

A FLIGHT OF "FANTASY"!

A SPACESHIP so fantastic that it is rightfully christened *Fantasy* .

A new spacedrive is quietly to be tested, a method previously unknown. If successful, it promises a whole new epoch in space travel, an unprecedented blossoming out into the unknown vastness of the cosmic realm.

Perry Rhodan & his men prepare to leap farther out into the universe than they have ever gone before.

How Auris of the emerald eyes & coppery hair glinting with metallic highlights figures in the exploratory trip of the *Fantasy* , will be revealed, along with other aspects of this beautiful alien, on your way to—"

THE TARGET STAR

1/ SPY ALERT ON LUNA

"MISTER, I wouldn't do that if I were you!"

Alfo Zartus froze in a cramped position. He gripped his upper dental plate in one hand as though it were the handle of a dangerous weapon.

"Turn around, hands over your head—and drop that dental plate!" said the same sinister-sounding voice which had startled Zartus in his furtive activity.

He tried to determine the speaker's location by the sound of the voice. Directly in front of Zartus was the wide conveyor belt of the fully-automated feeder station 18. It glided noisily past him on its glistening roller track. The assemblies on the belt were component parts of a remote-controlled weapon swivel. All were part of a secret design series (LA-185-GEZO-3) destined for use in the outer gun turrets of heavy cruisers of the *Terra* class. The new feature was the field-cushion slide channelling which had finally overcome the dangerous problem of lubrication under vacuum conditions.

Alfo Zartus looked around like a hunted criminal. His eyes darted into every shadowy alcove but there was no one to be seen. The long, narrow conveyor corridor did not offer much concealment for anyone, except perhaps for the uprights under the roller racks.

Zartus followed his instincts and moved his hand swiftly, shoving the upper dental plate into his mouth. For a moment he felt the sharp pressure of the micro-film container which had been shoved out of place in the haste of positioning the plate. Desperately he worked the thing with his tongue until it fell into place on its suction base and aligned itself with his facial contours.

The man with the slight build straightened up with a sigh of relief and turned around, smiling uncertainly as he raised his hands.

"Pretty clever, mister!" said somebody sarcastically. "You missed your calling—should have been a shell-game artist in a circus!"

Zartus knew that he was a goner if he were to be captured in this sector of the automatic assembly line. During the last 57 years the Earth's Moon had been changed considerably—in fact it had been converted. The end product was a satellite changed into one big integrated spaceship building-dock along Arkonide pattern and dimensions. This planetary factory, having the greatest productive capacity in the history of humanity, had been completed only a few months ago. Since then the Moon's vast assembly lines had been operating under remote control of relatively few automatic stations.

Zartus figured that he had been spotted by a vidicam because the place was heavily equipped with surveillance systems. But even so—and Zartus saw no other possibility—they couldn't have seen what he had hidden in his upper plate. Still, he had checked for remote cameras and hadn't noticed any. How had they been so well informed about his operation?

He took another look around him. He thought of his assignment, of the micro-camera under his wristwatch, and also of the Lunar Security organisation, which was part of Solar Intelligence. If he were to be picked up now in possession of the camera and the film, his career as a planning engineer for automated feeder systems would be terminated! Also there was the threat of the 3d degree, trial procedures, demotion, certainly a long penitentiary sentence or even maybe forced labour on some remote and airless satellite.

Perry Rhodan as First Administrator of the Solar Empire had reserved the right to preside over trials pertaining to cases of espionage which affected Solar security. When Alfo Zartus realized that his present act came under martial law, the fear of a Court Martial made him lose his rational control. He looked about himself again, this time ignoring the shout of warning. With a half-choked cry he exerted all his strength to swing up onto the feeder belt where he immediately fell flat, unable to crouch or stand. He was carried at high speed toward the narrow opening in the rock wall.

Beyond lay staging room 136 where components on multiple feeder lines from all directions were joined into a larger final-stage assembly.

"You out of your mind?!" he heard the unknown speaker shout. "Get off of that thing, do you hear me? Jump! That's fatal, man—jump, I say!"

Zartus laughed involuntarily. His fingernails clawed at the grip-tread of the synthetic conveyor-strip as he groaned painfully due to the jolting rollers, while at the same time he was trying to figure how to escape from staging room 136. The unknown observer was still yelling at him but the words had become unintelligible.

Zartus was just thinking that he's better destroy the incriminating data on him when he went through into the other room and was grasped and jerked upward by the steel tongs of an automated swivel mechanism. He cried out in panic as he realized the warning of the unknown observer had not been a trick. As in some detached reality he saw the onrushing opening of a spray isolation chamber where the larger semi-completed assemblies were given a synthetic coating that was acid and heat resistant. Behind the looming steel gate was a bright red glow. In there the thermoplast material was kept in a liquid state at close to 23000° Fahrenheit so that it could be sprayed on through high-pressure jets.

The robot carrier tongs were merciless. They were unable to distinguish between inert matter and a human body.

* * * *

Alfo Zartus, Planning Eng., b. 6/22, 2062, Lowman, Idaho ...

Col. Hildrun, Lunar Security Chief in Section F-81, laid the personnel dossier to one side. He raised his sombre gaze to the sergeant standing in front of his desk, surveying him deliberately from head to toe. A deeper frown appeared between his brows when he noted the guard's shock-gun in its open holster. He pointed to the weapon, his voice ringing sharply.

"And what do you call that! Did you assume we gave you that thing to use on mice or something? Why didn't you stun Zartus with it? He was close enough to you—or wasn't he?"

The young sergeant turned pale. He stood stiffly before his superior while the other officers of the Sector Guard looked on without a word. He knew what had happened was not at all as simple a situation as Hildrun seemed to think it was. "Oh yes, sir, that part's true," the Security man stammered. "I had my invisibility deflector turned on so that Zartus couldn't see me. I didn't want to knock him out Regulations prohibit the use of shock-weapons if it is not absolutely necessary. And to me it did not seem to be needed. The spy was small and only had a slight build. I could have overpowered him easily. Why should I injure him with a stun shot?"

Col. Hildrun got up so quickly that his desk chair glided resoundingly against the wall behind him. With hands clasped behind him, he strode across the room toward the beverage dispenser. "Oh, so you didn't wish to injure him! Instead, you let him go to a certain death, didn't you?"

"Sir, I had no idea he'd jump onto the belt, of all places! It happened too fast. Once he was on the conveyor I couldn't shoot!"

"Why not?"

"Because the supply belt moves faster than I can run, sir. If I had stunned him he wouldn't have been able to jump to save himself. That was his last chance. I shouted at him and told him that the spray chamber was beyond the wall. He didn't listen to me. What else could I have done, sir?"

Col. Hildrun turned from the drink machine holding a steaming hot cup of coffee. "Can you prove that you shouted this warning to him?"

The sergeant looked around helplessly at his colleagues. A lieutenant from the observation group came to his rescue.

"We have the audio tapes, sir. When Sgt Rodzyn sent the alarm signal over his helmet transmitter we locked in the remote pickup. He actually did yell like he said—in fact quite loudly."

Hildrun stomped back to his desk. He set down his coffee cup so abruptly that it slopped over. "Lucky for you, Rodzyn! You just lucked in! What gave you the idea, anyway, to follow the spy alone into the tunnel?"

"I've had my suspicions of Zartus for some time, sir, but I needed proof. That's why I followed him under the deflector screen. He took some pictures with the camera in his watch, not realizing that I was standing close to him. Finally he took out the microfilm and before I knew it he had his upper dental plate out and was putting the film roll into a container that fit into the upper gum plate. That's when I spoke to him and started to make the arrest. He froze on the spot and seemed to be completely helpless. That's why it was such a surprise when he suddenly jumped on the moving belt. I couldn't get hold of him then."

Hildrun looked at his staff officers. Sgt. Rodzyn waited breathlessly.

"Alright, turn in your statements for the record log. For the time being you're relieved of duty. Are you aware of the fact that I must report this case to the Chief of Intelligence?"

Rodzyn nodded uncertainly. Moments later he left the Chief's office. In an anteroom he found a chair and sat down in a state of nervous exhaustion. He could not get the terrible scene out of his memory. The little man's twisted face loomed insistently before his mind's eye.

"It was an accident, Rodzyn." a passing officer told him. "Go to your quarters and prepare your statement for the record. You look awful!"

"I feel awful, sir," replied the S-Man through dry lips. "Sir, may I ask you something?"

"Yes, what?"

"What's going to happen now? I couldn't help what happened."

"We know that. Well, unless you're lucky this thing can spread into bigger circles. There's a service regulation that says cases like this have to be reported personally to the Administrator. You probably know that this Lunar plant is blue sky to his eye."

Sgt. Rodzyn caught his breath as he stared in new fear at the officer. "You ... you mean, Perry Rhodan, sir?"

"Do you know any other Administrator? If you do have to appear before him, just describe everything frankly and openly. You can hardly be charged with any offence. It was an accident, as I told you. Get going now and for goodness sake get out of that suit!"

The officer touched two fingers to the peak of his cap and exited the small room, which was several hundred meters below the Moon's surface. The noise of the sector power plant could be heard nearby.

2/ THE 3d EPOCH BEGINS

For the past several hours, Lt. Brazo Alkher felt that he had entered a madhouse. Since his landing on the Moon he had been questioned by the Security Troops eleven times concerning his departure point and his destination. They had even queried him about his personal history, his background, his parents and grandparents. Finally they had asked him what his future plans were. But having been transferred under secret orders to Luna Base, the shavetail lieutenant could tell them nothing.

This was his first chance to marvel and gape at the mightiest fleet base of the human race. He knew that during the past 57 years the Moon had become a celestial shipyard and massive weapons factory as the Earth's satellite had been hollowed out with the most modern technology at tremendous cost. There was little indication of this mammoth industry on the surface itself. It had all been installed beneath the lifeless crust, leaving the pockmarked surface undisturbed.

Only the great spaceports lay open to observation—as well as the armour-plated domes of the cosmic defence fortresses.

It had taken Brazo thirteen hours to get to his destination. A tall lanky youth of 23 years, Brazo Alkher gripped his few belongings more tightly as a gleaming, silvery hood sank down onto his skull. He patiently endured the torture of the brainwave analysis, which was a major part of the robotic examination. If the human guards happened to miss something, the robot would find it

"Set down your gear!" came a crackling voice from the loudspeaker.

Brazo remained stiffly at attention. In his confusion he opened his clenched hands and his duffle bags noisily hit the floor. His face reddened as he looked around in embarrassment.

"Excuse me!" he said hastily, smiling uncertainly at the soulless machine before him. It did not react to his words.

He heaved a sigh of relief when a green light appeared and the ID-strip glided out of another slot.

"You have permission to enter, sir," rattled the loud speaker. "You are expected."

"Thanks a lot!" whispered Brazo.

While hastily ducking down to retrieve his gear his head struck a red-tipped lever and a bell started to ring inside the dome. Brazo caught his breath. He quickly decided to vacate the metal platform with a few wild, ungainly jumps.

Brazo Alkher had already been branded in the Space Academy as a hard-luck Charlie with two left hands and feet. In this case he had over-exerted his bony frame and now the force of gravity brought him to the floor in a swan dive with his arms and feet flailing about in the process, his helmeted skull collided with the frame of a man who stood in the way.

According to his friends, Brazo was normally as meek as an aging St. Bernard, but not now! It took awhile for his groping hands to straighten his helmet and set the knotted straps of his gear in order. Still

gasping from the ordeal he straightened up to encounter his next shock. He stared up into the grinning, grease-smearred face of a tall man in the undecorative uniform of the maintenance personnel. The man wore a crumpled, almost unrecognizable peaked cap on his dark blond head. He wore no visible rank insignia, which was perhaps why Brazo wasn't polite about expressing himself.

"Are you bolted to the floor, you petrified donk? You look a mess, y'know?" He surprised himself with the outburst and finally added with embarrassment: "Sorry friend, no harm intended. It's my fault as usual. Would you give me a hand?"

The tall, lean man with the icy grey eyes nodded. "Certainly. You know the way you jumped off of that platform you looked like a 3-legged Pavian."

"Is there such a thing?" asked Brazo wonderingly. The stranger laughed heartily and gently brushed off Brazo's dirtied uniform. "Now, that's better, isn't it, Lieutenant? May I ask where you are assigned?"

Alkher began at once to search desperately for the papers that he had been collecting from everywhere while being processed through. The lean man waited patiently as the lieutenant appeared to become more nervous but finally the latter managed to locate his transfer orders in a knee-pocket of his suit.

Brazo didn't know whether to take offence at the man's laughter or to hold onto his patience. He finally decided on the latter. Besides, his experienced eye had been attracted by what lay beyond. A giant cavern opened up before him in which there was an unusual number of armed guards and combat robots. Above them arched the gleaming spherical shape of an obviously sparkling new heavy cruiser of the *Terra* class, measuring some 200 meters in diameter.

Brazo knew by now that he was in the heart of the secret security area of the Moon's shipbuilding industry. Only a restricted few were permitted to know what was going on here. It took him only a moment or two to realize that the cruiser's equatorial ring-bulge was of special design. The propulsion ring-skirt was larger than on standard ships of this class, with a more sharply cambered rim. But that was all he could see at first glance that was unusual.

The grey-eyed man had stopped laughing. He glanced quickly through the young lieutenant's travel orders and seemed to be studying him intently. Brazo's soft-looking boyish face had hardened suddenly, appearing to be more decisive and manly.

The technician smiled almost imperceptibly as he bent down to pick up the heavy duffle bags. "let's go, sir. We've been waiting for you."

Brazo nodded absently but in a few seconds he was wondering at the smart and exemplary manner in which the soldiers and technicians greeted him. Even the guard robots started saluting and calls of "Attention!" rang through the general noise of the armament station. He began to feel uneasy.

He came to a stop and turned hastily to whisper to his companion: "Hey listen man—do they snap-to like this for every shavetail lieutenant here? They must be rocked off!"

"Just putting it on a bit thick, that's all," answered the tall one good-naturedly.

Brazo laughed uncertainly. A Fleet colonial passed them, jutting out his chest and raising a hand to the peak of his cap. It was too much. "Did you see that? The guy salutes but almost guns me down with his look! Listen buddy, what's going on? Is this some kind of Donk Domicile? Hey—you know you look awful. Why don't you wash your face? Good thing you're not in my command. You'd really be on the

carpet!" He shook his head and inspected the stranger critically, finally touching the other's face testily. "That Kerd's a foot thick!" he said reproachfully. "You look like you've been in a pig-pen!"

A frightening bellow was heard, causing Brazo to feel weak in his knees for a moment. He whirled about in startled dismay. Obviously the horrible sounds were emerging from the open airlock of the special heavy cruiser. They ended on a heavy bleating note like the drowning gurgles of a dying dinosaur.

"Glord, what was that?" moaned Brazo.

"The Commander was singing," he was advised. "Haven't you ever heard a native Epsalian sing before?"

Brazo gave up. He felt drained and baffled. Nobody around here seemed to be in his right mind—neither the security guards nor the robots nor even the Commander. He staggered along next to his guide until he saw the approach of a corpulent bald-headed man. The civilian had blue-veined pouches of flesh on his face and he came puffing and panting toward them with such a piercing look in his eyes that Brazo expected some new disaster to befall him. However, the Colossus paid no attention to him.

"Just look at you!" he said in a voice that had no less volume than that of the native Epsalian he had just heard. The bald-headed man was emphatically sarcastic as he stopped before the grease-smearing technician with his fat but mighty arms akimbo. "You go too far with this incognito bit!"

"Hello, Professor," said the blond one. With slow deliberation he removed his cap and ran a hand through his sweat-dampened hair.

Brazo paled. After his baggage carrier had removed his headgear it only took him a few seconds to recognize Perry Rhodan, the First Administrator of the Solar Empire and Commander-in-Chief. Whirling pinwheels appeared before Brazo's wide-staring eyes. At the same time he felt his legs turn to rubber beneath him. With something like a death-rattle in his throat he gasped, "Excuse me, sir!"

And so it happened that he fell into the arms of the speechless hyper-physicist, Dr. Arno Kalup, the irascible scientist whose name was closely tied to the revolutionary discovery of the so-called hyper-linear space-drive.

Whenever the testpilots and specialists of the "Linear" Command discussed the new-fangled compensating converter, which created compensator fields consisting of 6th-dimensional flux lines. They never bothered with its exact description, which was a tongue-twister. The machine was simply a Kalup Converter—and that just about said it all.

Arno Kalup, the greatest living scientist of the human race, looked down in stupefaction into the deathly pale face of the lieutenant before shouting at him in vexation: "Come on, what's all this? Get hold of yourself, man!" He let him fall roughly to the floor, where the youngster felt even worse.

Two nearby officers caught Rhodan's signal. They came to attention before the Administrator, who gave them a penetrating look. Rhodan's unique sense of humour was known far and wide but this time he seemed to have outdone himself. The two lieutenants of the guard were of different temperaments and physical build but their lips quivered with the same suspicious hint of a smirk. In fact, the smaller of the two had not been able to suppress a tearful glitter of laughter in his eyes.

Brazo straightened up with a groan as Rhodan addressed them pontifically. "Gentlemen, take your colleague with you. Judging from his papers, this young man is that same mad fire-control officer, Brazo

Alkher, who managed to cripple two Springer ships in the Orion sector while fighting with badly damaged weapons on the light cruiser *Formosa*. I'll never figure out how he did it; however, at the moment he happens to be the best heavy ordnance gunner that the Fleet Staff could find. Tell the First Officer to prepare for the swearing-in ceremony. We take off in two hours."

"Could I get a word in here?" asked Prof. Kalup with almost ominous forbearance.

"Just a second," Rhodan answered, seeking to appease him, while he turned to a major of the Security Guard and listened to a brief message.

"We have Sgt Rodzyn in the Guard Room, sir," said the major. "Do you still wish to speak to him?"

"I'll be there right away. I was delayed by running into Hard Luck Charlie there." Rhodan indicated Brazo, who was staggering along between the two lieutenants toward the heavy cruiser's ground lock.

After the major went away Rhodan smirked at Kalup while running a hand over his face. "Do I really look that bad? Brazo told me I looked as if I'd been in a pig-pen."

Kalup let out a roar of laughter. His face almost turned blue as he kept on laughing until the sweat stood out on his great bald head. "That's the best joke I've heard all week!" he gasped. "That really takes the prize! I see you have to go, so I'll wait for you on board. What's this sergeant been up to?"

"He discovered a spy in this area."

Kalup's face hardened. "Do you think maybe he had our experimental ship in mind?"

We may never know. The man had a fatal accident. But I'd like to find out whether or not his presence so close to the Linear Station was a coincidence or if there was something more subtle behind his actions. I'm hoping to get more detailed information from this S-Man. Excuse me, Professor, I'll see you in half an hour."

"Just don't trip over another grease-pan," the big scientist called after him jokingly.

Perry Rhodan was laughing when he walked away and passed beneath the ship dock's mammoth timeclock which clicked over one more minute: 13:22 hours, Standard Time, 4 March 2102.

Kalup's massive figure disappeared into the shadows under the special ship. As he looked up he saw the discoloured tubes of the impulse jets. For a moment the scientist stood still. He thought back on his developmental work with the linear space-drive, which had first been mentioned by Earth's specialists about 58 years ago. At that time Arno Kalup had just seen the light of day. He had been born when a fleet of mighty ships built by inhuman intelligences had just broken through into the Solar System. The giants from another plane of time had been known as the Druufs. They had possessed this linear drive and humans had appropriated it from them.

(Kalup's researchers had provided the breakthrough) but it had taken almost 57 years to unravel the secrets of the hyper-linear drive.

* * * *

"Buddy," said Lt. Stant Nolinow, "you must have the nerves of a robot—which means none at all!"

He stared curiously at Brazo Alkher, who sat on the edge of his bunk looking completely exhausted and close to a nervous breakdown.

"Lay off, will you?" whined Brazo. "How was I supposed to know that Perry Rhodan of all people—"

"OK, OK!" Nolinow interrupted him. You saw a heavy-set man with a dark blond bristly crewcut. "For our next magic act I'm going to have Atlan bring in the chow!"

Mahaut Sikhra suppressed a chuckle. He was leaning his svelte frame against the cabin bulkhead. Suddenly he made a supple movement and walked across to Brazo. He introduced himself. "My friends call me Sik. I head up a Special Duty detail. Stant is Commander of the Robot Troops. If I'm not mistaken, you'll be taking over Fire Control Central."

Brazo shook the young man's hand disconcertedly. "Hiya!" he muttered. "Hey wait a minute! How come I get the Fire Control? Normally that takes the rank of a major or at least a captain."

Mahaut Sikhra shrugged. For Brazo his expression was enigmatical. "On board the *Fantasy* everything is unusual. Even the ship itself is no ordinary battlewagon. Its strictly experimental."

Brazo's attention came to a new focus. He made a deliberate appraisal of these young officers who all seemed to have special qualifications. "Experimental...?" he echoed thoughtfully. "Hm-m-m ... That explains the beefed-up ring-bulge I noticed over those engines. I was wondering about that."

"Smart boy!" scoffed Nolinow. "You only wondered about it? You may be gaping like the rest of us before long! The *Fantasy* has a crew and supercargo of special passengers to really go with the name. We're carrying all the elite of the Solar System—from the standpoint of politics, the military, and scientific technology. And all of the legendary Great Old Ones have made a rendezvous here. You know, those said to have achieved a relative immortality from biomedical treatments."

"Stop! I'm getting butterflies in my stomach again!"

Stant yawned and shoved his hands into his uniform pockets. He flopped onto the hydro-pneumatic bunk next to Brazo and stretched out his legs. "But that's not all, brother! Every crewman's been handpicked. An ace in his own specialty. Which makes you one also or you wouldn't have been transferred here. Now does that tell why you were put through the traces?"

Brazo nodded excitedly. There was a new feverish intensity in his eyes. Stant nodded patronizingly. The slender Nepalese, Mahaut Sikhra, spoke briefly via videophone with Control Central.

Then Sikhra turned to Brazo. "In about half an hour you get sworn in. Pretty solemn stuff, I'm telling you."

"Sworn in?"

"Certainly. We're harbingers of the New Humanity, you know, and this ship's crammed with all the Top Secret goodies of the new wave of science. From the outside the *Fantasy* doesn't look much different from a Terra-class heavy cruiser but wait until you get a load of that power and engineroom section,

well—just bring your smelling salts!"

"I could have used them before I even came on board," muttered Brazo plaintively.

Nolinow laughed. "That's understandable, colleague! You know we already have a few test flights behind us here, which Perry Rhodan modestly calls 'short runs'. Those so-called 'short runs' ranged between 3,000 and 10,000 light-years. Kind of a cute understatement, wouldn't you say? The new propulsion system proved out very well. In fact Kalup came back beaming each time. That's our worthy Commander whom you'll get to know.

He laughs so loud he shakes the armour plate on the hatches. And our top Chief, Rhodan, has developed such a strange smile that I think of a conquest of the entire Milky Way. When the Old Man looks at you like that, you know something's really in the air."

Stant nodded gravely and Brazo wiped his sweating palms on his trouser legs.

"That's alright," said Sikhra humorously. "We have a laundry room on board!"

When Brazo hastily apologized for it, Stant yawned again. "Don't give it a thought—just let yourself go. We're here to brief you on the high points."

"You don't say!"

"Just a customer service, friend. It really grabs me, you know, to have the privilege of briefing such a Vippo. You're the only lieutenant in the Solar Fleet who ever used Rhodan as a baggage porter."

Brazo grinned. "You guys are chrakoes!"

Nolinow winked at the Nepalese. "I think we'll be able to stand each other. Well now, to summarize: Humanity has struggled some 57 years to unravel the mystery of linear propulsion. It was about 58 years ago that the Druufs put in an appearance. Those were the monster creatures who took advantage of a freak event in Nature to break out of their own timeplane in an attempt to conquer the Einstein Universe. At that time none of us was born, but Rhodan was the First Administrator already. That might give you an idea of how old he is."

"Old?" Brazo laughed humourlessly. "He seemed to me like a well-trained athlete in his mid-30s."

"That figures but nevertheless he's the oldest living Terranian. If you look him up in the encyclopaedias you'll find that Rhodan was on the Moon when he was about 35 years old. Now we're in the year 2102. That really says it all. While fighting off hostile alien intelligences he managed to unify the Solar System. At the present moment we're standing on the threshold of the 3d major epoch of human history. We're in the process of making a practical reality out of the design data on the Druufs' linear space-drive, which we took from them 58 years ago. The new engines are ready for application but only in this present ship. Of course, it's a prototype for the future production lines. So you're going to have the honour of joining us in an operation which will be a very decisive step forward in the expansion of power and influence for the Solar Empire. Either that or...?"

"Or what...?"

"Or you'll be joining the *Fantasy* as a victim of the void. Does that give you the picture?"

"A bit complex and blurry around the edges, I'd say..."

Nolinow frowned concernedly, turning to Sikhra. "He may have a point there," he said. "Do you want to carry on with this?"

"I'll leave it to your own powers of elocution."

Stant shrugged his shoulders. He looked thoughtfully at Brazo Alkher, who sat tensely on the edge of his bunk. "Well, OK, there's not much more to say. We're taking off in about an hour and a half. Where we'll be going this time nobody can say. The overall situation in space politics is more or less satisfactory at the moment. The Galactic Traders have quieted down and on the planet Arkon it seems that Atlan is in control of things. The Druuf invasion has already been forgotten — our colonists are slowly but surely planting their roots on the habitable oxygen-worlds in the local sectors of space. Fifty-seven years ago the expansion of the Moon Base began. Today its like a giant hollowed out anthill with countless wharfs and shipyards, accessory support industries and massive production lines which now carry ever larger ships on the final conveyors. What we've done is to finally arrive at the stage the old Arkonides were in a few millenniums ago. We've taken a respectably sized celestial orb and turned it into a fleet base so that we can show our teeth to any uninvited guests or conquest-hungry alien invaders. The Solar Empire is bristling with armaments and has become an independent political entity along Arkonide patterns. It's been bandied about that the lunar shipyards now have a building capacity equal to that of Arkon 3. More than 100 million superlatively-trained Terrans stand ready in an emergency. Do you still follow me?"

Brazo frowned and commented drily, "This historical review is about as enlightening as the contents of your socks. I'm fairly familiar with the fact that you have your feet in them."

Sikhra burst out laughing and Nolinow straightened up with a sigh of resignation.

"Alright. But orders are orders. You will experience the beginning of the Third Epoch. As to this secret linear propulsion business, you'll have to ask the experts. I can only tell you that the days of hypertransitions are over with—at least for the *Fantasy*. Up till now we've conquered hyperspace with a rabbit-hopping technique using a complex series of superpowered transitions. Oh, it was OK as far as it went, but all those long drawn-out coordinate calculations, the dematerialisation of physical objects and all the possible sources of error—that wasn't the ideal solution. On board the *Fantasy* you'll get acquainted with a completely new kind of trans-light space travel. We'll be flying toward our target star on a direct line of sight—purely optical. There'll be no more 'jumps' in the old sense of the word—you know, where you couldn't see or hear or even feel anything. In this direct flight method you can see anything you want to. In fact that's where the name comes from: 'linear space-drive'. We enter a so-called semispace zone. The Kalup compensator-field screens off the effects of 5th-dimensional constants, which prevents any actual penetration into true hyperspace. And it also prevents total dematerialisation as with the old transition ships. Since the energy of the compensator field is related to that of semispace or what's called the libration zone, we fly through a spatial stratum that can only be described mathematically. It lies between the 4th and 5th dimensions where energy effects from both sides are ineffectual. That way anybody entering there becomes a part of the interstitial zone where the Einstein laws don't work. Apparently you can go many millions of times the speed of light with the linear system but not even Perry Rhodan has put it to the test so far. In the direct flight method we don't develop a space-wave front that's at all measurable and there's no structural warp-shock like there is with the transition ships when they force themselves through a virtual time-barrier. It's easy to grasp the military significance of this thing. Whoever has linear space-drive has an advantage over all intelligences of the galaxy. I say, you've gotten pale again!"

Brazo had closed his eyes. He was breathing heavily. Even though Nolinow had tried to explain these

revolutionary things in an off-hand manner and though he had done his best to play it down as much as possible, nevertheless Brazo had caught the profound significance of his words. When he looked up again the two young officers were standing close to him. Nolinow's broad face had changed. He wasn't smiling anymore.

"That's a pretty hard row to hoe, isn't it?" he inquired gently. "With time you will understand. Maybe now you can guess why the Commander ordered us to fill you in a little and get you prepared. Chief Claudrin is a good psychologist though at first glance he reminds you of an armoured tank gone out of control and ready to flatten anything in its way. He's a native of Epsal—one of the first aliens to come through the adaptation program of 2045. Just don't lose your marbles when he comes up to you. Well, that's just about the gist of it. Any questions?"

Brazo shook his head in silence. Sik stepped to the visiphone and gave an order. Moments later a service robot entered the cabin wearing its typical stereotyped smile.

"This is Omega-185," explained Stant "He'll take care of your physical needs. I'll pick you up in half an hour."

Before Sikhra left the room he turned to add: "By the way, you know you can still decide against going on this flight. Nobody will force you to join the research mission. It's a dangerous operation. Think it over because once you're sworn in...!" The Nepalese shrugged without saying more.

Brazo Alkher already knew that he wouldn't decline the invitation for anything in the world. No matter how doom-shrouded the mission was made to appear.

He absentmindedly answered the service robot's questions. Yes, he wished to take a shower. No, he would clean and check his service-weapon himself!

Thirty minutes later Brazo was wearing the pale green uniform that the ship's supply officer had sent him.

3/ PHANTOM EMPIRE

He was as broad as he was tall—more or less the size and shape of a 1-ton safe. Col. Jefe Claudrin's chest measurements were 4 times the size of a powerful man and his musculature was correspondingly developed.

Born and raised on a planet with 2.1 gravs, Claudrin had found it difficult after joining the Solar Fleet to move about in the normal environment of only 1 grav. When the native Epsalian noticed that his muscles threatened to atrophy under such a "negligible" gravity load he decided to carry a special micro-gravitator with him day and night it served to double the pull of gravity for him. In this way Col. Claudrin had maintained his "physical fitness" as he chose to express it

Jefe made a joke out of "inadvertently" shattering several sturdy-looking chairs with his great bulk. His arms were like oversized pistons and his hands were anvils to fear. The crewmen on the *Fantasy* took care not to shake hands with him in the traditional manner. Before Claudrin came to control his deadly tong-like grippers a number of disasters had occurred.

All in all the Commander of the experimental ship *Fantasy* had the appearance of a sawed-off giant. His wide head with its fiery red hair was perched on a neck that was so bulging with muscles that it could not fit into any factory-made uniform collar.

As a commander and galactonaut, Claudrin was unquestionably an ace in the Solar Fleet and ever since the simulated grounds tests he had taken the *Fantasy* under his wing.

Perry Rhodan listened to the thundering of the normal impulse engines whose highly-compressed thrust particles accelerated the heavy cruiser at a rate of 500 km sec². They worked as perfectly and reliably as on 10,000 other spaceships of the Fleet. Having been built on Arkonide designs but more compact and considerably improved in various details, they represented the ultimate of modern technological development. There was little more that could be done to improve them.

It was almost senseless to listen directly to the sound of their operation. But in his accustomed way Rhodan made his checkout while watching the small inspection screen that gave him a closed-circuit look at the ring-bulge. There was nothing to be seen through a bluish shimmering, somewhat like masses of heated air. Owing to compact ship design, the *Fantasy* could operate with only 6 ring-bulge converters. Considerably more space was taken up by the new trans-light propulsion units which, strictly speaking, were not actually propulsion engines at all.

The sole purpose of the Kalup compensator was to envelop the hull of the ship in a spherical field which shielded it from the energy influences of the 4th and 5th dimensions, in a kind of reflecting or absorbing action. Within the spherical field the unstable libration-zone condition was generated where neither the laws of hyperspace nor of Einsteinian space were effective.

A necessary but not precisely calculable consequence of this altered conformity to natural laws was an abstract reaction of the normal engines. Under such synthetically modified conditions they could no longer operate as they did in the 4-dimensional continuum. The impulses which under normal operation could only reach the speed of light were much faster in this new semispace. Depending upon the intensity of the Kalup compensator field, velocities ranged between 10 to many millions of times the normal speed of light. It was the objective of the experimental program to determine what the upper limits were.

So far it was certain that the operation was dependent upon just two factors. First, the impulse waves changed their nature under the influence of the libration zone. Also, secondly, by varying the intensity of the Kalup-field the pulse-jet emission velocity could be altered very considerably. This again pointed to the fact that a total nullification of the effects of laws operating in both hyper and Einsteinian space was dependent upon the energy content of the Kalup field. The better the screening the more completely the *Fantasy* adapted to semispace, becoming a virtual component essence of the synthetically built-up micro-cosmos between dimensions.

During its latest stay in ship-dock, the vessel had been designed to achieve the optimum operational parameters. It had been equipped with a 5th power plant which added another 20,000 megawatts to the generating capacity. With that Rhodan hoped to reach the ideal flight state—namely, a total compensation which would screen out 4th & 5th dimensional effects entirely.

The rumbling of the ring-bulge engines began to subside. Rhodan stirred himself from his musings. The doubtful process of deliberation alone was not going to solve the problems related to linear flight. Only the practical test itself could do that.

The shimmering on the inspection screen disappeared. With a last guttering rumble the impulse

converters shut down. At only half SPEOL the *Fantasy* shot across the Martian orbit in freefall. The Earth and the Moon had long since dropped away into the dark abyss behind them. Only the countless stars of the Milky Way were to be seen on the regular viewscreens.

"Well?" quipped somebody nearby. "You back out of the fog?"

Rhodan pressed the buckle release on his safety belt, which was a regulation requirement on board the research ship, and it fell away from his waist

Reginald Bell was standing behind the expedition chief's chair, looking every bit as young and spry as he had been way back in the 1970s. He stared without expression at the glittering screens of the panoramic view gallery. Farther to the right was the giant custom-built pilot chair of the Commander. The latter paid no heed to the two men on his left. As Commander it was his job to keep the ship under his control every second.

Rhodan cast a scrutinizing glance at Claudrin, whose massive shoulders were visible on either side of his backrest. "Everything OK, Jefe?"

The Epsalian turned his head. His leathery brown-skinned face twisted into a smile. "As usual, sir," boomed his deep voice. "You ready to begin?" he added with equal volume.

Rhodan nodded. With a last glimpse at the viewscreens he got up from his seat. Bell was still standing stock-still. Beneath his flame-red stubble of hair his freckled face was uncommunicative and unusually grave.

The men on duty in the Control Central looked tensely at Rhodan and his Deputy Chief Administrator. Rhodan had to weave his way among the extra seats and auxiliary installations of equipment in the overcrowded room. "Are there any specific forebodings at the moment?" he asked without preamble.

Bell closed his eyes for a second. When he opened them again, Rhodan stood directly before him. The crewmen exchanged glances.

"Forebodings?" Bell repeated slowly. "No, none in particular. This peanut shell can't do more than explode."

"Oh? So that's what you think of a 200-meter class cruiser?" he said. Although there was a slight smile on his lips, there was a melancholy note in his voice. "I think I know what's on your mind."

"You don't say!"

Rhodan nodded thoughtfully. He looked absentmindedly around in the Control Central as he spoke. "Almost 57 years ago to this day, Khrest the Arkonide passed away. He could no longer take part in the expanding successes of the human race. Were you thinking of him?"

Bell nodded. "I still clearly remember the time when we discovered his own research ship where it had crash-landed on the Moon. A few weeks later we felt invincible because we had a tiny Arkonide lifeboat that belonged to the cruiser. Then came the unification of the nations of the Earth, followed by encounters with alien intelligences. Finally, Atlan showed up on the scene and the Druuf invasion happened a little while later. The robot Brain on Arkon 3 was reprogrammed and Atlan became the Imperator. Since then, 57 years have gone by. Now begins the 3d Epoch of human history. Hm-m-m ...!"

Bell interrupted himself and waved his hand about in an all-inclusive gesture. "When I look around me I see a strange parallel. When Khrest and Thora arrived on Earth's satellite we were terrifically proud of our primitive rockets. Today our colonists are coming to grips with strange forms of life on many different kinds of worlds. Which means we've entered an era where our own exploratory journeys have begun. Terra has become a major power factor in the galaxy. Where will it end? Who will show *us* one day where our limits are? We've just about replaced the degenerated strain of Arkonides. Atlan watches Terran expansion with a smile on one side and a worried look on the other. Of course he fully realizes that we're infiltrating his sphere of influence more and more. Terrans are already sitting in Arkonide ministries. Would you like me to tell you something?"

Bell squinted at the shadowy outlines of Rhodan's face. The *Fantasy*'s large control room was illuminated only by light from the panob screens and from countless instrument panels. Rhodan's features were flooded by a reflection of varicoloured lights. It was as though some invisible force were trying to mark out the tall man's countenance into separate blocks and planes.

"What is it you wish to say, Reg?"

"Not much. It's just that I've been thinking-nobody's been bothering us lately but a long spell of peace is like the calm before a storm. The Springers make a pass at us once in awhile but only from the sidelines. At the moment it looks as if there's nobody around to really make us sweat."

"But you know there are plenty of such intelligences. What holds them off is our alliance with the Greater Imperium of the Arkonides."

Bell made a gesture of rejection. "That's just a phantom empire. Atlan's always pressing the panic button and keeping us on edge while he puts out his fires of revolt here and there. But Arkon is not the galaxy. We only know a tiny fraction of this island universe of ours. We used to think the Arkon Empire was practically boundless but actually it's a star cluster out on the tip of the Milky Way. The dimensions have changed now.

What might be waiting for us deep in the centre—down in the core where no one has ever gone?"

"So you do have misgivings?"

"Maybe," he grumbled somewhat peevishly. "This present flight comes on as too strong a reminder of the journey undertaken by Khrest and Thora in their search for eternal life. Instead they found us and we took from them the technical might of the Arkonides. I'm just asking myself now—what are we going to discover?"

A viewscreen flashed to life. The face of First Officer Maj. Hunts Krefenbac came into focus. "The men are waiting for you, sir," he announced.

"I'm coming," Rhodan called into the microphone. Turning to Bell he added: "Don't make the men uneasy. You ought to know as well as I that there are intelligences we couldn't hold a candle to in a showdown. Even the power of the Galactic Traders is not to be underestimated. It's fortunate for us that those vagabonds of the void will probably never become united."

Bell turned and marched to armoured hatch #2. Rhodan signalled to the Commander who had just gotten up from his special seat. Broad and massive, like an unhewn monolith, he stood before Rhodan, who was a head taller than he.

"Jefe, we'll hold our present course," Rhodan told him. "We'll let loose just before the orbit of Jupiter. Meanwhile you can try pinpointing that red sun in the swarm of stars out there and while you're doing it you should also try to forget everything you've learned about hypertransit navigation. All we have to do is fly by sight. I think this one advantage of linear space-drive makes up for all the effort we've put into its development. At any rate I don't think I'd trust myself to go through all the necessary transition computations without an error—not to reach *that* star. Over such a distance who knows where we might come out, using the old system?"

As Claudrin suddenly turned about, he almost ran into a tracking technician, who instantly came to attention. "What's all this spit and polish, boy?" asked the Epsalian at only medium volume. It sounded like a peal of thunder. The tracking operator hurried out of his way while Claudrin rubbed his angular chin with satisfaction.

Rhodan cleared his throat slightly behind his hand, Then with a parting salute he went out. Bell was waiting for him.

"I'm going to put a muzzle on that fellow yet!" said Bell half-angrily.

* * * *

The crew had been ordered into the main messhall. Brazo Alkher didn't feel at ease. He was continually being introduced to people and among them were important personages whom he had only known before by their names. There was Prof. Kalup and the recognized mathematical genius Riebsam, who sat beside Gorl Nkolate the specialist in adaptive surgery. These were some of the scientists who had been included in the crew of the *Fantasy* .

In addition there were a few people who filled Brazo with a sense of awe—as was the case with 10,000 other lieutenants of the Fleet. These were members of the legendary Mutant Corps who were said to have contributed decisively to the growth of the Solar Empire. Brazo had never actually seen one of these mysterious beings before.

Hunts Krefenbac's lean figure was seen slouched next to the automatic food selector. Brazo had already heard that Krefenbac was not at all as lethargic as he always seemed to be. Just now he looked as if he had just finished polishing the *Fantasy* from stem to stern. All 200 meters.

The *Fantasy* 's crew appeared to consist entirely of specially talented men. From the main body of Fleet soldiers and all available scientists, Rhodan had selected some highly variegated individuals.

Lt. Mahaut Sikhra had just stepped into the messhall in the company of an insignificant-looking little man wearing the rank insignia of Chief Engineer. Actually the one outstanding feature of the ship's C.E. was his exceptionally large chest, which suggested a large pair of lungs.

"That's Slide Nacro," explained Stant Nolinow. "He was born on Mars. They say with those Martian lungs of his he can refill an oxygen tank with a single breath."

"No kidding?" said Brazo seriously.

Stant broke into a wide grin. A number of noncoms from the technical staff were standing nearby and Brazo saw them look at each other significantly. Apparently they were thinking that this new lieutenant was the only donk-dome on board.

Brazo bit his lip ruefully at his own stupidity. Somewhat nettled, he turned to face them but before he could find the right words for a retort, something happened that again left him flabbergasted.

Directly in front of him the air began to shimmer! There was the luminous outline of a small figure, perhaps 3 feet high. Then something wearing a miniature Fleet uniform emerged and took form. Brazo sprang back, horrified. In thunderstruck amazement he was staring into the sharp-nosed mousy face of a creature with large round ears. The only near-human thing about it was the uniform.

Pucky had come merely to take a closer look at the newcomer but when he saw the young man spring to attention before him he was touched by a paternal friendliness. The mousebeaver curiously "listened in" on the blanch-faced officer's thoughts.

Fantastic! This must be the most famous member of the Mutant Corps...seems pleasant and nice...a little comical but sort of pretty, and very sharp eyes...!

Pucky declined to take further advantage of his telepathic gift. Because of the young man's flattering thoughts, he beamed and waddled forward to extend his delicate little hand. Brazo's eyes widened as he stared at the mousebeaver's giant incisor tooth.

"Welcome aboard!" twittered the macro-mouse. "You are Brazo Alkher?"

"Yes...that's right, sir," Brazo stammered.

Pucky took a quick look around. Everybody had heard him being addressed as "sir". "Just call me Pucky," he said patronizingly. "I'll always be around if you want to talk to me. Don't let these rascals try to put anything over on you, do you hear?"

"Uh...whom do you mean, sir?"

Pucky giggled merrily. His big eyes gleamed in the light of the indirect ceiling lamps. "I mean those rascals right there!" He pointed to the surrounding men. "If they don't leave you alone, you come to me, OK?"

Brazo shook hands with the extraterrestrial creature in a state of complete confusion. He was also embarrassed when he became aware of Pucky's trowel-shaped tail, which necessarily protruded from the rear of his uniform trousers.

Brazo wiped sweat from his forehead as the little fellow strutted proudly away. Stant Nolinow hid a grin with his hand, his eyes bright with tears of merriment. Clearing his throat loudly, he ran a finger across his lips to clear them.

"Out of my way, shorty!" cried Pucky to a tall crewman. He laughed shrilly as he went past the technician and his small form disappeared among the tables that had been set up at one end of the hall.

"Man oh man!" gasped Brazo in near exhaustion. "Was that realsome or was I dreaming?"

Nolinow laughed restrainedly. "You'll get to know him better before you're through. They say he can

handle a thousand strong men without having to use any weapons."

"Come on, now!"

"I'm telling you—it's not a joke!" Stant asserted. "He's a teleporter—a telekinetic expert—and on top of that he's a telepath. How do you think he checked you out so quickly? I'll lay you odds—Oh, oh, here comes the Chief! Swallow it!"

Even before Rhodan stepped into the messhall he had received Pucky's telepathic call. When he entered, Pucky was already standing on the raised dais at the end of the room.

I took a look at him, Pucky signalled. He stands in childish awe of me, if you can image that!

Remarkable, Rhodan thought back with his meagrely developed telepathy.

But Pucky understood him well enough. *No snide remarks now, if you please, Big chief. I really made an impression on him!*

I already said it was remarkable.

OK, lay off. I gave him a quick probe. I'd say he's OK. He's naturally a bit shaken by the new situation he's in but otherwise he's all in one piece.

Good! Thanks very much.

Rhodan broke off the telepathic conversation. John Marshall, the Chief of the Mutant Corps, had listened in. He looked over at the new gunner officer and scrutinized him briefly before he spoke in low tones to Rhodan.

"He puts out a good set of vibes. Maybe a bit boyish, sir."

"Don't be deceived, John. I've been through his service dossier. When he was on board the *Formosa* he performed a few deeds that would have made Bell turn pale. That's saying a lot, you'll have to admit."

Marshall laughed under his breath while nodding a greeting to the *Fantasy*'s crew members.

A combination of wonderment and awe threatened to overwhelm Brazo Alkher as Rhodan stepped onto the platform and swung the arm of the microphone toward him. This was the man who had carried his luggage for him. But now the Administrator wore his Fleet uniform. The insignia was not flamboyant but it was unmistakable.

Rhodan's voice rang from the speakers. "Let's make this short," he said. "I've asked you in here to the main messhall so that I could inform all of you at once concerning our flight. This time we're going on a long one. Our target is a giant red sun just off the centre of the galaxy. It has no name. The distance given on the maps is 42,180 light-years but that's probably inaccurate. Using a normal transition ship we'd have to make it in at least 10 jumps and carry out all the coordinate calculations carefully if we hoped to come out anywhere near the target. That would take us just about a week. I intend to put our theoretical maximum velocity to a practical test. That means that the *Fantasy* will be hurtling through semispace at about 25 million times the speed of light. That figure is highly relative and is to be regarded merely as a means of reference. Don't be frightened by the sound of it. These relative concepts are not the critical factors in considering a long stretch like that. The only thing that counts is the actual time-span we require

for covering an approximately known distance. Anything else is immaterial. Linear-drive spaceships open up new aspects of hyperspace travel. That's why it's important to become familiar with a new set of concepts."

Rhodan reached into his breast pocket and pulled out some papers. He looked out searchingly at the 300-man crew of the cruiser. He saw wide-awake eyes and tense faces.

"The second point to clear up concerns our target accuracy," he continued. "As on our previous test flights we will be able to see our target star with our paraoptical equipment. At a velocity of 25 millions times SPEOL we should be able to reach the red sun in about 14½ hours. On the basis of all previous experience, we should not be subject to time-contraction effects—provided the total screening of the Kalup field doesn't hold other surprises for us. We can't be sure but that's why we're trying to find out. The only thing we know for sure is that this new space-drive was borrowed, you might say, from the inhuman Druufs and with it they were able to reach their various target areas with an uncanny precision. We also know on the basis of investigations made by our cosmic agents that when the Druufs made their long-distance flights there was no occurrence of relativistic time displacements. I'm of the opinion that we'll take our own time-ratio right along with us so there shouldn't be any undesirable phenomena to contend with.

"However if there should be any such distortion effects we have means of surviving them. But that subject belongs to the purely technical portion of Operation Target Star. Lt. Alkher ..."

Brazo jumped when he heard his name called. In sudden confusion he noticed that all eyes were turning toward him. "Sir?" he managed to stammer out.

"Have you looked over the *Fantasy*'s Fire Control Central?"

"Yessir!"

"Do you feel ready to operate it?"

"Completely, sir. It's no different from the fire stations in other ships."

"Good. Thank you very much." Brazo sat down. "You should prepare to take instant action under emergency circumstances. The *Fantasy* is no superbattleship—in fact not even a full-fledged heavy cruiser. Some of the weapons have been dismantled in order to make room other equipment. We're not much more than a flying power plant. If the need arises you will have to use the few guns we have—in fact so swiftly and accurately that we will not suffer any unpleasant surprises. I want you to focus your attention there and under no circumstances are you to be concerned with anything else."

"Yessir, I understand."

Rhodan clapped his notes together. After a glance at the clock he calmly concluded: "In half an hour we'll reach the orbit of Jupiter. There we will enter semispace and accelerate to top speed. Spacesuits will be required. You will switch on your helmet transceivers for voicecom contact and strap yourselves in. Of course we're hoping that we may have cured the causes of the hull resonance vibrations we recently experienced but safety is safety. Never forget that you are on board a prototype ship. This is an all-out attempt to find out what we must and it's an all-out risk as well. Always keep in mind that linear-drive space travel will bring humanity another step upward and outward. However foolproof the transition-type ships may be, a linear spacer is immeasurably superior to them, even if burdened with sources of error in the initial stages. After all, we haven't invested billions of Solars in this development

for nothing.

"Thank you very much. That is all. Are there any questions?"

His listeners indicated that they were satisfied. Rhodan made a brief salute before he left the hall.

For a few seconds there was a nerve-shattering silence. Then excited voices rang out. Suddenly the men fell into groups and huddles.

"Ye gods!" exclaimed Stant Nolinow. "Over 42,000 light-years! This time he's really out to bag a comet! How do you feel, buddy?"

Brazo smiled enigmatically. He was still lost in thought as he stared at the spot where Rhodan had just been standing. "Pretty fair—in fact very well. Do you know, Stant, I think I can understand now why that man has to stay young and healthy. Humanity would have had it if he were no longer around! The bubble would burst—we'd be in chaos."

"Probably," admitted Nolinow. "But let's get off that. Right now the game goal is to get through this flight with the best possible results and no bruises. Can you form a realistic impression of what it means to be going 25 million times the speed of light?"

"Not really," Brazo calmly asserted. "I think Rhodan gave us the right handle on it. It's not the speed ratio that counts as much as the time-span involved with a given distance. Looking at it that way you don't go croggo. The time-ratio approach makes it more normal and mentally digestible. Whatever the Druufs could or couldn't do with this kind of propulsion we ought to be able to do as well."

"My sentiments exactly!" said someone in a high, thin voice.

Brazo turned about and came to attention. It was Capt Slide Nacro, the Chief Engineer. He was carefully scrutinizing the tall Fire Control Officer of the *Fantasy*.

"If you need any help, Mr. Alkher," he said, "you can call on me. To be on the safe side. I'm going to hold an auxiliary power unit on standby for your disintegrator cannon. In a real emergency you wouldn't make it with those synchro-converters. But if you think you need to fall back on an extra booster, don't think too long about it. We still don't know what's waiting for us out there."

The Martian jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Evidently, by "out there" he meant the central core of the galaxy. With a light salute he departed. Brazo had a good idea why the small, barrel-chested man had become Chief Engineer of the *Fantasy*. Here everybody seemed to be a top-flight specialist and efficient crewman.

Nolinow looked at the clock. "It's getting to be that time. How do you get along with your men?"

Brazo frowned a moment in puzzlement but then smiled again in the same strange manner. "Oh, you mean the gunner crew? Right now I'm sort of a country cousin to them—a little wet behind the ears."

"You think so? Hm-m-m... Let's wait and see," said Stant pensively. "Come on, let's go!"

The 300 men gradually dispersed and vacated the messhall. According to their assignments they went to their specific stations, where they waited for what was to come.

In the central core of the heavy cruiser the control instruments—most of them provisionally installed—were put through their checkouts. Professor Kalup and his technical staff concerned themselves with the huge, 4-level converter that had been named after him. The largest hold in the special ship had been converted to accommodate the mammoth apparatus.

By far the greatest space was taken up by the 5 main power plants. Their combined maximum output was 220,000 megawatts, exclusively to be used for building up the compensator field. Although it seemed to be an incredible amount of power, it was still as nothing when one considered the natural energy fields that the relatively small, spherical forcefield would have to struggle against.

Three minutes before the entrance into semispace the final ready signals were received from the power and engine rooms. Capt. Nacro activated his power reactors and closed his distributor switches. The *Fantasy* became a living mechanical entity of consummate perfection.

4/ EXPERIMENT PERILOUS!

It was like a surrealistic dream, neither tangible to the mind nor to the senses.

The manoeuvre of entry had been accomplished with perfect precision. After the Kalup compensator field had been built up and the structural transformation of the impulse waves had taken place, everyone had the impression that nothing on board the ship had changed. There had been no sensation of dematerialisation pains as on normal hypertransition ships. No physical object had attenuated into nothingness. The optical view of the target area ahead of the ship remained unblemished. Only where the expanded edges of the para-stable echo beam became attenuated did the outlines of the galaxy appear to be blurred.

The red target star gleamed from the special screen as a tiny point of light. They were flying on a direct line of sight without any complex calculations or adjustments to compensate for changing angles of incidence. The *Fantasy* was speeding so fast that the distant sun's own stellar motion became a negligible and easily adjustable factor.

Deep beneath the Control Central the Kalup continued to thunder. Only a few minutes after acceleration started inside the libration zone it was determined that the compensation converter had not reached its full loading capacity in spite of its soaring power absorption. The 220,000 megawatts were still not enough to satisfy the current-devouring monster.

The computers were going full speed in the mathematical section. The energy concentration in the Kalup field had only shown an increase of 5% over earlier test runs although the newly-installed 5th power plant furnished an additional 20,000 megawatts. After an approximate period of 8 minutes of acceleration within the artificially created semispace region, the maximum velocity was reached.

The emission velocity of the structurally converted impulse waves was close to 25 million times the speed of light. Even if the desired total isolation of 4-dimensional energy effects might not have been achieved it was certain that no trick or artifice would serve now to increase the velocity they had attained to.

Their view of normal space around them was blurred and diffused. Nothing could be seen but ghostly lines and streamers of light. Only in the propagation sector of the para-optical reflection beams were things in focus. The farther the distance ahead the wider the angle of sight.

The first results of the instrument readings showed that the Kalup-generated screening field continued stable even though under expansion its flux density diminished.

The target star at the focal point of the para-tracking beam was exactly in the centre of the 3-D sensor screen.

Owing to a rash of duties the crew of the *Fantasy* had almost forgotten by now that they were existing in an unreal and only mathematically conceivable segment of space. The 5th-dimensional effects had been completely screened off by the Kalup field. No other proof of that was needed than the fact that there were no signs of any dematerialisation. Everyone was familiar enough with the effects of hyperspace to know that hyperphysical laws were inoperable within the libration zone.

Rhodan had activated the auxiliary flight console. In an emergency he would be able to take over manual control of the ship. But Jefe Claudrin sat there so calm and composed in his special seat that Rhodan finally relaxed. The first quarter hour after the successful entry manoeuvre had been turbulent. Now the various reports from stations weren't coming through in such a headlong rush.

Rhodan carefully felt of himself. Nothing seemed to have changed.

Bell looked at him in amusement. His blue eyes gleamed with the spirit of adventure. "Were you thinking you could reach through your stomach and maybe scratch your backbone?" he asked.

"Here anything's possible," said Rhodan. "How do you feel?"

"Terrific. It just seems unbelievable that we're clipping along at this speed."

"How often do I have to explain that speed is an unimportant ratio now—except as a mere mental reference? What's important is..."

"... the actual distance in terms of time—I know."

Rhodan got up from his seat. Moments later he instructed all hands over the P.A. system to open their suit helmets. "But be careful," he added. "It could happen that we might have to slap them on again in a hurry to shield ourselves from the environment."

He walked over to the Commander's chair. Jefe Claudrin had his hands full trying to carry out Prof. Kalup's incoming instructions. Most of it had to do with jet aperture adjustments and small course variations! Rhodan remained standing behind the Epsalian, whose hands moved over the controls with an uncanny swiftness and precision. No autopilot had yet been developed for linear flight, so Claudrin's outstanding reaction capabilities were of inestimable value.

Directly in front of him was the 3-D screen of the para-optical viewer. The rasters of the normal viewscreens only flickered with pale reflections.

"Sir, this is fantastic!" mumbled Claudrin suddenly. "Kalup is trying to talk me into burning up some injection fuel. What do you think?"

Rhodan pondered this for a moment. It was easy to follow Kalup's line of reasoning. With the compensator apparently at the upper limit of its capability he wanted to try every other means of increasing their speed.

"Try it!"

"What!" exclaimed Claudrin in astonishment. His broad face showed strains of consternation.

"Go ahead and try it, Jefe! Cut in the injectors and give *full power* to the converters. I'd like to see what happens. We have to make at least one try at it."

His instructions were overheard down in the mathematics section. Kalup's massive figure loomed from behind a hyper-plane triangulator whose pengraphs were racing madly. "Well, finally!" he blustered in his usual irascible manner. His blue-veined cheek pouches were more rigid now under the strain. "Just let me have that mike!"

One of his staff technicians leapt quickly out of the path of the lumbering physicist. Kalup grumpily twisted the flexible mike arm toward him.

"This is Kalup!" he said, raising his voice unnecessarily. "Sir, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear," came Rhodan's voice from the intercom speaker.

"Good—at least that's something!" he said peevishly.

"If you're ready to take the advice of a man of experience then let's get with it! For this test I'm going to need 32 tons of Bismuth per engine per second. Can your miserable turbo-chargers handle that?"

"What?" Claudrin's voice thundered out of every speaker. "Did you say 'per' both times?"

"That's right!" Kalup called back angrily. "*Per* engine and *per* second! Mister, who's the Chief Physicist here, anyway?!"

"Arno, you're out of your mind!" interjected the Chief Engineer, who had meanwhile established a rapport with Kalup. "You're talking about a 4-stage concentration of nuclear plasma and in that quantity the energy output won't be controllable—and it's right next to the nuclear reactor! You're going to need a blanket screening and I need every kilowatt for your compensator. The output of the emergency plants won't be enough to beef up the kind of shielding that will be mandatory for safety!"

"That plasma's controllable!" asserted Kalup in a fit of temper.

"Sure—with at least 3 full power plants!"

"With 2 emergency plants, you little runt!" yelled Kalup while gesticulating wildly. "What kind of physical laws do you think we're operating under at present? I'm going to prove to you that..."

"All of you quiet down, please!" Rhodan's calm voice broke through the storm. "Mr. Nacro, turn up the Bismuth-tank heaters to 2700°. Set your turbo-chargers for the required fuel load. Impulse converters full on and get ready for the plasma injection. Prof. Kalup, there are a lot of risks being taken here. You realize that over a short period the thrust output of the engines will be quadrupled. I'm assuming that you have some supporting calculations at hand what safety coefficient have you allowed for, using 32 tons per

second?"

Kalup stared at his viewscreen. He controlled himself with a visible effort. His great bald head gleamed with perspiration. "Sir!" he almost hissed back, "the term coefficient is synonymous with the enumeration of a change of magnitude as a mathematical function—or in this case it's a number that expresses the expansive force of a substance. Did you think by any chance that I had neglected the safety factor?"

Rhodan's expression remained unchanged. "I guess I know you, sonny.

"What do you mean—sonny?!" raged Kalup. His face turned a bluish shade while his vast corpulent frame began to tremble. "Did you call me *sonny*?"

"Precisely. I was deep into trigonometry and force-vector triangulations before your great grandfather saw the light of day. Does that tell you anything, my son?"

Kalup was nonplussed. All it took for him to lose the rest of his composure was to see the grinning faces of his assistants. Rhodan cut off before the physicist could explode completely.

Rhodan turned to the Epsalian with a faint smile.

Bell thought out loud: "I'm still going to pin a muzzle on him, that's for sure! Claudrin, I hope you come down with a heavy case of lockjaw. Maybe then you'll stop beating in my eardrums."

The Commander laughed and it was like the thundering of Niagara Falls.

* * * *

Stant Nolinow almost fell through the heavy armoured hatchway instead of climbing through it into the Fire Control Central. He sought support by hanging onto an automatic gunsight for a moment and then managed a few weaving steps toward his flight seat. Breathing heavily he sat down and hastily groped for the safety straps.

According to orders, Brazo Alkher was sitting in front of his firing console, watching for non-existent targets. At sight of Nolinow he stared in puzzlement. The gunner crewmen perked up their ears when Stant gasped out his warning.

"Maybe you'll buckle in too, pretty quick! Don't you have any idea of how Kalup's brainstorm can affect us?"

Brazo was suddenly aware of a sense of uneasiness as he saw his subordinates reach with amazing dexterity toward their fastener buckles. He was still pondering what he should do when the video intercom buzzed and Capt Slide Nacro's tense, lean face appeared on the screen.

"Alkher, I need every last watt your cannon converter can put out. Switch it over into power circuit 4."

Brazo's soft boyish face suddenly became so hard and unfriendly-looking that Nolinow widened his eyes in amazement. The crew sergeant pursed his lips in a silent whistle as he looked across at his new

Fire Control Chief.

"I'm sorry, sir," replied Brazo, sounding very reserved. "My orders say that I have to keep the few weapons we have in constant fire-readiness."

"But don't be silly!" urged the C.E. in obvious irritation. "Your gun stations can give me another 40,000 megawatts!"

"As much as 43,000, sir."

"Alright then. Shoot me the juice through your distributor main—now come on!"

"Request denied, sir. I'm in charge here. My guns remain on operational standby."

"My, aren't we brave and noble, Lieutenant!" said the Martian icily.

"I hope so, sir. If I receive permission from the Commander to place the weapons power at your disposal—you're welcome to it, and Captain, if you'll permit a remark: I consider the Administrator's precautions to be justified. He must know to what extent Prof. Kalup's claims can be realized."

Nacro cut off abruptly. The sergeant ran a hand across his mouth and looked questioningly at Nolinow.

"Now watch it, buddy!" warned Stant. "Let's not make enemies! Why didn't you give him your few paltry megawatts? If that expanding plasma breaks through those weakened contraction fields, all 6 engines will be splinters!"

"First grade molten steel," Brazo corrected him drily. "But aside from that: if the output from the emergency plants is not enough, then my cannon converters will be too little anyway. There'd be as much danger as ever, except for one difference. In case of contact with an enemy we'd then be helpless..."

"Get off it! what are you talking about? Enemies here in the liberation zone?"

"The Kalup could go out. In that case we'd automatically drop back into normal space. Which means we could be in for some surprises.

With meticulous care Brazo strapped himself in. No one was aware of the seething agitation he felt. This was the third time in his career as a Fleet officer that he had contradicted a superior officer.

I'm covered by that command from upstairs, he thought to himself. But then he felt ashamed. No. I'll not hide behind orders—I'll stand up for my own opinions! Nacro has no right to cripple all the ship's armaments, regardless of whether we have an enemy contact or not.

Stant was about to comment when the *Fantasy*'s engines began to roar. Somebody was giving the countdown. At zero count the normal engine noise swelled to a sense-numbing thunder.

Brazo could see that Nolinow was yelling something. He couldn't make out a word of it. Two seconds after the jet fuel injection the cabins and sections of the heavy cruiser began to resonate. Within moments the vibrations became so violent that they began to break sensitive instruments.,

A vast organ-like tone began to override the thunder of the engines. The *Fantasy*'s spherical hull rang like a giant bell under a Titan's hammer. This inferno of sound was also augmented by the howl of sirens

touched off by the automatic warning system.

But suddenly it was deathly still. There was only a subsiding resonance. The ringing sound faded until it could no longer be heard.

Brazo found himself gripping his temples. Somebody was trying to come through on the intercom but the crew's dulled hearing made the words unintelligible at first.

It was some time before the men's sense of hearing returned to normal but then they immediately recognized the deep tones of Perry Rhodan's voice. The Administrator was speaking calmly but what he said brought a smile to Brazo's lips.

"OK, Professor, that was it. The jet fields held although they were half-starved for power. In normal space we'd have gone up in smoke. As for the resonance vibrations you'll have to discount them. Even if we had tied in 4 full powerplants to those plasma fields we'd have been ringing loud enough to wake the dead. What kind of results did you get?"

When Kalup's face appeared on the viewscreen it was beaming. "Alright so now maybe you'll forgive your *sonny boy!* We accelerated according to my calculations. The full evaluations are still being processed. But we have proof now at least that even residual 4-D space effects can be partially removed by artificially generated forces. What I need is an additional 3 high power plants."

"Not *on this* ship."

"Then build me one big enough and forget about cost. I'm not yet satisfied with this experiment!"

Rhodan cut off the connection. Brazo turned to look at Nolinow. Stant got to his feet and silently checked his limbs. He finally ended up digging into his ears to try to open them up.

The crew sergeant exchanged looks with the other gunners present. Finally he also got up and walked over to Brazo. Alkher felt nervous, anticipating a first breakthrough in communication.

Turning away, the older man said. "About Capt Nacro, sir—I wouldn't worry about him. He's not the kind to hold a grudge and he has respect for a man's personal convictions. That's what we wanted to tell you, sir.

"We...?"

The sergeant pointed to the other crewmen. "All those chrakoes sitting there grinning at you, sir."

In a few moments Brazo accompanied Nolinow to the inter-compartment airlock giving entrance to Fire Control.

"You know, Stant, it's a wonderful feeling to have friends."

"You don't have to convince me of that, buddy. Well, carry on—but don't forget the inner man in all this. You've got to eat, libration zone or not—and in spite of going 25 million times as fast as light. Will I see you in about half an hour? I still have to check over my combat robots. I hope the chapeks were smart enough to turn on their protective screens. Positronic micro-brains are very sensitive to vibrations."

"Actually *what is* your speciality?"

Stant made a theatrical bow. "Allow me to present—Stant Nolinow, Solar Fleet Lieutenant, which includes graduate engineer in hyper-frequency positronics. That's a specialty within a specialty but it all adds up to cybernetics. A bit confusing, wouldn't you say?" He laughed. and went into the lock as he called back: "In half an hour you can celebrate your first meal in semispace!"

Brazo nodded mechanically. When he returned to his place he suspected that he had just become a charter member in a company of very capable crewmen—who were also his friends.

On the Fire Control's console the big target screen revealed a gleaming red point of light. It was the distant sun that Rhodan hoped to reach within 15 hours.

5/ COLLISION COURSE!

Rhodan jumped when he saw it. He only needed the fraction of a second to grasp the situation. "Claudrin! Shut off the Kalup!" he shouted to the Commander.

The Epsalian also realized that it would be impossible to veer from course at this incredible Speed The on-rushing ship had acquired far too much mass to be diverted.

The target star had been plainly visible before them. Then suddenly it had been engulfed by the flames of a giant yellow sun. A 1 to 38 billion chance or "possibly never".

The *Fantasy* hurtled toward the strange star at many millions of times the speed of light. Before Jefe Claudrin could react Rhodan had changed his mind. He grasped intuitively that it was already too late to inactivate the Kalup. Without a word he lunged forward and blocked him. The Epsalian's broad hand slipped past the emergency switch and glanced against the console edge with such force that it was splintered, then rebounded to strike Rhodan in the face! The Administrator slumped back with a groan.

Under physical circumstances which were totally unknown and not even theoretically calculated, the *Fantasy* collided with the massive obstruction in its path. Rhodan's last conscious awareness was that the cruiser shot into the equatorial belt of the yellow sun. The almost instantaneous chaos that followed could only be reconstructed later.

For an infinitesimal moment which was only a fraction of a micro-second, the *Fantasy* came close to splitting asunder. Then came effects which no one would have dared to even imagine.

As in a timeless trance Rhodan heard the groaning and shrieking of overstressed steel. Every bolt and seam came alive with a voice of its own. The 5 big power plants surged to maximum output and the Kalup compensation converter developed a sound like a nuclear explosion.

There were no outside witnesses to this most improbable of all occurrences. Moving at an inconceivable velocity a comparatively tiny man-made object hurtled into the star's white-hot atmosphere and broke through its superheated core without damage. It all happened so swiftly and under such strange para-dimensional conditions that the ship did not have time to be destroyed. Before the compensator field could collapse the *Fantasy* had already come through the dense, flaming inferno.

In spite of the ship's swift penetration, great masses of matter broke from the heart of the sun and were hurled outward into space along with the fleeing linear-drive cruiser. The gaseous cloud moved away like a newly-born planet that was carrying an alien man-made object at its core. Like a synthetically generated protuberance an ultra-bright tongue of flaming gases whipped outward into the void. As it touched the fugitive its ravening forces overcame the Kalup field effects and once again the *Fantasy* was a stable component of the Einsteinian universe.

A second phenomenon occurred which was as unforeseen as the first, having to do with gravitational effects of the normal protection screens. They had attracted and captured some of the gaseous matter that had been torn from the centre of the star. More than 99% of the glowing masses fell behind but the remainder had been pulled along with the ship which was now flying at half SPEOL.

By the time this whole combination developed a rotational motion of its own, the punctured sun had already become a faint light speck among billions of others.

The first linear-drive spaceship from Earth had been too swift to be destroyed or captured by the ravening forces of a stellar body. It had shot through the sun like a small-calibre rocket going through a bucket of molten steel at hundreds of times the speed of sound, except that this particular projectile had the advantage of effective defence screens. They had simply not had time to collapse as swiftly as the event had occurred. Spinning like a top on its new-found axis, the glowing phantomesque mass hurtled away into the star-swarving abyss of the galaxy's core.

The red target star was now way off to one side and hardly discernible. It was only months later that the men on board the *Fantasy* were to comprehend a third effect of the total phenomenon. It was not at all by mere chance that the tiny, freshly created planet was now flying toward a certain blue sun.

It was many light-years distant from the yellow sun they had penetrated. No one on board the *Fantasy* suspected that at the moment of their collision a very unusual transition had occurred, involving some very specific energy characteristics. But it made little difference whether the cruiser's crew attributed their new course to an incredible coincidence or to the immutable processes of natural law.

The crucial point was the fact that the *Fantasy* was flying directly toward the great blue star.

* * * *

Rhodan struggled futilely to reach for the green emergency switch. His limbs were fighting against a pressure of at least 5 G's. Normally the automatic feature of the flight console should have come into play by now and arrested the cruiser's wild rotation by means of the powerful nav-stabilization engines. Apparently the automatic circuits had failed because of the collision. Rhodan was painfully aware of this as well as the fact that the *Fantasy* was spinning like a centrifuge around its polar axis.

That the G-shock compensators weren't operating was even more of a puzzle. Perhaps when the Kalup converter failed it had caused a short-circuit somewhere and the power plants had shut down. The automatic emergency connections were malfunctioning and no current was being fed to the inertial absorbers.

With painful clarity Rhodan was reminded of similarities between the present situation and that of the first manned spaceflight. At that time there had been no neutralizers to alleviate inertial effects but of course in those days astronauts had gone through a different kind of schooling. Those specialist pioneers had been trained for years under the severest simulated conditions so that 5 G's would not have bothered them overly much. Under such pressure they would still have been able to operate vital switch controls. They also had a different breathing technique to keep them from smothering under such a centrifugal load.

Lying in a half-raised position, Rhodan was pinned against the wall just under the panob screens. Inside the ship it was strangely still. A blood-red emergency light illuminated the Control Central where the crewmen hung in their straps in their automatically flattened-out contour chairs. Only Rhodan had left his seat just before the collision. He strained futilely against the centrifugally produced gravity, realizing that with each passing second such a struggle made him weaker and more helpless.

His vision was already blurring. His optical nerves were failing under the strain. The only sound he could bring to his lips was an unintelligible gurgling noise, which immediately brought on another threat of asphyxiation. He thought of Pucky, who as a teleporter would have been able to activate the emergency switch, but no doubt the delicately built mousebeaver had long since fallen unconscious. Nor was he able to make telepathic contact with John Marshall.

Out of it! he thought angrily while close to unconsciousness. *Only a ridiculous 5 G's and we're not able to handle it!*

His brain was being drained of blood and he couldn't think straight any more. He was only able to make out the shadowy outlines of a broad figure nearby which groped upward with excruciating slowness. The right hand of the figure was working up the thick body toward a fist-sized device hanging on his chest

Jefe Claudrin had to contend with two difficulties. 5 G's wouldn't have been too much for him to take but he was under extra pressure because his micro-gravitator was still working. This placed an extra weight load on him. By the time he managed to shut off the grav generator, Rhodan was unconscious, but now Claudrin was relatively free. He moved against the terrible pressure and reached out his right hand, which grasped the green switch and closed it.

Inside the spinning spacesphere the alarm sirens started to howl. The emergency automatics sprang to life, registered the situation and proceeded to make the necessary connections. Power plant 3 revved up to maximum output and the inertial compensators received their required supply of energy. Seconds later the unbearable load was lifted from the men. A roaring from the correctional jets indicated that the rotary motion was being arrested.

When Rhodan awoke he saw Claudrin's bulky figure standing over him. Without a word the Epsalian lifted Rhodan into his ponderous arms and took him over to a contour couch.

Everywhere in the ship the men were regaining their senses. Brazo Alkher also straightened up with a groan and gasped convulsively for air. His first glance was toward the target viewscreen. A bright red glare almost blinded him.

With a seemingly superhuman effort he called to the Control Central. When the Commander answered, Brazo groaned out: "Fire Control ready and safe, sir. What happened? Did we hit something?"

"If I'm not dreaming it seems we've flown straight through a star of considerable magnitude."

"Good God!"

"Remain at your station, Alkher. I still don't know the meaning of that reddish glow around us. In any case we're back in normal space."

"Sir, maybe I'm crazy but it looks as if we were still in the middle of that sun."

Claudrin was about to reply but then became silent for a brief moment. Then he spoke more slowly. "My boy, that gives me an idea! OK, now you look out for your men and send any casualties to the sickbay. Report your personnel situation to the First Officer—that is all!"

"Right, Sir," muttered Brazo mechanically.

He listened absently to the roaring of the power plants that were feeding the defence screens and protecting the cruiser from the dangers of outer space. Something did not seem right on board the *Fantasy*. It was no longer possible to use the para-optics.

Brazo took a long deep breath.

All there was to be seen on the screens was a bright glow.

6/ LOST IN THE VOID

"It's an accident that can happen to a linear-drive ship at any time," said Kalup calmly over the video intercom. His face looked pale and drawn and even his pouches had a taut look about them. He continued dispassionately: "The computations are in. I've used the tractor beam to bring in a sample of matter from outside. We've nipped off a piece of the sun's mass and brought it with us. But this little ship couldn't have done it—the compensator field is the culprit. The sequence of physical events involved is fairly clear. It was lucky for us that at the moment of impact our screens were at full power. Otherwise we wouldn't have gotten out of there alive. It may sound foolish to say this but do you know where we are? We're at the centre of a swiftly revolving cloud of matter which is cooling down fast because its nuclear activity has subsided. That seems strange to me but we're going to find out why."

In the Control Central Jefe Claudrin turned his head to look at Rhodan. The latter sat exhausted in his flight seat. Under his left eye was a swollen bruised spot.

Claudrin spoke as softly as his mighty voice would permit. "It's a good thing you knocked my hand away in time. Otherwise I'd have turned off the Kalup at the exact moment of the collision."

Rhodan nodded. His lips tightened in pain. During the heavy G condition he had been lying against the smooth steel wall but probably he had broken several ribs. "I realized it at the last moment," he answered. "We were already too close. OK, forget it Kalup—what do you suggest?"

"The wall of matter around us is still soft and yielding. We have to break through before it cools down. That brings up a few problems that have to be worked out."

"That's why I'm asking you, young man."

Kalup snorted impatiently and his face showed some colour again. "Can the kiddy bit, *please!* We have to operate now like a baby chicken. We have to break our shell from the inside and slip out of it. There's no other possibility. In order to do this we have two alternatives."

"Oh, we have a selection!" said Rhodan.

"Don't sarc me—this thing's too serious. At the present moment I'm not willing to risk turning off the normal defence screens, which would be necessary to put the compensating converter back in operation. It could be that there's some critical radioactivity still going on in that cloud and if we had a nuclear blast out there we wouldn't make it without the screens.

"I see—and so?"

"I understand you had the Fleet Command provide you with a Fire Control officer who has some special qualifications—is that right?"

As Rhodan's eyes brightened with interest a certain young man named Brazo Alkher stiffened tensely. In startlment he looked across at his gunner crew. Sgt Enscaath gripped the arms of his chair.

"Jehoz!" exclaimed the latter. "I knew it would come to this!"

"Are you saying, Professor, that you want to take a shot at that heat shell?" Rhodan's voice was on all the ship's speakers so that everyone could hear the conversation.

"We ought to give it a try. In any case it's less risky than to chance shutting down the outer screens. Hello—is the Fire Control Officer listening to this?"

"Yes...yes sir!" said Brazo shakily into his microphone. "Lt. Alkher here, sir!"

"Good! I believe we ran into each other on the Moon, isn't that right?" said Kalup, laughing loudly as was his way.

"Yes, that's right, sir. You were kind enough to save me from a fall."

"I remember. Now tell me—do you think you could put a shot through that rotating shell out there? I mean accurately enough to carve an exit for us?"

Brazo forgot his nervousness. Rhodan was watching him attentively on the screen and he nodded slowly in approval as he observed the young man's sudden change to hard-jawed alertness.

Brazo's mental calculations had already been completed. In an entirely altered tone of voice which was all business now, he gave his answer: "It's not all that easy, sir! I believe you mentioned that the shell was rotating. That means the *Fantasy*'s going to have to be spinning with it at the same speed if I'm going to hold my fire on any one spot long enough. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to concentrate my fire beam and all I'd be doing would be wasting energy in an ineffectual sweep.

"Correct. I'm right along with you there—you can think, my friend. So get ready to concentrate your fire and use everything you've got. Just use the weapons that won't put us in danger under these conditions."

"Sir, only the impulse and disintegrator guns can be used here."

Rhodan issued final instructions. The ship's instruments located a good target in the surrounding shell which consisted of a prominent bright-glowing spot. The inertial neutralizers were set for synchro-mode. Moments later the *Fantasy* started rotating again but this time the motion was calculated and controlled.

On Brazo's target screen the bright target spot became more and more stable in a relative sense until it finally swung into the cross-hairs and held steady. There were a few vernier adjustments to make. The heavy cruiser was spinning at a rate of 22.36 times per second on its polar axis. The fixed guns in their extended turret positions thus moved at a similar rate. The concentrated fire could begin.

Claudrin's voice boomed from the speakers. "The distance to that condensation of matter is marked by our grav-magnetic defence screen—precisely 10 kilometres, Adjust your beams so that you can knock out a circular opening in that staff with at least a diameter of 3 K-Ms."

"Wilco, sir," answered Brazo mechanically. His eyes were fixed on the target screen. His sensitive fingers moved across control keys on the fire console. All frontal cannons of the *Fantasy* were turned so that their line of fire would converge at the same point.

"Fire when ready," said Rhodan.

Brazo depressed the master switch for an automatic salvo and like some monster startled from slumber the cruiser began to bellow and flash with destructive thunderings. The violet streams of impulse energy were sunhot and almost as fast as light as they leapt from the shielded gun muzzles. The molecule-disrupting rays of the disintegrators could hardly be seen but they were even slightly faster than the beams from the thermo-impulse guns.

Brazo held down the salvo-release key for a duration of 3 seconds. The *Fantasy* shook heavily in every joint and seam. Outside where the fire was concentrated the spherical shell of condensing matter appeared to explode. Powerful nuclear reactions blasted against the ship's protective screening and threatened to destroy it. Beyond the vessels armour-steel hull the furies of Hell seemed to be unleashed. The suddenly reheated masses shot tongues of flame out into the void. Brazo was generating a miniature sun which was erupting with ravening prominences of exploding hydrogen.

"Hold it—cease fire!" cried Rhodan over the intercom. "No good—it won't work! With all that nuclear reaction the exit hole will be filled with critical masses of gas again. Out of here before that cloud turns into a nova! Kalup, get ready for linear-drive. Nacro, set your engine piles for maximum.

"That's senseless—we'll only take the cloud along with us!"

"Just do what I say. Kalup, get us some speed. The compensator screen buildup and collapse of normal screening has to dovetail at the same moment. If they don't match exactly we'll be going up in steam. Is that completely clear to you?"

"Oh, quite!" said Kalup with humourless emphasis. "Alright—wait for my signal."

Brazo Alkher had moved his hands away from the console keys of his fire control. Outside all space was ablaze. He knew that his overheated weapons had initiated the nuclear reactions which physicist Kalup had feared. Now the cloud's fusionable hydrogen atoms were activated. It was high time to vacate the trap if they could.

A rapid stream of commands came from Control Central. The thundering of the Kalup converter began

to override every other sound. Two minutes later the engineroom announced that full accelerating power had been reached. The swiftly-heating stellar material was being carried along with them. No escape seemed possible by this means. Moreover they were uncertain as to what would happen now that they were getting close to the speed of light.

Rhodan issued final instructions. All hands closed the helmets of their spacesuits. Voice-com then continued by radio. The gas-cloud's chain reactions were increasing wildly. Just as the tremendous forces threatened to shatter the defence screen, Rhodan's voice came through again. As was unique with him at the most critical moment he, was unusually calm.

"Jefe, it's your move. Give us 5 seconds of acceleration in semispace and then shut off the Kalup. That ought to be enough. Are you ready? Let's go!"

Claudrin took a final look at the green indicators on the automatic vernier synchro. The building of the Kalup zone had to match the collapse of the normal screening within less than a microsecond. Then with an almost imperceptible motion the Epsalian cut off the manual override, which threw everything into automatic commit.

It seemed that the cruiser was virtually exploding. The white-hot glow from outside appeared ready to burst through the viewscreens into the ship. The Kalup drowned out all other sounds and even the tortured ringing of the overstrained hull could not be heard. Only the earthquake of its vibrations could be felt.

This lasted for a few moments and then without warning the blaze of unchained atomic forces disappeared. On the forward viewscreen of the optical system appeared the star-glittering background of the void.

Rhodan sighed his relief as he sank back into the cushioning of his contour seat. Almost at the same moment a heavy shock ran through the structure of the *Fantasy*. The speed indicators dropped rapidly. It was as though the ship had ploughed into a sea of cotton wadding. The phenomenon lasted about a second but it was enough for Claudrin to shut down the Kalup within Rhodan's designated time-period of 5 seconds.

Once deprived of its compensation field the test ship dropped back immediately into normal space where it continued in free fall at the velocity it had reached prior to the entry manoeuvre. The engines and the Kalup were silenced. On the normal viewscreens gleamed a giant blue sun.

The mass detectors came to life with warning signals. Racing pengraphs indicated that this bright hot star possessed a considerable family of planets. But this was not surprising for the *Fantasy*'s crew. It was nothing to worry about. Many suns mothered a system of planets.

Rhodan fixed his gaze for a few moments on the giant screens of the panob view gallery. Five of the discovered planets were already showing green echo blips. He didn't pay any attention to them. What was far more important was that they had successfully pulled away from the centre of an imminent miniature nova. Still, there was something else that might be of equal or greater importance just now: the peculiar drop in velocity which Claudrin apparently caused when he hurried to cut off the linear drive.

"What was that?" he asked. "You noticed it didn't you?"

"Of course, sir."

Reginald Bell got up from his flight seat. He went over to the panoramic gallery and stopped directly under the viewscreens. His eyes narrowed suspiciously as he observed the visible disc of the bluish sun. Once his eyes had adjusted themselves to the brilliant light, he saw that there was a faint blue shimmering in the empty space around the alien star. What was missing here was the star-strewn darkness of the normal universe.

"Can anybody tell me where in the devil we are?" asked Bell. He shoved his hands in his uniform pockets and turned to look slowly from man to man.

Kalup and a few other scientists came into the Control Central. It was characteristic of his swift reaction capability that he wasted no words on their successful escape flight. To him that part was taken care of so it was forgotten. He approached the screens with heavy steps, having overheard Bell's question.

"Where are we? You can be sure we're not in hyperspace or any other mathematical quasi-universe. This is a completely normal solar system and it's a part of our own galaxy."

"A completely normal system?" Bell repeated questioningly. There was an ironic innuendo in his tone. "Kalup, you're turning into an all-knowing oracle."

With unaccustomed gravity and calmness the hyper-physicist shook his head. "It's just that I'm ahead of you in my observations and my conclusions. If the air envelope of a planet happens to shimmer, that's understandable, but when the vacuum of space around it also shimmers, that is entirely something else again! Or have you ever seen a vacuum that acts like that?"

Now Rhodan narrowed his eyes in thought as a new suspicion occurred to him.

Kalup continued: "During our brief linear flight we were slowed down by an unknown force. I presume that we penetrated a defence screen that is in some way similar to our compensator field. Otherwise we would have been repulsed or even destroyed. It's the defence screen that's generating that blue light. We ought to call this the Blue System."

"A defence screen—out here in the middle of space?" said Bell, flabbergasted. "You mean a bubble of force so big that it can contain a large solar system with at least 15 planets inside it? Professor, do you really know what you're saying?"

Kalup nodded, his eyes gleaming. As a scientist he saw the whole thing as a fascinating phenomenon. But Rhodan and the ship's leading officers were of a more practical mind.

Maj. Hunts Krefenbac, who was the First Officer, lost his usual lethargic manner. He quickly drew the first available microphone to him. "Krefenbac to Fire Control: ready at battle stations! Channel your object sensor into Control Central—and confirm!"

Brazo's fingers began their artistry on the console again. Alarms began to ring in the quarters of off-duty personnel. "Fire Control Central, Lt. Alkher here. Combat readiness is in effect. Object sensor switched to Control Central—over and out!"

Rhodan glanced pensively at his First Officer and then looked at Kalup. "Now you know what the fighting men think of your Blue System."

Kalup shrugged. But then he followed it with a gesture of vexation. "That's nonsense! We have to find out first what's going on here!"

"Precisely, Professor! But while we're waiting to find out, Hunts has also ordered combat standby. It appears to me, young man, that the Third Epoch of human history is being heralded with a bigger roll of drums than expected. Krefenbac—what's your recommendation?"

Before the First Officer could express an opinion the hyper-sensors in the next room went into such a sudden bedlam of alarm that within a few seconds all the fuses blew out Rhodan did not say a word. He only smiled strangely as he looked through the transparent plasteel partition into the tracking central where technicians were busy cutting in a safety backup system. The chief duty officer switched on his heaviest buffer circuits against overload shock.

Once more the sensors were able to measure warp-distortions in 4-dimensional space and the result was an uninterrupted thundering of tracer signals.

"Tracking to Commander," sounded the officer's voice through the speakers. "We have a warp wavefront, intensity 30, issuing from 15 red and 3.3° green. Heavy amplitude, sharp impact echo. There must be countless spaceships in transition or coming out of hyper but we can't make out a single one of them. Over and out!"

Rhodan was perplexed. "What? With a continuous warp registration you have no trace of any ships?"

"That's right, sir. The echo source is only 18.25 light-hours away but we can't make out a single ship!"

Bell laughed humourlessly. "That does it!" he exclaimed. "Didn't I tell you we'd be in for some surprises this time? Our sensors are about to go up in smoke but there are no ships to be seen. So where's the warp front coming from? Who or what is causing them? You know if I weren't the most curious guy around—and if I didn't have to know exactly what's behind a thing like this—I'd say we ought to show this place some jet smoke!"

"But you're curious as a cat." Rhodan gave him an ironic smirk. Then he turned to the others and spoke phlegmatically: "Well, gentlemen, before you spend an hour shouting me down and burn up my last reserves of nervous energy, let's fly onward and take a look at what's causing all the excitement. Of course I'd feel better if I had a super battleship of the Imperium class under my feet. We'll hold our speed at normal light velocity. Krefenbac, track the echo source exactly and dump the data into the autopilot system." He checked his watch. "In 10 minutes all ship's officers will be briefed. Mr. Alkher, that excludes you. I need you in Fire Control. You'll be instructed later."

300 highly specialized crewmen stared at each other.

Somebody said: "He wants to really find out, does he? Let's hope this Blue System is on the edge of the galactic core where the stellar density is supposed to be fabulous. That's where we are, aren't we?"

"You'll have to ask your big brother," said another engine tech.

"He isn't here."

"Then shut your mouth. Actually I'd like to know, myself, who's setting off these hyper-fireworks. I hope we don't singe our itchy noses. Darned if we can ever resist scratching an itch!" He shook his head and went over to his station where he switched on the closed system video viewer for engine 2. He thought he could guess what the officers' briefing would be about. Nor was he wrong.

Within another hour the first new orders began to be issued. The *Fantasy* lurched into action with a sudden thundering of machinery. The goal was the 5th planet of the Blue System. It had been clearly determined that the warp-shocks were coming from there or that they had been generated on that alien world.

7/ THE BLUE SPHYNX

Rhodan's first action after picking up speed was to order all non-essential personnel to rest. He knew that he could get more out of refreshed men than he could when they were at the shaky edge of exhaustion.

Only 19 hours had passed since beginning their journey. Now they crossed the orbit of a planet in a strange star system. On the viewscreens passed the glowing spectacle of a cloudy Earthlike orb possessing great oceans, high mountain peaks and broad, green plains. Its gravity reading was 1.1 and was layered with a thick oxygen atmosphere. In this sector of space, everything seemed to glow with a strange bluish hue.

Rhodan assigned the name "Sphynx" to this mysterious 5th planet. Sphynx possessed 2 moons. One of them was almost the size of Mercury whereas the second was an insignificant and apparently uninhabited satellite that wasn't much more than meteoric in size.

These facts would have been of negligible interest if there had only been one spaceship in evidence at this close range to the 5th planet. The men on board the heavy cruiser were faced with a riddle. Although the warp shocks had subsided somewhat they were still being registered in sufficient quantity to make one assume there was a lively movement of space traffic here. But in spite of this not one alien ship was sighted. Not even a short-range courier craft. It was as though the unquestionably extant inhabitants of the 5th planet had never heard of manned spaceflight. Yet this gave the continuous sensor echoes, which indicated a high state of technology, an even greater mystery.

For 10 minutes the precision measurements of the *Fantasy*'s tracking station had finally cast some light on the subject. The source of the continuous space-warps was not on the 5th planet but rather on the Mercury-sized moon which also possessed an atmosphere suitable for humans.

On the basis of this information, Rhodan decided to compute a course to the larger satellite.

* * * *

The *Fantasy* was gliding into its final approach ellipse. Its velocity was down to 7.6 km per second. The Fire Control Central under Alkher's command had long since been under top alert. The heavy cruiser was ready for battle although there was still nothing to defend oneself against.

A few brief sensor echoes were picked up. After analysis, the conclusion was reached that the moon's

inhabitants possessed translight hypercom facilities. Why they did not have spaceships became problem number one.

Sphinx was very prominent on the viewscreens. But the bare, desert-like surface of the principal moon was even more prominent. The satellite circled its planet on a 53-hour orbit. Rhodan had named it Rameses.

At present the warp-echoes were not coming in as often as before. Yet once in awhile a powerful burst would be registered.

Rhodan waited another hour, during which time he had the research ship approach the larger moon more closely. There was no sign of tracking beams from an alien ground station nor was there any answer to periodic friendly radio messages sent from the visiting humans. No ships took off to meet the strangers nor were they met with any challenging ground fire. In a way it was the weirdest reception that Perry Rhodan had ever encountered among alien intelligences.

Meanwhile the astronomical and galactonautical departments of the research ship furnished information concerning the size of the Blue System. The hot blue sun possessed 18 planets among which only number 5 appeared to be inhabited.

After the *Fantasy* circled the larger moon of Sphinx for almost two hours, Rhodan lost his patience. The men who knew him best could detect by his controlled movements and inscrutable face that he had made a decision.

Telepaths John Marshall and Pucky tried in vain to pick up a clear and definite thought-impulse. Although it was now certain that there were millions of thinking entities both on Sphinx and on Rameses, their conscious radiations did not have the required clarity to be comprehensible.

The mousebeaver finally retreated to a contour couch in exhaustion and rolled himself up on the foam-cushion upholstery. Breathing heavily the little fellow covered his eyes with his delicate hands. Even John Marshall had to give up. Pale and wearied, he walked over toward Rhodan, who had been silently watching the efforts of his most capable mutants for an hour. Marshall sat down in a nearby flight seat, stretched out his legs and looked up thoughtfully at the panoramic viewscreens.

"Well, John?"

Marshall swept the back of his hand across his sweating forehead. He looked over at Pucky concernedly because the mousebeaver's frail little frame had been severely shaken during the uncontrolled spinning of the ship.

"It's a confused situation, sir," said Marshall guardedly. "I can't make anything out of the psi currents from those alien brains. Everything is blurred and distorted. I get hazy geometrical figures that seem to be scintillating with all the colours of the spectrum—but that's not a very satisfying pickup, nowhere near enough to give us a handle. In fact I'd even go so far as to say ..."

"Yes, what?"

"The aliens have screened themselves from us. It's not inconceivable that they could have detected the telepathic probes that Pucky and I were sending out"

"That presupposes a great deal of knowledge concerning paranormal phenomena and the pertinent

physical faculties that go with them, wouldn't you say?"

"Right, sir, but—" Marshall interrupted himself to look uncertainly at Rhodan.

"Yes, John?"

"Sir, if you asked me it would be my advice to make an immediate retreat. Something's pooky about all this. Why don't they answer our radio calls? They're advanced enough both culturally and technologically to comprehend the universal principles of mathematics, so they must be able to recognize radio-impulses carrying intelligent information. Let's turn around, sir."

Rhodan was silent a moment before he replied. "John, it's a bit too late for that. The Administrator of a still young stellar government can't afford to let intelligences of this advanced state go unobserved simply because they seem to be pooky."

"They don't know where we've come from," interjected Bell.

"Right—but we know they're here and that's enough. I must at least find out who they are and what we're dealing with. Col Claudrin ... !

The Epsalian straightened up from his flight seat. His deepset eyes gleamed in the lights from the control console. "Sir?"

"Prepare for a landing manoeuvre. We'll just take a look around down below. Bring the *Fantasy* down near those, strange light patterns we've been puzzled about. Combat readiness remains in effect. Have the landing commandoes stand by. Lt. Sikhra..."

The Nepalese answered over the ship's intercom.

"Check your troops' equipment. Put on your Arkonide combat suits. I'll be going with you. This moon's air is breathable and the temperatures are tolerable. That is all—thank you."

Sikhra switched off. In another section of the ship the combat-ready robots received their first programming inputs.

Brazo Alkher noticed that his palms were sweaty. Moments later there was a rising whistle of wind to be heard outside the hull. Claudrin was making a steep downward curve toward a landing. The air molecules were being shoved out of the flight path by the powerful collision screen.

The light patterns they had seen came nearer. Shortly before they landed the first sighting was made of life forms. On the giant viewscreens of the Control Central the optical magnification system conjured up the tall, humanlike figures. Even this would not have been extraordinary had it not been for the fact that not one of the aliens had found it necessary to even glance upward at them. They certainly could not have been deaf to the thundering of the engines. However, down there everybody was calmly going about his business just as though nothing were happening.

At an altitude of 2 km the First Officer extended the landing struts. Again the alien intelligences failed to show a reaction. They acted as though the *Fantasy* were not there at all.

And so the landing took place within about 1 km from a group of massive official-looking buildings. When the engines died down and the last shock-waves of their arrival whirled sand and gravel over the

desertlike surface amidst thunderings as though from a passing storm, 300 Terranians stared perplexedly at the numerous screens connected with the outboard camera system.

The warp-sensors came to life again but this time in such volume that they finally had to be turned off. The energy-detection instruments revealed the presence of power sources of such mighty magnitude that even Arno Kalup turned pale. The current generated in the area would evidently suffice to power 100,000 major spaceships of the Imperium class. This was only one power plant whose component machines appeared to be installed in the great halls and skyscrapers of the nearby city.

Otherwise nothing happened. The unknown inhabitants seemed to be neither friendly nor hostile. No one came out to meet them at all.

Bell laughed grimly and gave the best appraisal of the situation: "For these gentlemen we seem to be some kind of vermin that no one pays any attention to. They see us alright; but who's going to bother about a few buzzing gnats-unless they start to sting a little?"

"So we're just bugs, is that it?" asked Rhodan. "Maybe your comparison isn't far from wrong. I think that we ..."

"Excuse me, sir!" Rhodan was interrupted by the hurried entrance of Dr. Con Nkolate. The dark countenance of the tall, lean man revealed his excitement as he swiftly crossed the deck of Control Central. In his right hand he held several large film negatives which he hastily spread before Rhodan on the flat top of the flight console.

"X-ray photos?" Rhodan inquired in surprise. "Well now, whose bones might these be?"

Nkolate was not his usual laughing self. He ran a hand nervously through his crinkly hair. He was known as the leading specialist in galactic adaptive surgery. His heart and limb transplantations were famous.

"Those weren't taken of anybody on board, sir," he explained quickly. "Just before the landing I made a few long-range photos with the X-ray cannon, that's all. So now—don't you notice something? The skeletons of the aliens should tell you everything."

Bell came closer. Officers and scientists suddenly besieged Rhodan's chair. Perry only needed a second or so to grasp the state of affairs.

"I'm losing my mind," he said almost tonelessly. "There's no doubt about it—the skeletal pattern is Arkonide! Just the solid thorax and back plates where the ribs should be—that's enough! Or did you mean something else, Gorl?"

Dr. Nkolate shook his head. "No sir, that's it! I'm familiar enough with Arkonides to be able to state with confidence that these intelligences are of the same breed, at least from the standpoint of their physiological structure. Up to a point. They don't have the typical white hair of the Arkonides nor their reddish eyes. Also their complexion is not as clear as we're used to seeing among Arkonides. In spite of that, though, these unknowns are from the same stock."

Dr. Carl Riebsam, the research team's mathematician and logician, pushed his way between the tensely listening men. Without saying a word he reached for the X-ray photos. Rhodan glanced down at his instruments and then looked up again to watch him. Riebsam's peculiarly fixed stare was the result of optical surgery but it was always somehow disconcerting, as it was now. Finally the logician replaced the negatives on the console.

"Well, Carl, What do you think?" inquired Rhodan.

"Not much to think about. The facts speak for themselves. The only question that bothers me is—who has descended from whom?"

"...and his razor-sharp mind found the answer in seconds!" said Kalup mockingly.

Riebsam ignored him. "It's a matter of whether the Arkonides we know are descendants of the intelligences who live here or if these people have originated from early Arkonide colonists. Which culture is older? Who has emigrated from where? Which race was it that had to adapt itself to a new environment? The Arkonides—or the natives here? You find that out, sir, and you'll know a lot more."

Rhodan cleared his throat. Finally he got up from his seat. "Alright, then let's try to cast some light on the subject. Of course if the Arkonides have descended from these inhabitants that would be a very significant discovery.

"May I ask in what way?" interjected Bell.

Rhodan laughed humourlessly. "In a way that wouldn't be too reassuring where we are concerned. The history of the Arkonide expansion policy proves in every case that later descendants of early resettled colonists never appear to retain the technical and scientific ability of their forefathers. It seems to be a natural law that intelligences uprooted from their original environments are more susceptible to symptoms of degeneration. Looking at it from that standpoint I'd say that the Arkonides have originated from the race of people living here and not the reverse."

"That's a very shrewd observation," said Nkolate tensely. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. The terrible degeneration of almost all present Arkonides supports it. Their white hair, the reddish eyes, their weakening bodies and their lack of interest in anything practical in life—all of that is further evidence. On the other hand if you take a look at the obviously superior technology of these people you don't get the impression that they've also fallen into decadence. I even believe that in the course of millenniums they've developed far enough to be able to dispense with manned space travel."

Bell sought a place to sit down. Suddenly he was looking at the viewscreens as though with other eyes. "Now that could be very interesting!" he said, nonplussed. "How did you run across a theory like that, anyway? How come they could bypass space travel? I don't quite follow you there."

Carl Riebsam answered him. His reasoning seemed to be unassailable. "The power sources we detected ought to explain that to you, not to mention the terrific warp-shocks we registered coming in. Those point to a complete conquest of the 5th dimension. I think we should have a closer look at those light-pattern phenomena. I have a certain suspicion."

Rhodan had two crewmen help him into the cumbersome combat suit. Meanwhile he returned a thin smile. "Oh, so you also have a suspicion? I, too, my friend. If you happen to be thinking that this big moon is nothing else than a gigantic transmitter station, I'll shake your hand. That would be a concrete explanation for all those spacewarp shockwaves."

Riebsam silently stuck out his hand and Rhodan took it. Prof. Kalup hurried away as fast as his portly frame could take him. He had turned very pale.

Only Bell sat there in a grimly ironical mood. "Now ain't this just grand! So with no invitation we barge in here and land on this kind of world? Probably these unknown masterminds are starting to wonder what to do with us. Have you gentlemen of the *Fantasy*'s top command forgotten, perchance, that when we came into this system we broke through some kind of energy screen?" Bell took a look around. Rhodan's face was uncommunicative. Bell continued. "Alright, then you haven't forgotten. I can see it in your faces. If I were one of these pre-Arkonides the first thing I'd ask myself is how the research ship *Fantasy* managed to penetrate the most colossal defence screen in the galaxy—especially since it's probably been considered impregnable until now. No doubt it wouldn't sit well with me at all to see strangers landing here and snooping around the place. I think I'd rap your knuckles for you and maybe even punch your nose while I'm at it. Any race that's so far advanced it can replace space travel with giant transmitters is *sofar* over our heads that they can just ignore us entirely if they want to—or at the most we're nuisances, insects of some kind that they can shoo away in a very exotic manner whenever they're ready to. Do you gentlemen find my explanation logical?"

Bell got up and stuck his hands in his pockets again. He walked over to where Rhodan was busy putting on his backpack containing the micro-generators for his antigrav and deflector screens. With these items the Arkonide combat suit was complete.

"Almost too logical," Rhodan told him distractedly. "There's just one thing you overlooked or forgot to mention."

"Oh? What is that?"

"The question of why these so-called pre-Arkonides—and that's a handy name you thought up—are so weirdly patient with us. If I had as much to conceal and protect as these people do, I'd certainly not allow a few curious Terranians to land here. So where's the body buried? why do they simply ignore us without making a single attempt to give us that punch in the nose you mentioned? If I were the head man around here, that wouldn't be allowed, I can tell you. I'd have ordered the *Fantasy* off to any place else but I wouldn't permit it to land right here in my own system. . . what's the matter, John? Thought-waves?"

It took a few more seconds for the telepath to shake himself from his motionless position. Dazedly he passed a hand over his eyes. "Somebody out there opened his thought screen," he explained swiftly. "Sir, I picked up clear conscious impulses and it's hard to grasp—but they apparently think that we're Arkonides who have come here to visit the original home of their forefathers. Now I don't get anything because they've shut off again."

The tension among the crew was becoming unbearable. Only Rhodan appeared to be calm and collected.

Bell shouted at him: "If you're going to tell me now that you were already thinking that, I'll go through the roof!"

Rhodan put on the weapons belt with its heavy hand-beamers. With exasperating preciseness he checked the load indicators on the guns. While so doing he spoke without looking up. "You'd better explode then, but spare the roof. It is what I had in mind."

"Kerd! Not even you are omniscient!"

"Naturally not, but I can think, can't I? In the entire known galaxy there was only one race—until recently—that built spherical spaceships. The Arkonides, my friend. As latecomers we've been doing the same, of course, but what would give the people here any reason to think we weren't from the Arkon

System—how could they know we're from a place called Earth? Apparently they haven't maintained any contact there for many thousands of years. They have no idea of what's transpired on the Arkon worlds, which are more than 40,000 light-years distant. On the other hand, here we come in a spherical spaceship and discover the Blue System. What would be more logical for them to assume than that we're the descendants of the pre-Arkonides who emigrated from here about 20,000 years ago?"

"I agree with you, said Riebsam. "They probably assume that we've found the position data for the Blue System in some ancient star data. So they don't attack us because they're thinking that we are of their own race. Of course when they find out the truth they just might remove the welcome mat!"

"But since we're only thick-skinned barbarians we might not understand such a refined gesture. Col. Claudrin, you will remain here on board. Maintain battle-readiness. Keep the ship in standby mode for emergency takeoff. Don't worry about us, we're only going to take a quick look around. The longer they take us for Arkonides the better it will be for us. But should they find out that we only have the outer physical form of their colonial descendants in common with them—then it will be time for an immediate retreat."

Bell called for a combat suit. In the machine control room the transformers were humming and in the power bays the reactor generators were running again. The engines flashed green on the indicators. The *Fantasy* was ready for emergency takeoff. Only in the Fire Control Central there was not much to do because everything had already been taken care of.

The robot commandoes under Stant Nolinow were not sent to the exit lock. Only a small portion of the human crew disembarked. For this mission Rhodan employed three of the shifts which the research ship had brought along. These were all-purpose armoured personnel carriers, capable of travel on the ground and in the air.

Only 30 men stepped onto the surface of the alien world. The two-headed mutant Ivan Goratschin remained on board. The only mutants who went out the ground lock with the commando team were Pucky, John Marshall and the other telekinetic expert, Tama Yokida.

A handful of men thus ventured boldly forth, impelled by their very nature to solve a riddle once it dangled before them. They were about to investigate the secret mystery of an apparently very ancient and highly advanced civilization. It was a foolhardy undertaking—but for such things the members of this research team had been selected.

* * * *

"...to Auris of Las-Toor: determine origin of aliens. Also find out how they succeeded in penetrating the time screen."

The young woman took the instruction container out of the com transmitter cage and after removing its contents she replaced the empty container in the sender slot. When she pressed a contact button the capsule disappeared in a flash of light, only to reappear at once in the com central's return transmitter cage.

Auris turned her attention to the written orders of the Governing Council.

"They are being very presumptuous," said an older technician who was pointing to the viewscreen. "Now they are coming out of their ship in a landing party. It seems they have lost sight of proper custom and protocol. Another indication of their deterioration and inferiority. You should let them know that they are not wanted here and see to it that their ship departs as quickly as possible."

Auris of Las-Toor turned to look. With the pragmatic detachment of a scientist she watched the clearly-visible strangers who were just now flying over the first of the reactor stations.

"They don't seem to show any signs of deterioration!" said the old technician. "Amazing! But you must put them back in their proper place—they go too far!"

Auris ran both hands through her long, coppery-red hair. She put on her protective screening and after picking up her short shoulder-cape she went over to the security door of the transporter station, which glided up soundlessly at her approach.

Two more steps brought her into the focal area of the transmitter field. The older technician watched as her tall, slender figure dematerialised.

Without any measurable time delay the girl reappeared in the receiver chamber on the planet's larger moon. Auris of Las-Toor was ready to carry out the instructions of the Governing Council. Calmly she observed the landing of the three flying vehicles. Certainly something had to be done!

A technician at master control station 18-IV-3645 communicated with her. "Should they be treated as guests?"

Auris frowned, rejecting the suggestion. "By no means! Their behaviour is very improper and crude. They must be aware of the fact that we have no intention of answering their clumsy attempts to contact us. Send me a robot glider and inform the travellers. These degenerate throwbacks are not to be given any consideration."

8/ WHERE ANGELS FEAR

Shortly prior to the disembarkation Rhodan issued orders that from now on all hands were to speak in Arkonese. Every member of the crew had a perfect command of the language. The landing party flew unmolested over the gigantic buildings and dome structures of the powerplant centre they had detected. As seen from above the extensive installations had the appearance of a city.

At some distance beyond the buildings the light phenomena became visible. Ranging in colour from white to deep red, these were glowing, deadly-looking energy beams which emerged abruptly from the ground to form into a sort of rainbow arch at a distance of 50 to 100 meters above the surface. Thus were formed a strange assortment of mighty portals at whose thresholds the world appeared to end.

Rhodan staked everything on a single card. The three shifts landed at a distance of only a few hundred meters from the largest of the arching light phenomena. These unknown people had laid out wide avenues, kilometres in length, all of which ended at the dark gaping orifices of the energy portals. It was

as though the thoroughfares there had all been sliced off with a knife.

The 30 Terranians gazed in wonder at the countless aliens who were milling out of the long buildings surrounding the area or who busied themselves in the vicinity of the energy portals where all types of commercial goods were being loaded. Giant, robot-controlled machines crawled out of the warehouses. The cargoes were carried in antigrav fields and were transferred to wheelless, basin-like freight vehicles. Once loaded, the latter hummed softly and glided weightlessly to the various gleaming archways.

It was obvious that transmitters were involved here which were beyond the technology of either Earth or Arkon. Rhodan watched the various proceedings closely until he was sure that he was familiar with the nature of these extensive installations. This whole vast area of countless transmitter gates was nothing more than a super spaceport which was used for dispatching and processing the general traffic in goods and personnel. In principle what was happening here was neither sinister nor abnormal but simply technologically advanced.

The pre-Arkonides—if that's what they actually were—had found a practicable and technically perfected method of reaching the farthest planets. So they had dispensed with complicated spaceship travel. If these arching energy fields were transmitters for the dematerialisation and shipment of all types of material, it meant that the transportation could take place without any time loss and with no laborious loading and unloading operations.

Now Rhodan understood why such a colossal power station had been located in this area. It furnished each individual transmitter with energy but there were no power cables or field-isolated power-beam projectors to be seen. Just how the transmitters received their operating supply of current was not determinable. Also there was no sign anywhere of the synchronizing and control-switch panels and stations which were unquestionably here somewhere.

Rhodan and his team of scientists had already seen enough to get a picture of the state of technology of the local inhabitants.

"Take a look at that!" said Bell in a tense voice. His water-blue eyes were wide with amazement.

Rhodan looked in the direction he was pointing. About 300 meters away a seemingly endless train of gigantic floating platform vehicles was rumbling toward one of the largest transmitter gates. The antigrav hovercraft were carrying monstrous machines, carefully packed goods and immense numbers of pre-Arkonides who sat in neatly-ordered rows on board the transports. There where the weirdly gaping maw of the energy gate began, one vehicle after another disappeared in brief flashes of brilliant light. Only a few minutes went by until the entire column had dissolved into nothingness, undoubtedly to reappear on some distant world as they emerged from a similar transmitter-receiver gate.

"We couldn't hold a candle to such people as these," said Bell with an uneasy smile. "Apparently they can bridge across any distance they want to."

Lt. Sikhra's lean face wore a grim expression. "On each of their bases they must have at least one receiver station," he said. "Sir, when you look closely at this whole situation you have to assume that the pre-Arkonides still must be using manned spaceflight techniques, as well. How else would they get their indispensable receiver-transmitters to other worlds? Or do you mean to say that they're using equipment here that operates *without* receivers? That would be weird, sir!"

"It's not entirely impossible. The entity on Wanderer uses such a method. On board the superbattleship *Drusus* is a tele-transmitter from Wanderer which enables us to transmit material objects to any desired

place."

"But these installations don't look like that," said Bell in a blunt rejection of the idea. "At least they don't seem as primitive! Anyway, all this makes me feel like an apeman fresh out of a cave. What do you plan to do?"

"Pull back. Let's turn around as fast as we can go, answered Rhodan finally. "These high-and-mighties don't even consider our presence to be significant. To them we're like an undesirable odour that they avoid breathing in for fear of being contaminated. Sikhra, call back your sergeant!"

Mahaut signalled to one of the men in his command, a small dark-haired sergeant named Totrin. For several minutes the enterprising noncom had been trying to strike up a conversation with the passing natives.

Totrin was possessed of both humour and patience. Thus all he did was smile innocuously when the people either left him standing there or else looked through him as though he were nothing but air. However, he had found out a few things in the process. Responding finally to Sikhra's signal, he sauntered slowly back to the leading shift and climbed over the low rail of the cargo-loading bay.

"Well?" asked Rhodan, disquieted.

Totrin made a wry face. "No go, sir—nobody will answer. If you stand in their way they simply go around you. They just go on talking with each other as if they hadn't been spoken to. I tried it with at least 50 different people. Most of them have copper-coloured hair that sometimes has a dark bluish shimmer to it. They all have a velvety-brown complexion. From that standpoint they don't look at all like Arkonides and yet they speak Arkonide."

Rhodan wrinkled his brow at this. "What? Say that again."

"They speak an archaic form of Arkonese, sir. I was able to understand them quite easily. It's about the same language we always found on the Arkonide colonial worlds. What's important is the name they have for this system's blue sun. They call it Akon!"

"That does it!" exclaimed Bell tensely. "Akon! Just add an 'r' to it and you have Arkon! It's pretty evident that today's Arkonides must have shoved off from here long ago. Our good friend Atlan shouldn't give himself too many airs about the great past of his people. They're only a degenerated offshoot of the people here."

"A hovercraft approaching, sir," came an announcement.

Rhodan turned swiftly to look. The glider swept along over one of the wide avenues and headed straight toward the three quads. "Oh, so now they're getting impatient, are they?" muttered Rhodan as though to himself. His eyes narrowed. The blue sun was almost deceptively pleasant. The average temperature outside was 85° Fahrenheit. He waited a few more moments until the person sitting in the glider could be seen more clearly.

John Marshall spoke swiftly. "They're sending a woman to us—in fact a young and pretty one. She's thinking of us and of a certain assignment she must accomplish. These people send out para-vibes that are unstable and distorted, sir. Very hard to get hold of their thought content."

"You can say that again!" confirmed Pucky. He had been very reticent since their escape from the cloud

of matter. Everyone knew that the delicately-framed mousebeaver had suffered considerably from the high-G effects of that experience.

"She has an assignment in mind?" asked Rhodan. "Sikhra, get ready for takeoff. If she keeps on flying toward us, let's merk out of here! Who knows what she may have up her sleeve? To me she's a representative of a mighty people. There are circumstances which could cause them to lose their patience and become angry with us. I don't have to tell you what might happen then."

Pucky became slightly more animated. "She's really heading for us! She's thinking of something tiny—something scabbly and crawly with feelers on its head that's very disgusting to her. She associates the crawly thing with us!"

"Maybe we're bedbugs," muttered Bell.

"They don't have antennas, sir," grinned Mahaut Sikhra.

"No matter. Maybe the local variety does. But this is the limit!" cried Bell. "This lady appears to think more highly of her race than Thora did in her day of the Arkonides. To her we were also something not much better than cavemen.

Rhodan was visibly startled by this remark and Bell suddenly looked guilty. Ever since her death Thora's name was only rarely mentioned in Perry's presence.

"Sikhra, take to the air! Back to the ship—on the double!"

With humming antigravs the three quads lifted off the ground just as the scientist Auris of Las-Toor was bringing her glider to a stop. For the first time she was surprised by these strangers. She was suddenly thrown into confusion when a certain tall man among them looked directly at her. His features were strong and impressive and his grey eyes seemed to smile in mockery as he removed his cap and pointedly bowed in her direction as his vehicle bore him away. With an unaccountable sense of consternation she watched the flying tanks race away from her and disappear seconds later beyond the powerplant buildings.

Hastily, Auris made a radio report to her headquarters. She received instructions not to molest the strangers any further since they had obviously broken up in fright and retreated. But the girl could not explain why the term "fright" did not seem to apply here. That tall, superior-looking man had appeared to be far too self-possessed to be retreating in any panic. In a clear and unbiased manner she attempted to analyse the situation. Finally she decided to hurry back to her headquarters and research all the data she could concerning the earlier history of Arkonide emigrants.

Auris of Las-Toor was a galacto-sociologist. As such it lay within her sphere of duties to examine the sociopolitical problems of alien worlds that had been settled by Arkonides and to also handle them, if need be, in accordance with the principles of ancient laws.

As she hurried back to the transmitter base she was of the opinion that she'd be able to clear up the situation with little difficulty. However it was with some exasperation that she attempted to eradicate a certain tall figure from her memory. If only that man had not looked down upon her with such a superior expression of mockery!

"It was because of the situation," she told herself angrily. "He was physically in the air above me. That degenerate freak couldn't do anything else but look down!"

* * * *

Lt. Brazo Alkher removed his fingertips from the direct contacts of the weapons console as the last of the flying quads came unharmed through the big equatorial launch-locks of the *Fantasy*. At the moment Stant Nolinow had no particular ship duties. He appeared in the Fire Control Central to brief Brazo on the latest developments.

"...and nobody even paid any attention to us!" he was saying with some intensity. "I'd say they've got their nerve! But that girl now—hm-m-m. Nothing but class!"

He rolled his eyes and snapped his fingers. Brazo smiled. In such matters Nolinow was apparently easily inspired.

"Did you get to see her, Budrick?" Stant countered, seeing his scepticism. "No, of course not. You had to keep your eyes on your target, screen. But I was in on the remote TV observations. Mahaut had promised to cover everything of importance with his portable camera transmitter. And that's how I got to see *her!* Just imagine the slim, resilient figure..."

"What..?"

"The willowy figure of a goddess," Stant continued, unperturbed. "With long wavy hair of the colour of old copper that gave off a hint of green in certain light angles. The slim straight nose of a Greek noblewoman, the full lips of a Spaniard and the proud indifference of a British queen. There was ice in those green sphinx eyes of hers, but when she saw Perry she started breathing about 2½ times as fast."

"Not 3 times as fast?"

"No—2½ times. I counted. Why should I lie?"

"Don't you find the lieutenant to be a little peculiar, Sgt. Enscath?" Brazo inquired of the old noncom.

Enscath smirked. "It's not my place, sir, to express an opinion of the ship's officers in public."

"I'd like to just catch you at it!" threatened Stant "But my friends, you've no idea what heavenly visions there are on this barren-looking moon! You see me in a heady transport of patriotism, gentlemen—quite ready to offer my life for humanity, provided that I might negotiate the fate of the *Fantasy*'s crew with *her!* In a smiling euphoria of joy I would stride to my death... No, what am I saying? I'd even *jump*, but then..."

Claudrin's thundering voice was suddenly blaring from every loudspeaker. "All hands to stations! Stand by for emergency takeoff—and confirm!"

Stant became silent but looked around with an injured expression. "What a braster, to interrupt me so crudely," he muttered. "Did you hear me at all? I was talking about *her!*"

"OK, but now you'd better flee to your robots, you frustrated poet!" said Brazo somewhat callously.

As Stant stomped away toward the armour-plate lock-hatch in the interconnecting bulkhead, Sgt. Encsath called after him solicitously: "Sir, you know we are concerned about your welfare. Maybe if you'd like to put a red wig on one of the robots—I could speak to the supply officer about it..."

"You donk dome!" Stant exclaimed, giving him a withering look.

When he disappeared through the hatchway, Brazo raised a finger didactically. "We'll have to check regulations to see if ship's officers have the right to insult other crew members, even though they deserve it."

"Let's hope there's an excuse, sir!" laughed the sergeant. "OK, the weapons power pile is flashing green!"

* * * *

"Where are we off to now?" groaned Bell, flabbergasted. "Where are you taking us?"

Rhodan buckled himself into his seat. Far below him the antigrav projectors were rumbling. They were nullifying the effects of the moon's gravity on the ship. "To the 5th planet of this solar system, which we named Sphynx," he explained matter-of-factly.

"That's crazy! We've seen enough! You know my upper neck vertebra is throbbing and that's a bad sign!"

"It's because you're too fat!" cried Pucky mischievously.

Bell made an impatient gesture. "Keep your snout shut, you imp! This is a serious matter. Perry, what do you have in mind?"

"Not much. Just want to have a quick look around on #5 to see what's going on. This moon is just a big power plant and we know its operation already. As for these Akonides—and we might as well call them that from now on—I'd like to see how they take their transmitter-receivers to their various other worlds. For that they'd really need to maintain a space fleet. Where are those ships? How fast are they? What kind of propulsion do the Arkonides use? What's more important: what's the status of this people's thirst for conquest, if any? It wouldn't be very pleasant, you know, to find some arching energy gates secretly placed on Earth some day and to see maybe a million combat robots marching out of them. When you think back on the warring conquests of the old Arkonides you're forced to ask yourself how their original root race feels about such things. Ready, Jefe. Let's take off!"

Bell's comments were drowned in the thunder of the engines. The *Fantasy* hurtled so swiftly into space that it was lost to sight in a few seconds. All that remained was a hot shockwave that whistled across the vast area of the strange transmitter spaceport.

Somewhere an Akonide control technician exclaimed angrily: "They've really forgotten the rules of etiquette! We ought to destroy them!"

Destruction—it was the one thing Perry Rhodan did not believe would happen. That's why he had decided to utilize this unique opportunity up to the last second. The trip only took a few minutes. For the Epsalian commander it was child's play to carry out a nearly full-power landing. The heavy cruiser shot into the 5th planet's air canopy with a brightening contrail of incandescent gases and only went into retro-braking in the stratosphere.

Meanwhile, Claudrin commented: "They seem to have spotted us. No reason to be super cautious here. At least they'll get to see that Terranians know their way around with heavy class spaceships."

Maj. Krefenbac looked wonderingly at the backs of his hands. He had just wiped his forehead with them and his skin was wet. "Can you beat that!" the First Officer muttered to himself. His taut, melancholy face was more expressionless now than usual. He recalled that he had not perspired in this way for at least 10 years. As a consequence, Hunts Krefenbac finally took the precaution of strapping on his weapons belt. In spite of service regulations in this regard he had always categorically refused to wear it.

"Holy Jupiter!" exclaimed Bell excitedly. "That long drink of water is grabbing his guns! I don't get it. Confound it, why don't these Arkonides do something? Claudrin's shaving down their forests with his shockwaves. Now I'm really curious how much longer their patience is going to hold out."

"Sam here," said Rhodan. "This can't keep up much longer. Jefe, there are cities coming into view ahead. We'll land at the best spaceport we can find. Keep the ship ready for emergency takeoff. Energy Central, come in...!"

The duty engineer appeared on the intercom screen.

"We're landing right away," Rhodan explained very calmly. "Use your energy and mass sensors to see if you can locate any spaceships they may have stowed away. Make the basic assumption that the Akonide ships are also equipped with linear drive. If you pick up any responses, start a cross-triangulation to locate them. Is that clear?"

"Right, sir—we'll do our best."

"What was that?" Kalup's voice rattled in the speakers. He had overheard the order. "Are you by any chance thinking that the local intelligences have also developed a jump-free system of hyper-linear space-drive?"

"As a matter of fact I'm sure of it. Of course it can't be a direct copy of our compensator converter, but I'm sure their system operates on the same basis."

"I demand a convincing explanation of that!" shouted Kalup in his usual irascible manner.

"You'll make no demands, sonny, but I will explain it to you."

"What insolence!"

"Think so? Listen—the only way we got through that giant defence screen of theirs was because we were flying with the Kalup in full operation. If the Arkonides can also fly through this system-wide screen they must be using some kind of similar compensating field—otherwise they'd have themselves locked in. You can bet the installation generating that screen is vast and complex, so it's inconceivable that they'd shut it on and off for every ship passage. That's why we can figure that the Arkonides have gone beyond

transition travel and that they use linear drive and a para-optical target system for guidance. Does that satisfy you!"

"Only after I've worked out the mathematical variables of such a possibility."

"Why don't you do that, Professor? I'll be interested in the results."

A few moments later Krefenbac operated the release for the landing struts. The Martian Chief Engineer, Slide Nacro, shut down the power pile, only to turn it back on full after they had set down.

Like some menacing, belligerent monster, the *Fantasy* had landed on a vast level plain which could be nothing other than a spaceport.

9/ THE MAIDEN AT DOOM'S EDGE

The commando team under Mahaut Sikhra came back to the ship. By means of a micro-transceiver arrangement Rhodan had been able to keep track of the small reconnaissance detail and thus he knew that they had failed again to make any contact with the natives.

Apparently nobody had concerned themselves about their landing here but 20 minutes after touching the ground the ship's tracking and sensor stations began to give the first results of their activity. There were spaceships here at the spaceport. Impulses from their propulsion units could be detected.

After a mathematical analysis of the data under Kalup's personal supervision, what had already been suspected was confirmed: the Arkonides were also using the linear-propulsion method. Although their compensator fields were very similar to what the Kalup converter could produce, the equipment in general was much more advanced.

Arno Kalup was beside himself. There were unlimited possibilities here for the further development of the Terranian linear system and yet there was apparently no way of getting the Arkonides to divulge their secrets voluntarily.

Mahaut Sikhra's mission on the outside involved more than merely making attempts to contact the aliens. His men carried special sensors and analysers with which they were to determine whether the ships they'd detected had been "mothballed" into some kind of space museum or if they were readily operable vehicles still in use.

Pucky had vanished somewhere and it was assumed he'd been able to penetrate through security screens into one of the concealed space hangars.

Barely discernible in the haze of distance were the towering shapes of typical Arkonide conical buildings silhouetted against the pale blue sky. Just this exclusive architectural characteristic alone was proof enough that the Arkonides must have originated from this place. Although they had retained their forefathers' customs and usages in this regard, nevertheless turn the course of millenniums they had developed a variant culture which was becoming increasingly alien to that of the original civilization.

Rhodan had not dared fly over the major metropolis. As it was, he had a feeling that he had just about pushed events to the limit here. Moreover, it appeared that the present moment of respite was merely like the calm that precedes a storm. All native vehicles or ships had been withdrawn from the broad spaceport. Far and wide there was not an Akonide to be seen. Their disdain for the uninvited strangers could not have been expressed more strongly.

"It won't be long now," said Bell uneasily. "Either they'll convert us into a gas cloud or they'll try something maybe a little more unexpected."

Mahaut Sikhra entered, wearing only his uniform. Rhodan had issued instructions to refrain from wearing the Arkonide combat suits since they might seem a bit too challenging. Of course it was rather a moot point as to which was more challenging: their uninvited landing here, or wearing apparently hostile equipment. All in all, the Terranian comportment so far had been sheer insolence; Rhodan harboured no illusions about that.

Sikhra delivered an appropriate salute. His face gleamed with sweat. The seat from the blue sun of Akon was somewhat unpleasant here.

"What have you found out?"

Mahaut removed his service cap. His face expressed his exasperation. "Not much, sir. The ship hangars are all secured by built-up energy fields. We couldn't get through. Anyway it's been determined that those space propulsion units are 'hot'. Those are no museum pieces in there. They're spacers on standby—they can roar loose from here any moment. We didn't run into a single Akonide. Two aliens retreated suddenly when they saw us coming across the landingfield. They not only don't want to talk to us—they seemed to shun our very presence. But that's about it, sir."

"It's enough!" answered Rhodan with a humourless laugh. "Gentlemen, ready for takeoff. All we're waiting for is Pucky."

The mousebeaver materialized in the middle of the Control Central three minutes later. Again he was exhausted. Marshall carried him over to the nearest couch and bedded him down on the soft cushions and it was from that vantage point that the little native of Vagabond reported.

"Those screens are rugged. It just about drained my batteries to get through them. I've seen the spaceships. They're also surrounded by energy screens.

"What do they look like? Are they spherical?" asked Rhodan in such a relaxed tone that he almost sounded sleepy. It added to Bell's uneasiness because he knew his friend only too well. His exaggerated lassitude was a sure sign of seething tensions within.

"Naturally they're spherical! It's just that they're flattened off a little at both poles. Those ships look as if somebody had taken a knife and snipped off both ends. But they have ring-bulges although none of them's very big. The biggest one I saw probably had a diameter of 150 meters."

"Those are the transports for setting up receiving stations," commented Claudrin. "Alright, so what are we waiting for? We should know enough about these people now.

"This is the Tracking Centre. Two vehicles have suddenly appeared in front of the ship!" came an excited voice over the speaker.

Rhodan stiffened visibly and went to the controls where he switched on the ground observation system. Two large hovercraft became visible on the screen, elegantly shaped and with transparent cupolas. They came to a stop within only a few meters of the ground lock.

"How did they get under the ship?" asked Rhodan. "Did anybody see them approaching?"

"No sir—at first there was no tracking pickup and then suddenly they were there!"

"Com Central," came another officer's voice. "We're being hailed by the aliens—in old Arkonide, sir. They're asking you to come out of the ship for a conference."

"They're asking me?"

"Yes sir! Shall I channel this to your speaker?"

"It's not necessary—I've been expecting this. Just tell them I'm on my way. Over and out!"

Rhodan reached for his uniform cap. Claudrin stood up slowly. There was a silence in the Control Central until Bell spoke up.

"How did they get under the ship? The hull is 200 meters. They would have had to come 100 meters under us to get to the ground lock at all."

There was another interruption from the tracking sector. "We are picking up some undefinable echoes which apparently are coming from inside the *Fantasy*. They sound like very short wave sensor pulses."

"Do you think it's some kind of radio propagation?"

"By no means, sir. It's more like number groups and patterns. I don't know what to make of them."

Rhodan cut off the connection. "Bell, Claudrin, Marshall and Lt. Nolinow—you will accompany me. Let's go."

"It's rattle-brained!" said Bell. "You're donked out of your dome! Did you notice that the same woman is waiting for us—the one we tore away from on that transmitter moon?"

Rhodan smiled enigmatically. "How you talk! Did you really think I could have missed seeing her?" He shook his head reproachfully.

Two levels below, a panting Stant Nolinow ran to the central grav-lift. Even while he was gliding downward in the antigrav field he sought to straighten the collar of his uniform. He was the first man in the ground lock. Rhodan and the ship's commanding officers followed a few minutes later.

* * * *

She stood tall and straight as a ramrod in front of her vehicle. The light from the open airlock was reflected in her metallic-gleaming hair, seeming to conjure up fascinating fires and scintillations.

Auris of Las-Toor knew that for some minutes now the circuit sensor-analyser in the second aircar had been functioning perfectly. After the strangers had made their surprising landing here she had been given orders to find out, once and for all, where they had come from. The Akonide circuit sensor was a wireless device which was capable of penetrating the ship's positronic memory banks and performing a readout of the data stored there. No one on board the *Fantasy* suspected that the carefully-secured position coordinates of the planet Earth had now been revealed. Auris had beamed the navigation data onward to the Ruling Council.

Thus by the time the first crewmember appeared in the airlock hatch fully automatic calculators were already at work in the distant city. Scientists and specialists of the Akonide Energy Command were obtaining readouts from their own storage banks which had been registered 20,000 years before concerning colonizations of alien worlds. They were ready to make comparisons with the position data which Auris had furnished them.

Marshall, Claudrin and Nolinow came to attention before the tall young woman. Stant's heart was thumping wildly. He had to make an effort not to stare at her too obviously.

Rhodan was the last man to appear. Standing in the open hatchway he glanced briefly below and merely touched a finger to his cap in salute. Then he turned very calmly toward the interior of the ship and called out a few entirely superfluous instructions. Marshall knew this familiar ruse of the Solar Imperium's Administrator. It had always been his habit to make it very clear to other intelligences that he had no sense whatsoever of inferiority in their presence.

Auris had been determined not to be affected again by this stranger's unique charisma but as she looked upward and strained to see his features she caught herself succumbing to the same reaction as before.

Rhodan floated downward in the antigrav lift and touched the ground with a lithe spring in his limber legs, after which he walked slowly toward the girl.

Their eyes met for the first time. She looked into a pair of cool grey eyes that seemed to be dissecting her. In instinctive defence she drew herself up still more haughtily.

Col. Jefe Claudrin played his assigned role. With a thunderous voice he introduced Rhodan to her. The girl was startled but quickly controlled herself. It was in that moment that Auris realized for the first time that these unusual men could not be descendants of earlier Akonide emigrants. Suddenly troubled and concerned with the difficulties of this new situation, she studied them more closely. Especially the Epsalian.

"Your Excellency," said Rhodan in his best archaic Arkonide, "may I ask your name?"

Auris' face seemed to turn to stone. Indignantly she stared at this stranger from head to foot. "I am the one to ask the questions here," she admonished Rhodan irritably.

For a moment Perry was reminded of his dead wife. It brought a faint, thoughtful smile to his lips. How familiar these overbearing tones sounded to him now! "Please assume that you have the word here," he replied. "Did you wish to offer me your hospitality? Or was there another reason for your second visit?"

She sensed that she had been offended. This debased creature appeared to have lost all sense of propriety. She decided to act accordingly. "You have landed here uninvited and without permission. I must request that you leave the planet immediately. I am authorized to express to you the regrets of the

Ruling Council that this demand must be made at all but it's apparent that you have no respect for the rules of etiquette and protocol which were once observed by your early forefathers."

Rhodan nodded in some deliberation. He had expected this much. These people were a bit too formal for his way of thinking. "For my part I also regret that we have been received with such reserve. Has it become customary in the Akon System to treat the representatives of their own race as poor relatives and beggars? The accounts left us by our forefathers spoke of the noble attitude of the Arkonides."

Auris lowered her gaze. Rhodan had touched upon something that had even been discussed in the Ruling Council. She replied with restraint, "You may be assured that your unexpected visit has been discussed. You don't seem to be aware of how much our two races have been estranged as a result of former colonial wars. Are there no extant records of this in your historical archives?"

"They must have been lost," answered Rhodan without expression.

John Marshall almost forgot to breathe. Here then was the answer to the mystery! There had been heavy dissension and strife between the emigrating colonists of the early days, the present Arkonides and the Arkonides of the home system.

"We thought as much," said Auris in a somewhat friendlier tone. "Go back, Rhodan of Arkon! Or is there another title I should address you by?"

Marshall telepathed a warning which Rhodan understood at once. The girl was beginning to be vaguely suspicious. The innuendo had been her first thrust.

"How do you mean that?"

"It was just a question."

Once more their eyes met. She sensed the aura emanating from the immortal and it made her all the more uncertain. Rhodan decided to break up the conversation, which was becoming dangerous.

"I shall follow your advice. But won't you tell me your name?"

"Auris of Las-Toor."

"Thank you very much. I am really called Rhodan. I had hoped sincerely to have friendly relations with your people. My home worlds are rich. We have no interest in subjugating other races.

"That's quite a distinction from your forefathers," she remarked indifferently.

"Mistakes have been made in the past," said Perry evasively.

Marshall's warnings became more insistent. He could not explain why Auris had an increasing presentiment that she was not dealing with Arkonides. It might have been an emotional reaction.

Seconds later something happened that no one had anticipated. On the curved roof of the leading aircar a lamp began to glow. When Auris noticed it she turned without excusing herself and went over to the vehicle in which two silent and statuesque Arkonides were sitting. Rhodan noted a grimace of shocked surprise on the girl's slender face but in a matter of moments she recomposed herself. When she turned slowly toward them, Marshall telepathed in a virtual panic.

Watch out! Her thought screen is open and she's very agitated. Now she's blocking her mind again. They've given her a report. I think they've succeeded in tapping our ship's positronicon and they've compared the Earth's position with that of the Arkon System. It doesn't match. They know that we are aliens!

Rhodan waited a few more moments. Marshall's mental message had reached Pucky, who relayed it to the First Officer. Until now the engines had only been humming at idling speed but now they began to rumble. The ground-side gun turrets swung about. Somewhere in the ship a certain young officer was ready to press all 10 fingers down on the keys of the firing console.

Auris came to a stop directly in front of Rhodan. Her full lips trembled in her excitement "Who are you?" she asked in low, swift tones. "Go from here—quickly! I'm sorry for you. You must never come back and you must forget that you have found my native world. You reckless fool! How could you even dare to deceive the Ruling Council!"

"Just curiosity, nothing more," explained Rhodan in equally low tones. "Auris, one day I shall see you again."

"Never!"

She ran back a few meters from him until her slender figure began to attenuate. The two aircars also disappeared in an iridescent mist of light. All that was left behind was a small, portable transmitter device, which revealed to Rhodan how the vehicles had been able to appear unnoticed beneath the ship. The transmitter started to move and then it swept away over the ground at high speed.

At the same time the outside loudspeakers began to roar. Major Hunts Krefenbac was doing the shouting. "Sir, back to the ship! But take care! We're being surrounded by a greenish glow of flickering light and were turning stiff! Someone's aiming an unknown weapon at us, sir—I can hardly speak anymore. Sir, already my hands are stiff as ice.

From a standing position, Claudrin made an incredible leap up to the airlock. Bell, Marshall, Nolinow and Rhodan followed him. The inner and outer hatches glided shut behind them but the heavy sound of the engines had not changed.

One of the airlock guards shouted excitedly. "Sir, take a look at this. They attacked the crew in the Control Central first and now they're already paralysed down in the machine and power controls!"

Rhodan pushed the man to one side and stared into the small inspection screen. Krefenbac, Slide Nacro and all the leading scientists of the *Fantasy* were sitting or standing at their stations like stone statues. Only a few men were still trying to crawl slowly and laboriously out of the danger zone.

"Pucky!" cried Rhodan, while sending the mousebeaver a mental call. "Pucky, are you still alright?"

"I can still think, that's all. I can't move a muscle."

"The green glow is also showing up down here. I think it would get us even if we left the ship. Are you able to concentrate for a teleport jump?"

Only an impression of pain came back. Rhodan saw the Epsalian jump into the connecting lift to the machine rooms. He shoved off with such force that he shot upward like a projectile.

"I'll try to get to the Control Central!" he shouted. But within seconds he was silenced. He had been gripped by the alien forcefield.

Bell pulled Rhodan into a lateral passage. The shimmering green light was spreading slowly but when it engulfed a man it would immediately cause his body to start reacting strangely. Rhodan had an intuitive feeling that it had to do with a systematically-controlled molecular alteration of various organs in the body.

A silence slowly descended over the test ship *Fantasy*. Calls and messages ceased to come over the speakers of the videophone intercom system and only a few last lingering cries could be heard from men who had been taken completely by surprise.

Even Pucky had ceased to communicate, although to the sensitives on board, his stream of consciousness was still readily traceable. It was something like a tetanus attack that affected the whole body yet failed to suppress the thought processes.

Rhodan, Bell and Marshall retreated farther into the remotest recesses of the spherical hull. It was evident that the mysterious radiations had started first at the level of the equatorial ring-bulge. The Arkonides seemed to know quite accurately that the most important elements of control and command were located there.

Farther ahead, Stant Nolinow had frozen in a stooped position as he was trying in vain to drag a fallen airlock guard out of the danger zone. Rhodan toyed with the idea of getting out of the endangered ship so that he could try to destroy the alien projector which must certainly be out there somewhere but he immediately discarded it. Such an attempt could never succeed.

But Bell had gathered his wits about him again. He stood helplessly in a remote corner and stared ahead as the green light came closer and closer. In a strangely calm voice he said: "Now we know what happens when they lose their patience. I'd have preferred having come to friendlier terms with them down there when they found out we were not Arkonides. These people with their super politeness! Do you see now how merciless they can be when they feel threatened?"

"Who wouldn't be?" answered Rhodan, his fists clenched.

Now even the last shouts of startled alarm had ceased to be heard. All upper sections of the ship must have been completely engulfed in the paralysing light. The *Fantasy* had become a giant wax museum in which only the machinery was still functioning, with all systems ready for takeoff. Only a single impulse was necessary to activate the pre-programmed emergency takeoff autopilot. Once it was activated, all else would be operated automatically.

"Marshall, see if you can channel into me and strengthen my weaker psi output. Let's try to reach Pucky telepathically, in unison. He's in the Control Central. If he really can't do anything for us, then we're lost. Before long the Arkonides are going to gather us up like so many birds with broken wings. All Pucky has to do is shove down the emergency takeoff lever."

"If he's no longer able to see anything, his telekinetic powers will be ineffectual," Marshall advised. They retreated some distance until their backs were against the unyielding armour-plate of the lock door. "He probably won't be able to turn his head anymore," John concluded. Nevertheless he locked in his formidable psi powers as Rhodan made a new attempt to call Pucky.

Pucky, answer me. Pucky, can't you hear me? If you can still think, then answer!

A clear thought returned:*I hear you. I must have been out for a couple of seconds there. It hurts.*

Forget it, little one! Tell me—can you see the red activator lever for takeoff?

No—my face is flat against this contour couch. I can't even move my tail.

Alright, then try to get set for a short teleport jump. The switch is up above on that bevel-face cabinet for manual controls. You should know where that is. When I am in my flight seat the lever is just to the right of me. Do you remember?

I know it alright but what should I do? Hurry, because I'm not going to be able to hold out much longer.

The greenish glow had now engulfed the a desperate men as well. The strange pulling sensation began in their legs. At the moment of contact it was painful but then the feeling was superseded by a sensation of numbness. Within moments Rhodan felt his body become stiff and void of feeling. He managed to grip his left arm during the process and was able to feel the tissues growing hard. At first it was like cartilage but finally it became as hard as glass.

In spite of this he could still think, see and hear. As his mouth became immovable and his tongue seemed to become a lump of lead, he projected his thoughts at their fullest intensity:*Pucky, you must force yourself to make a teleport jump. It ought to work. It doesn't make any difference if you dematerialise with your body in this condition or if it's unpleasant for you to do it. The whole process should happen in any case if you try!*

Rhodan's para-senses detected a mental note of complaint but he continued more insistently.*Pucky, you have to do it. Imagine the lever, its exact location and that it is moved from its raised position downward. It's sticking out of the panel horizontally now and it's quite long. If you can rematerialise right over it you will fall on it and you'll throw it into contact. Do you get that?*

The mousebeaver was silent about a second before he answered.*I get it. I'll give it a try. But no more interruptions—I'll need all my strength to concentrate.*

Rhodan gave up, exhausted. Within the ship not another voice was to be heard. There was only the continuing sound of running machinery—waiting...

* * * *

In her headquarters, Auris of Las-Toor held her burning gaze on the large viewscreens. She knew what was happening inside the alien ship which was now completely enveloped by the conversion field. She could hear the sharp instructions in her earphones. A troop of robots was ordered into action. The fighter machines were to load the paralysed Terranians onto the hovercraft and then wait for further instructions.

Auris was thinking of the tall, lean man with his fascinating, mocking eyes. She should have warned him sooner. She did not know what it was that drew her to this stranger but she had the instinctive

premonition that her destiny was somehow linked to his. He could not be a mere barbarian.

She forced an impersonal smile to her lips as several members of the Ruling Council hurried past her in triumph.

Outside the robots marched toward their target.

* * * *

Pucky had finally managed to relax himself completely. His powers of visualization were bringing the switch into increasingly clearer focus. When he finally had a clear mental picture of the manual controls he exerted his final strength to build up the para-stable forces of his dematerialisation field.

His small brown furry body vanished from the contour couch and rematerialised in the same moment above the lever panel. Pucky could not see where he was falling. He only knew in that one hovering instant that he would have to drop at least a meter or so to the steel plates of the ship's deck. As he finally glided downward his unfeeling body slid across the bevelled face to the switch cabinet. What would have been a painful impact under normal conditions was not registered by his benumbed body. The red lever was pressed downward by his weight and clicked home in the contact slot. But Pucky did not hear the sudden roar of the engines because he had passed out.

The positronicon responded with perfect precision to its programming input which required it to put the cruiser into a 20 km/sec acceleration at takeoff and then to open up after reaching free space. The circuit signals of the synchromatic controls went out in the same fraction of a second. The inertial absorbers started to howl as the antigravs freed the *Fantasy* from the gravitational grip of the 5th planet of Akon. The impulse streams flamed out of the ring-bulge jets.

The robot contingent had just arrived but was crushed to powder in the titanic blast. The cruiser rose in a raging thunder and shot like a bullet into the sky. Without warning it broke away from the effective range of the greenish light and hurtled beyond the atmospheric envelope into outer space in a timespan of 5 seconds.

The blinding sun-bright flash of an energy beam reached out from below but missed the *Fantasy* by a few kilometres. Then the synchromatic pilot opened the engines to maximum acceleration and before anyone on the surface of Sphynx had really grasped the situation the ship was gone. The propulsion units raged wide open and soon all was in order. Except that the men on board were not able to move a finger.

* * * *

The synchromatic suddenly raised an alarm. The cycling sequence of the propulsion units had signalled for nuclear fuel injection and the autopilot system was not programmed for it.

Rhodan heard the shrieking sound. Sensation was slowly creeping back into his limbs but before he could comprehend that he would now be entering a transitional period of pain he was startled by the sound of a deep, bellowing voice blasting from the speakers.

"Commander to all hands. I'm back again in Control Central. Just hold in there and be patient—the paralysis will soon be over with. I'm not fit myself, yet. But I'm switching over to manual and activating the Kalup."

The sudden thundering of the compensator filled Rhodan with such a sense of relief that it helped him over the attack of pains accompanying the phase-out of the paralysis. Claudrin was indispensable. His titan frame had managed to shake off the effects of the alien weapon in very short order. Before the crew members had been able to move again, Col. Jefe Claudrin had set up the linear flight mode and put it into operation.

Saved! thought Perry in a transport of relief.

At the same moment he was aware of a telepathic signal from John Marshall. "Now there's no one who can overtake us, sir. Where is Claudrin taking us?"

"Who cares? The main thing is to get out of here. Those Arkonides finally started to show their teeth, didn't they?"

John did not deign to answer the obvious. After a few more minutes, Rhodan regained control over his limbs. He dragged himself laboriously to the antigrav lift, where he met a number of other crew members who were recovering.

His face was still taut with pain as he staggered into the Control Central and there sat the broad-shouldered Epsalian in his huge special flight seat, apparently as invincible as ever. Directly in front of him was the echo screen of the para-tracker, showing a yellow sun at the target centre.

He did not turn his head as he spoke. "Hang on, everybody! We're hitting a bump!"

Rhodan fell to the deck as the *Fantasy* broke through the Blue System's mysterious energy screen and lost a large portion of its velocity. It only lasted a few seconds and then the outer void suddenly regained its traditional blackness, which they had been accustomed to seeing for more than a century.

Reports started to come in from one ship station after the other. Dr. Gorl Nkolate appeared on the scene. He went over to Pucky's prostrate form without a word and felt of his unconscious body. Finally he carried him to a contour couch.

"He's the one who did it for us, right?" asked Gorl.

Rhodan nodded. "Get that little tyke back on his feet. Without him we would have been lost Claudrin, take it easy—we're not testing our maximum speed now. It's enough to just get away from the Arkonides."

Finally it became quiet in the Control Central as the *Fantasy* plied its course at a million times the speed of light, heading for a star that Claudrin had instinctively picked at random.

"I knew we were asking for it back there," said Bell as he finally ensconced himself in his contour chair. "There was bound to be trouble." His face looked grey and haggard but this was typical of everybody on board the cruiser.

Rhodan didn't answer. He was thinking of the girl Auris and of her warning that had almost come too late. In spite of everything it was obvious she had sought to help them and that was the only thing that mattered.

Claudrin wondered about the smile that touched Rhodan's lips and appeared to relax and soften the hard angularity of his face.

Operation Target Star was at an end. The only question remaining was what the accidental discovery of the Blue System would mean to the human race in the future.

We'll make it, thought Perry. I'm sure we'll come through as we always have.

The *Fantasy* hurtled onward through the zone of semi-space. Not even the Blue System had been able to capture it.

ORDER OF THE ACTION

[1/ SPY ALERT ON LUNA](#)

[2/ THE 3d EPOCH BEGINS](#)

[3/ PHANTOM EMPIRE](#)

[4/ EXPERIMENT PERILOUS!](#)

[5/ COLLISION COURSE!](#)

[6/ LOST IN THE VOID](#)

[7/ THE BLUE SPHYNX](#)

[8/ WHERE ANGELS FEAR](#)

[9/ THE MAIDEN AT DOOM'S EDGE](#)

THE TARGET STAR

Copyright © Ace Books 1976,
by Ace Publishing Corporation

All Rights Reserved.

