towers. It's in the upper third section. You be careful now, OK?" "Shall I go along?" asked Tako Kakuta from the background. He was our second transporter. "Nothing doing, I'm going solo!" cried the mousebeaver vehemently. In his small hand was the specially designed weapon he carried a deadly needle beamer. In a moment the intelligent inhabitant of the planet Vagabond went into his concentration.

Then he teleported with such speed that he hardly produced the usual shimmering effect of dematerialisation. We waited breathlessly. Then a fearful screaming caused us to turn around. Almost 100 meters away to one side and far short of his mark, Pucky had suddenly become visible again but he was no longer himself. An expanded version of Pucky who looked 10 times his size came reeling toward us like some bellowing monster. His proportions kept changing continuously with sometimes the head widening grotesquely or the arms growing longer, until finally the thickened lower torso seemed to shrink and collapse. His cry was not a shout of battle but one of terrible pain. The 30-foot giant came stumbling toward us pleading for help. His now bristling fur seemed to glow with an inner light of its own. It crackled with small. Lightning and muffled thundering that broke the stillness around us. By the time we started toward him he had started to become smaller. The weird effect appeared to be fading rapidly and yet when we reached him he still was 15 feet tall. The process of shrinking was still accompanied by stretching and distortions but the glow of his fur was diminishing. He finally lay unconscious before us and the doctors and other mutants rushed in to take care of him. We stood there by his twitching body until Rhodan spoke out in brittle tones. "Atlan, what can be done now? My mutants have failed. Glord! I never figured on running into these Antis! We didn't even know there were such monsters in existence!" Allan D. Mercant had kept a cool head about him. He waited for John Marshall's report which advised us that during Pucky's jump the dematerialised substance of his body had been violently rejected by an unknown force and consequently during rematerialisation his bodily atoms and the molecular groupings had not immediately reassembled in a proper matrix. This had been the reason for the distortion phenomena we had witnessed until a stabilization had occurred. Having a clear picture of the situation, Mercant spoke up. "That was the last trump card and it's been lost. Make your attack, Atlan! As Imperator of this empire the authority is yours. I can't take the responsibility. It is you who must give the orders." "Do you have any further suggestions?" I asked, feeling strangely self-composed. "Yessir. I urgently advise you to maintain your calm and reason. There's nothing to be gained by losing our heads now. We still have one possibility. Open your main fire against the outer walls and also put a few of the buildings under fire-but only the ones that do not contain the activator according to our tracer. Give them a demonstration of your power and will, even though some might take it as an act of desperation. I have to assume that in spite of his supernatural faculties this high priest is still, a living being who values his life. Use the attack to force him into a communication. Negotiate with him! He can't be absolutely sure if you have a duplicate or not. Maybe he'll even believe that you're bluffing. Nevertheless, in the back of his subconscious there may remain a shred of doubt. Once you have him in radio contact, half the battle is won. Bargain with him-his life for the activator!" Mercant did seem to have a built-in computer in his head instead of a brain. Could he ever be wrong? It almost seemed as if he had never possessed this human characteristic. Five minutes later my robot-guided tanks rolled into position. They were the heaviest units of the Arkonide space landing forces. I again made contact with the Regent, who at my request took over the direct command. 52 hours and 48 minutes after the theft of my activator, the impulse cannons began to thunder. Night turned into day as white-hot shock waves forced us to seek cover. I had the mobile armoured equipment move in closer. The massive enclosure walls were ripped apart. Molten remains swirled into the night sky, impelled by the blast of destruction. The next bombardment destroyed three temple buildings, ripping them to their foundations. But only after the fifth building collapsed under fire and the air had become unbearably hot did I receive the anxiously awaited signal from the commanding officer of the mobile com station. I could see the young officer as he raised an arm and waved it strenuously. I immediately ordered a cessation of firing and went over to his vehicle. "A certain Segno Kaata wishes to speak with you, sir," said the lieutenant. "Over here, please-screen #3. Kaata is

precisely on our voice-video frequency." Rhodan gave me a challenging pat on the shoulder. His face was tense. He personally removed the disfiguring bioplastic padding from my nose and cheeks, thus restoring my natural facial characteristics. Mercant relieved me of the dark-haired wig. I brushed back my long, white-blond hair and reached for the imperial shoulder cape which we had had the foresight to bring along. It served to conceal my Terranian uniform to the waistline. And so I stepped before the pickup lenses of the view camera. On the screen was the lean and wrinkled face of a white-haired Arkonide whose reddish eyes were clearly visible. He wore the loose white robes of a scientist which displayed symbols, however, that I had never seen before. I forced myself to be calm. This was the crucial moment. . . . The high priest laughed. It was an unusual laugh in that one heard it but didn't see it. The wizened face with the very shrewd eyes had not moved a muscle. "I do not believe Your Eminence," he declared in a deep, well-modulated voice. "The attack proves you are dependent upon the device you seek. All right, why should I deny it any longer? I have it in my possession!" "You mean you can't deny it," I said coldly. "You've overlooked the fact that it could be traced by sensor equipment. By now the traitors in the Crystal Palace have been taken into custody. We have unravelled this plot quite thoroughly. You made just two mistakes, Segno Kaata. "In the first place you took the word of somebody who only knew part of the facts and in the second place you underestimated me. Or did you assume that I would stand for such an effrontery? The treason of the Terranian, Thomas Cardif, is immaterial to me. As far as I am concerned he can tell anyone he pleases about the importance of my cell activator. I always have a reserve duplicate available." "Is that a fact?" he sneered. I had to get a tight grip on myself in order not to make any mistakes now. "Whether you believe it or not-who cares?" I retorted. "Then why do you place my temple under attack, Your Eminence?" "To force you to relinquish the device you have stolen, of course. Why should I subject myself to the difficulties of having another duplicate made?" These were the most precarious words so far in a discussion with a man who was not normal in the ordinary sense. Naturally I had to do something to get to the core of the issue. I had to demand the return of the device, cost what it might. As anticipated, he immediately made his thrust. "Oh, then this loss will cause you difficulties?" asked the high priest with an impudent pretense at courtesy. "In that case you wouldn't dare to destroy the main temple building because then you would destroy the apparatus." I prepared to use my last recourse. No other choice was available to me now. Either he would have to declare himself willing to hand over the activator in return for some assurance of amnesty or he'd have to take the risk of flight in order to save himself from the final onslaught. He had probably weighed these alternatives but would wait until the last moment before destroying the activator. I smiled scornfully and looked at my watch. "Are you counting on the supposed 60-hour time allowance?" "Precisely, Your Eminence!" he replied calmly. He seemed not to have a nerve in his body. Then he hastily added: "If you are still able to negotiate with me at the expiration of exactly 65 hours you will convince me that you have a replacement device. In that case I shall surrender the original in order-as you say!-to spare you the aforementioned difficulties. Since such action appears to be of importance to you, then in return I demand a personal absolvment from all charges." "And your priests?" "They are innocent. They had nothing to do with this." "Except for one person whose surrender I demand." After a short pause he said: "Agreed." I had played out my last hand. This seemingly cold-blooded schemer knew the alternatives and probabilities very well. I was backed into a corner, having no choice but to reject the proposal. If I had really possessed a duplicate, I could have accepted. I forced another smile to my lips. With deliberate care I looked at my watch again. "In 15 minutes I will open fire. Of course you realize that all subterranean dungeons and passages will be destroyed, so they will offer you none of the security you were apparently depending on. If prior to that time you declare yourself ready to surrender the stolen device to me, then I

shall let you go free-after you've received a psycho-conversion treatment. That's all that can save your life now. If you do not signal your surrender in time you will be consumed in the atomic fire. That is all. I only give people of your kind but a single chance!" With that I cut the connection. Weary and inwardly drained, I turned around to Mercant. The little man nodded approvingly. "Good, sir, very good! Your offer was especially credible when you made the condition about the psycho-conversion treatment. Had you just offered him unconditional freedom it would have brought down the whole house of cards. So now let's wait." Wait. For me it was the beginning of my most desperate period of waiting. How would the high priest react? Would he be convinced that I really had a spare device? Would he consider it logical that I was merely trying to avoid the difficulties of making another duplicate? Question upon question crowded in upon me. Without any doubt I knew I was in the weaker of the two positions. Rhodan informed me that the fleet flagship Drusus had landed at the Torgona spaceport with further backup troops. The cruiser Togo was still out in orbit. The seconds became eternities while the high priest remained silent. Allan D. Mercant's face was grim. Finally he came over to me. "This Segno Kaata is a shrewd one. I've figured out why he personally carried out the robbery or why he was at least there personally to supervise the operation. He is quite aware of his anti-mutant faculties. Since it is also known, sir, that you were once a Fleet Admiral and nephew of the Emperor at that time, and as such you were privileged to have your extra-brain activated, it was to be assumed that you might have since developed telepathic or other paranormal capabilities. This is why the Antis were used in the robbery." "I understand, Mercant." "It was unusual, however, that John Marshall claimed he had been awakened by thought impulses. It would have been impossible for him to have been aware of the Antis. This indicates that other normal people were involved in the action. I'll look into that when this emergency is over." "As a precaution I'll have to give you some special authorizations," I said with an effort. "That's not necessary, Atlan! Let's wait till the high priest makes his decision. He's too smart to destroy the activator on blind impulse alone. Probably he wants to see if you really decide to open fire. If you do so, however, his wavering convictions will become still more uncertain. Your claim that you have a duplicate device is not at all unbelievable. He will probably weigh the pros and cons. In my opinion, at the last moment he'll make a final condition to be set free without the brainwashing treatment. And that will depend upon whether or not he will accept your promise as valid." "Can he escape?" Rhodan had been listening in silence but now he pointed to the assembled mass. of troops. "Against a force like that? Surely he can see us on his viewscreen. Besides, he should know by now that all space is swarming with warships. He'd have to seek some other way out." These were also my thoughts but none of us knew then what was to come. If we had been more informed about the Antis we might have taken other precautions. In no case would I have expected what this uncanny fiend dared to do a short time later.

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The 15 minutes passed without result. Segno Kaata had not been heard from. It was then I began to suspect that even a man of the stature of the Solar Chief of Intelligence could be mistaken. For some minutes now he had been avoiding my questioning gaze. Mercant seemed to know that just this once he may have come close but missed. I was thinking of accepting the 65-hour request, considering that then my robot double could be presented to the high priest. The special automaton had already been brought to the location and was on hand in case of need. Undoubtedly I might fool Kaata with it but what might have happened to me during the excess 5 hours? I could last the 60 hours without notable signs of deterioration although now I could already feel the disturbance in my bodily cells. No, I could not comply with the Baalol's proposition. It would definitely be fatal to me. I entered the control room of the spacejet with Perry Rhodan and the double-headed mutant, Ivan Goratschin. Measuring some 35 meters in diameter, the disc-shaped

interplanetary spacecraft was one of the latest examples of Terranian manufacture. It could be flown and controlled by a single person. Also, it was equipped with a new device that enabled one to make a precision tracking of any hypertransition undertaken by another spaceship. We were alone. Fastened to the horseshoe-shaped control console before us was the cell frequency sensor. The sharp beeping notes were an indication that my activator was still in the temple. The sensor's pickup was flawless. The radio intercoms were operating. I was in contact with all command posts. The robot units of the Brain could be reached on channel 7. Moments before, Allan D. Mercant had retreated, apparently unable to stand my increasing desperation. By the time the 15-minute period I had stipulated came to an end, the timing since the robbery stood at 54 hours and 11 minutes. I had 8 hours at the very most. It was a stay of execution that was driving me insane. Here, after a major piece of sleuthing, we had located both the thief and the device itself, and yet we were relatively helpless! Of what use would it be to atomize the temple and its inhabitants? It was a foregone conclusion that the delicate apparatus itself would not survive the holocaust. And as for the mutants I had been relying on, they were condemned to stand idly by and do nothing. The Antis could well sneer in triumph, especially the high priests. Naturally this Segno Kaata knew that my hands were tied. I had already shown a little weakness and now all he had to do was wait to see what further measures I would take. If I hesitated any longer he would become certain that I did not have a replacement activator. "It's time!" said Rhodan tonelessly. He gazed expressionlessly at the large viewscreens, which gave us a clear picture of the remains of the temple buildings. "I suggest you have the robot troops storm the place during the bombardment. Maybe they can catch that priest." I had already toyed with the idea of holding off the main guns entirely and only using a robot attack. But that would have also proved to this unquestionably perceptive priest that I could not risk a complete destruction. I decided to take the final risk. A few moments later I issued the command to fire and thunder arose from the impulse cannons and advanced tank positions. I had carefully described the exact target areas so that the main building would still be spared. Rhodan activated all systems on the spacejet. I barely heeded the loud howling of the energy converter as the antigravs neutralized the pull of the planet. A light burst from the ground jets thrust us quickly upward, where we obtained a better overview of the action. Rhodan levelled the spacecraft off at an altitude of 100 meters. Not far ahead the nuclear holocaust was raging: a number of armoured vehicles opened fire on the subterranean installations and the sun-bright and sun-hot impulse beams burrowed downward. Deep chasms were carved into the ground. Boring inward at an ever steeper angle the ribbons of energy were threatening a collapse of the foundations. I sat tensely in front of the videophone-my direct contact with the troops' signal vehicle. "There is no communication from the priest!" came the duty officer's announcement. I only nodded to him. Questions were futile. Beneath us we saw the ravaging fire of the impulse guns on the mobile equipment. Seen from above, they made a bright ring of fire that turned the night into day for miles around. "The Drusus could handle all that in a second," said Goratschin. Neither of us answered him. We knew that we could not employ heavier weapons than these. Even the handguns of the soldiers might have accomplished as much but without such a spectacular demonstration. But everything depended on keeping up appearances. In the temple they had to believe that the loss of the activator was relatively unimportant to me. Three minutes after opening fire the great temple area resembled an erupting volcano. The main structure that had been spared thus far now began to sway. We saw pieces of masonry shaking loose from the sharp cone of its peak. Wide fissures were growing around its edges. A final collapse was only a matter of minutes. The videophone came to life. It was the lead officer of the mobile tracking station. "We have an energy reading, sir! Either somebody's turned on powerful fusion generators with a very high output or our fire has caused a reactor to start going out of control. There's no mistaking

our readings. Something is happening over there!" Rhodan suddenly leaned forward. The whistling beeps of the frequency sensor had become irregular. On the small scope the waveforms were changing. "Watch out!" he called to me urgently. "The activator's location is changing. Atlan, hasn't that priest answered yet?" Rhodan had hardly spoken before the recognizable cone of the still standing edifice changed suddenly. As it gaped wide open, something shaped like a teardrop shot upward. It hurtled up through the light ring of the firing tanks and disappeared into the darkness of night. In stark astonishment we watched the gleaming phantom depart. Only Goratschin had the foresight to act. He turned on the fully automatic hyper-tracer and pressed the red button as he swung it roughly to the area in question. Seconds later the ship which had just taken off was on our relief screen. The small craft, measuring hardly more than 15 meters in length, was racing vertically up into space, where more than 1,000 ships were waiting for just such an escape attempt. "Has he lost his mind?" yelled Rhodan, beside himself. "Look, the sensor shows the activator is on board. Atlan! Command all robotships at once to let the fugitive come through!" In the same instant the com panel speakers threatened to come off the bulkheads. Personnel on duty at numerous tracking stations were signalling us what we already knew from, our own observations. I contacted the Regent and ordered him to prevent firing on the small spacecraft under any circumstances but to track and register its course and changing locations. At the same time, Rhodan took off after our quarry. This ultra-modern spacejet had the acceleration capability of a State class cruiser. Rhodan had seen at once that we would have to undertake the pursuit ourselves. The Drusus and the California were on the ground at the Torgona port and the Togo had retreated deeper into space to give the Regent's ships a wider berth. Moreover it was not practicable to use the large ships for this type of pursuit. The priest still had an advantage inasmuch as he had taken the activator with him. Our screens showed a reddish-white glow on the outside of the hull because our forced start was compressing the air before us to the point of incandescence. I was hardly aware of the thunder from the superpowerful engines as they took us in a few moments into the depths of space. We shot from behind the night hemisphere of Arkon 2 into the light of the great Arkon sun. Far ahead of us, considerably more than 3,000,000 km away, the teardrop vessel raced onward into the void. Our energy tracer immediately picked up the fugitive's propulsion impulses which kept us firmly on his invisible trail. The spacejet's power and propulsion machinery roared at maximum output and the indicators of the inertial-pressure neutralizers were hovering close to the red markers. Meanwhile Rhodan had raised the telecom mike to his lips and now he called to his 3 Terranian ships. "Rhodan to Fleet unit: the Drusus and California will take off at once. Try to keep us in your tracking monitors. It is to be assumed that the fugitive will seek to secure his escape by going into a transition as soon as he reaches speol. With our new hypersensor we'll stay on his trail no matter where it leads us. Maybe the priest won't have time for true coordinate jumping and he may do some blind hyper-transiting to get out of the danger zone." "Now hear this: all units of the robot Regent have received orders to hold fire. The situation has changed. While the 60-hour time allowance is still in effect there can be no direct shooting under any circumstances. Atlan and Goratschin are here with me. We'll try to overtake the other spacecraft." He put down the mike. "What happens then I'm not sure of, myself," he muttered. The commanders of the Terranian vessels confirmed the message. At the same time I received a report from the robot Brain over my command transceiver. All robot units had ceased their attacks. Shortly thereafter, Allan D. Mercant came through on the telecom. He was speaking to us from the mobile com station near the temple. "This is Mercant. The combat robots have stormed the rest of the temple and discovered many priests inside. They had all gathered inside the one remaining building. It's likely that only the high priest himself got away although we have no proof of it. The cleanup and capture operation is continuing. One question: is the activator on board the escape ship?" "You

can bet on it! I'm just picking up a new trace on it now. Kaata's ship isn't overly fast. At most I'd give it a rating of 500 km per second squared. I'll be lightspeed in 3 minutes. What do you make of the high priest's action, Mercant?" Rhodan lowered his mike as the Intelligence Chief began to speak again. The video portion suddenly came through and his face appeared on the screen of the translight hypercom receiver. Thus there was no time delay in transmission. "Interesting psychologically, sir. He acted differently than we expected he would. Before trying such a crazy escape, any human or any Arkonide would have made one last attempt to negotiate his freedom in exchange for a return of the stolen property. Since he neglected to do this, there are certain inferences to be-" "OK, you can stow that!" Rhodan interrupted him. "Such observations are of no use to us now. We're staying right on his heels. We're sure he has the activator with him. Since he knows it's supposed to be a big chore for Atlan to reproduce an alleged duplicate, he's gambled on a final chance. It's too bad it was even mentioned to him." "So how else would you have justified his returning the device?" "By right of ownership-as simple as that!" "That would have gotten nowhere with Kaata." Rhodan cut off the communication. His grey eyes flashed angrily. I sat resignedly in the co-pilot's seat. Ivan Goratschin had taken over the radar and hypercom tracking console. Owing to his separately thinking heads, the trained mutant was able to carry on two functions simultaneously. And as a pilot he was not to be matched. The impulse space drive was working at full power. At 75% speol or the relative speed of light, Rhodan cut in the nuclear fuel injectors. The thundering of the engines became more deep-throated and powerful. We were catching up very swiftly but the 7 minutes between the priest's takeoff and our own still made an agonizing difference. Rhodan was calculating. While staring at the green blip on the hyper-tracking screen and altering his course accordingly, he commented suddenly. "We've already come into shooting range but if I open fire on him that bubble boat will smash like an egg under an elephant's foot." Stirring out of my lethargy I turned my burning eyes toward the echo blip on the screen. Our proximity was so close now that the return beam was showing a recognizable outline of the ship. "How would you be able to capture him, anyway?" I asked wearily. "We don't have tractor beams." By way of an answer, Rhodan turned on the hyperwave sensor and coupled it with the transition autopilot. It was a new kind of circuit hookup which enabled a pursuer to continue a chase through hyperspace without having to wait for the target ship's transition thrust. "He's going to jump before we get close enough. He's already at about 5% under C velocity. With maximum injection we could get another notch of speed out of this ship but it would not be significant enough. And I don't want to risk any sharp shooting this close to the light barrier. But that's the choice we have if we don't want to rip him wide open. I've got to lay a fine beam into his tail section and cripple his propulsion. Then we'll see how much this Anti values his life!" Anti! It made me shudder. At the same time I saw Goratschin turn one of his heads toward us. Ivan was unusually calm when he spoke. "Get ready! Here's a warp trace. He's just going into transition. His first hyper pulses are coming in!" I slumped back into my seat, bracing for the jump. Rhodan checked the synchronous autopilot once more. On the basis of energy values fed into it, at the moment of transition it would be able to automatically pattern its trajectory through hyper-dimensional space according to the jump configuration of the other ship. But even the new 'synchro'-pilot was only reliable within transition ranges which did not exceed 10 light-years. Beyond that the coordinate tracing had a wider margin of error. Suddenly we heard a booming report from the warp sensor. The Anti had disappeared from the normal continuum. Our own transition came 0.3 seconds later. That's how long the fully positronic synchro-pilot had taken to calculate the related values of the tracked warp echoes, to coordinate them with the mass of the alien ship and to convert everything in terms of our own transition alignment. Only 3/10's of a second-and yet even that seemed to me an eternity. Then came the shock of dematerialisation. It was quite short in duration and not too



painful, which was a sign that the Anti could not have made too big a jump. Rhodan's bodily outlines shimmered into nothingness. We attenuated and were temporarily transformed into energy quanta of 5th-dimensional space where a 4-dimensional body could not remain materially stable. The last thing I heard was a shout from Goratschin. I did not catch what he wanted to tell us. 300 ADVENTURES FROM NOW Clark Darlton show you Hideout: Futurity 8/IMPASSE ON GELAL'S MOON 10,000 years before, by Earth reckoning, when a decision was made to activate the brain of one Atlan, a Fleet Admiral of the ruling house of Gonozal, so that dormant cerebral centres could be excited into usefulness, a by-product of this process turned out to be a photographic memory. Once I had seen or experienced something, I never forgot it. I recognized the sun that lay ahead of us. It was a small yellow sun, almost a dwarf star, and it possessed but one planet. However, the latter was a bloated methane giant which was unusable to oxygen breathers. Even in the palmier days of the Imperium we had not established a fleet base there. The small sun was slightly distant from the main centre of the star cluster, the nearest star being about 0.5 light-years away. There were many problems involved with making transitions inside the Empire's star-clustered domain. At the inception, of translight space travel this had been the cause of many serious disasters. In Arkonide catalogues the semi-dwarf was listed under the name of Gela. According to the standard system of designation, its single planet was simply referred to as Gela! After we completed our emergence into normal space and rematerialised we immediately looked about in search of our quarry. Before my anxiety became intolerable, the tiny ship was spotted by Goratschin. We had come out of the para-dimensional void within just half a million km from the teardrop spacecraft but in contrast to the fugitive we had still retained about 97% of the relative speed of light. The Anti's vessel was not of any Arkonide design, which was indicated alone by its outward form. The scientists of my venerable race had never built anything other than spherical ships. So there were considerable differences here which quickly became apparent in the wide gap between our respective velocities. The Anti was travelling only at half the speed of light. After picking him up in our tracking beams the special sensor device also responded again and confirmed that my activator was still on board the fleeing ship. Rhodan was placing everything now on one cut of the cards. I marvelled at my state of indifference. My senses seemed suddenly to have become dull and unresponsive. Even the thought of my imminent end could hardly shake me now. After marshalling every last shred of my awareness I finally perceived that every cell of my body was now being taxed and what affected the cells affected all my functions whether mental or physical. I was so groggy and exhausted that I had to struggle to look at my watch. Since the theft, 56 hours and 58 minutes had passed, or more or less 57 hours. My stay of execution was almost at an end. After having been fully active shortly before the transition, now I suddenly felt no interest in anything. A weak signal from my extra-brain advised me that was probably due to the double burden of the dematerialising and rematerialising processes entailed in the hyperjump. Considering my state of health and already overtaxed cellular structure, the additional torture had been poison. I looked down at my hands. In places I could see the skin beginning to shrink. My wrists were showing deep wrinkles and folds. I tried to laugh but could bring no sound past my lips. Somewhere in the depths of my brain I knew that the feared deterioration was approaching faster than anticipated. Goratschin's mighty figure loomed before me. I looked up listlessly at his two heads. Why didn't they leave me in peace? I heard Rhodan say something that I couldn't quite make out. I only sensed that his voice sounded sharp and urgent. Goratschin swung his arm as though to heave a stone. I felt a sharp pain which swiftly subsided, however. In some stupefaction I stared down at the visible part of the heavy hypodermic that the mutant had thrust into my chest muscles. Only then was I aware that he had first opened my uniform. I felt the pressure of the injected fluid. Why in the world was Goratschin using this antique hypodermic on me? I was not very

fond of being stuck by needles. But I soon gave up my feeble protestations. To me it made no difference whether they stuck me or used an automatic high-pressure injector. I looked down at his thumb as the plunger went lower and lower into the chamber of the hypodermic. The fluid disappeared into my body. When there was hardly any of the liquid left to see, I suddenly felt sick. The resulting giddiness was so overpowering that I lost consciousness. When I came to my senses again I felt as though I could tear up trees. I sat up vigorously in my seat. I could not recall clearly what had happened prior to that but I knew I could not have been unconscious for long. "What was wrong?" I asked, more gruffly than I had intended. Belligerently and somewhat suspiciously I looked about almost as though I'd been outraged. But then I realized I must be acting stupidly. Goratschin's two heads winked at each other and grinned in satisfaction. But on Rhodan's face there was hardly an expression. He was looking narrowly at the tracking screen where the other spacecraft was delineated very clearly. "Don't ask," he muttered deprecatingly. "You had thrown in the towel—just about given up the ghost. Ivan gave you a super shot of parastimulin. I hope you can still hold out a few more hours. I have a question: how good can you shoot, Arkonide?" I knew what he was getting at. "Better than you think. I've never missed a target." "OK, that's what I wanted to hear. I'll have enough to do with the controls. The ship is still about 4,000 km away but in terms of space fighting that makes it ridiculously close. It's big enough on the screen and you should be able to just swipe its tail. We still have about two minutes left. If we wait longer than that he'll have picked up enough speed to be able to go into the next transition. And with that he could get away. Do you understand what must be done?" Our eyes met. Yes, I understood very clearly! It was now or never! For me there was no more time. I switched on the impulse cannon's power supply. It was a fixed bow gun that was similar to the calibre of a 500-meter battle cruiser. All the modern space-jets of Terranian design were similarly equipped. Because of its necessarily fixed position it could only be aimed by aiming the entire ship. This was of considerable advantage in terms of accuracy, yet it also had tactical disadvantages. The target viewscreen lighted up. In spite of the close range the picture resolution was not very good. I could hardly make out the stern of the tiny ship. The cannon was ready to fire. The fusion catalyst charge which had been injected into the reaction chamber waited only for the igniting arc to produce the nuclear action. The screen compensator fields along the barrel were giving me a green light; I could beam out the unleashed forces without fear of converting the space-jet into an atom bomb. Following my course correction data, Rhodan aimed for the target. It was a matter of moving mere fractions of a degree through vertical and horizontal coördinates. The green dot of my target indicator wandered to the stern of the alien craft which had been built by an unknown space-faring race. It was in no way comparable to Arkonide or Terranian designs for that small size of vehicle. Unknown technologists had worked a masterpiece when they managed to install a hyper spacedrive in such a limited space. This was probably the reason the high priest had chosen such a spacecraft. It was also why he had traded off other capabilities and now was the time to turn that fact to his disadvantage! All products of technology and science were limited in their development by certain natural principles. One could always compromise with such laws to obtain a seeming advantage. And such was the case here. It was true that Segno Kaata had a ship capable of exceeding light velocity in spite of its small size but in terms of acceleration and transition capabilities it fell way behind other designs. The tracer light zeroed home. I had the flaming tail jets of the Anti in my sights. I called for a vernier adjustment just slightly forward of the stern, whereupon I carefully and firmly depressed the firing button. A ring of sun-bright atomic forces formed in front of the impulse cannon's muzzle, made visible by the fact that our velocity was compressing the cosmic dust particles of space ahead of us. The phenomenon enabled us to see the energy beam stretching out ahead of us for about 100 meters, as thick as an

arm. Beyond that point it disappeared because the space-dust compression effect tapered off at that distance. There was a frighteningly long moment of waiting until the light-swift bolt of energy reached the steadily accelerating ship but then Goratschin suddenly shouted. Just as he detected the impact burst we obtained a visual sighting of the white-glowing flame emerging from the vessel's stern. The diminutive ship was torn from its course. It was just then I noticed that we were heading toward the methane planet that encircled the dwarf sun of Gela. Rhodan cut back the engines and threw all systems into idling mode. In free fall we raced after the now apparently unguided ship. "Good!" exclaimed Rhodan with a strange smile. "In fact, quite excellent! The Anti should be a little pale around the gills right now. But look-his nav jets are still working!" We observed the small pulsejets emerging from the curved bow. The bluish flecks of light were clearly discernible on our screen. "He's in retro!" snorted Ivanovich the Younger excitedly. "Putting on his brakes!" Rhodan also went into retropulsion to brake our speed. The velocity of the alien vessel dropped rapidly. Now the Anti was cut off from escaping through hyperspace. Evidently my hit had destroyed vital parts of his main spacedrive. To our surprise the priest made a swift manoeuvre we hadn't expected. After a strenuous deceleration he suddenly made a sharp curve into an orbit around the large methane planet and at increased speed. Thanks to our super-powerful equipment we were able to brake our higher velocity just in time. Rhodan strained to force the space-jet into the orbital curve and the ship seemed to protest in every atom. The fugitive had already disappeared behind the planet's curvature. Under such high-stress manoeuvres I could not have risked a second shot anyway. We almost thought that the Anti had gotten away until we perceived a narrow echo blip on our tracking screen. Then it became clear that the high priest was about to land on the largest of the planet's three available moons. With flaming bow jets the ship plunged toward the nameless celestial body which could not have measured more than 1,000 km in diameter. Our instruments indicated its gravity at 0.11, no atmosphere, and its astonishingly fast rotational rate of 21 hours. We had hardly detected the other ship before it again disappeared behind the horizon of the fast-approaching satellite. Rhodan once more overburdened the retro system in an attempt to adapt our course. At the full deceleration of 750 km per second squared, he manoeuvred onto a wide elliptical orbit. With our high velocity, the centrifugal force was almost too much for the weak gravitational pull of the moon to counteract it. We were forced to hold the orbit with the help of our vernier jets until our speed diminished sufficiently for free fall. "If he's lucky, his plan may work," said Rhodan with exasperating calmness. "If I were in his shoes I'd make a jump from the falling ship and throw the incriminating activator as far from me as possible. Then I'd find a hiding place somewhere. I'd figure my pursuers wanted the device itself much more than they wanted me. But I wonder if he's that smart." No, he was not that smart—at least in that sense of the word. We traced the high priest on our third orbital pass. He was carrying the activator on him, which obviously invited his discovery no matter where he went. Then something occurred to me. Tensely I turned around. "This is just a thought," I said quickly. "He knows that we were already in the air at the moment of his escape. Do you think he'd give any credence to the idea that we wouldn't have had time to bring along the sensor device I mentioned to him? He surely couldn't guess that the sensor was installed on the space-jet from the beginning." Rhodan rubbed his nose and glanced at me doubtfully. "Hmm... anything is possible with this character. That much we've learned. Apparently he doesn't know we've got the sensor with us or he would have ditched the activator by now. OK, it's just as well he has it on him, as far as I'm concerned!" At that particular moment we were looking at the provisional 'night' side of the moon when we saw the sudden burst of a nuclear explosion. The sun-bright blossom of flame was intense enough to be seen visually. Rhodan exclaimed: "That was his ship; It crashed—a total wipeout! I wonder if he was in it." "He's alive," said our two-headed companion

immediately. "And he's got the activator. After he saw his damage was greater than expected, he probably made a jump with an antigrav pack. Sir, I'm picking up a nice clear set of beeps. Don't give up now. The Anti is safely away from the crash location." With a last retro-thrust from the forward nav jets, Rhodan brought the space-jet into an orbital stall. Following Ivan's signals, we slowly dropped toward the surface. The bare, twisted face of a mountainous world emerged in our screen, utterly devoid of vegetation. Somewhere down there was the Anti. Our grav-absorbers had automatically adjusted us to the local gravitational pull. These space-jets were excellent interplanetary vehicles with high manoeuvrability. We glided weightlessly over the surface until Ivan announced that the activator had come to a halt. If we could assume that the Anti was carrying it on his person, it meant that he must have finally landed. I got up silently and went to the lockers to find a spacesuit to fit me. Which reminded me that the two-headed mutant would certainly not be able to find a special outfit for himself on board. I stopped in front of him thoughtfully. "What are we going to do about you? You can't go out-there's no oxygen here." Goratschin had already worked out the problem. "There's a light flying tank on board-you know, a quad, a 4-way. It has enough room for me. I can even keep you covered with a lightweight energy gun." Rhodan agreed with the plan just as the space-jet slowed down over a mountainous and heavily fissured terrain. The airless moon's surface was bleak and desolate. But at least the temperature outside appeared to be bearable. The small weak sun was far away. I slipped into a Terranian-designed spacesuit that was equipped with an antigrav pack. Although it did not afford a flight capability in the full sense of the word, it nevertheless made it possible for one to progress in mighty leaps. I also pulled out a suit for Rhodan. Goratschin selected two cumbersome-looking impulse beamers from the locker. They would have been too heavy to use on a world the size of Arkon but here they could be handled by any person of normal strength. I double-checked the small defence screen projectors that were built into the suits just under the oxygen packs. The micro-reactors revealed a full charge although they could only put out about 80 kw. It was an indication of the comparative weakness of the protective screening but a beam-shot of normal intensity could be repulsed. When Goratschin announced that the amplitude of the sensor signals was at a maximum peak we knew that we were directly over the spot where the priest had landed after his desperate jump from the ship. At the moment he was probably thunderstruck that we had found him so quickly. If he hadn't yet relinquished his sharp reasoning powers he would have to know now that we actually had the personal frequency sensor on board. Rhodan went into his landing manoeuvre. The landing struts extended as we made a hovering descent while at the same time the ship's mighty energy screen was cautiously built up to full strength. We sat down softly without a jolt. The engines subsided. Only the heavy fusion reactor for powering the ship's systems hummed as actively as before. Rhodan glanced significantly at my special timer. I read off the elapsed time since the theft: 58 hours and 16 minutes. "Still one and three-quarters of an hour, Barbarian," I told him with feigned serenity. Rhodan put on his spacesuit. Goratschin disappeared into the small hold behind the control room. Outside the bright light of the yellow sun glared from the surface, unhindered by an atmosphere. Where the sharp shadows fell was the deep blackness of night. It was an inhospitable and foreboding world we had landed on. We waited until Goratschin announced that his 4-way vehicle was ready for launching. Rhodan operated the lock doors so that the mutant could drive the quad outside. When we saw it safely out, we shut down the ship. Once we were outside and the outer lock door had closed, Rhodan cleared his throat and spoke through his helmet transmitter. "Where is that logic sector of yours hiding, Atlan?" I looked at him in some confusion until he added: "We forgot to send off a hypercom signal to the waiting fleet. How are they supposed to find us in case of emergency?" The question elicited a curse from me. When I was about to open the airlock again in order to take care of the matter at once, Rhodan called sarcastically: "Nobody is infallible, not even the Anti. Take cover,

Arkonide!" I fell instinctively to the ground, noting that the hatch door of the ship was about 20 meters away. A blinding energy flash zipped close by me. My defence screen glowed briefly and I was aware of a light electrical shock. To the right and left of me the ground was heated to incandescence by further beam-shots. The sharp energy blasts came toward us at a low angle and ploughed up semi-molten furrows in the sandy ground. From then on we could only run until we reached the first outcroppings of rock and the low cliffs. The Anti had cut us off from the ship and we had neglected to radio our position!

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Even over the radio the sonorous voice of the high priest was unmistakable. It rang out with a deep fullness in our helmet phones. I still felt fresh and active. The injection of parastimulin Goratschin had administered was now at its peak of effectiveness. But from a purely tactical standpoint our situation was untenable. With our first attacks against him the Anti had proved that he possessed the best defence screen in the galaxy. With my heavy duty impulse gun I had managed a direct hit when Segno Kaata sought to change his location. Although he was hurled violently to one side under an effective impact of tons of force, his energy screen had functioned flawlessly and reflected the nuclear jolt. Rhodan had also fired at him after he fell and converted the ground all around the Anti into a molten lake. In spite of this, Kaata survived it and got away. It left us dumbfounded. It was Goratschin who finally thought of an explanation. He maintained that among other faculties of the Antis they had the ability to structurally strengthen and stabilize a normal force field by means of some sort of physical catalytic emanations. The explanation was complex but sounded probable. After all, we knew very well that Segno Kaata's field projector was not a jot better than the ones we were using. So we had lain there firing back and forth without effect, and for me the time was dwindling away. The relativistic concept of time had suddenly become very real to me. It signified existence or non-existence. Then after a final exchange of fire, Kaata's voice was heard. Apparently he had tuned in on our voice band. He was on our same frequency. I listened breathlessly, searching desperately to find some clue to salvation in his words. "I presume, Your Eminence, that you have troubled yourself personally to come to this moon," said the high priest in calm, objective tones. "Naturally, then, you do not have a duplicate activator, in which case I urgently beseech you to give up your foolish strategy. I am invulnerable." I looked over at Rhodan. He lay at a distance of some 30 meters from me behind a massive boulder. At the moment nothing was to be seen of Kaata. He seemed to have found cover in a depression of the ground. Rhodan motioned to me strenuously. Behind the hemisphere of his helmet I could see him shaking his head negatively. I glanced at my watch. My time was running out. All I had left was a single hour. How long would the energizing effect of the parastimulin continue? Certainly the drug could not completely hold back the imminent deterioration of my strength. I decided to speak firmly and effectively then. With careful deliberation I depressed the transmitter button. "Atlan to Segno Kaata," I announced. "You are surrounded. Right now there is a heavily armed tank moving up behind your position. There is no way that your weapon can penetrate its powerful defence screen. You must surrender!" His laughter shocked me and caused my spirits to slump. I was slowly getting shaky. I could no longer suppress my constant anxiety over the ebbing minutes, no matter how hard I tried. I could see that I was losing control of myself. If only this devilish enemy had not laughed in such superior tones! "You consider my weapon to be weak, Your Eminence? It happens to be of special design. If I should make a direct hit just once, your personal defence screen would collapse. You still have 58 minutes in which to accept my proposal." I gasped in surprise and looked in alarm at my timer. Kaata was very precisely informed. He was only 3 minutes off because my period of grace had actually only 55 minutes to go. I could have shrieked like a madman! My instinct of self-preservation seemed to overpower the processes of reasoning-yet I was able to get hold of myself once more. "You know my

terms," I replied. "Surrender the device to me and after your psycho-conversion treatment I will allow you to go your way." He only laughed again. At some distance behind our position, Goratschin's terrain tank emerged into view. It was armed with a disintegrator gun that had the effect of destroying the molecular bonds of matter. Any matter struck by the weapon was atomized. Almost as though he could read minds, the high priest spoke again. "There can be no talk of a brainwashing, Your Eminence. I demand my freedom and your ship. For that I will promise to throw your device on the ground where you may find it after I have taken off. It goes without saying that I shall not relinquish the activator prior to that." Everything within me urged to give in to his demand. I was almost about to raise up to reply when Rhodan signalled to me again. He abruptly switched into our conversation. "This is Perry Rhodan, First Administrator of the Solar Empire," he said, introducing himself. His voice was cold and threatening. "Your offer is denied, Kaata. Kindly refrain from trying your tricks on me. I discovered you and I will destroy you." "Oh, the Terranian barbarian!" said the priest. This time it was Rhodan who laughed. But I realized that he knew how to handle people like this better than I. He was the personal embodiment of decisiveness. He seemed to radiate an aura of primordial force which made every foe apprehensive. The high priest felt this immediately as Rhodan continued. "I'll give you just 5 minutes, Kaata. If by then you haven't come out of your hole with your arms up, you will experience what we barbarians call Hell." "You are mixing into the internal politics of the Empire," said Kaata evasively. "To me you are a criminal. Crawl out of your hole. I demand to have the activator." "Come and take it from me!" cried the priest. But this time his voice was not so self-assured. He felt himself running into a granite wall with Rhodan. Ignoring the Anti, Rhodan called out to the tank. "Ivan, veer a little farther to the left and speed it up! He can't get through your defence screen." Goratschin answered. It was obvious that Segno Kaata could understand every word, until Rhodan suddenly changed over to English. "OK, now listen carefully. That character can't understand English. I've an idea his energy screen may have certain weaknesses. Something doesn't quite figure with him. Otherwise all he'd have to do is simply wait calmly for us to try something. Possibly in some way his paranormal warpage of force fields can be his own Achilles' heel. Our task now is to find that out. Since he's hoping to take the ship, if you get closer to him, Ivan, he'll probably make a try for it. Under no circumstances must he be allowed to get there! Even if we can't destroy him he won't be able to escape injury under the high impact from our pulse beams, at least not for long. By being knocked around he can be wounded and maybe end up with some broken bones. Of course he's aware of that. "Attention, Ivan: I don't think your disintegrator will have much luck with that unknown screen of his. So concentrate on whatever cover he finds and destroy it so that we'll always have him in view." "Atlan: as soon as you see him, open fire and aim it so he'll always be knocked away from the direction of the space-jet. That way we can prevent his breakthrough. All set? OK. Ivan, start the action. You're close enough now." Rhodan's plan was quite clear. Probably after a few hours of being battered around by our beams like a ball he would be so weakened that he might surrender. The only trouble was, I didn't have hours of time at my disposal! But I was interrupted from falling prey to my emotions. The high priest had correctly surmised that his present position was going to become untenable for him. He suddenly appeared from hiding and began to sprint with giant leaps toward the space-jet, which was a scant 100 meters away. The negligible gravity of the moon of Gelal permitted one to broad jump with ease and yet there were drawbacks to this very advantage. After each jump the Anti had a hard time keeping on his feet and kept falling. Rhodan fired first. The searing bolt of energy caught the priest in the middle of a jump but because of the airlessness of our surroundings it all happened in silence. I could see the finger of destructive force hit his screen and then cascade away in a shower of coruscating fire. Nevertheless his body was violently knocked sideways and finally slammed against a rocky

uprising with enormous force. Of course his screen served as a collision buffer but the shock of impact must have been transmitted to him. In a sudden transport of rage in which I poured out all of my helplessness and despair I took aim and opened a ravaging energy fire which suddenly made the priest look like a statue bathed in lightning. He leaned back against the high rocky ridge, unable to move. The accurate and incessant bombardment of energy beams from our heavy impulse weapons literally 'nailed' him there under the high force of impact. I kept on firing until my gun flashed a red warning light. The pulse blaster was overheated. Rhodan was forced to make use of his hand beamer which of course did not have the energy output of his heavier weapon. I threw my big blaster into the black shadows close to my cover where it would radiate its heat more quickly and cool down. When we started to fire with our normal weapons, Kaata was able to free himself. Still staggering and falling to the ground, he drew behind the stone outcropping and disappeared from our view. Rhodan laughed. Kaata must have heard him since he probably had not shut off his radio. "Ivan, do you see him? He must be on your side!" "Right in my sights, sir." "OK, fire at will. Pulverize that outcropping." Since the fire from the tank cannon was invisible it was all the easier to see its effects. After an initial cracking and crumbling the solid rock formation suddenly dissolved into nothingness. Segno Kaata became visible again. He lay flat beside the small mound of dust which had been a granite wall moments before. But the disintegrator rays had not been able to destroy his screen. Rhodan immediately resumed firing as he shouted to us: "Don't let up! Keep him under fire!" Shortly after that we had an unexpected piece of luck. The high priest was again whirled away across the ground while his own shots went wild. I had again picked up the heavy blaster. The red light was out which meant the weapon was ready for use once more. I kept a steady beam on a round boulder which was perhaps 2 meters in diameter and which Segno was obviously trying to reach. Under my pinpointed fire the rock heated to incandescence and then exploded. Simultaneously something happened that I could only assume but could not see directly. In our headphones we heard a shrill cry of pain. Kaata grasped his upper right arm which appeared to be dangling uselessly at his side. I forgot to keep firing. I watched the priest excitedly just as he dove into a deep fissure in the ground. "What was that?" I asked tensely. "What happened to his arm? Did you see that? Did one of our shots get through..." "No!" replied Rhodan in a strange tone of voice. "No way! It happened when the boulder exploded. There were heavy fragments flying around him like flak." "Can he be injured by that?" Rhodan did not answer. He seemed to be pondering the subject. But suddenly we heard the high priest calling. "If you don't cease firing at once, Your Eminence, I'll destroy your activator. It's up to you!" Rhodan cut in on him. "Surrender it and we'll let you go!" Kaata used a degrading swear word which caused Rhodan to speak in more frigid tones. "You are dealing with me now, is that clear? I'll smoke you out, you can depend on it. This is my last offer: you will place the activator on a stone in plain sight and give yourself up. I'll guarantee your safety and I'll land you on any planet of your choice." "Without the brain treatment?" "Without it! Think it over. I'll stand on my word!" "You're not authorized to make that decision, Terranian!" "Yes he is!" I interjected swiftly. By now I did not care whether this man remained alive or not. I had to have the activator. I only had 39 minutes left. And from that point on the Anti knew that I did not possess a duplicate. Seconds later, Rhodan gave up trying to keep it a secret. "You are close to death," the high priest said to me. "I knew that you did not have a second device. So my information was valid. I demand full freedom and the right to participate in programming the robot Regent." "You're a little late with that idea," remarked Rhodan. "Without the activator, Atlan will die. If that happens because of you, Kaata, I'll come after you personally! You'll not get inside that ship. If Atlan is put out of action you will still have me and my mutants to face. We'll chase you all over this moon if we have to. I am familiar with the spacesuit you are wearing. It only gives you 10 hours of oxygen. Our Terranian suits have a

superior regeneration system. We can breathe for 24 hours! What use is it to resist? What could you gain by Atlan's death? Use your reason! I'm offering you complete freedom-what more do you want? You're beaten, anyway." The Anti was silent for a few moments, during which we allowed our weapons to cool off. Otherwise we would not have been able to use them. Then came Kaata's answer: "I can't rely either on your promise or on that of a dying man. I prefer to gamble on what's real. My prospects of conquering you are better than anything you can guarantee me. I have no faith in the pledges of a barbarian or in the promises of an Emperor who has gained power through deception. You will have to die, Atlan!" His burst of scornful laughter made me go out of my mind. Rhodan crawled across to me and pushed me back under cover. A shot from Kaata's weapon caused the rocks close above me to glow white. The time left to me was only 26 minutes. By Rhodan's horrified expression I knew that my face was changing. Probably the skin was becoming loose and wrinkled. I felt a leaden weight in my limbs. The final realization came to me of what I actually was: after 10,000 years of synthetic immortality I was just an ancient used-up old man with no natural claim to life. It was then that I surrendered to fate and could finally smile. "Is it so bad, after all?" I asked softly in English. Rhodan said nothing. He grasped my left arm swiftly and looked at the timer. Then he spoke. "Still 25 minutes! OK, I'm going to try something. No, don't contradict me now!" he snapped at me in louder tones. "Here, you take your weapon and mine, too. I want you to do exactly what I tell you." I nodded resignedly. A strange peace came over me. I was ready to surrender. I probably didn't even have the strength left to continue the chase. Without Rhodan's help I'd have been lost long before this. But the game stretched out a little longer because the Terranian would not give up! I listened to his instructions, which twanged in the phones with overdriven emphasis. "Ivan, listen to me! I'm making a run for the ship. We're going to plaster the Anti with fire. I want you to destroy his present position. Keep moving in on him and do all you can to make him lose his head. Atlan will keep that devil under continuous fire. When one beamer is overheated he can use the other. I don't want the fire coverage to let up for a second! Did you get all that?" When Goratschin confirmed I said to him listlessly: "I guess you're going to use the heavier ship's armament, aren't you? Good. That will probably break down his defence screen. But what good will that do? The activator will be consumed in the atomic fire along with the Anti." . . . He signalled me to get ready. Seconds later the tank cannon began to fire. I waited until the high priest was visible behind his disintegrating cover and then I began to shoot at him. The repeated beams again hurled him away across the rough ground. Without his impact screening he would easily have been broken and crushed. Whenever he found new coverage the mutant would proceed to disintegrate it. Rhodan had been biding his time. When Segno Kaata fell under a particularly heavy hail of fire, he sprinted forward. He avoided making large jumps which took more time gaining him height than distance. Instead he utilized the light gravity by making long gliding steps. The technique made him practically fly over the sun-scorched terrain. He often landed on all fours but always managed to keep his highly trained body under control. Before I realized it he had disappeared under the hull of the disc-shaped machine. The lower hatch swung open. From then on I could not make out what Rhodan was doing. I didn't see him come out of the space-jet yet it was amazing that he did not put it into operation or attempt to use its heavy gun. The ship did not move. The Anti had found a good place to take cover. He was lying in a trough that was completely surrounded by rock ridges which even the disintegrator could not destroy easily. Also my two heavy weapons had been overheated again and I had to hold my fire. A glance at my timer showed I had just 8 minutes left. After that my deterioration would set in with appalling swiftness. I would not die immediately but my body would wither like a flower suddenly exposed to the heat of an oven. No word from Rhodan. There were 7 minutes left. My eyes seemed to be glued to the relentlessly flashing numbers of my timepiece. I was halfway into some unreality of dreaming when I



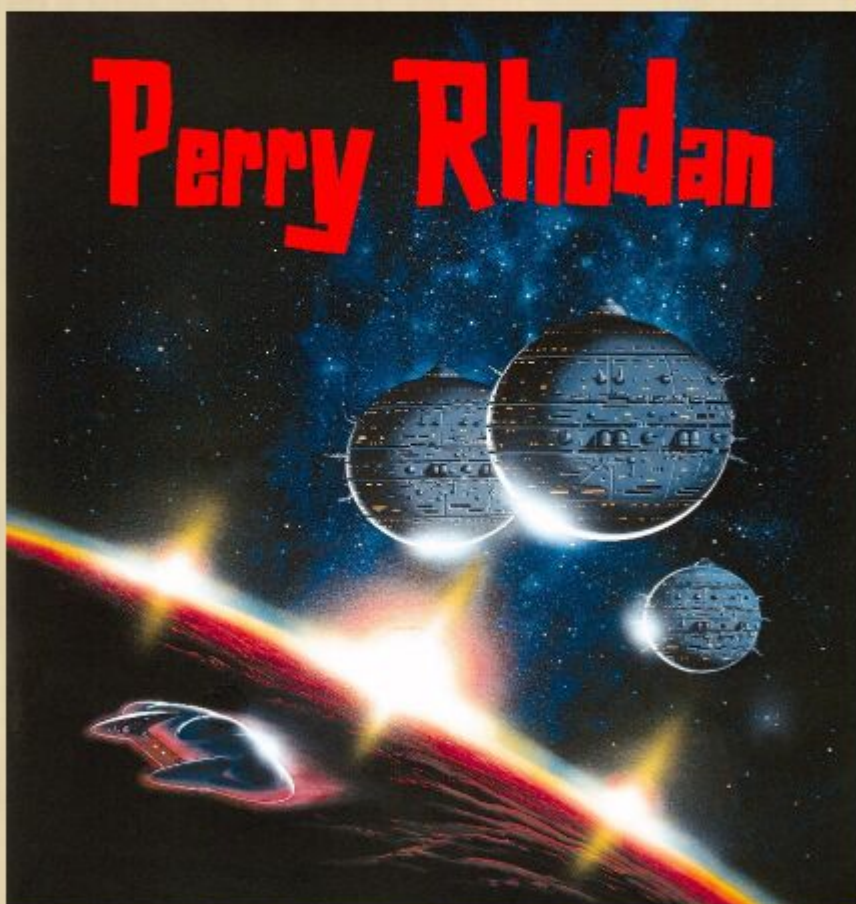
suddenly heard Rhodan's voice in my helmet phones. "Watch out-don't shoot! I'm right behind the Anti." I raised up swiftly from my prone position. Rhodan appeared just behind the rugged wall that surrounded the criminal. I could see him quite clearly but I could not make out the nature of the strange device he was carrying. It looked like a curved staff which he swiftly bent into a semicircular arc. Something flashed away from him, reflecting the sunlight. It darted down into the declivity and then I heard a horrible cry. It was an anguished moan from the Anti! Again Rhodan made the same odd movements and once more the high priest cried out. But this time the sound was more throttled, as though he were gurgling instead of articulating. After Rhodan's third enactment of an operation I still could not comprehend, the screams below ended in a deep groan. Then there was silence. Rhodan stood there motionlessly on the rock wall. I got up and staggered toward him. I realized that the Anti was dead. And if so, his special defence screen would have collapsed automatically. Goratschin raced forward in the tank, coming to a stop close to the declivity. Rhodan had disappeared into it but when he reappeared he came toward me in great leaps. In his right hand was my activator. When he reached me he threw me almost violently to the ground and pressed the device tightly against my chest. . . . I must have been unconscious for some time. When I came to my senses I could sense the resuscitating stream of pulses from my activator. I could think clearly again. Strength flowed into me. As my eyes wandered, I saw behind the transparent cockpit bubble of the nearby tank, Goratschin waved to me. Both his heads were laughing. Rhodan waited until I could sit up by myself. I felt the activator in my hand and suddenly pressed it fervently against my body. Rhodan was the first to speak. "By the time I got that thing to you, you had only 1 minute left. Is it in time to restart your cell regeneration?" "How do I look? Wrinkled?" "Still to some extent but the effects are fading away." With a deep sigh of relief I sank back again. Lying there flat on the ground I looked up into the glittering void which began directly at the surface of this airless moon. "How did you manage to kill him?" I asked in a low voice. "It was a try that could just as easily have failed. I got the idea when the Anti was wounded by the flying rock fragments. The stone flak went right through his screen! I knew that energy weapons were not the answer, so it was the same for any magnetically susceptible form of energy or material. This brought to mind the sports equipment we carry on board. You know that every spaceship carries athletic and sports equipment for maintaining physical fitness." I nodded but said nothing. However, I turned my head to look at what he was referring to. Not far away I could see a long sports bow lying in the sand. It was made of highly elastic synthetic fibre material. The quiver with its long arrows still hung over Rhodan's shoulders. When I looked at his face, he smiled. "I'm a very good marksman with a bow, didn't you know? The arrow shafts are made of non-magnetic synthetics and the sharp heads are also made of a nonmagnetic metal alloy. I came over the Anti's back wall and before he knew what was happening I shot the first arrow into him. It went through his screen with no effort at all. It took 3 arrows. That was it!" "That was it," Rhodan had said simply. I savoured the words wonderingly. How had this amazing man ever gotten the idea of firing at one of the best and most impenetrable energy screens in the galaxy with just a bow and arrow? Such a conclusion could only have been reached by a man whose forefathers had been hacking at each other with swords and battleaxes only a few hundred years before. I could hardly comprehend it but the result had proved the validity of Rhodan's strategy. His voice jolted me out of my reveries. I already felt fresh and reinvigorated. The activator was stimulating every last one of my bodily cells. Rhodan was looking off toward the declivity where a dead man was lying. In the high priest's body were 3 arrows which had actually been designed for target practice. "You know," said Rhodan thoughtfully, "the Anti shouldn't have kept calling me a barbarian. Believe it or not-that's what gave me the idea to revert to bow and arrow." He helped me up from the ground. Goratschin came closer with the tank. Rhodan went over and picked up the bow.

As he came back toward me he was using it as a walking stick. Strange-what ideas these little barbarians of Terra came up with! The End



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