

OF ASSASSINS & ATLAN

ATTEMPTS on his life.

Eternal intrigues.

Threats to his reign.

The rule of Emperor of Arkon is certainly not one of serenity.

His subjects hate him!

His ancestors despise him!

And now, it appears, there is a new nuisance on the blue horizon: aliens intent on pitting the Realm of Arkon against the Solar Empire!

Atlan must meet with Perry Rhodan to defeat this malicious plan, this systematically arranged sabotage by—

THE BLUE SYSTEM

1/ SAD DOG DICTATOR

WHEN A MAN IS LONELY he has a greater longing than other men for love and affection, for genuine friendship and entertaining diversion.

And I was very lonely! I was probably the most forlorn and lonely individual in the entire cosmic conglomeration of star cluster M13 in the constellation of Hercules, whose suns and planets—from all reports, at least—belonged to *me*. I was alone among several billion Arkonides and 500,000 humans from Terra, to whom I had granted permission to come to Arkonide planets in my capacity as Emperor Gonozal VIII and absolute ruler of the stellar empire.

But even the Terrans had not been able to relieve the situation very much although for months I had been making an effort to loosen up the stiff formalities of the receptions and solemn festivities. Thus far I had failed to break through the ancient traditions of protocol and ceremony in an attempt to interface with the representatives of humanity on a more cordial and unconventional basis.

For I was the Emperor! And as such I had to comport myself, as my Protocol Chief Drautherb was always reminding me. The preservation of necessary respect was a question of 'royal propriety' which could not be allowed under any circumstances to deteriorate to the disgraceful level of a 'handshaking

familiarity' with other intelligences. This policy was also urgently pressed upon me by the officials of the court.

Royal propriety had also been explained to me as 'representative restraint or reserve' but I wasn't quite sure what was meant by this concept. In my opinion the whole thing contained a contradiction. On the one hand if I were to properly represent the Greater Imperium, then pomp and all related issues were indispensably connected with it. Yet this was somehow incompatible with the idea of 'restraint'. In my estimation this simply called for a combination of modest discretion and unimpeachable deportment.

At any rate I very soon realized that I could not swim against the current forever. My initial resistance to the prevailing social order on the Arkon planets degenerated into a sort of helpless resignation. If I had been surrounded by a sufficient number of mentally active Arkonides who were still imbued with the old acumen and perception, it would have been possible to change the situation. Then I would most likely have been able to take an 'iron broom' and sweep the palace halls and chambers clean of this rubbish.

So I was forced to depend upon the few Terrans around me who in turn had their own problems to contend with. All of these things had become an inseparable part of the Empire—the ridiculous splendour of banquets and celebrations, the vacuous and trivial blathering of loafers and fawning psychopants, the groundless hauteur and overbearing attitude of counsellors and high-ranking officers of the Fleet. I could not shake them out of their lotus dreaming. More and more my thinking was becoming more valid for the distant Earth than it was for the Arkonide Imperium.

But to all these difficulties was added still another constant danger. More than once, there had been attempts to get me out of the way by one means or another. Assassination attempts had practically been the order of the day until I took energetic measures and refused to suspend a few death sentences here and there.

They hated me! As the old Arkonide admiral Atlan from the ruling dynasty of Gonozal, I was as much feared as I was unpopular. I had long since confessed to myself that I was more human than I was Arkonide. My actual and only true friends lived 34,000 light-years away in the Sol System. Perry Rhodan was the First Administrator of the Solar Imperium that he himself had brought into being, and on this man I could rely in the fullest sense of the word.

He had proved himself worthy of my trust and so I had no plausible reason for standing in the way of humanity's galactic trade and colonial policies. In my secret heart I knew that the golden age of the Arkonides was finally at an end, in spite of all my attempts to regenerate the Empire. And for me it was painful to realize that Perry Rhodan was quite aware of my situation.

Now I had called for his help again after having had to turn to him only two months before. An unknown power had attacked the Arkonide Empire as well as the Earth. Very unusual technology had been demonstrated which convinced me that the boundless arrogance of the still mentally active Arkonides was highly inappropriate.

Actually I was pleased that Perry Rhodan specifically had been involved since many Arkonides still considered him to be a barbarian. He had been able to prove that we were nothing more than degenerating colonial descendants of a great race of people who had sent the ancestors of the present Arkonides into the depths of the void some 20,000 years ago.

This was a fact which I had only learned a few months before. As a result, my position as Emperor of the realm had become more important and responsible. But something had happened that we Arkonides would never have permitted ourselves to imagine. In the centre of the galaxy there was a race of people

who treated us with as much arrogance as we had been accustomed to treating other intelligences until now. Naturally, Rhodan had not been able to resist pointing this out to me, with appropriate sarcasm.

He couldn't offend me any more with such remarks but the 'Barbarian's' explanation had caused other Arkonides to turn visibly pale. It was too humiliating for them to think that the members of their mother race should consider them to be degenerated colonial descendants with outmoded customs.

Such was the situation on the Crystal Planet of the Arkon Empire when the linear drive major class Terran battleship *Ironduke* burned a glowing contrail into the atmosphere and prepared to make a landing at the imperial spaceport.

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The sky seemed to burst into flames. The white sun of Arkon paled in the piercing jet glare of the 800-meter giant as it spread out its landing struts and lowered toward the plasteel pavement. The *Ironduke* was a Terran battleship of the Stardust class. Under casual observation it did not appear to be much different from other ships of this type but I knew that its mighty spherical hull contained machines and propulsion equipment with which nothing on Arkon could be compared.

With his usual succinctness, Rhodan had advised me over hypercom that this time he'd make his appearance in the first mass-production model, whereas two months prior he had shown me a heavy cruiser that had been equipped experimentally with the linear drive system. *Ironduke* was what he had chosen to call this wonder ship of the void. The name recalled to mind my long years of wandering through the historical periods of Earth's development. As always I felt the pulsation of the small cell activator against my chest, the mysterious device that had kept me young and healthy for thousands of years. How long would this condition prevail? I knew not when my hour would come, especially considering the hatred and bigoted ignorance that surrounded me.

So it was with a mixture of bitterness and nostalgia that I watched the precise manoeuvres of the *Ironduke* as its tremendous mass was brought gently to the ground in a perfect landing. The officers and officials in my retinue ducked quickly behind the armourplated buffers which had been provided for their protection. Owing to my own special equipment I preferred to stand alone on the broad landing strip and let the vessel's searing hot shockwaves bounce off my supercharged protective screen.

I listened to the high-pitched hum of the miniature reactor that was encased in my backpack along with a number of other devices. After having averted the attack of the so-called Akons, who were otherwise known as the pre-Arkonides, I had finally decided to carry a personal screen projector kit. After all, the choice of weapons was not inconsiderable among my seemingly uncountable enemies. And thus I joined the ranks of those few unenviable persons in galactic history who had to fear for life and health both night and day.

Only just recently somebody had reprogrammed one of the combat robots of the palace guard and the metal Colossus had attempted to shoot me down but this was only one of many variations that had been tried. I would not and could not understand why there was such a stubborn persistence about these attempts to get me out of the way. There had always been ambitious and envious Arkonides but actual cutthroats and murderous assassins had not been too prevalent in the history of the Greater Imperium.

Ever since it had become known that there was a strong possibility of our being the descendants of a race that was far more powerful than we, even long before the expansions of Arkonide power, apparently a number of resistance groups had gotten together some wild ideas. Whatever their new confused objectives might be I was probably more of a stumbling block to their plans than ever before. But I had no intention of bowing to the will of these unknown factions in their attempts to rescue the pitiable remains of our former glory and greatness.

The shockwave subsided. In the ensuing silence all that could be heard was the dying whine of the *Ironduke's* engines.

Moku, my frisky pet Boxer, came barking toward me, but she stopped just short of my defence screen since she had learned of its dangers through past experience. Sitting there like a pitiable beggar, she whined and lifted her right forepaw as though to knock on a door, pleading with me to let her inside. She was a present from Rhodan. He had sent the wonderful animal to me in a courier ship along with a note that said it all: the love and devotion of a Terran dog was more genuine and to be valued more than the testimonies of fidelity from 100,000 Arkonides.

Moku kept up her pleadings. She seemed to know who had arrived in the great ship. I couldn't look into her moist brown eyes without feeling tempted to open the defence screen. As usual she would snuggle close enough against me so that I might close the screen again without endangering her.

I glanced around me swiftly. Rank upon rank the 500 robots of the guard stood in front of me because of course the First Administrator of a friendly major power had to be received with military honours. The guard regiment of the 3-eyed Naats had also put in an appearance. The stentorian voice of their commanding officer was just ringing out over the field. Behind me had gathered several officials of the Court and more than 10 officers of the Fleet. While I merely wore a plain service uniform, out of pure spite, and whereas I displayed only a minimum of insignia such as the inconspicuous symbols of my imperial rank and the medal of my family house, these gentlemen had come forth in full-dress regalia. The scientists of the High Council were decked out in white, red and violet, and of course the officers were in the full brass parade uniforms of the Fleet.

Knowing Perry Rhodan as I did, I knew he would only acknowledge this sumptuous display of precious metals, iridescent materials and scintillating orders of merit with a characteristic frown. Personally I had very seldom ever seen him in anything but the simply tailored battle suit such as was always worn on board the warships.

Moku's howls were heart wrenching. Even an Arkonide Emperor could not remain insensitive to the pleading look of such an animal—at least not I.

"Alright, come on then!" I called to her, and I switched off the screen.

With a joyful bark, Moku prepared to greet me with her usual leap into my arms, which would end with her licking my ear. It felt good to sense in even an animal such a genuine affection. I braced myself and opened my arms to receive her, when suddenly I heard a sharp report close behind me.

A white hot energy discharge shot past my chest so closely that the synthetic fabric of my uniform began to smoke. Moku was struck in midair by the thermobeam and the powerful impact knocked her sideways with such violence that I heard her body strike the ground with an audible thud. The dog remained motionless, apparently killed instantly.

Aflame with anger I whirled around and as I struck my holster release the weapon sprang ready into my

hand while I simultaneously hit the wide activator buckle of my auto-defence system. The screen immediately snapped back into place.

"Lloyd!" I yelled in amazement and my weapon hand jerked upward.

Fellmer Lloyd, a Terran member of the special Mutant Corps, still held the beamer in his hand, staring at me without expression. As a Terran liaison officer on Arkon he had advised his top Chief of the frequency of attempts against my life and only 4 weeks prior to this he had been assigned to me as my personal bodyguard. But now he had fired at me himself in the moment when my screen was down.

Fired at *me* ...?

My logic sector became painfully active: "*Fool! Do you think he'd miss you at this close range if he'd meant to kill you?*"

Under the compelling impulses of my activated extra-brain I pulled myself together. Involuntarily I lowered my weapon. My finger relaxed on the trigger.

Muscular and dark-haired, Fellmer Lloyd kept staring at me as he finally drawled out: "Sir, I beg your forgiveness. I only noticed the small barb when Moku started to jump at you."

"Barb?" I stammered, bewildered.

"That's right, sir. You know I'm quite familiar with the brain-wave impulses of your dog. When she jumped from the aircar of your serving robot I sensed something like pain and distress—and something else that I couldn't quite define. The animal was desperate or it was being goaded by something. Moku wasn't herself. Her instinct was to go to you right away for help, to let you know that she was in pain. But somebody had counted on that, sir! Whoever it was also knew that you would not have the heart to keep your screen closed under the circumstances. I almost waited too long, sir. You must believe me—there was no other way to stop her. I had to shoot."

I stood there in a momentary daze. I looked back and forth from the mutant and my frightened retinue to the body of the dead Boxer. Several of the officers had drawn their weapons but were now uncertain. They replaced their guns in their holsters.

"*Whatbarb!*" I gasped. "What in the devil are you talking about?"

"His Administrative Excellence is approaching, Your Grace!" I heard Truk Drautherb whispering to me with a note of despair. "Your Highness—the reception...!"

I gave the babbling court dandy an imperious shove to one side. A car stopped behind me and I could hear its motor humming but I did not look back. Against the warnings of my extra-brain I again shut off my personal screen. I had to examine the one best friend I had on Arkon. *Too bad for you, Fellmer Lloyd*—I thought—*if your story doesn't check out!*

A cold, commanding voice rang out. "Mahut Sikhra, the Emperor is unprotected. Do something!"

"Commandos!" came another voice in the same note of alarm. "Weapons at ready—spread, out! If anybody reaches for a weapon, fire without warning!"

"Regardless of who it is!" added the first one who had spoken.

I was aware of the muffled stamping of elastic boots. The lofty lords in my own retinue had become paler if possible but I still didn't look back. I sanctioned the action of the newcomer, who must have seen the beam shot and noted its consequences.

As I kneeled beside the dog, Fellmer Lloyd was beside me. Gingerly he lifted up the still-undamaged head of the animal and opened its jaws. With still greater caution he shoved the tongue to one side and then I saw it myself. Beneath the tongue a finger-long needle-sharp barb had been fastened with some instant adhesive material. It was apparently the same type of bioplastic that was used in surgery for sealing incisions without leaving a scar.

If Moku had greeted me in her usual manner I would undoubtedly have been wounded by the point of the barb. I stared in stupefaction at the most treacherous murder device I had ever seen in my life. Somebody had been fiendishly clever. They had counted on my affection for Moku and had used the innocent creature as the carrier of a frightful weapon.

The commanding voice spoke behind me again. "Well try to analyse the poison on that barb, Atlan. Stand up, old friend. Lloyd really had to shoot. The dog wouldn't have lived much longer, anyway."

Somebody grasped my shaking shoulders and drew me to my feet. When I finally turned around I looked into Rhodan's familiar grey eyes, which were cold and hostile until they met mine. Perry Rhodan was one of the few men I had ever seen who seemed able to smile with his eyes. At least I thought I could physically sense the sudden glow of warmth I saw in them.

Only a few meters away were about 30 of his special commandos. All of them tall, well-trained figures of men. These were the types of fighting men that I, the Emperor of the Arkonide Imperium, was forced to do without. On all the planets of the Empire there was not one soldier to equal them in quality.

The gentlemen of my retinue were staring into the shimmering field muzzles of the Terran energy weapons with a mixture of fear and anger. Rhodan had not hesitated a moment to threaten the dignitaries of my court—thus he knew very well how much my life was endangered.

I looked down at the dog's lifeless body. In accordance with Arkon laws it would have to be incinerated in a thermal chamber and the ashes disintegrated. There had never been graveyards here. I tore my gaze away as Fellmer Lloyd picked up Moku in his arms and carried her over to my waiting aircar. I knew that he would take care of the necessary details.

"There is no doubt that he saved my life," I told Rhodan quietly, and I strove to think only of the present. I was forced to forget Moku's faithful little face in which her feelings had always been so clearly expressed.

Rhodan was also a lover of animals but he was tactful enough to avoid superfluous remarks. Maybe someone else would have tried to remind me that although it was regrettable, after all it was 'only' a dog. At the moment I don't think I would have been able to take such a comment without losing control of myself.

We heard a couple of thundering drumbeats immediately followed by some ghastly-sounding musical discords, which was all I needed to shook me out of my spell. Rhodan heaved a great sigh of resignation which was drowned out by a now rhythmical combination of horn blasts, toots and stamping feet. With some distinctly unimperial cusswords I whirled about to see the assistant master of ceremonies go into action. He evidently thought that at least a bit of marching music might help to save the aborted reception

of "His Administrative Excellence Perry Rhodan".

With a great rumbling and clanking the robot musicians' corps marched toward us, fully programmed with a capacity of about 800 musical numbers. As they came, countless metal arms whirled and descended upon synthetic drumheads with a roll of accompaniment that sounded like the voice of doom. Other robots worked their portable air-compressors and sent such a blast of air into their built-in horns and fanfare trumpets and other noise instruments that one could not hear himself talk. I shouted a few more curses at the on-marching leader of the band and even shook my fist at him but the old-school courtier was not about to be deterred from his 'duty'.

So we were forced to stand there while the whole mad assembly stomped on past us. The men of the Terran commando unit watched us almost helplessly. Rhodan half-heartedly held one hand in salute, lightly touching the peak of his gilt-trimmed service cap. There was a Terran colonel present whom I had not seen before and this one grinned so openly at the whole spectacle that he suddenly made me feel better. It seemed that only humans were capable of such frank expressions. For me it was heartwarming to look at this powerfully built officer and see the grim amusement in his darkly tanned and rugged countenance.

It was only a few seconds later that I noticed the colonel's rank insignia and realized that he was a battleship commander. Also he seemed to be no ordinary Terran. His body was almost as broad as it was tall and his uniform was tautly stretched over some really startling bulges of muscle. It struck me that this man must possess a fearsome physical strength.

Rhodan had followed my gaze and I could sense he was pleased to be able to unobtrusively distract me from the formal proceedings. He made a somewhat hasty introduction. "Colonel Jefe Claudrin, Commander of the *Ironduke* —a native Epsalian

"Epsal...?"

"It's a colonial planet with a 2.1 gravity. Jefe carries a micro-grav unit on him which gives him the extra weight he's accustomed to."

Impulsively I stepped closer to the man and stretched out my hand to him in greeting. The musicians had receded sufficiently by now so that I heard a sudden gasp beside me which was almost like a whistle. Turning, I saw my Chief of Protocol, who seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown. To him it was nothing short of catastrophic for the Imperator of a stellar empire to shake hands with a 'common' colonel. But I was happy to ignore him.

At the most, Jefe Claudrin was about 5 feet 2 inches in height and I virtually towered over him but he was more than twice my width. When I felt his handshake it was all I could do to keep from groaning aloud and sinking to my knees. Yet I was convinced that Claudrin was aware of his monstrous strength and was trying to be as gentle as possible.

"A pleasure, sir," came his deep voice like a roll of thunder.

But then, after all, such a set of pipes was befitting for such an unusual man. When he addressed me as "sir" I had to chuckle with pleasure. At last I was being spoken to sensibly after having suffered through years of "Your Highness" and "Your Magnificence", ad nauseum.

Claudrin was interesting from another point of view. He was a living proof of the unusual enterprise of the Terrans who had ventured to adapt normal humans so that they could colonize larger planets in spite

of heavier gravity. By means of certain cosmo-genetic manipulations they were able to develop new races of men who were thus adapted to new environments. Evidently Claudrin was among the first who had been born on a world with a 2.1 gravity.

I looked thoughtfully at Rhodan, who was watching me in evident expectation. I gave him a faint smile and suddenly I felt quite weary. These little barbarians had chalked up more successes than other races would probably even know what to do with. It was only a few decades ago, just about 59 years now, since Rhodan had helped me to conquer the mighty robot Brain and revise its programming. In the interim the Terrans had succeeded in building their formerly weak Solar Imperium into one of the great major powers of the galaxy.

I still had a vivid recollection of the day when the fleet of the inhuman Druufs attacked the Earth. At that time I had sent out my robot fleet to help Terra. Today such aid would not be necessary, even if those monsters were to reappear out of their alien time plane. I knew that Earth's moon had been converted along Arkonide patterns into one gigantic spaceship-fabrication plant. It was possible that by now the Terran shipbuilding capacity had already outpaced our own.

I looked over toward the *Ironduke*, which unquestionably represented the latest type of construction. The giant's spherical hull measured 800 meters in diameter. It would have been interesting to find out how long it took the Terrans these days to build such a vessel. Probably only a matter of months now when several decades ago it would have taken them at least a dozen years.

Jefe Claudrin had been watching me with a fixed expression. He seemed to guess my thoughts and feelings. I excused myself hastily and smiled somewhat distractedly. "You have a beautiful ship there, Colonel. My compliments!"

Claudrin slightly nodded his ponderous head on which his light service cap seemed a bit out of place. "Thank you very much, sir. The *Ironduke* does have a few points to recommend her."

I could well believe it. The fighting ship's mysterious linear space-drive alone was a miracle. It awakened my technical curiosity.

I was startled from my pondering by the shrill voice of a small, narrow-hipped officer with sharply defined facial features. Rhodan was standing next to me in an attitude of seeming indifference but I was quite positive that he had analysed me in these few moments. He was an excellent psychologist. The commando leader was ordering his men into their waiting hovercraft.

Rhodan then spoke up with his famous or infamous candour: "OK, so we survived the shockwave from your marching tin-tooters and we might even live through the poison barrage of looks from your courtiers. I would have preferred skipping all this idiotic foppery, you know. The *Ironduke* is on standby for takeoff. I'd like to know as soon as possible what kind of data the robot Brain has come up with. So what do you say...?" He looked around at my coterie with obvious impatience and they in turn seemed at a loss for what to do under the circumstances.

I made a short speech of formal greeting in honour of the Solar Administrator, merely to satisfy the minimal requirements of protocol, and then I curtly dismissed my followers and turned toward the service glider of the *Ironduke's* commander. I was maliciously gleeful over the horrified expressions of my courtiers until Rhodan smiled knowingly but cautioned me confidentially.

"If that's the way you handle your people," he said, "then you shouldn't wonder about their attempts to assassinate you."

"They can go to the devil!" I retorted in English. "They and all their affected fuss and bother make me sick. I've a few more important things to take care of than give greetings to about 5,000 representatives of their so-called noble families and suffer through all their scraping and bowing."

My protocol chief came running to me bathed in sweat. His reddish Arkonide eyes glittered as though he was on the verge of tears. He blocked our way with profuse apologies. Rhodan nodded courteously to him while I boiled with anger. Nobody was ever satisfied with my own arrangements; always there was somebody who thought it necessary to bring my attention to this detail or that in their affected formality and superfluous forms of speech."

"Your Excellency, the lords of nobility are waiting in utter devotion and humility for the appearance of Your Grace and His Solar Excellence. Your Highness, may I with all due respect remind Your Eminence that the internal political situation on Arkon I requires a demonstration of benevolence on the part of Your Grace? What I mean to say—"

"You heard my orders," I interrupted the effeminate fop in a hostile tone.

At this juncture, Rhodan gave the man a beaming smile and explained: "His Majesty is responding to a special request of my own, sir. Please be so kind as to extend my highest compliments to the nobility of Arkon. Unfortunately there are certain galactic events which are of the utmost importance to the *external* political situation and these have forced His Eminence and myself to forego the pleasure of the reception you have so masterfully arranged, sir!

Even this was a form of rebuff but Rhodan had managed to decline the invitation with formal courtesy. The court official needed no further translation, he understood. While stiffly maintaining his dignity he withdrew. I sprang into the glider and as soon as Rhodan followed me it sped away.

I still had to give a salute to the honour guard which had approached us. The giant Naats seemed to watch us go with an obtuse indifference. The large contingent of robot guards suddenly did an about face, prepared to leave the field.

Jefe Claudrin was chuckling at the whole spectacle but I did not share his amusement at the moment. This native Epsalian did not seem to have the slightest idea, of the monstrous offence I had committed against the sacred traditions and customs of Arkon. I would not have dared to go this far as it was if it had not been for this latest assassination attempt.

Rhodan removed his peaked service cap and squinted upward at the hot Arkon sun, after which he carefully wiped the sweat from his brow. "Atlan," he said, "as a friend to a friend, may I speak to you frankly, like one soldiering spaceman to another?"

I did not look at him. I sat there silently and watched our approach to the vast spaceship. Its arching steel hull had already obscured our view of the spaceport installations farther to the North.

"Please do!" I mumbled finally.

"You're a pretty sad old hound dog, do you know it?"

I felt neither piqued nor insulted. I had expected him to make such a remark, under the circumstances. Should I simply tell him that I wished for nothing more fervently than to rejoin the ranks of his Terran spacemen so that I could rove once more through the galaxy? Should I tell him how wonderful it was for

me just to be by his side and hear his voice and to be able to look into the laughing faces of real men?

No, better not, I thought. He was sorry enough for me as it was, and it made me sad. To think that at one time I wanted to kill this man simply because he had blocked my return to my native world! And now today I knew how logically he had thought and acted.

I made an effort to smile as I answered him with mock irony. "This old hound dog can't bark yet as loud as he'd like to. Do you think it would be alright to let loose inside your ship?"

"You can bark as long and as often as you like but just don't bite my leg!"

We both understood each other. No—it was already an axiom on Terra that I would never again show him my teeth. Arkon was not strong enough for that anymore. But together we made an invincible power.

Invincible? I thought of the robot Regent's final evaluation. Somebody had shaken the foundations of both of our empires. It was high time that we did something about it.

2/ THE BRAIN'S INNER SANCTUM

Upon close examination one might have regarded the Terran ship *Ironduke* as a space-going super power plant in which every nook and corner was utilized.

After taking the legendary linear space-drive from the Druufs, the humans had been able to duplicate its construction after a long and difficult period of research. However, during the short crossing to the 3rd planet of the Arkon System the new method of propulsion was not put to use. So I was not able to observe its operation nor did I get a chance to examine it at first hand. In fact it was even very doubtful that Rhodan would have shared such secret data with me.

The *Ironduke* was the ship of the future. Its tactical combat capability was superior to that of any other spaceship. Moreover, men like Col. Jefe Claudrin embodied the type of commander it needed—one whose nerves and reactions were also superior. For the Terran Strategic Space Command, ships of the *Ironduke* class were extremely potent instruments of power. With the forthcoming new conquest of space and time they would no doubt have to make practical use of them.

Of course much of this was also true of the conventional transition-type ships but the latter types could not be guided toward strategic points with such incredible speed. Also with the old types the unavoidable warp-shocks enabled them to be detected, whereas this was no longer the case with linear drive. Instead of making *ajump* through 5th-dimensional hyperspace, the new ships could hurtle through the unstable realm between normal and hyperspace on a straight course at a million times the speed of light, and in addition the crew could still maintain visual contact with the point of destination. Not only did this system eliminate the pains of dematerialisation and rematerialisation; it also made it unnecessary for flight crews to undergo the physical hazards of high-G centrifuge testing.

The advantages of the new spaceship were all too obvious so I refrained from besieging Rhodan and his scientists with questions.

Arkon 3 was a world given over to fleet building and all related feeder industries, which were robot controlled. By the time we landed there I had weighed certain thoughts in my mind which were not entirely of an unselfish nature. For some days now I had known only too well the magnitude of that menace which had appeared from the depths of the central galaxy. Only I possessed the data which would be indispensable to Rhodan and his further operations. He had told me that under the pressure of events, circumstances permitting, he would be willing to furnish me with the secret details of the linear space-drive. I was already toying with the idea of converting the mammoth assembly lines of this industrial planet so that the heavier units of the Arkonide Fleet could be equipped with this fantastic new system.

However, Rhodan had given me no opportunity to bring the subject up for discussion. To him everything depended first of all upon the information he was to get through me from the robot Regent as to where the Arkonides had originated and in what way they were related to the so-called Akon race.

This I had discovered after hooking up the ancient data banks to the greatest robot brain in the Milky Way.

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This was the first time that a non-Arkonide was being allowed to enter the subterranean control centres of Arkon.

In this respect, however, I had thrown all conventional thinking overboard, especially since there was probably not another living person outside of Rhodan and myself who was even partially informed concerning the installations here. A few decades ago the two of us had overcome the robot Regent, which was known then as an autocratic and merciless machine. I had succeeded in getting certain security circuits to respond to me, circuits which had been built into the Brain by my forefathers, and after that there was an end to the Regent's uncontrollable actions.

Now these truly gigantic installations were being put to a more profitable use. The incalculably vast ramifications of the Imperium's administrative machinery were directed exclusively by the Robot even now; however, where political or military events were involved the positronic Behemoth had no further influence without my specific sanction.

Rhodan had requested permission to bring one of his mutants along with him. After some hesitancy I had agreed, although I wasn't quite sure why such an aide was important to him here.

Tama Yokida, a Terran of medium height and stocky build, was a native of Earth's federated state of Japan. He was a quiet and unassuming little fellow whose special faculty was psychokinesis, whereby he could move and handle material objects through the force of his will alone. Tama had also been cleared by Rhodan to receive the so-called biological cell shower treatment and so it was that three relatively immortal beings approached the scintillating energy honeycomb of the defence screen.

How long would Nature permit herself to be deceived by our biotechnical expedients?—I was thinking at the moment. When would the point in time be reached when the final cell decay would commence? Rhodan, Yokida, many other mutants and myself were hybrid curiosities caught in the warp and weft of Nature's mighty tapestry. Our existence was based on a 'shabby trick', as one Terran naturalist had

expressed it.

His statement applied especially to me because I had always managed to keep a close enough eye on my micro cell-activator so that my cell regeneration processes had never been seriously interrupted. Many times I had been right on the razor's edge of extinction and it had made me come to understand that the mysterious communal being on Wanderer had considered the statistical probabilities when it gave me the device. By the law of averages I should have died long before this. During my extensive wanderings through Earth's past history there had been hundreds of times when I might have lost the activator. In fact it had often happened but in each case I had gone *against* the laws of probability and succeeded in retrieving the apparatus prior to the critical moment.

A slight cough from Rhodan startled me out of my self-contemplation and I looked about me.

The shimmering honeycomb of the robot's screen was directly in front of us. The *Ironduke* had landed two kilometres behind our present position. The ground car that had brought us to the red danger strip waited beyond the death zone. I recalled that 60 years ago we had come over the high protective wall and hugged the ground while firing at any and every chunk of metal in sight. But now I could just calmly approach the robot guard behind the screen and request an entrance in the name of the Emperor.

Rhodan and Tama Yokida had come to a stop, watching me silently as I proceeded onward. They knew that their individual impulse patterns had to be picked up first and registered by the security circuits, after which they would have to be transmitted to the defence stations along with the necessary orders.

The gigantic bell-shaped screen opened before me. I stepped through and switched on my command transceiver which was fastened to my left wrist.

"Welcome, Your Highness." The apathetic mechanical voice of the Regent rang from the loudspeaker. This had been his customary greeting for the past 60 years. I was brief.

"The Administrator of the Solar Imperium and his aide are to be admitted. Process their patterns, register them in the data banks and beam them collectively to the defence units."

If it is at all possible for a mechanical brain to be speechless, that is what happened now. There was simply a loud humming in my transceiver. It was several seconds before the Regent was heard from again however, in an unexpected way. After a sharp crackling in the speaker a more well-modulated 'voice' rang out. "Security circuit section A-1 speaking, Your Highness. In accordance with the programming your ancestors provided me with, I am instructed to deny entrance to aliens unless extreme circumstances affecting the stellar empire make it absolutely necessary for an authorized Arkonide to request access for aliens. If such a measure is to be taken, the complete justification shall be stated."

For a moment I forgot to breathe. This was something new! In some confusion I turned and waved Rhodan back as he was about to step over the red line. And it was then I noticed that the warp opening in the screen had closed behind me. Rhodan jumped back to safety. He seemed to get the message but he could probably see that I had again raised the transceiver to my lips.

"Emperor to security A-1," I announced emphatically. "The extreme circumstances affecting the stellar empire exist. According to information obtained from the ancient registers, whose data I requested, the existence of the Imperium is at stake. The quarrel with the Arkonide mother race—which has come to be known as the 'Hub War'—has reached a new and critical stage. The Akons attacked the Greater Imperium two months ago and the 3rd planet was transferred back through a time-field to the period of Emperor Metzat, 15,000 years ago. Although in a relative sense the Arkonides of that time had been

dead for thousands of years, they awoke to a new and incomprehensible existence. An ancient Arkonide battlefleet then attacked the Earth, which was not under the influence of the time-field. The time-converter that had been planted by unknown agencies was eliminated and that brought us back to a normal state. These data are known—"

"Yes, they are known, Your Highness!" confirmed the security section in almost deafening tones. "In regard to the two aliens you mention, what is their relationship to these events?"

My mind raced feverishly. It was only possible to convince a robot brain of something with pure logic. It would have been useless to explain that Rhodan merely wanted to take a look at the ancient film report for purposes of information. I knew I had to be more convincing than that.

"The degenerated condition of present-day Arkonides is also known to you. In order to defend ourselves against the attacks of the mother race we must request the armed assistance of the Solar Imperium. His Administrative Excellence, Perry Rhodan, must be personally convinced of the circumstances. His companion is functioning here as his adjutant and is endowed with special paranormal faculties."

"Can these faculties be employed in the interests of the Empire?"

I knew by the question that I had won the argument already. Shortly after I answered in the affirmative, A-1 spoke again.

"After due analysis of the available data, Your Highness' proposal is conditionally authorized."

"Conditionally?"

"In accordance with my programming, Your Highness. The two non-Arkonides may be admitted to screen room 7. Other sectors of the Regent's brain are restricted to aliens both in the sense of physical access or by remote observation through a video system. Your Highness' opinion concerning the importance of the armed assistance that is to be gained has passed my logic gating to the extent of this permission. Any further concessions may not be granted."

I was happy to have at least gotten this far. In spite of myself I had to marvel at the foresight of my forebears who had devoted centuries of labour to the building and programming of the giant robot. There was nothing they had overlooked! Even my own life wouldn't be worth a straw from this moment on if I were to lead Rhodan anywhere other than the designated area. My normally unlimited power of authority seemed to stop at that point.

I waited until the mobile data sensor stopped beside me. Only then did the field-warp provide an opening in the energy screen. I stepped outside again and beckoned to Rhodan but he didn't move. He seemed tensed as though to leap away. I could feel his distrustful gaze on me. Now he was once more the fundamentally cautious Terran who was making a cool, calm assessment of the situation while still allowing for a slight measure of 'playing it by ear'.

At the same time I sensed a kind of nibbling and probing at the back of my brain. The telepaths of the Mutant Corps on the *Ironduke* were trying to scan my consciousness although they had known for many years that this was not possible against my will. With the help of my activated extra-brain I blocked my mind, which had the effect of making me mute for the telepaths. The aborted attempt didn't anger me in the least. I knew that the impertinent mousebeaver Pucky, especially, could never desist from putting me to the test, time after time.

The only disturbing thing about it was that the mutants had certainly not acted without orders. Rhodan possessed a minimal telepathic faculty which he had augmented through every modern paranormal means at his disposal. With a good telepath receiver on the other end he was able to communicate very well. But that was the extent of his range. So naturally, since he was always suspicious, he had sent a mental command to his mutants, telling them to snatch any thought fragments they could from me. It was about then that I gave up the hope of ever learning from him how his new hyperspace-drive worked.

I suppressed my vexation. This Terran would never learn. He had gone through a hard and merciless school. Life and widespread abuses throughout the settled regions of the galaxy had convinced him that no one could be trusted. The axiom wasn't false by any means, nor could I attribute his attitude to any chronic malevolence but he shouldn't have let himself get carried away to the point where he even included his true friends among those who were to be mistrusted.

I turned on my portable radio and spoke sarcastically into the microphone: "Thanks for the show of confidence, Barbarian! In case the mutant gentlemen on the *Ironduke* are still tuned in, they should know that their para-mental snooping is just as futile as it always was."

Rhodan's stiffness relaxed. After that he laughed and I couldn't be angered with him anymore. He was and remained a Terran who had once more identified himself with all of humanity. Before he would permit any harm to befall this humanity of his he would rather see himself torn to shreds.

He took his radio communicator from his belt and lifted it to his lips. As was typical of him, instead of asking a question he went directly to the self-evident point. "You got into a jam there—how come?"

"Security circuit A-1."

"Aha! So that's it! Getting pulled up short like that is something new for you, isn't it?"

"Your logic, as they say, has hit the nail on the head..."

"Thank God for your sense of humour, Arkonide! So now is it safe to come nearer?"

"You may enter screen room 7, that is all."

"Oh, then there are several of them!"

"You might assume that."

He laughed disarmingly. Together with Tama Yokida he started slowly forward. My eyes became moist when they crossed over the red danger line. It was a sign of my tension, which was a characteristic of my race. How would the Regent react to their presence from there on in—and above all the security circuit? It would be unthinkable if Rhodan were to lose his life during a mere friendly visit.

I only began to breathe normally again when the two of them passed through the individual impulse scanning unharmed. I waited until the sensor hoods raised from their heads and circuit A-1 confirmed the registration.

The combat robots who had deployed themselves around the distant steel dome retreated and disappeared. Anyway the Brain considered me reliable enough to trust me with keeping an eye on Rhodan and Yokida.

I briefed them hurriedly and concluded: "I urge you not to try anything stupid. That goes for you, too, Tama—no telekinetic fooling around. We're dealing with a mammoth machine that can understand neither a joke nor bravado."

Rhodan had to contact the *Ironduke* telepathically because voice communication was no longer possible. The Brain's honeycomb screen blocked radio impulses in any form.

"OK, let's go. The crew has been informed. If anything should happen here at least they won't be able to attribute it to any hostility on your part." He looked at me pointedly and the angry protest stuck in my throat. He had meant it as a grave statement of fact.

Silently I turned away. A repulsion-field float-glider took us over to the low steel dome which barely rose above ground level and there an antigrav lift was waiting for us. My ancestors had installed the Brain's vast circuits far beneath the surface.

Rhodan and the mutant followed me closely. Nor did they deviate from my course as we came through the last armourplate hatch door at a depth of 2,000 meters. After that we entered the mysterious labyrinths which reflected a technology that the present-day Arkonides did not possess. Even I would not be able to repair any of these sectors should one of them fail. My venerable ancestors had also thought of that because the Regent took care of his own repairs! But technically speaking, those ancestors were actually my descendants, since I had been born 5,000 years earlier.

An unarmed special robot was waiting for us at the entrance to screen room 7. The steel doors glided back. Before us was a rectangular hall which was arched and supported by pillars. Other than the great viewscreens, a horseshoe-shaped programming desk and the steel case of a terminal device protruding from the wall, there was nothing to be seen here. That is with the exception of the comfortable viewing seats which had known the presence of the greatest scientists and statesmen in Arkonide history.

I pointed to the seats without a word. The whole presentation had been prepared. It was not necessary for me to feed any detailed questions to the machine since I had retrieved all the pertinent data-bank information several days before and now it was already in the coördinating logic section of the local terminal bank.

This moment was a significant one for me and Rhodan although not necessarily decisive. However, before activating the start signal I prefaced the presentation with some casual remarks. "Perry, your unexpected thrust into the Blue System was apparently only possible because of your linear drive system. However that trip unleashed an avalanche of varied events and consequences. Your information is correct. The pre-Arkonides, properly called the Akons, are in fact the mother race of the Arkonides as you know them and which I also represent. For the members of the Supreme Council of Arkon, this fact is especially regrettable."

"Why is that?"

I looked at him thoughtfully. "You know the answer as well as I do. We have felt the effects of an apparently unavoidable law of Nature. Almost every sociologist, biologist or medical authority agrees on that point. They are unanimous in their contention that when any race is uprooted from its original environment and brought to other worlds where it is exposed to completely different natural conditions it cannot remain stable. This applies to its culture and ethics as well as all the technical and scientific knowledge that has been handed down. The indisputable state of degeneration of almost all the present-day Arkonides is a direct consequence of this unfortunate principle. So now we know the reason

for these feet of clay that the whole Empire seems to be standing on. As a result of your test-flight into the hub of the galaxy we have solved the riddle that we have sought so long and in vain to find an answer for. We are the colonial descendants of a great people and thus we've degenerated. Almost all Arkonides, including the leading members of the Supreme Council, are in the mental state of a group of insane or psychotic patients whom no psychiatrist can convince that they are sick. Logically it would seem to be the need of the moment to make these Arkonides realize that we've come to the end of our way. However, there's no chance of my succeeding in that. The more advanced their state of decadence, the more overbearing and presumptuous they become. Completely unjustified, of course! So what I'm saying is, according to that you and I are on our own."

"The data registered in the Brain reveal that a terrible war broke out at one time between the Akons and my ancestors—about 20,000 years ago by Earthly reckoning. It involved vested rights and interests, autocratic demands and claims, trade relationships and all those things that we've repeatedly regarded as a cause for devastating conflicts. In the Blue System you learned that this war has not yet been forgotten, as evidenced by recent events. The Akons are trying to eliminate the danger which has emerged with your own appearance on the scene. You have become dangerous to them because you have the secret of linear spacedrive."

Rhodan watched me fixedly. None of my emotions escaped him. "Yes," he said, succinctly.

"The Regent gives a 100% probability to the fact that your demise would mean the end for Terra as well as for the Arkonide Empire. On the other hand you could fall if it were not for me, because I command the Arkonide spacefleets. Accordingly, it makes no difference where the Akons make their point of penetration. And that is why I have asked you to come here today."

"Sir?" asked Tama Yokida. "Is the Regent's conclusion really as inevitable as all that?"

"Even more so. If I ceased to be the Emperor, the Arkonide fleets would attack Terra—of that there can be no doubt. And if Terra were to be weakened by other means I'd not be able to defend myself against my countless enemies. We are dependent upon each other. Now then, shall we begin?"

"Wait a moment," said Rhodan tonelessly. There was something in his tense, lean features which disquieted me.

"Yes?"

"Your hypercom call arrived when I was getting ready to leave. I planned then and still intend to fly a second time to the Blue System where I'm going to try to clear up our disagreements."

A silence pervaded the large auditorium. Rhodan watched carefully for my reactions. I wasn't especially surprised. His intention merely expressed his unflinching instinct for strategic imperatives.

"I understand—but did you find my communication to be unusual?"

Not a muscle moved in his face although his features seemed pale. "Speaking frankly for myself—yes. I wasn't intending to tell you ahead of time." He got up and came to stand in front of me. We studied each other in silence for a moment.

"Is that so?" I muttered while trying to keep the tension out of my voice.

"The internal political situation in the Arkon System is obvious," he explained hastily. "I figured it would

be dangerous to reveal my purposes at this time."

"You know I'd not have revealed your intentions to my useless ministers," I protested bitterly. "So you were going to take off without my knowledge in spite of the fact that we've been under mutual attack? What do you plan to do now?"

Our eyes met again. He turned slowly and went back to his seat.

"Your message arrived just in time," he said as he sat down. "I hadn't suspected that I would see such a blatant confirmation of the darkest foreboding on the part of Terran researchers."

"Does that mean you have changed your opinion, Administrator?"

Rhodan only smiled at this form of address and I suddenly thought I understood why he had not wanted to keep me informed. I was a shadow figure on the throne of Arkon, even though I was doing everything possible to combat the untenable circumstances.

"Come off it, old friend!" he finally retorted. "You would have been told about the flight, regardless."

At least that was one positive note, I thought. Without any further questions, I activated the visual presentation.

3/ THE GREAT HYPER-CAPER

"...and consequently, within the parameters of the counter-offensive program, the 12th Arkonide Cruiser Fleet under Adm. Talur began the destruction of the Akon reserve base of Tarkta, 4th planet of Opogon in the central system. The flagship was the auxiliary craft carrier *Her-Akal*. After a 4-year retreating action on the part of the colonists, the 12th Fleet made a decisive attack which contributed greatly to the containment of the ancestral offensive..."

The mechanical voice of the Regent rose above the sounds of battle. The great screens of the 3-D panoramic projection system revealed an event that had taken place 20,418 years ago by Earthly reckoning. What came to be known in history as the 'Hub War' was a schism between the ancestors of the present-day Arkonides and the free colonists of that time—a conflict which broke out only 182 years after the first colonization of star cluster M-13.

Being furnished with the most modern equipment of the mother race, the emigrants had quickly become independent, and with their massive superiority in all kinds of ships and weapons they had managed in just 60 years to subjugate intelligences of all classifications who lived in star cluster M-13.

Such were the beginnings of the Arkonide Imperium. About 180 years after the first colonial ship had landed there was an internal overthrow. An imperialistic form of absolutism was invoked whereby all internal resistance groups were ruthlessly eliminated. Seven years after his assumption of authority the first Emperor Gwalon I declared the new empire to be independent. In a lightning surprise offensive he then sought to destroy the outlying fortress and supply bases of the ancestral forces which were still within the star cluster.

The plan succeeded.

Although the ancestral forces retreated they did not recognize the new Emperor. Then followed the 11-year 'Battle of the Hub', initiated by colonists who now called themselves Arkonides, and the bitterest conflict of Akon history was inaugurated. The numerous sound films taken by long-dead cameramen showed us portions of the battles between Arkonides and Akons—who at that time were already established in that central solar system which Perry Rhodan had discovered in March 2102 during a test flight. It was now 16 December 2102, yet when I looked at the screens it seemed to me that the events depicted had only happened but moments before. What were apparently the mightiest fleets ever to hurtle through the galaxy were clashing together and they included the newly developed giants of that age, measuring 800 meters in diameter. Tens of thousands of spaceships of all types and classes were spewing out death and destruction.

This ghastly spectacle was anything but a vehicle for gaining prestige with Rhodan. These deeds of my forefathers had been a retrogression into barbarism. We also heard some wild commentaries which would have seemed harsh enough to me only a few days ago but here in the presence of the two Terrans my face reddened in shame. After that I didn't venture to look at Rhodan. Perhaps he could sense what I felt.

The mission of the 12th Fleet ended with the first application of the newly invented gravitation bomb. Entire solar systems were ripped from the 4-dimensional structure of space-time. According to the film commentators, Adm. Talur had been the greatest Fleet Chief of the colonial forces. However he had known as little compassion as his Opponents.

I was glad when the film reports began to come to an end. At the conclusion the Regent spoke again:

"After evaluating all factors involved in the Hub War as well as the new data from recent events it may be concluded with a probability factor of 100% that the Akons represent the Arkonide mother race. The treatment that was received by His Administrative Excellence, Perry Rhodan, while on the Akon worlds, gives a clear indication that they haven't forgotten the conflict there. The danger created by the advent of the Terran linear space-drive must be regarded by the Akons as a very disturbing factor. Further attacks of the same nature as before are to be expected. The existence of a glowing blue defence screen that is capable of embracing an entire solar system—according to my input data—is representative of an increased technological and scientific development of the greatest magnitude. You are advised that there are only two logical alternatives: either you must attempt to come to an understanding with the Akons or you must launch a preventive war of destruction against them. Although conventional transition-type ships cannot penetrate their defence screen, the Terran linear space-drive offers the possibility of doing so. An attempt should be made to send out an Arkonide robot fleet of at least 10,000 heavy ships. Linear drives will be required..."

I looked quickly across at Rhodan. His eyes had narrowed as he sat there listening and he seemed to be breathing more heavily.

"Denied!" he exclaimed.

It startled me. I had seldom heard him speak in such a cold and restrained manner. The Regent calmly registered his statement and proceeded to process it. Within a mere matter of seconds he had arrived at the logical conclusion:

"In that case a surprise attack would be impractical unless the Terrans could make an opening in the

Blue System's screen, using the special ship they have at their disposal, so that a conventional fleet might make an entry there."

Rhodan answered in the same flat tone as before. He appeared to be extremely agitated. "We can discuss all that if my planned peace negotiations are rejected. Moreover, I do not see any justification for a lightning attack in the old Arkonide tradition, unless the Akons go so far as to attack the Earth, our trade network of planets or the Arkonide Imperium. In that case alone I would see myself compelled to declare war."

"Your Excellence is overlooking the strategic necessity of a surprise attack—*without* previous warning!"

"Your logic is tempting, Regent, but an action of that kind is not to be expected of humans."

I didn't make a sound. Rhodan must have known that our robot Regent could not speak otherwise. His communications had to be regarded as the result of mathematical calculations. Mathematics, however, know nothing of human feelings."

"For the time being, then," responded the titanic machine, "I see no feasible way to a solution unless you proceed at your own risk. It is recommended that you initiate peace negotiations, provided that the mother race is similarly inclined. I can predict with a 90% factor of probability that all such attempts will be useless. The comportment of the Akons when your Excellence visited them gave evidence of a clear rejection, their further actions indicated a deadly hostility and the events to come will bring both Imperiums to the brink of extinction. The technical superiority of the Akons has been established. They also have linear spacedrive in addition to transmitter equipment which can transport solid materials instantaneously over great distances. I urgently advise you to give logical consideration to my recommendations. That is all!"

The Regent had cut off abruptly. For a moment it seemed to me that he was offended but of course that was unthinkable.

The lights came on. Rhodan looked at me with a forced smile. He cleared his throat noisily and I also felt that my throat was parched.

"Your ancestors weren't exactly the considerate types," he said. "I don't mind telling you, that shook me up. I wouldn't have wanted to tangle with them."

"In those days there were only cavemen on Earth. They were in no danger."

"That's hardly any excuse for such a bloody rage of destruction, which even wiped out innocent bystanders. Actually I could never bring myself to follow the advice of the robot Brain, merely to follow the footsteps of your grandfathers. I'm taking off in an hour."

He got up swiftly and checked his watch. For my part I gave up trying to justify the actions of my forefathers. Words could not undo what was past and done.

So now Rhodan knew how the Greater Imperium had been founded. I tried to consider this from a logical standpoint. I wasn't disturbed by his reaction since I was of the same opinion. The actions of the ancient Arkonides were inexcusable, which I admitted to him. Especially their attack on the planet system of their origin.

"Naturally!" he exclaimed heatedly. "Of course it was unjustified! When you've flown from the nest and

strengthened your wings, as well as your claws, it's a mistake to figure you can do without the home flock—to go back and attack the ones who taught you to fly, and from an ambush at that! That is an out and out criminal act!"

I looked away. What could I have answered? Rhodan seemed to be aware of my mixed emotions, which may have calmed him down.

"You certainly have no blame in this, sir," interjected Tama Yokida.

I was just pulling myself together enough to give him a weary nod, when Rhodan suddenly tensed. His head fairly jerked up as his eyes closed either in pain or concentration. My left hand moved instinctively to a switch on my chest and even as my defence-screen generator started to hum. I perceived Rhodan's warning. He must have sensed something that neither Tama nor I had been able to hear.

Rhodan reached for his weapon. His tall figure tensed for action. But something was already happening which I would never have expected within these hermetically sealed confines of the robot Brain.

In the instant while my screen was forming I noticed a shimmering red glow of light just inside the closed armourplate doors of the viewing chamber. It took me several moments to realize what was really happening because I had never seen a special Akon transmitter like this before. Rhodan dove for cover, followed by Yokida. I still stood there as though in a trance as the apparition expanded into a sort of archway revealing a darkened room beyond it. It was as though everything behind that arc of energy had evaporated.

Then I also jumped back and took cover behind the seats. A split-second later I was aware of a green, iridescent ray of energy that was shooting through the arc opening and almost instantly filling the room. Rhodan yelled something I couldn't understand. As his words faded and I saw his prone figure begin to convulse and stiffen on the floor, I finally knew what was happening here in the heavily secured circuit sectors of the robot Brain.

My own extra-brain reminded me of Rhodan's report which had mentioned this strange type of phenomenon. *Agreenish glow*—this is what he had called this readily recognizable flood of ray energy. On the principal planet of the Blue System the Akons were supposed to have used this in an attempt to incapacitate the crew of the first linear drive test ship. Its effect was a more or less rapid paralysis of the nerve reflexes, without impairing the thought processes, however, nor the sense of sight or hearing.

It had only taken me a moment or so to finally comprehend what was involved. The arc of energy was the 'delivery end' of an Akon transmitter from which the paralysis beams were emanating. At the moment I wasn't interested in how the alien thing had penetrated the Regent's deepest bunker section. Only quick action could save us.

I was sure that my loud outcry could be heard by Rhodan but he was already in no condition to answer. Judging from Rhodan's account of his previous experience, I figured that without the protection of a screen he and Yokida had been taken by surprise and were quickly incapacitated. Apparently here in the confines of the chamber the effect was considerably more intensified.

Even I was beginning to feel a pulling and tugging in my legs, which began to creep upward swiftly. Driven by a rising panic I leapt forward from the cover of the seats and in the same instant the Regent set off an alarm. As I heard the shrill howling of the sirens and the clamour of airhorns it gave me a bit of courage again. If the combat robots could get through the screened security lock fast enough we might be saved. The greenish glow was harmless enough in itself as long as there was nobody there to take

advantage of our paralysed condition.

I threw myself down beside Rhodan. His face was frozen in a twisted expression of alarm. When I touched his body it felt as stiff as a board. Yokida's arm had also acquired the hardness of stone. Rhodan gripped his weapon in his outstretched hand. He had not come to the point of firing it since nothing had yet appeared at which he could shoot. Anyway the transmitter field itself could not have been demolished by a thermo-beam, especially since there was no sign there of the ray projector. Other than the red archway with its ink-black cavern behind it, there was nothing to be seen.

Over my command transceiver I called to the robot Brain, after deciding not to try for the exit. The paralysis energy was probably the most intensive there and I wanted to remain active as long as possible. My legs were already beginning to stiffen. But I realized then that my powerful screen had delayed the effects of the paralysis field. However, it could not protect me much longer.

Desperately I struggled to raise my unwieldy weapon, still hoping to eliminate the transmitter's arc but at the last moment I desisted. Probably I would have damaged the doors behind the apparition, melting them so badly with the thermobeam that they would not be operable with the aid of special equipment. Since I was hoping for the arrival of the robots I had to refrain from shooting.

Meanwhile my mental logic sector was telling me insistently that the greenish ray weapon was not being employed for nothing. If someone were attempting to incapacitate us in this manner it could only mean that the same someone wanted to approach us while we were helpless to exert our wills.

It was this I waited for now, nor did I have to wait long. Behind the screen room's defended security doors, nothing was stirring. Where were the Brain's robot guards? Had the unknown enemy used his superior technology in some way to also incapacitate the robots? I was not able to carry this thought to any conclusion because inside the arching lines of the transmitter field the blackness began to fade. There was a violet brilliance for a moment and within this new light I saw two tall, strangely dressed figures materialize.

Here then were the mysterious Akons whom my forefathers had once fought so bitterly. I could not hesitate any longer. My body had already become incapable of moving. The paralysis attacked my shoulders and began to affect the functions of my arm muscles. With my last strength I aimed the thermo-beamer. One of the Akons noticed this and sprang forward, at the same time lifting his own weapon which was a type I could not recognize.

I pressed the trigger.

I didn't get a second shot. Something struck my defence screen with such terrific force that it couldn't compensate for the load. I heard my backpack generator shriek in complaint and at the same time the screen collapsed. It was the second intruder who had fired at me. With my protection gone I was gripped completely by the greenish glow and I stiffened rigidly as though I had an attack of tetanus.

But I could hear footsteps as somebody approached. A lean, expressionless face came into my range of vision. The glimmering muzzle of an alien weapon appeared but the stranger refrained from firing it a second time. He seemed to know that by now I was also under the influence of the greenish glow. Not bothering about me further, he turned, and I could just see his legs moving beyond my angle of sight. A moment later I could tell by the sounds that one of the Terrans was being dragged away. It was Tama Yokida, as I perceived shortly, because I could still observe the red-gleaming energy arch of the transmitter.

After that came Rhodan. The invader dragged him over to the arch, after which he shoved the Administrator's motionless body across the threshold and waited for the dematerialisation process to complete itself.

Finally it was my turn. I felt nothing when I was jerked across the floor and shoved across the energy line. Nor could I sense anything from the dematerialisation process. All that happened was that my consciousness sank into a fog as I might have expected from a spaceship transition.

For in the broadest sense that's all it was—another form of hypertransition. But my final thoughts were concerned with the miserable performance of the robot Brain. The Regent had had enough time to attack! Why hadn't it happened? And besides, how had the Akons succeeded in bringing a portable transmitter terminal into the main computer complex?

If the infiltration had been made during the previous raid while everything here was in the grip of a time-field and present influences were neutralized, then the transmitter setup was fully understandable. But that didn't answer the question of why it had not been detected after the time effects had been normalized! Such a piece of equipment would have to be putting out measurable radiations. Why had they not been sensed by the automatic security installations?

That was all the further I got in my search for an answer. Swiftly my thinking processes were extinguished by the full dematerialisation.

4/ PURSUIT IN LIMBO

Everything about her was fascinating.

She was one of those women who were able to combine intelligence and charm with beauty of face and figure. I stared at her with unconcealed admiration while I noticed how her aquiline and expressive features seemed to harmonize with her coppery-red hair as it scintillated in the light. She was beautiful and gave an overall impression of being, as I say, extremely fascinating. This was what the Arkonide women of the expansion era must have looked like. For me there was no question but that she represented the mother race.

Rhodan and Tama Yokida had also regained consciousness. Our rematerialisation in the main transmitter of an unknown station must have occurred with practically no time lapse to speak of. We did not know where we were because any trip through the para-realm of hyperspace left one totally without any reference points as to the passage of time or relativistic distances.

We were lying on narrow folding cots where they had placed us before the paralysing effect of the greenish light had subsided. We had regained control of our limbs while resting here but this fact amounted to practically nothing. Strange machinery sounds and various features of our surroundings indicated that we were on board a moderately sized spaceship. Two other members of the Akon race had come into the cabin behind the girl. They were tall men and they were armed.

Only moments after regaining my physical strength I became aware of the fact that my special backpack had been removed containing my built-in screen projector and power transformer. Only my cell activator

was still where it was supposed to be against my chest. Could it be that they knew how vital this instrument was to me?

The girl—or should I say woman?—was wearing a close-fitting uniform which was apparently the normal practice for all Space Age intelligences. The only non-standard item was her short shoulder cape made of a fluorescent lavender material.

She looked at us carefully, one at a time.

"Hello, Auris of Las-Toor—how are you?" came a sudden voice beside me.

Rhodan was speaking in excellent archaic Arkonide, which was another talent acquired from his extensive hypno-schooling. Naturally I also had an equal command of the language of my ancestors. However, I was surprised at this greeting until it occurred to me he had mentioned meeting a young female Akon scientist who had not been entirely uninvolved in the successful outcome of his test flight. Was that this particular female? My interest increased all the more.

Her satin-brown complexion seemed to pale as Rhodan spoke. I knew that if her upbringing was similar to that of Arkonide girls of earlier times, his casual form of address must have been shocking to her. I waited interestedly for her reaction and it turned out to be as I had expected.

Her two companions looked at Rhodan in evident exasperation as he raised up on his cot. The girl warned him with a quick movement of her hand. He was just moving his feet to place them on the floor but decided not to. His mocking smile caused the Akon woman's features to change colour again and from that moment I was certain that she knew him. What was it about this Terran that had impressed her? His long, lean figure, the cool virility in his eyes? Or perhaps even the subtle and mysterious aura of his relative immortality?

Rhodan couldn't resist provoking her, and at the time I considered this dangerous.

"So here we are together again," he remarked casually. "Of course under circumstances that make the peacefulness of your people very questionable."

As she answered him I saw her long graceful fingers clutch at the edge of her shoulder cape. "I strongly advise you to speak only when you are told to!" she said sharply. "It is impertinent for guests to speak before the host."

This was in no way surprising to me because at least I knew, from extensive research, traditions and customs of my early forefathers. The words she used must have sounded strange to Rhodan but apparently he didn't realize how merely rhetorical such usage often were.

Instantly the famous smile of subtle sarcasm came to his lips. "Guests? Host?" he queried with a lifted eyebrow. "I don't quite recall having been invited or coming here of my own free will. Do you have your facts confused, Madam?"

He continued to smile at her. The other two Akons looked past him or through him as if he did not exist. Having seen the Regent's evaluations of the reports from members of the Terran expedition, I knew that these people considered both Terrans and Arkonides to be nothing more than insects or vermin. For the first time in my life I sensed that same disdain and arrogance directed at me with which the representatives of my race had treated other galactic intelligences for so many thousands of years. Evidently they did not recognize in me an Emperor of a vast stellar empire but rather an uncouth colonial

chief who had sunk into barbarism.

Rhodan was less patient and prudent than I. Anger gleamed brightly in his eyes as he stood up, completely ignoring the threatening weapons aimed at him. Auris of Las-Toor seemed uncertain and the look on her face told me everything. *Sothis* was what fascinated her about Rhodan! Though only a recent upstart from an insignificant planet system, he dared to defy the representatives of a far superior civilization. This was the same way he had faced up to the members of an Arkonide exploring expedition some decades previously, with the result that an Arkonide woman of one of the noblest families became his wife and one of the topmost Arkonide scientists became his best friend.

I raised myself up in a state of alarm and agitation. My eyes were smarting and now Auris' attention was also turned to me. Against my better judgment, I had decided to adopt Rhodan's tactic. "You are speaking to the ruler of a solar empire," I told her sharply. "And in me you see the Emperor Gonozal VIII, lord of the Arkonide Imperium. I demand an explanation of this inexcusable action which is neither proper nor in keeping with diplomatic tradition."

While her companions continued to remain silent she gave me an enigmatic look. "I am quite aware of your identities," she said.

"Then I demand to be informed as to the purpose of this action which—judging by the circumstances—could very easily lead to a serious altercation between our respective races."

She looked at me with a mixture of pity, interest and pride. "I am not authorized to answer your unsound arguments."

"Then what is your mission?"

"Kidnapping," said Rhodan, "which in civilized circles is considered to be a crime!"

She coloured vividly again. Scorn and anger glistened in her dark, eyes, which were so different from those of modern Arkonide women.

"Further proof of degeneration process in modern Arkonides!" announced my logic sector.

"The decisions of the Ruling Council of Akon are not criminal," she said swiftly. "I carry out their orders. I must urge you to follow my instructions without contradiction." She lowered her gaze fleetingly as if to go but Rhodan's next words detained her.

He still wore his famous challenging smile but his manner of speaking changed. Dispensing with all diplomatic guidelines, what he said was hard and straight to the point. "Madam, it seems to me that the arrogance of your people needs to be toned down. I must assure you that your abduction of two statesmen of our galactic importance will not remain without its consequences. If your so-called Ruling Council is interested in our linear space-drive, then let me advise you that this kind of action *is not* going to induce the political and military leaders of the Solar Imperium to make such details available to you. You overestimate your powers, Auris of Las-Toor!"

She appeared to ponder this message a moment but nevertheless she finally went out without answering him. She was followed by her double escort. As the hatch door closed behind them, Rhodan lay down again on his couch without a word to either of us. He placed his hands behind his head and closed his eyes.

I was about to say something to him but Tama Yokida motioned swiftly to deter me. Then I realized that Perry was attempting to get into telepathic contact with the mutants on board the *Ironduke*—and soon he seemed to be succeeding. He began to stream with sweat and his features contorted under the strain. From my knowledge of methods used by the gifted members of the secret Mutant Corps I knew that they were all forming a coordinated pool of their wills, into which they concentrated all of their strength.

Rhodan was only a very weak telepath. One mutant alone could probably not pick up his message.

Some minutes passed before he relaxed again. After another 5 minutes or so he had recovered enough to be able to sit up. I could guess what had transpired. Rhodan was not the type to let himself be abducted without taking action. And yet it would be very easy for us to lose our lives if we were unlucky. In fact, I had already been fairly close to death. One of the Akons had fired at me, which indicated that if necessary they were quite ready to do away with me. And from this one could draw several conclusions.

Perplexed by my own train of thoughts I realized that they had apparently only been after Rhodan. I had been an unwelcome intruder whom they had brought along simply because it had worked out that way unexpectedly. Rhodan appeared to be occupied with similar thoughts. Naturally he must be asking himself how the Akons had been able to show up at precisely the right moment with their paralysis weapon. This mystery required an answer as soon as possible.

"Do you happen to speak Japanese?" Perry asked me in that language.

It took me a few moments to understand what he had said. I was forced to switch my thinking rapidly. "I did a few centuries ago," I answered, struggling with the unaccustomed words. "I was there when Kublai Khan's fleet attempted to raid the Japanese Island Empire—but his ships were destroyed by a miraculous storm."

Tama Yokida looked at me curiously. My Japanese was archaic and probably not too understandable.

"Good enough!" said Rhodan. He looked suspiciously about in the small room and finally checked his watch. He continued in the language of the insular state. "Naturally we're being monitored by a bug of some kind. But it will take them time to translate these new sounds with their mechanical devices—I'd say maybe 24 hours at least. So we can say what we're thinking now."

Tama was just returning from listening at the door when a great bedlam was heard outside. Sirens and alarm whistles began to shriek. The sound of running feet was heard beyond the door, which apparently wasn't too thick. Within moments we could hear the rumble of heavy machinery. For a fraction of a second we felt the effects of powerful G-forces but then the inertial shock absorbers came into play and absorbed the pressure.

Nevertheless Tama was thrown to the deck and I was pressed back on my folding cot. Only Rhodan had been able to balance himself quickly enough. But we knew now for certain that we were on board a spaceship, which had evidently increased its velocity on a crash emergency basis.

"So the super-vermin are making a run for it!" said Perry sarcastically. The look in his eyes disturbed me. I had a presentiment that something was happening which he had started.

He looked at me directly as he spoke curtly and concisely. "I'm sorry, Atlan, but I've had to encroach on your authority. I was able to make contact with my telepaths. Pucky, Marshall, Betty Toufry and Fellmer Lloyd built up a single para-block between them. They understood my instructions and I was able to get their messages. We got that far and everything is working."

My suspicions were confirmed! "But what do you mean about encroaching on my authority?" I asked.

"The Regent responded immediately and communicated with Col. Claudrin. The Brain saw everything that happened, including our sudden disappearance. The robot units he dispatched could not get in to us because they ran up against an unknown curtain of energy. That's why we didn't get any help. Just before we were abducted I had managed to send out the necessary orders, so Claudrin took off at once. By the time we materialized on this ship, the *Ironduke* was already into outer space where its special sensors could go into action."

He tapped his knuckles against the edge of the narrow cot. "This ship was detected only a few moments ago and its coordinates were determined. Claudrin is in pursuit. It should be interesting since the Akons also have linear drive. Anyway, that's why they got under way so fast. At the time they were just 3 light-months outside the Arkon System. That's the location they were operating from. Their terminal transmitter was probably placed in the Regent's underground bunker two months ago when they were attempting to change the course of time. That's the only way it could have been possible for them to kidnap us so easily. The receiver terminal of the transmitter was on board this ship. They waited patiently for us to show up, and then they struck Two birds with one stone, Atlan!"

"Slow down a minute!" I protested. "Those are theories. It could have happened differently. How could they have known the exact time to strike?"

"The Regent has found out that your last hypercom message to me was traced. I assume that they deciphered it and that's why they knew I'd be showing up soon on Arkon."

"Which did not provide the information, however, that I would be taking you down into the Regent's inner computer section. There's something wrong with your story."

He waved a hand. That's relatively unimportant at the moment. In any case they were aware that I would be arriving soon. If I had not shown up in screen room 7 they would have probably gotten to me in another location and maybe by another means. These people seem to have had plenty of practice at things like that."

I gave up trying to find logical explanations. At the moment it was useless. "But I still don't know what you mean when you say that you have encroached upon my authority. You mean you acted in my name?"

His lean face tightened perceptibly as he began with some very weighty information. "Claudrin contacted Earth and gave the mobilization order in my name. Bell is taking off with all available units of the Solar Fleet and is going into transition en route to the Blue System. All available linear drive units are following him just about now. In addition to that, through Col. Claudrin I instructed the Robot Regent in your name to launch the Arkonide fleet and have it set its course also for the Blue System. Atlan, in that action I did something that I had strongly rejected only 4 hours ago. If we haven't managed to escape from this ship by a certain time, Col. Claudrin will attempt to split open a rift in the Blue System's energy screen so that the fleets behind him can get through. And then we'll have the war on our hands that we had hoped to avoid under any circumstances."

I felt a sudden dryness in my throat. Rhodan had acted swiftly and without compromise. Had he made the right move? Was he not overestimating even the combined power of both Imperiums? Had he fully comprehended what it meant to strike out against an enemy like this? In fact were we really dealing with an enemy in that sense of the word? Yes, it probably had to be so. Both of the Akon secret attacks had been more than a provocation. In both cases the very existence of humanity had been threatened and no

doubt also that of the Greater Imperium as well.

Then on top of it there was this armed kidnapping by force. That had been a very unwise action on the part of the Akons. It had to cause political complications since Rhodan thought and operated more militaristically than politically. His quick reaction was typical of him. Had I acted in his place I probably would have still attempted to clear up the whole mess by means of negotiation. It might have been possible to convince the Ruling Council that they could not disregard a force of some 40,000 spherical ships of the Solar and Arkonide Imperiums. Especially the Terrans had been erroneously classified by the Akons.

I had certainly come to know them—these rash, bold men from the planets of an insignificant sun! As a rule everybody always underestimated them, as other intelligences besides myself had already learned. Nonetheless, there should first have been an attempt at negotiations, and in this regard I expressed my thoughts.

But when I had finished he gave me a strong rebuttal: "My friend, you'd still do better as an admiral than a statesman or an Emperor. I have no intention of losing the one ace I have in exchange for the unlikely good will of your so-called mother race. My telepathic contact could be broken at any time when maybe it would be too late. I am not able to bridge great distances, you know. That's why I had to give the decisive orders before that became impossible to do. The appearance of the combined fleets in the Blue System won't necessarily mean cosmic war—at least I hope not! In fact I am of the opinion that this demonstration of power will accomplish much more than a thousand negotiations around a green-topped table."

I could sense that he was right and yet I was frightened by the possible consequences of his action. I thought of the tremendous weapons and technology we had already witnessed as a result of our involuntary contact with the Akons.

"Perry—they'll destroy our ships faster than we can even imagine!"

Rhodan smiled. "There is the flaw in our reasoning. I know definitely that the Blue System has not been doing any ordinary space travelling for thousands of years. They operate enormously powerful super transmitters which handle all of their intergalactic traffic. There are only a few small space vehicles left, of the type you have under your feet right now. We've simply been impressed by those few Akons who fly out in these little space buggies in order to set up their receiver transmitters on other worlds. They call themselves the Energy Command. I'm sure that we're dealing with such a unit now. So that's why I don't buy the idea of their being able to destroy a super fleet of our combined forces—as long as each commander is smart enough to keep out of range of any cosmic fortresses or main defence installations on the ground."

So the grand avalanche was in progress! I tried to imagine what must be happening on the Earth by now and among all the planets of the Sol System. I knew they had prepared plans or 'war scenarios' for such mobilizations as this and there would be no delay in launching thousands of fighting spaceships into the void—including the super giants of the Imperium class. The Terrans' new destroyer carriers would also be taking off and every pilot in those tiny but terribly swift marauders would be receiving his instructions.

The giant military machine of the Solar Imperium had come alive—there could be no question about it anymore. And on all the worlds of the Arkonide Imperium there were similar activities going on. I was fully familiar with the incredible precision of the numerous robot fleets.

But I still harboured the faint hope that we would be able to nip this burgeoning holocaust in the

bud—before any attacks began. Rhodan was a genius in tactical space strategies but his ships were a long way from being inside the fabulous system-wide defence screen of the Akons. My remarks in this regard caused Perry to clear his throat somewhat laboriously before he answered.

"Of course you have a point there," he admitted, "but the Akons seem to lose sight of the fact that I have my linear drive ships now and they have no conception of such commanders as Jefe Claudrin, not to mention the mutants, of whose existence they don't seem to be aware. Our snooty girlfriend is probably wondering right now how such a sudden pursuit could come about—by a Terran battleship equipped with linear spacedrive. If she'll listen to her own instincts, maybe this war can be avoided. If not, then by hook or crook Jefe Claudrin is going to blast his way through the blue defence screen. Once inside, he'll try to find the generating plant or power stations that are projecting the main screen. That thing hasn't formed all by itself, you know. Atlan, do you have any regrets about my order to the Robot Brain?"

What was I supposed to do in such a situation as this? I had no recourse but to agree. Actually I was puzzled about my hesitancy, which was not characteristic of the mentality of a former space admiral. What hindered me from accepting Rhodan's logic and making it a part of my own? I could find no answer. At any rate I knew that there was probably no other alternative but to show the mother race how serious this situation could get.

I was startled out of my brooding by Tama Yokida. The mutant was standing by the locked door and was scanning it with his special faculties. "I can open this lock quite easily," he announced suddenly. "A fairly simple pulse mechanism controls the bolt. I could either move it by forcing it against its stop-frame or I could turn the 6 sliding contacts to where the door would open automatically—but even though that would be the normal way for the pulse controls to open it I can't say whether or not it would set off an alarm somewhere."

I forgot the emotional burdens of my advanced age and my instinctive opposition to Rhodan's plans, which in the final analysis could mean the mutual race suicide of three of the most advanced civilizations in the galaxy. Suddenly I was nothing more than Atlan the old Arkonide admiral who after his fateful exile had fought and suffered for many centuries with the inhabitants of the planet Earth.

This fellow Tama Yokida here was another typical example of humankind. While Rhodan and I had been discussing the situation he had already been working on a little plan of his own, which he now revealed to us.

Rhodan comprehended at once. He gave me a quick glance and I nodded my agreement. He checked his watch.

"OK, we can still talk without detection. The Japanese language should offer a few problems to even the best translator devices. Are there any hidden spy cameras in here?"

Tama leaned back against the door and looked indifferently at the wall across the room. "In the right hand corner over there—right under the ventilator screen."

Rhodan did not look in the indicated direction, which would have been too obvious. I was in the best position to see the spot without being conspicuous.

"He's right." I confirmed. I was becoming more tense now, aware of Rhodan's readiness for action.

He finally turned to me with a meaningful smile. "Imperator, you must have been worried about your safety for months now, wouldn't you say?"

I said nothing. We knew each other too well to waste words. I knew what he was trying to tell me. Naturally I had not neglected to provide myself with emergency defence equipment in addition to my more obvious weapons belt. I knew I still had the device on my person. The Akons' search of my clothing had probably been quite thorough but they apparently could not imagine that a man of my lofty rank could be forced to resort to such melodrama in order to counteract paid assailants and half-mad fanatics.

"What can you come up with?" This time Perry looked directly at me. Yokida's face had also become tense.

"An honorary donation from the Supreme Council of Arkon, which is still in my chest pocket. It's a pulse-powered writing machine for preparing pretty documents in 3 separate colours."

"How nice! So what else do you have?"

I was aware of giving him a mischievous grin. "Nobody knows that it's been reworked by your little cucumber people, the Swoons—the most ingenious micro-technicians in the galaxy. They built in a micro-beamer. That was with the kind permission of your Solar Intelligence organization."

His brow furrowed for a moment. Apparently Allan D. Mercant had made no file record of it, which was a sign of the man's special circumspection, if not his consideration. Rhodan checked his watch again and finally began to lay the groundwork for our action.

"It's pretty darned hot in here, you know?" he complained. He stood up and wiped sweat from his brow while he turned his eyes toward the air-conditioning outlet. Then he walked up to the ventilator screen and placed his face as close as possible to it as though to take advantage of the stream of fresh air.

Tama Yokida looked at me expectantly but in the interim I had reconsidered.

"Don't force it open unless I fail in something I'm going to try. Hold off!"

I began to rummage through the drawers of the built-in commode nearby and Rhodan came back. It wasn't time yet to keep the camera lens covered but it was a good rehearsal.

"You looking for something?"

"Writing material," I said in pretended vexation. "Pulse foil or even ordinary paper..."

"Oh."

Moments later I walked over to the large viewscreen. It was built into the steel wall right next to the door. I could hear the roar of the ship's propulsion system, which was evidently still functioning at maximum power. Just as I was looking for the right buttons to push, the screen lit up and the face of Auris of Las-Toor appeared. But she was not calling in regard to what I had pretended to be looking for.

"Please get back on your cots," she said, "and prepare to hold on tight. Our next flight manoeuvre will be quite a strain on you."

Her tone of voice was merely indifferent but that quickly changed when Rhodan made a fast retort.

"Well now, is your linear space-drive so poorly designed that physical discomfort can occur? In ours we've eliminated all that."

The girl appeared to become indignant. As Rhodan watched her on the screen his facial expression was enough to bring far less sensitive persons to the boiling point.

"That is a matter that must be left to the judgment of the Akon scientists, Your Excellence!"

Rhodan acknowledged mockingly. "That is my title, Madam—thank you for your courtesy. May I put in a request?"

"Hurry, then—the manoeuvre takes place in 3 minutes!"

"The Emperor requires writing materials so that he may prepare a formal complaint for the representatives of your government. Pulse foil if you have any. We have a small writing machine."

"I'll attend to it."

She gave us a formal nod and closed the connection. I cleared my throat nervously and went over to lie down on my cot. Again I had occasion to marvel at Rhodan's quick uptake. He had grasped my idea almost immediately. It was better to have the door opened by the Akons themselves. Certainly we wouldn't have gotten by the guards they must have posted outside—not without using force. So I had preferred to have them enter by official orders.

Tama and Rhodan also lay down on their bunk-like cots. Seconds later we heard a new thundering which emanated from the wall to our left. I suspected that they had put their mysterious hyper-propulsion into operation for linear flight. There followed a severe type of warp-shock which brought with it a pulling pain of short duration. For about the length of a single breath my vision dimmed but then it returned to normal.

That was all there was to it. We heard a shrill sound of bells, which seemed to announce that the emergency was over with. I raised myself up again.

"Hm-m—that was close to being a dematerialisation," said Rhodan. "Obviously a transitional shock on entering semispace. How come they can't do away with that or—" He thought with a new intensity for a moment. "Or do these unpleasant side effects have something to do essentially with an important technical factor we don't know about?"

I was also surprised by the experience. On the Terran linear drive ships the transition into the dimensionally unstable realm of semispace was accomplished without any noticeable physical complications. However, this gave me an idea.

"Whenever the Regent tracked one of these Akon ships before, there was no sign of warp-shock disturbances. Could it be that they do fly normally without any transition shocks—just like your new Terran ships—*except* when they are forced into a special manoeuvre? It seems that your *Ironduke* is breathing too hard down their necks."

Rhodan pursed his lips and sat there motionlessly for awhile with the tips of his fingers pressed together. After a time I could tell that he was straining to pick up a telepathic contact with his mutants on board the battleship. After a few minutes his face was streaming with sweat again but he gave it up.

"No use! We're in a libration zone between the Einstein continuum and paraspace. When any ship travels faster than light-speed like this, it has to develop a spherical field screen which has the same characteristics as a telepathic block. I can't get through anymore. Tama—are you ready?"

The mutant got up casually. With a forced yawn he strolled leisurely over to the viewscreen and curiously inspected the alien-looking switch-panel beneath it. Rhodan issued a few swift instructions. It was obvious that we had to attempt to reach the Control Central. The crew of this ship could not be very large. Nevertheless we couldn't hope to incapacitate the men of this Energy Command one after another, even though Yokida's psychokinetic powers were worth several heavily armed soldiers. Even he was not immune to deadly weapons and none of us had separate defence screens.

On the other hand, the limited crew in the Control Central could probably be overcome, provided that we could manage to reach that area.

Rhodan gave us some additional information about the inner construction of the ship. Pucky the mousebeaver had once been able to penetrate the interior of an Akon spaceship. According to his report there was little difference between this and one of our own spacecraft. After all, we Arkonides had originated from Akon, and the Terrans had copied our designs faithfully.

All we were concerned with was to temporarily take over the Control Central, cut off the linear drive and hold the room for a short period of time. The *Ironduke* was unquestionably close on our heels and once it came within firing range the Akons would be in for some surprises.

Rhodan got up again and went over to the ventilator, where he turned his perspiring face toward the air stream coming out of the blower. This happened at the moment when the steel door slowly opened.

5/ PERRY'S ATYPICAL ACTION

There were three of them: two armed guards and an unarmed officer who wore some unrecognizable rank insignia on the jacket of his uniform. The two men escorting him carried hand weapons which were also strange to us. The gun muzzles were lowered as they entered.

Tama Yokida stood in a position where he could keep his eyes on the door panel. Rhodan had turned so that his back was to the other wall but his head and neck still covered the ventilator area. His broad shoulders must have been blocking the view of the camera lens.

The big viewscreen was not operating at the moment, and probably it was actually out of commission because Yokida had manipulated the controls a bit 'too expertly'. What he had also been able to do to the inner circuits of the apparatus by means of his psychokinetic powers I could fairly well imagine.

I was sitting on my bunk-cot facing the officer. We had to get him to come farther into the cabin. The Akon must have received instructions to maintain a reserved degree of politeness. In his right hand he carried a transparent case containing greyish-white pulse foil, apparently of the same kind that was used on Arkon.

He came closer to me finally and then stopped with a slight inclination of his head. "Your Majesty, we

hope that this material will be usable in your pulse writer. If not, you will have to be satisfied with my manual scribe."

"Does it transcribe in printed form?"

"No, Your Highness, you would have to guide the beam-stylus with your hand."

By this I knew that they had made a close inspection of my special 'typewriter'—of course without discovering its hidden secret. Also, it seemed that the admonishments Rhodan and I had given them concerning the possible consequences of our abduction had finally borne fruit. The Akons were suddenly being quite accommodating. Had they had time to realize what complications their diplomatic 'goof' might engender? The close pursuit of the *Ironduke* could not have gone unnoticed. They might even have picked up a radio challenge from its commander.

The officer removed a sheet of foil from the case and placed it on a portable writing pad he had brought along. I very calmly reached into my pocket and withdrew the writing instrument which was not much larger than an old-fashioned fountain pen. Unobtrusively I released the firing safety. It was uncanny what the Swoons had been able to pack into the tiny space provided. The thermal-type needle beam was 10 times thinner than the finest hair. It did not operate on the normal catalysis principle of a laser-type fusion emission but was more like the original laser beam, using a fine concentration of high-frequency light. It produced largely the same effect.

I saw Yokida's eyes staring at nothing, as though he was in a trance. Actually, however, he was concentrating on the two guards. During the apparently boring discussion they had let their weapon muzzles sink even lower toward the deck.

In a pontifical gesture I looked up at the officer and pointed my micro-weapon at him as he took two steps backward uncertainly. At the moment Rhodan could not take a hand in the action. He still had to keep the camera eye covered. With the instrument pointed at him the officer presumed that I was addressing him indirectly.

"How good or bad are your medical scientists?" I inquired.

The question startled him. "Have you been injured, Your Highness?"

"No, but unfortunately I am going to have to wound you somewhat. It won't be too bad."

I pressed the tiny firing button, at the same time narrowing my eyes to slits for protection. Which was none too soon because a soundless and blinding light beam struck the Akon in his right shoulder. At first he did not react but then he began to sway, after which he finally dropped to the deck. Ultra-frequency beams of this type were seldom deadly, especially when so finely focussed and not directed at vital organs. However, the shot was generally accompanied by such a shock of pain that in most cases the victim lost consciousness.

It had all happened in the fraction of a second. Tama Yokida had acted with far less delicacy. His incomprehensible powers had gripped the two sentries and slammed them down on the floor. I sprang to their sides and stunned them senseless with a brief throttling of blood supply to their brains. This trick of inducing unconsciousness had been taught to me by a Greek doctor whose superior knowledge at that time had won him an appointment as royal physician to the Roman military monarch Septimus Severus.

These ancient memories came to me fleetingly as the second guard lost consciousness. Hastily I got to

my feet. Yokida was already busy with the task of destroying the hidden camera pickup. He had to be clever enough in his work to make it look like a normal electronic failure.

Rhodan came forward without a word. He appropriated the guards' weapons and tossed one of them to the mutant. We hardly had to say anything because our course was clear. The narrow passage outside our cabin was empty. The thundering of the ship's propulsion drowned out the sound of our footsteps as we hurried along toward our goal. When we came to a turn in the passage we paused to orient ourselves. According to the ship's sounds we appeared to be on what was known as the equatorial deck in the centre. From this area the bulkhead hatch of the Control Central could be reached. If the Akons operated in space according to our own experience, there should be no difficulties in this region. There were no other crew stations on the equatorial deck since there were no weapons installations here nor any auxiliary navigational posts.

We continued forward. In about 5 minutes the guards would regain consciousness and sound the alarm. Meanwhile perhaps the failure of the spy camera would have been noticed. But now we were committed—it was all or nothing. The corridor started to curve which was typical of a spherical spacer. A few yards farther on we discovered a radial passage which evidently led to the centrally located Control Central. There was more probability of encountering someone here than elsewhere because the lift shaft was somewhere close by.

Rhodan spoke in low tones. "Tama—if anybody gives us any trouble, you have permission to fire."

He carefully checked the cross-passage but there was no one to be seen. A few moments later we were standing in front of the circular hatch door of an airlock. It was obvious that it led to the Control Central. Rhodan calmly activated the opening switch and the steel hatch swung back. We knew that this would cause an indicator lamp to light up on a panel somewhere inside. This one had to expect no matter whose ship was involved.

We stepped inside, closed the outer hatch behind us and activated the switch of the inner door. I prepared myself for meeting men now who would be armed with ready weapons. To me it seemed that a whole day must have transpired since we had overcome the three Akons in our cabin but my watch told me that not even 4½ minutes had passed.

Slowly the ponderous inner hatch swung back before us. The subdued light from the airlock flooded into the dimly illuminated control room. We made out only the heads of two Akons whose backs and shoulders were shielded by their high-backed contour seats. Due to our restricted angle of vision these two were all we could see at first.

Tama Yokida sprang ahead of us and I followed with Rhodan behind me. As he came through the hatch he swung his free hand to activate the closure of the lock behind us. I heard someone cry out. The mutant stood there with his legs apart, slightly inclined forward like a track-runner ready to spring, his eyes on all who were present in the relatively small chamber.

There were 5 men and a young woman—Auris of Las-Toor. She was resting on a contour couch that was off to one side which indicated that she was not connected with the ship's fight crew. I recalled Rhodan's report in which she had been described as a sociologist. She probably understood very little of a translight spaceship's controls.

I whirled around and aimed the micro-beamer at the thin line separating the armourplated hatch door from the bulkhead wall. As I fired a searing brilliance of light pained my eyes but the steel began to melt immediately. I produced a few weld joints so that I could be sure that no one would be able to enter here

without special equipment.

Then I heard Rhodan's announcement: "I hereby declare a state of war between the Solar Imperium and the Akon stellar empire. By virtue of my administrative authority and on the basis of emergency powers vested in me I am authorized to issue this declaration even without the written consent of the Solar Federal Government. I must inform you that as prisoners of war you must obey my orders. As of now you are under martial law, which you will kindly not confuse with piracy and ambush!"

I had suspected as much! Rhodan had actually acquired extraordinary emergency powers. The happenings of the past few months and now this abduction were sufficient grounds for him to take direct action and make this official war declaration. Therefore, our present activities came under the heading of a legitimate military operation.

One of the tall Akons ducked down suddenly in his seat and reached for his weapon. Tama Yokida fired first and the Akon was killed instantly. Auris screamed, staring at us in bewilderment. Rhodan turned about and also fired his alien weapon at the lock door, which became all the more deformed and unworkable. The Akon raygun operated with very little sound and generated no heat effects other than at the impact point. Evidently it was a version of the Arkonide disintegrators, which shattered molecular bonds in crystalline structures.

Alarm whistles began to shriek. We paid no attention to them. The four remaining members of the fight crew did not make a move. They sat there silently and watched us. Only in Auris' lovely face could we see a trembling reaction.

Rhodan didn't give her time to collect her thoughts. "You will give the order immediately to come out of hyper-flight and return us to the normal universe. I am not jesting, Madam!"

I noticed that she cast a quick glance toward the main viewscreen. A superimposed light line pointed toward a blue sun that was still but a small, barely discernible disc. I presumed that it was the central star of the Akon System. This was how the target was kept in sight during translight space travel.

Auris still hesitated. She seemed about to say something to us but quickly restrained herself. One of the other Akons cleared his throat nervously as she gave the order: "Follow the instructions of His Excellence," she said. "The state of war alters the situation."

Rhodan looked at her suspiciously. I was also immediately on my guard. Her acquiescence had come a bit too quickly. When I saw one of the flight officers touch a green-lighted switch, I yelled.

"Hit the deck—the G-shocks!"

I dropped to the deck and was joined there by Tama and Rhodan. It was obvious that they had hoped to take us by surprise in our standing positions so that we would be incapacitated for a few seconds by the pressure of the momentary thrust and the semi-dematerialisation effects, during which they planned to overpower us. I was aware of the eerie murmuring whisper that accompanied the transition but here somehow it was not as pronounced. The pulling pains followed and for a moment my vision dimmed again.

But then my eyes cleared. I had fallen with my weapon in readiness to fire. The brightening viewscreens of the typical panob gallery revealed that we were back in the star-sprinkled normalcy of the Einstein continuum. The linear hyper-drive had actually been shut off.

What was more astonishing, however, was the fact that nobody tried anything that we logically expected from them. None of the Akons reached for a weapon or made any movement that we could interpret as belligerent or threatening. What disturbed me most was Auris' rather malicious smile.

"Why the uncomfortable positions?" she asked.

Her new attitude was a riddle to me. I sensed that we had overlooked something or made an error. But what?

"Watch out!" warned Rhodan hoarsely. His features were taut as he made two jumps and arrived at the flight console. With his back against it he could cover the four-crew members with his weapon.

"Don't try to be smart!" he blurted out involuntarily in English but then he repeated an equivalent warning in archaic Arkonide.

The four men showed no reaction. They seemed to look through us and the walls—blankly. Only the girl attempted to be a bit more approachable. Rhodan snapped at me excitedly.

"Come here and keep an eye on things," he said swiftly in Japanese. "I'm going to try to contact the *Ironduke*."

Auris of Las-Toor followed our movements attentively. I caught her twice in the act of glancing at the big darkened screen of the semispace-tracking console. What had we missed?

Rhodan sought in desperation to make a telepathic contact with the mutants on board the battleship. If the *Ironduke* were still in semispace his efforts would be fruitless. However it could be assumed that the target visibility feature of linear flight had enabled Col. Claudrin to follow the precipitate retreat manoeuvre of the Akon ship. It was technically possible with the battleship's tracking sensors to trace a linear-drive ship also inside the libration zone. Claudrin *must* have noticed our sudden change of dimensional position.

I was worried about that word *must*. If the tracking had not functioned precisely or the decision to break out of the flight mode that was carrying the other ship forward at a million times the speed of light had come too late—what could happen then? If Claudrin had not followed our manoeuvre instantly he would be many light-years beyond us by now. Even after re-entering normal space it would not be a simple task to relocate the small Akon spacecraft.

On the other hand, if he had located our position, a very tricky and time-consuming course-matching manoeuvre would be necessary. I knew what a task it was to attempt to coordinate courses while employing normal propulsion during an approach to another ship that was travelling at close to light-speed. Not only was this a tremendous problem in navigational calculation; it presupposed astronomical know-how which posed a tremendous challenge for the *Ironduke's* crew out here in this dense stellar zone with its concentrated gravitational factors. So I could only hope and trust that Jefe Claudrin had succeeded in time to match his manoeuvres to ours.

Auris of Las-Toor was looking at me with a mysterious expression on her face. Her puzzling attitude was almost too much for me to take. What was she trying to communicate to me in this silent manner? Was she expressing compassion, pity, benevolence? I forced a smile at her but it probably only resulted in a distorted grimace. Still more distressing for us, however, was the continued silence of these incredibly insensitive crewmen. It seemed to me that they had surrendered too casually to a situation that they shouldn't be taking at all so lightly.

After all, there were at least 50 highly qualified scientists and technicians outside the Control Central who must know a way of getting in here sooner or later. If I'd been in their place I would have at least attempted to blow some kind of anaesthetizing gas into the room through the ventilation system. It was logical to presume that such an expedition ship would be supplied with such chemicals. There were many other possibilities that came to my feverishly working mind. Why didn't they try anything? The whole thing was insane.

Rhodan didn't have any success. His ESP faculties were too weak and insufficiently developed under such conditions to enable him to make such a purely mental contact. Claudrin's ship could either be light-days ahead or behind us.

Perry finally desisted. He staggered over to a seat and sank down into it. A sharp furrow appeared between Auris' brows. Had she sensed what he had been trying to do? Outside nothing stirred. No one even tried to call through over the intercom system.

"Stop engines—go into freefall!" Rhodan ordered. The hoarseness in his voice reflected his fatigue.

I nodded in agreement. It was the only way to help Claudrin to make his expected adaptation manoeuvre.

In that same moment we began to hear a rumbling noise somewhere in the spherical hull of the Akon ship. I looked up, listening, while Auris began to smile for the second time. With a graceful gesture she brushed back her long, copper-coloured hair in which the dim light from the flight panel seemed to scintillate.

Rhodan raised up and slowly arose from his chair. He seemed to sense that something was wrong. "Just don't make any unwise move, Auris!" he warned her. "You are in my hands. So I want you to contact the other ship's officers and—"

He stopped speaking as she shook her head in rejection. She was quite calm and again I noted that strange expression of pity or compassion in her eyes.

"Too late, Your Excellency," she announced. "For what is to happen now, no one on board can be held responsible. You have overlooked the fact that this is a ship of the Akon Energy Command. It might have made you realize how tremendously powerful and versatile our main transmitter is. When you entered here you would then have destroyed a certain viewscreen immediately. In that case our Central Station would not have been able to see you in here nor would they have been able to track our galactic position. But it's done now. There's no use talking about it."

Rhodan lowered his weapon. He looked angrily at the arching screen. It was the one which had provided a view of the target star during linear flight. It was a strange situation, to say the least. We knew that in a few seconds something incomprehensible was going to happen and yet we were helpless to do anything about it. Resignedly I also lowered my tiny weapon. Even now the Akon officers revealed no sign of emotion.

The rumbling became a muffled thunder. If it had been possible for us to get out of the Control Central now and destroy the ship's transmitter before it reached its full power output, that in itself would have been fine, but the thought was a hopeless one because even if we could have gotten out we'd have run into the armed crew.

Tama Yokida was the first to put his weapon away, since he saw the futility of the situation. He sat down without a word in one of the seats but still kept a sharp eye on the Akons.

Just as the ship's hull began to tremble, Rhodan's body also started to become rigid. I was filled with a frantic hope. Had he made a contact? I struggled not to reveal my anxiety and finally Perry's face relaxed. His faint smile told me that the telepaths on board the *Ironduke* had just gotten through to him and that meant that the Terran battleship had also, dropped back into normal space. Although he gave me no explanation I was sure that the mutants had been updated as to current events.

It also meant that the *Ironduke* would be returning immediately into semispace in order to continue its interrupted course toward the Blue System. So in spite of everything we were not alone!

Before I could ponder the pros and cons of the new situation the Akon ship was gripped by a terrible force. Before my eyes the others in the room began to blur. My vision was obliterated in a burst of crimson pyrotechnics and then there was nothing. My last thought was that this was the most violent dematerialisation I had ever experienced.

The Akon Central Station transmitter must have generated an incredible burst of power to be able to dematerialise the considerable mass of the spaceship and take it over in the form of extra-dimensional pulses.

6/ THE FIGHT FOR TIME

I could still feel piercing pains in my body when I awakened as if from a nightmare. Tama Yokida was apparently still unconscious. Close beside me, Rhodan raised himself up with a groan. He muttered that 'they' had not even made an effort to place us on cots or in contour chairs. In his opinion 'they' had suddenly become very disagreeable.

When my vision cleared sufficiently I noted that we were no longer on board the spaceship. That's why we were on metallic slabs that gave us no warmth at all. A biting cold pierced my thin uniform and seemed to augment the stiffness of my limbs. Rhodan helped to pull my sagging spirit together. I looked around and was quickly filled with amazement.

We were lying on the metal floor of a large corridor or hall that was covered by a transparent ceiling. Farther ahead it ended at an airlock that was also transparent. Close beyond it was a small spaceship with flattened poles, measuring perhaps 50 meters in diameter. Its equatorial ring was excessively wide and sharply canted. I was sure that this was the vessel in which we had been abducted but at the moment the ship itself was immaterial to me. What was much more fascinating was the arching structure of light that almost blinded me as I looked at it. More than 200 meters high, it consisted of two towering pillars of energy which seemed to meet in a pointed are where the bright red glare became an ultra-bright violet. Between the giant transmitter's bands of energy there was a blackness of night. It gave me the impression of a gateway to the legendary underworld.

The spherical spaceship stood close to this yawning darkness. I guessed that we had been hurled out of it somehow because the small craft had obviously suffered considerable damage. The left side of its ring-bulge had been ruptured and I could see that broken machinery had been blasted out of its interior.

It was evident that this violent jump through the 5th-dimensional continuum was not an everyday affair. They had taken emergency measures which had apparently involved considerable risk.

Robots were marching past us, carrying lifeless-looking bodies. One of the humanoid figures I recognized as one of the officers who had been in the Control Central. Nothing was to be seen of Auris.

"It seems we've fared better than the Akons," commented Rhodan in a low tone.

I turned my head but did not make the effort to get up. Nor did I even look up at the Akons who had just been handling us. I hadn't yet seen their faces but since the ship's crew were being carried off I knew that all of them would be strangers anyway. I followed Rhodan's gaze. By his expression I saw that he was also astonished. But he paid little attention to the giant energy arc since he was already familiar with the phenomenon. Actually they had been the reason for his first landing on the great moon of the planet Sphynx.

At first it seemed that we had emerged on a similar moon but that was an illusion. We were located on the spacious upper flat pole of an incredibly gigantic space station. My preliminary impression was that we were on some kind of super spaceship but that didn't make too much sense. At least I had never been on any space vessel, regardless of type, where one could land on its exterior hull. We had to be on the upper surface of a space station. About 500 meters from us the curvature of a spherical wall began. I could only see a small arc of the curve because the rest of the great curving wall was beyond my range of vision.

While I was pondering the significance of such a mammoth structure the transmitter's energy arc suddenly collapsed in upon itself. The blinding glare of it vanished and I was soon able to see the first glimmerings of the countless closely packed stars which were like a tapestry scintillating in all the colours of the spectrum.

"We're at the edge of the galactic centre," Rhodan whispered to me. "Inside the Blue System! Don't you see that sheen?"

My eyes had recovered by now and wherever I looked I noticed the bluish light. Behind us flamed the glowing disc of a sun that was also blue. Now I could understand why the surviving crewmembers of the first linear test flight had spoken of this solar system in such tones of awe and even fear.

I forced myself up onto my elbows and remained in that position for awhile. When I finally got into a crouching posture to shake off the dregs of numbness, nobody came to give me a hand. I stood up. Three Akons glanced at me in obvious hostility. I ignored them as Rhodan joined me and we attended to Tama Yokida. His sensitive brain had apparently not been able to recover yet from the heavy shock. With mutants one never knew what type of strain they could stand.

Rhodan checked his pulse and then reassured me. "OK, he'll be coming around soon. Have you noticed that we've landed on the flat-topped dome of a giant space station?"

When I confirmed that I had noted this he added: "Alright then, maybe you can tell me why they've built such a monster out here on the farthest edge of the system?"

No, that I couldn't tell him because I hadn't the slightest idea. "Defence fortress?" I suggested hesitantly.

When he laughed this didn't seem to please the three Akons. One of them came closer indignantly.

"Go to the devil!" said Rhodan in icy tones, and then he added in archaic Arkonide: "I don't wish to be spoken to!"

The Akon coloured visibly and I held my breath. This Terran had his nerves about him! Rhodan turned his back to him and talked to me as though nothing had happened. But this time he reverted again to Japanese.

"This station probably is one of many power plants they've had to place here at the edge of the system in order to supply energy to the blue defence screen. Those dome-like structures over there..." He pointed to the right. "They're the projectors. I wouldn't like to get very close to them. Oh, so he's still here, is he?"

This time he smiled at the confused-looking Akon who was evidently trying to find his voice. "His Majesty, Emperor Gonozal VIII of Arkon," he said, introducing me. "I myself should be known to you by now. I must urge you to extend to us the courtesies to which we are entitled. Your name?"

The old man suddenly became very reserved. If he had possessed a sense of humour he might have been able to handle Rhodan's confrontation more adroitly. I could hardly suppress a smile. My barbarian friend was permitting himself to be insolent with this obviously high-ranking representative of my mother race. Nonetheless I was amazed to note that Perry's words seemed to take effect. Was it possible he had intuitively found the key to the alien mentalities of these people?

Rhodan seemed to be provoking them deliberately. This time it was *he* who gazed with cool disdain at the two other Akons nearby.

"Your name!" he repeated more loudly and insistently. "Am I addressing an officer in command here or an empowered statesman? If not I request that you inform someone who is properly authorized."

Slowly I began to get the picture. Rhodan had never once, even by inference, made an exhibition of his high political and military position, yet here he was doing it deliberately. Of course, I thought, he had every right to reject a reception or any interrogation by mere underlings. However, I was surprised when this older and more distinguished Akon complied with Rhodan's demand as a matter of course. I figured it would be a good example to follow.

The Akon introduced himself. "Your Excellency, I am Lempart of Fere-Khar, First Chairman of the Ruling Council of Akon and Chief of the Experimental High Energy Station, Erete."

He had spoken with respectful reserve. So this was how one had to talk to them! This was interesting to know since we had both assumed that in spite of our high station we would be looked upon as barbarian chieftains. Or had our near escape and Rhodan's declaration of war caused a considerable change in the Akon attitude? It almost seemed that way.

"I demand an explanation for this crime which has been committed under your orders!" I said sharply.

I then experienced the most belittling fiasco of my entire existence as Arkonide Fleet Commander and Emperor. Lempart reacted sharply, fairly snarling at me, "You have nothing to demand here, you degenerate! You colonists are still under the command of the Ruling Council even though you've managed for some time to elude our jurisdiction. Your assumed rank is immaterial to us."

I heard Rhodan swallow audibly. This *was* bitter medicine for my Arkonide pride! So Rhodan was somewhat respected as an alien head of state while I was nothing more than a descendant of degenerate

colonists. It required a great effort to control myself.

"Will you please follow me," said the Ruling Council's chairman. Apparently he had come fully authorized to negotiate with us.

"*You mean with Perry Rhodan!*" announced my extra-brain rather curtly.

In the meantime Tama Yokida had regained consciousness and had been able to understand the discussion. His expressionless oriental face irritated me even more. I could imagine that those dark eyes were laughing at me.

Rhodan gave me a wink. He followed the elder Akon and passed the two other representatives of this race as though they were nothing but air. It had become useless for me to emulate his conduct. Only now could I fully appreciate how providentially Rhodan had acted in issuing emergency orders to his forces and mine.

We walked along the transparent passage which shielded us from the vacuum of space. In spite of this it had become very chilly. Therefore I was glad when the open steel door of an airlock came into view. I wondered at the fact that there was no one else here except the three Akons and their robot escort. Could this gigantic station be unmanned?

This possibility proved to be factual, which gave me something new to think about. Were the circumstances such that these three Akons had been sent here only because of our surprising arrival? This would explain why possibly the highest official of the Akon Empire had put in a personal appearance. Now I realized that Rhodan's war declaration had come as a bombshell. Apparently they had been convinced that the Solar Administrator would never risk such a move.

After the air in the lock had become equalized, we stepped through into a section where the antigrav lifts were located. They were similar to those used among Arkonides, which was not surprising. Certain of the basic technologies were not too susceptible to change. After all, 20,000 years ago my ancestors had taken everything with them that the mother race had thus far discovered or invented. When certain items reached an ultimate state of perfection they were simply not subject to change.

I immediately became aware of the muffled rumble of machinery. So this was actually a power station!

When we arrived in a sector of the giant sphere that lay deep within its interior, the machinery noises increased to a steady roar. I stole a glance at my watch and then whispered hastily to the mutant, "How long will the *Ironduke* take to get here?"

"About 11 hours," Tama whispered back.

From then on I knew that we had to stall for time. We must not under any circumstances leave this deep-space power station prior to the arrival of the Terran battleship. If there was going to be any rescue at all, Rhodan's mutants were going to have to contact us where there were as few people as possible.

My logic section gave me the only feasible suggestion. I would have to become 'untransportable'. Even if they regarded me as a 'degenerate' rebel with an assumed title they would still have to be concerned about my physical status. After all I still represented a mighty military force. And no doubt Rhodan would catch on to the ruse and demand that I be shown due consideration.

I began to stagger. I grasped my head with both hands and finally fell with a groan of agony to the floor.

Tama cried out. Rhodan turned around suddenly. I could only give him a fast signal with my eyes but at first he didn't comprehend. There was a genuine expression of concern on his face as he bent over me. The three Akons behind us were thrown into a state of alarm. The robots drew their weapons in a flash, aiming at us threateningly.

"Stay here till ship comes!" I whispered swiftly.

Rhodan got the message. When he took over the act I pretended to fall unconscious.

"The Emperor needs medical help," I heard him say. "Is there a clinic here?"

I strained to overhear the ensuing short discussion. The Council Chairman seemed to make no effort to conceal things here. Either he was too worked up at the moment or he didn't think it mattered much to blabber about things that I would have considered to be military secrets. No, the power plant space island was unmanned and was robot-controlled. For this reason there was no clinic. On a scheduled rotational basis there were only 5 technicians on board who handled the most vital inspections of the most important machinery.

This was very useful information for us. It meant that we must not leave this place under any circumstances. As Rhodan's questions became sharper and more insistent, Lempart of Fere-Khar still made no attempt to conceal tactical information. In his perplexity he suggested that I should be taken immediately to the 5th planet of the system. He explained that this would be only a matter of a few seconds.

Rhodan got around this point very adroitly. He requested a fast spaceship equipped with all necessary comforts. The Chairman was sorry, explaining that such a 'Primitive' means of transportation had been all but replaced, owing to the high state of Akon technology. Of course we already knew this but it allowed Rhodan to drive home his advantage.

In an agitated tone he declared: "Even though that's how you transported the crewmembers of the damaged spacecraft to the 5th planet, the Emperor cannot be expected to go through another transmitter."

"But—Your Excellence—the crew of the Energy Command were considerably worse off than—"

Rhodan interrupted the older man. It was obvious what he had wanted to say, aside from being quite logical. "Let me correct you there," he said. "The Emperor does not have the youthful stamina of your men. Also you know that due to environmental changes affecting the Arkonides they are not as adapted to such strains. That's why I am urgently requesting that you bring a medical team here with their most modern equipment. For the time being the Emperor cannot be moved. Under no circumstances should he be subjected to another dematerialisation. When may we expect the arrival of the medicos?"

We had won! The Chairman conferred in low tones with the other two Akons, who seemed to be subordinates. A few minutes later the robots picked me up and I was carried into what were apparently the living quarters of one of the on-duty inspection engineers. I kept my eyes tightly closed and attempted to breathe as lightly as possible. There were voices outside. I could hear Rhodan talking with somebody.

But at that moment Yokida was whispering to me: "They're sending one of the technicians through one of the local transmitters. The Chairman says he doesn't have any spaceships here to satisfy the Chief's requirements. He says all available ships are designed for special purposes and besides they are out on missions. Sir, these people actually don't have a space fleet anymore! Can you imagine what will happen

to them if our super battleships can break through the blue screen?"

Now my breathing almost did stop—I was horrified.

Did the Akons have any conception of what it meant to face a declaration of war by a major galactic power like the Solar Imperium? Did they have the slightest idea of what it meant to be exposed to the combined salvos of a battlefleet? Certainly their former ancestors had experienced this in the war against the colonists of that time.

But what was the situation with the present-day Akons? True, they possessed a marvellous super-technology. They had developed a non-physical means of spaceflight and apparently they had always been lucky in their contacts with other intelligences. Moreover, they had apparently managed to make it a standard rule to get around any open conflicts. It had clearly been demonstrated to us how dangerously they could work from ambush and how they could achieve fantastic success by relatively simple means. They were proud and courageous, there could not be any doubt about that. This was apparent in the daring flights of their Energy Command.

But what would they do if they were suddenly thrown on the defensive? Already something had happened that they had never thought possible. Strangers had succeeded in penetrating the blue screen with a new kind of hyper-flight propulsion. Rhodan's abduction had been but a Pyrrhic victory although the Akons might still believe that they were immeasurably superior. In this respect they were probably deceiving themselves. Terra was in the process of sending her sons into space. Some of them were already close to the borders of the Akon Empire—and they were coming in a linear-drive battleship whose crew alone was enough to destroy the entire solar system.

I ventured to open my eyes for a moment. Rhodan was just closing the door behind him. His smile was indefinable.

"You're not really going to attack them, are you?" I whispered.

"They're due for a little lesson," he said evasively. "The doctors will be here in a few hours—maybe sooner. So get yourself prepared. The Chairman is more or less the head of the Ruling Council. They're getting nervous."

"Already, sir?" asked Tama Yokida.

"They have us in their power," I interjected swiftly. "With the first shot from a Terran energy cannon, we're dead!"

"Of that I amnot so sure," he retorted. "Just keep playing sick and at the first shot well be on board the *Ironduke*. If they're going to kidnap statesmen by force they should do it less conspicuously. Solar intelligence would have handled something like that with much more finesse."

He smiled suddenly and then I knew that he didn't consider our situation to be entirely hopeless. At any rate I wouldn't have wanted to be in the Akons' shoes just now, provided that the energy screen could be cracked. If that were not possible, Rhodan would not have the last laugh. Once more this incorrigible barbarian was relying on his men to come through for him. Perhaps too much so. If Col. Jefe Claudrin made the slightest mistake, the Akons would be in command of the situation.

At present everything depended upon this native-born Epsalian. Meanwhile I continued to play my role as a sick man—which was certainly unworthy of the Imperator of a gigantic stellar empire!

Rhodan patted my cheek and gave me an impudent grin. "You're still a sad old hound dog, Emperor. The Akons would just as soon put you in the nearest brig. For presumption of power, rebellion or you name it. In any case they'd get you for traitorous subversions in the Akon colonial region of Star Cluster M-13!"

7/ IRONDUKE BREAKS THROUGH

She had come back to salvage what could be salvaged. Which led me to believe that Auris of Las-Toor was alone in her opinion.

She was both beautiful and intelligent, the two things about her that I especially appreciated. Perhaps also it had been her scientific background that prompted her to think things over once more from our own standpoint. She had joined the two doctors who had been ordered to get me 'on my feet' again. For the present I did not intend to abandon my pretense at being sick.

Rhodan helped me with the delaying tactics by making objections to the medical equipment and procedures. He strenuously objected to their intended application of hypno-mechanical therapy, always using the argument that my 'degenerated' colonial brain would not be able to stand it.

By this means we had already stretched out the time to 12 hours but the feverishly awaited *Ironduke* was still not here. At least the telepaths on board the battleship had not yet made contact, in spite of Rhodan's strenuous 'listening' with his weak para-senses. The situation had become dangerous. One of the doctors had become indignant and threatened to leave immediately if the procedures he believed to be proper were obstructed. Naturally I could not afford to be too thoroughly examined.

Meanwhile Rhodan had also been playing the role of a very busy statesman. In the space of just 12 hours he had gone through no less than 7 conferences and in the process he finally learned what was behind our abduction. The Akons were demanding precise construction details of the Terran linear space-drive, plus an operable unit for examination and testing. This was actually all they were after but Rhodan had become very angered by the proposition. Yet his constant counter-negotiator Lempart of Fere-Khar had stubbornly maintained that he was justified in making such a demand—as a negotiable compensation—since Rhodan's test flight had violated the sovereign boundaries of Akon.

They denied having made the two attacks on Terra and the Arkonide Imperium although we could prove that the plasma monster as well as the time-displacement on Arkon 3 could be traced to their Energy Command's operations. All in all, the representative of the Ruling Council was presenting a very weak case in his negotiations. There was no way of excusing the fact of our abduction.

The justification for this highly undiplomatic action only brought a pitying smile to Rhodan's face. Lempart confessed that the Council had had no other choice since the First Administrator had not deigned to appear at a conference with the Akon heads of state—in spite of 'numerous' radio calls. No such hypercom signals had ever been recorded in Terrania. The Akons had not communicated in this manner, although meanwhile they may have realized that their procedures had been completely wrong. Their demands for handing over the technical data were just as groundless as all their other assertions.

On the other hand we now knew what was really behind all the actions of these people. Through Rhodan's test flight they had been torn loose from a security that had lasted for thousands of years. Suddenly an outsider had succeeded in breaking through their powerful defence screen. By a purely logical chain of reasoning they had resolved to either eliminate the unwelcome intruder by military or political means or to attempt to improve the energy structure of the spherical shield. But before they could do that they had to know first how the Terran linear space drive worked and what hyper-physical laws were involved in its operation.

This was the whole purpose of their undertaking. They wanted to reestablish their accustomed security without running the risk of having Terrans surprise them whenever they pleased. Their attempts to destroy us had failed. We had acted too swiftly and with too much precision. The Akons could not risk an open conflict since they no longer possessed an effectively powerful fleet.

Thus with many of their Energy Command ships they had eavesdropped on my hypercom conversation with Rhodan and had managed to decipher it. This had led to the abduction, which they now seemed to regard with some uneasiness. Rhodan's war declaration had really been the bombshell but it had still not deterred the Ruling Council in their demand for the linear space-drive data.

During the past two hours—so I was informed by a worried Tama Yokida—the tone of the Akons had become sharper. At this point in time, Auris came to see us for the first time since her return. Other than the time spent for discussions, Rhodan and Tama had been with me continuously on the grounds that they could not leave an important ally by himself.

Three minutes before, Auris had made her appearance in our quarters, this time as the legitimate female ambassador of the Council of Akon.

* * * *

I had immediately resumed my pretense at being unconscious. A half-hour before this one of the doctors had given me two injections that had a very stimulating effect. My pulse was sure and sturdy. Seldom in my life had I felt so healthy and vigorous. Under these circumstances it would have been difficult for a much better actor than I to play the part of a weak and helpless man.

Auris had come alone. I risked a quick glance at her. The smile with which she greeted Rhodan filled me with misgivings. I had to take another look. She was standing close to him and was looking up into his steady grey eyes which were suddenly not glittering so much with the cold rejection he had radiated since the beginning of this abduction business. Why didn't she look at me like that?

I involuntarily moaned and turned on my side. Tama Yokida cleared his throat in a warning signal and I lay still again.

"If I were you," she said, "I wouldn't try so hard."

An icy shock ran through me. Whom had she meant? Was it possible this shrewd maiden had perceived what the medicos hadn't been able to see through Rhodan gave the answer. He was too rational to attempt to fool Auris anymore.

"You can relax and open your eyes, friend," he told me. "This is between the four of us."

"*Betrayed!*" my extra-brain signalled to me. But I didn't need any help to arrive at such a conclusion.

I turned slowly and, opening my eyelids, I found myself looking directly into her pale, tense face. Her hands gripped the seamed edges of her shoulder cape. Rhodan was standing calmly beside her.

"The doctors have gone back," she explained. "They found out that you're not sick. Why this attempt at deception? What did you hope to accomplish by it? I am instructed to inform you that..."

"That what...?" Rhodan urged her.

"That within about an hour you will be transported to Drorah—by means of a matter transmitter."

Yokida gazed at her in concentration, undoubtedly trying to sense whether or not she were concealing a weapon on her person; but as it turned out she was unarmed. My suddenly aroused affection for Auris was forgotten, however, because my watch interested me more just now.

"*Hardly a sign of true love!*" quipped my logic sector cynically.

I shook my head angrily in response, which appeared to startle Auris. Where was the *Ironduke*? What had gone wrong? Had Jefe Claudrin been unable to break through the energy screen? Was it impossible to repeat the performance of the first test ship *Fantasy*, which had been accomplished with so little effort? To what extent had Rhodan miscalculated?

Once more he was wearing that noncommittal smile of his but I knew that his mental wheels were turning. Naturally he was mulling over the same questions that bothered me. I felt that my expression might be revealing more of my premonitions than I intended—but who was the 'sad old hound dog' now? Maybe all of us! We were in a boat that somebody had shot full of holes. In view of the high Akon technology it was practically a dead issue to think of being saved by the mutants, once we had been taken to the main planet. But even if we remained here any attack by the fleet would be stymied because the Terrans certainly weren't inclined to shoot at their First Administrator.

"*Nor at you!*" added my logic sector.

"Why this deception?" Auris again demanded to know, and she added somewhat plaintively: "Right after I heard the news about you I knew right away that you could not be so sick and exhausted."

"And you remained silent about it anyway?" queried Rhodan.

She dismissed the question with a wave of her hand. I have brought to the attention of the Ruling Council the fact that this abduction was wrong. They don't believe me. I reminded them of the Great War between Akons and Arkonides—they consider it dead and gone but they haven't forgotten it. They know that Atlan probably commands a powerful force."

"I am refraining from military steps at the moment," I told her.

She nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, but soon you will also issue a declaration of war. As an absolute monarch you have the authority. Either my people will be victorious or it will be the end of them."

She suspected something! She seemed to know also that the combined forces of our two empires were

not to be taken lightly. Disheartened, she turned and opened the door. Outside stood three of the same kind of 4-armed combat robots that the positronic Regent of Arkon employed.

"The robots have been tuned to your individual wavelengths," she said warningly. "Please don't try anything rash. It would be most regrettable."

"To you? Why?"

Rhodan still wore his impersonal smile. Auris gazed at him searchingly.

"I don't quite know why."

But I knew! With a sense of resignation I realized that she had lost her heart to this tall, grey-eyed Terran.

"Now follow me," she said softly.

Rhodan remained where he was. Tama Yokida was observing the three robots carefully. Apparently the Akons hadn't thought it necessary to use any larger guard detail than this. Hadn't they noticed during our previous escape attempt that uncanny powers had been in operation? In any case they didn't seem to suspect that our capable psychokinetic friend would be able to handle these fighting machines quite easily. All he had to do was to hurl them forcefully against the nearest steel bulkhead and it would be all over with them as far as their high-precision brains were concerned.

Auris' obvious disregard of the mutant was somehow conspicuous in a deeper sense. A suspicion began to form inside of me. Could she actually be aware of Yokida's dangerous powers? Had she deliberately remained silent in order to give us a chance? No, the thought was too farfetched. No matter how tolerant she might be she would not bring herself to a betrayal of her people. Perhaps she didn't quite know how to classify the mutant's mentality.

"You mentioned the name of a planet, Auris," said Rhodan. "I think it was Drorah. Is it the same world we refer to as Sphynx?—the 5th planet of the system?"

She only nodded. We finally went out of the room with her. The officials of the Akon Government had disappeared. The only persons present were the five regular supervisory engineers and also two Akon officers of the Energy Command who were apparently under Auris' orders. The technicians were unarmed. On the other hand the officers carried weapons which I took to be thermo-beamers. And lastly there were the three robots.

The force represented here was considerable in a relative sense. Without the mutant it was unlikely that they could be overcome. But the question remained: would there really be any purpose in risking a surprise attack? It would be senseless to force our freedom without the presence of the Terran battleship. In such a case our gains would be only temporary—if any.

I came to a stop. Ahead of us was the wide, gently curving passage that led to the antigrav lifts. We were approximately 300 meters beneath the flattened dome of the space power station which according to Rhodan was supposed to be about 11 km in diameter. Considering such a diameter I could get a fair idea of what mammoth machinery must be installed here. In turn this began to form a concept of the energy requirements of the blue defence screen which encircled a giant solar system.

"A light range of some 50 billion kilometres!" my logic sector announced. With 18 planets in the

system this estimate was probably far too small. I did not know what centrifugal laws affected planets around a star at the galactic centre. There was some experience to indicate that distances between such worlds was much less than between similar worlds not under the influence of compact gravitic fields such as occurred in regions of high stellar densities.

As I listened to the deep, monotonous rumbling that seemed to come from all directions, I wondered how many of these giant power plants might be swinging through their fixed orbits out here and how many of them might be necessary to maintain a steady supply of power to the great blue screen. How many billions of megawatts was the insatiable Moloch consuming? In fact had I been conservative in thinking only in terms of mere 'billions'? Only through such considerations did I finally realize what an achievement the Akons had accomplished in the creation of such a spherical energy field. They were generating the energies of a small sun, exclusively for the purpose of being able to screen themselves off hermetically from the rest of the galaxy.

Shaking my head, I followed Rhodan and the girl. Tama came behind me. The two officers walked on either side of us and the robots brought up the rear. It might have been easy for me to overcome one of the officers—but to what avail? What could we do with such an impractical type of temporary freedom? Besides: hadn't Auris said that we'd be transported from here 'within about an hour'? Why hadn't she let us remain in the small living quarters until then? Question after question piled up in my struggling mind.

10 minutes later we knew why they had let us away to a new location. We were to receive injections for the purpose of stabilizing our blood circulation. The automatic hypodermics were ready. One of the station technicians explained that 'incidentally' he was also a doctor. What knowledge this man must possess!—I thought. In an age of technology which required a thousand-fold division of subjects and disciplines so that any one man could grasp even the essentials of his own particular specialty, this man was just 'incidentally' a doctor as well!

I was the first to strip down to the waist. The injection was to be given in the left pectoral muscle region close to the heart. I noted the sudden tense interest of the Akon. My cell activator appeared to be consuming him with curiosity. Even Auris took a step nearer.

"A muscle-bound Viking, wouldn't you say?" said Rhodan.

I jerked up my head to stare at him but not a muscle moved in his face.

"Viking?" asked Auris wonderingly.

"As a sociologist it should interest you to know that this Arkonide has had a great influence on the development of certain races on the planet Earth."

"Oh...?"

"Take a look at the scars in the abdominal area. They mark the location of some butchering he suffered one time when he had been forced to swallow his cell activator to conceal it. It had to be retrieved quite rapidly but under very primitive conditions."

The doctor was practically panting with curiosity now but Auris gave him a reproving look and he had to remain silent. What had motivated Rhodan to sing my praises like this? At first I assumed he was merely amusing himself at my expense but he soon explained himself.

"As you can see, Auris of Las-Toor, this is what the colonial descendants look like whom your people

despise and refer to as 'degenerated' Do you think it was very advisable or commendable to kidnap the ruler of billions of people like him?"

She was about to make a reply. Perhaps she was going to bring up the natural law concerning unavoidable degeneration of colonists, and she might also have been ready to mention sarcastically that there were few Arkonides of the type I depicted. However, she never had a chance to express herself in this vein. Even if she had tried to speak, in any case the alarm whistles of the space station would have drowned her out.

I jumped so severely when the infernal shrieking started that the high-pressure jet of the hypodermic slipped from my chest and the fine medicinal spray expended itself harmlessly. Soon all Hell seemed to break loose. The two officers sprang to the door with weapons in hand and stood ready to fire. There was something to be said for their excellent training, since they expended no time or energy in curses or audible threats. Their stepping into firing positions had been almost a reflex action—and that was all. But it was enough for us since the robots had also taken the same action.

The technician who was 'incidentally' a doctor ran from the small room, apparently to join his colleagues. Undoubtedly they would be taking over their operating stations, which might also be weapons control points. Hopefully Jefe Claudrin would be taking this into consideration. It was quite obvious that he had been able to bring the *Ironduke* through the barrier screen and into the Blue System. Now things were getting serious. The alarms could not mean anything else. Otherwise our guards would not have acted so conspicuously.

Rhodan's face relaxed as though he was receiving something from afar off. I knew that he had made contact with the telepaths on the battleship.

After the alarms stopped, Auris spoke excitedly. "Unfortunately you will have to go without the injections! I must ask you to go at once to the transmitter station!"

Now she had become simply an Akon girl who was determined to act purely in the interests of her own people. I made an appropriate reply and was relieved to see that Rhodan's mental absence was not noticed. He had to remain in contact with the mutants so that the right space station could be traced. I was sure that there must be many of these orbiting power plants.

We kept on going then, but this time the weapons of our organic and non-organic escorts were in fire-ready position. I whispered a few instructions to Tama Yokida in French, on the assumption that they may have been able to translate Japanese in the meantime. I felt safer by keeping them guessing.

Yokida understood me. He was waiting for my signal but the time for action hadn't come yet.

8/ THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

It had taken us 12 minutes and 23 seconds to reach the wide high-ceilinged hall that contained the transmitter station. Here were at least those transmitters which were used for transporting personnel and supplies. The exceptionally gigantic type of equipment I had seen at first on the outer hull was not in evidence here but nevertheless the station here appeared to be designed for heavy duty. Objects or

stacks of material as large as a house could be dematerialised in these matter-reduction fields and beamed to receiver stations in the form of extra-dimensional hyper-impulses. It was a marvellous technology but just now it did not concern us.

Practically speaking, the Akons were running now—fleeing from the swift approach of the *Ironduke*, which they must have traced by now and whose formidable dimensions they must have measured. It was very doubtful that they had any ship that could even approach this giant of the Terran home fleet with its nearly half-mile diameter.

The 5 station technicians were elsewhere but the face of one of them could be seen on a large viewscreen in the area. He seemed to be in charge of the transmitter controls. A 30-foot arc of energy was already taking form and the roaring of unseen high-powered reactors could be heard. The thundering increased in volume and deepened its tone until it became constant, at which time the arc was also complete. Within its red-gleaming outline there was an eerie darkness which was a threshold into the dematerialised state of the transport process. Meanwhile Rhodan had remained incommunicado where we were concerned. In fact his absentminded state had already become apparent to Auris but she still didn't seem to suspect what the Terran was actually doing. I would have to act with Tama alone because Perry could not be interrupted. Telepathically he was our locator beacon.

The two of us didn't wait any longer. One moment was as good as another. I gave Tama the signal. He came to a stop and his eyes became fixed on the Akon officers. Almost instantly their heavy weapons were ripped from their hands so violently that they cried out in startled pain. Their momentary confusion was all that the gifted mutant needed for handling the robots.

Before I realized it the three fighting machines were lifted from the floor and brought rapidly to the ceiling where they began to whirl about. In this manner Tama was best able to coordinate his mental forces. By the time the robots were spinning in a lightning blur of motion, Tama released his control abruptly. Gripped by their high centrifugal momentum, the three metal monsters hurtled away in different directions, followed by the terrific sounds of impact.

Shattered parts and debris shot through the hall like hail but I had already charged the nearest Akon and knocked him out with a blow of my fist. I was struggling with the second officer, who was trying desperately to reach his weapon that was lying on the floor. He did not succeed because I was faster and he soon went down.

I did not have to worry about the first man because Tama had taken charge of him, at the same time making sure that Auris could not reach the fallen weapons. I ran to them and tossed one to the mutant. Without much hesitation, Tama used his psychokinetic forces to lift up the unconscious Akons and throw them into the dark maw of the waiting transmitter. The men disappeared in a lightning-like flash, probably to rematerialise almost instantly somewhere on the 5th planet of the system.

It had all happened almost soundlessly except for the crashing destruction of the robots. No one had spoken a word. Tama took hold of Auris' wrist and pulled her along with him. I guided Rhodan to the nearby open airlock and we all took shelter behind the armourplate door. Then the first voice was heard. The technician who was visible on the viewscreen was shouting unintelligible words.

"The transmitter, sir," said Yokida quite calmly. "If they send reinforcements..."

Knowing that this was our source of danger I raised my alien weapon and groped for the firing button. I was just about to press it when Auris screamed at me.

"Don't shoot!" she cried out. "You'll blow up the station stop it!"

I desisted just in time but I turned to her. "If this is a trick, Auris—"

"It's the truth!" she insisted and I could see that she was trembling. "Your energy beam will cause an uncontrolled release of the wireless current conductors. Do not fire!"

Finally Rhodan began to show some life. His taut face slowly relaxed. At the same time I was aware of a dull thunder that shook the mighty structure of the station in every seam. Nothing appeared in the still-operative transmitter—not even a robot.

"That was a beam hit, sir. The *Ironduke* is attacking!"

I gave Tama a fleeting nod. He was still keeping an eye on the area outside the airlock. There was also nothing to be seen of the technicians. Was it really this easy, I thought, to escape from this strange imprisonment?

Another 10 minutes went by in a tense, nerve-wracking silence. Auris appeared to have calmed down somewhat and Rhodan seemed to have picked up another contact. I was just about to make an inspection of the situation but I had only gone a few feet into the hall when Rhodan spoke to me. His voice was strangely toneless.

"Stand by—the teleporters are on their way."

He had hardly finished speaking when three figures appeared simultaneously out of nowhere. These were the mousebeaver Pucky along with teleporters Tako Kakuta and Ras Tschubai. They were probably the most talented members of the Mutant Corps and they worked quickly with hardly a superfluous word.

"Claudrin is swinging back in 30 seconds—his 4th pass!" announced Pucky in his shrill, high voice. "I'll take you and Perry. Tako, the girl. Ras gets Tama. All set? Hold on tight around our necks—it's a long jump!"

Rhodan came out of his trance, which also brought me back to action. We grasped hands and then what happened is something I shall probably never be able to comprehend naturally. Pucky's uncanny teleporting powers took the place of what the Akons could only do with the help of their gigantic transmitter equipment. But the little fellow had the advantage of not having to depend upon a receiving station. Something seemed to explode in my brain and there was a moment of pulling pain but before I could sense it fully, everything became bright before me and I had 'landed'.

Jefe Claudrin's massive figure appeared in my field of vision. He gave me a brief nod, just as if I had merely left the Control Central to get a drink of water. Close behind us came the other teleporters—Auris utterly confused, Tama Yokida heading at once for his action post. Rhodan also sprang into action. Almost before getting his bearings correctly he was already giving commands.

After hardly giving me more than a friendly smile, Pucky started to waddle away on his short, powerful little legs. "That was class, eh?" he chirped. "100,000 kilometres, man—some milk run!"

I was reminded of the mousebeaver's characteristic playfulness. In spite of circumstances I could almost forgive him when I thought of the daring missions that this 3-foot-high little creature had gone through

I remained seated on the floor, still exhausted. Auris slowly got to her knees, her face as pale as a ghost. She looked at me imploringly and I managed to smile at her. I wanted to say a few kind words to her and explain that our escape plus the appearance of the *Ironduke* were not as alarming as she might perhaps think they were but at that moment the alarms began to shrill.

"Fleet Chief now in command!" blared the loudspeakers.

Rhodan was already seated in the Commodore chair, Jefe Claudrin close beside him. Reports were coming in from the central control stations for machinery, engines and weapons. One of the hypersensors began to roar. The flat curve on the scope indicated a minor warp-shock.

"Tracking to Commander—space station has activated a transmitter. Assume crew has evacuated—over and out!

I knew that this was true. The five technicians had only been waiting for us to leave. But this meant that Rhodan had nothing to hold him now. Auris sank back to the deck in tears. Nobody was watching us. The tall soldiers of Terra had their hands full. They had hardly had time to acknowledge the return of their Chief. Here and there I noticed a fleeting wink, a glance from the corner of an eye, perhaps a chuckle of satisfaction. That was all. It was enough to know that he was back on board.

The *Ironduke*'s power converters suddenly thundered louder and seconds later the space station's first salvos blasted against the high-tension screens of Earth's most modern battleship. The *Ironduke* recovered easily. Only the outer layer of the 3-ply screen revealed an 80% drain of its absorption capacity.

A tremendously precise war machine sprang into action. No commands were shouted, no one spoke louder than was absolutely necessary. Everything was carried out calmly and with disciplined efficiency. For the Terrans it was no more than a practice manoeuvre to fly toward the unmanned space station and prepare their fire for exactly the right moment.

"Broadside red—fire!" said Rhodan into his microphone.

The *Ironduke* transformed itself into a fire-spewing monster. The hard recoil of the red batteries knocked me back on the deck where the vibrating armour-steel plates seemed to be in the grip of an earthquake. The roaring and thundering repeat salvos, chattering almost like titanic machineguns, threatened to tear the ship apart. I thought an eternity passed while I listened to this infernal racket but the whole thing only lasted three seconds. Then the *Ironduke* was past the target, flying at half speed, and the space station ceased to be a miracle of technology.

It took 48 seconds for the light to reach us. The stern viewscreens finally flared with a blinding light. I had seen many a spaceship explosion but this was much more like the birth of a minor star. An ultra-bright ball of blue fire seemed to sear the faintly iridescent fabric of the system-spanning energy screen and suddenly a great rift began to expand in the barrier wall. This time the crew yelled with enthusiasm because suddenly the star-strewn blackness of outer space could be seen beyond the bluish veil.

Auris sobbed and buried her face in her hands, which caused me to feel terribly helpless. Rhodan glanced up at the large ship's chronometer. By Terra time it was 00:32 hours.

"Where is the next one, Col. Claudrin?" asked Rhodan coldly. "I hope you've tracked a few more stations. Where is the Fleet?"

The Epsalian answered swiftly. 5,000 Terran units were out there beyond the screen and they harboured within themselves an additional 4,000 fast interceptors and destroyers. They were in striking position, only waiting for a rift in the barrier screen. And now it was there.

Within 18 minutes the second orbiting power station was destroyed. The great rent in the outer screen widened considerably. Shortly thereafter we were hailed by Reginald Bell, Rhodan's Solar Deputy Administrator and provisional Commander-in-Chief of the 'normal' Fleet. He was about to enter the Blue System with 14 Terran superbattleships of the Imperium class. His message was short. He was purely businesslike and managed to conceal his great relief over Rhodan's rescue.

Rhodan instructed him over the hypercom. "You are not to attack any planets or other celestial bodies in this solar system under any circumstances. However all space stations recognizable as power projectors for the blue defence screen are to be destroyed. Such stations are unmanned. The small technical crews are able to get to safety through their transmitters. You may engage any attacking spaceships. Repeat and confirm!"

8 minutes later the first of the Terran space giants penetrated the unprotected solar system of Akon. Behind them came the swift heavy cruiser squadrons followed by light cruisers of the State class. I wasn't able to determine what other light spacecraft might be moving into this work of destruction but later I could recall staggering as in a trance to the hypercom console to contact the Chief Admiral of the Arkonide robot fleet.

I couldn't believe my ears. The Regent had launched 30,000 ships of the heavy and super-class types just to pull the Emperor, Gonozal VIII, out of a very tight scrape. 30,000 ships—it was too much to grasp all at once! I also had my fleet fly into the system but I deployed the ships into picket positions in a battle-free sector of interplanetary space. This was all I could do from my side to bring the situation under control.

The Terran ships experienced 18 separate attacks by Akon units. We knew they had to be the few spaceships of the Energy Command which had been ordered by the Ruling Council to enter a completely hopeless battle. On Akon 5, known as the planet Sphynx or Drorah, they seemed to be utterly desperate. There was no other way to explain such suicidal action.

As for the power space stations, Rhodan's commanders tracked them down one after another. They practically made a game of it, going into increasingly complex approach patterns before shooting them out of their orbits. Within a space of 6 hours, 3,407 of the massive power plants had been turned into atomic infernos. The former Blue System was now as normal as any other, except that it had now acquired about 3,000 artificial suns out just beyond the farthest planetary orbit. Owing to some highly refined catalytic carbon process they didn't look as though they were going to bum out.

10 hours later I pulled in the Arkonide Fleet to closer positions and the units were soon re-deploying at half lightspeed toward all inhabited planets in the system, where they formed their blockades in accordance with regulation containment procedures. Thus the Sword of Damocles hung over the various life centres in the form of a combined fleet formation.

If now there should be one misunderstanding of commands... one false move... the smallest error...?

I left the hypercom station and went back to join Rhodan. The *Ironduke* was in a close orbit around the 5th planet. Perry sat in his high-backed chair and concentrated his gaze on the giant screens of the panob gallery. Some of the female members of the Mutant Corps were taking care of Auris.

As I came into the area the Terran officers acknowledged me. I felt tired and drained. The past hours of crisis had been exceptionally rough. I watched the viewscreens in silence. Curiously, nothing was happening! We knew for certain that formidable surface fortresses threatened us but apparently they had not received their firing orders.

So far the Akons had not suffered any casualties except for those few whom the Akon government had sacrificed in a kamikaze attempt. The space stations had been empty of any humanoid life, as we had been able to detect through the continuous warp-shocks from activated transmitters. However if there were any new hostilities now, not only would their fortresses go up in smoke but moons and mighty planets as well. My eyes sought Rhodan's face. The two of us studied each other for some time in silence and he finally broke into a smile.

But then came Auris, appearing behind us with tearful face. "We could have killed you—but we didn't!" she half stammered, as though to make us change our minds.

I had to explain to her, first of all, that there was nothing she had to dissuade us from, because we had no intention of attacking the planets. However I reminded her that the galaxy certainly did contain a number of intelligences who might be differently inclined. In a case such as ours, aware of holding a quite formidable opponent at bay, they would not have hesitated to strike the final blow.

Rhodan spoke to her, calmly and succinctly. "Auris of Las-Toor—you may thank your lucky stars that your Council chairman did not decide to assassinate either Atlan or myself. In such an event, right now there would be no more of your Akon Empire! I will have one of my officers take you down to the 5th planet in one of our scout ships. I am demanding a full capitulation. You may inform the members of the Ruling Council that I should be quite happy if I have succeeded in destroying the source of their exaggerated presumption and arrogance—meaning their orbiting power stations. I demand an assurance that you will never again try to attack us without warning from ambush and that you will henceforth abstain from any such underhanded methods. Further: I demand that unrestricted commercial and trade relationships be opened between yourselves and our respective star systems; and along with that we want the details of Akon linear spacedrive. That's about it. You will be leaving in 10 minutes."

She drew herself up in unexpected hauteur and stared down at him. This unpredictable Terran had finally turned the tables. Now he was demanding from them the details of their hyper-propulsion system, which in its design was considerably more simplified than the Terran version. She was even moved to smile. Apparently she sensed the tragicomical irony of the situation.

"Is that *all* ... Your Excellency?"

He only nodded and she departed. Her escort was Maj. Hunts Krefenbac, First Officer of the *Ironduke*. In a late-model space-jet he chauffeured the lady down to the 5th planet below us.

* * * *

We waited 7 hours, which I took advantage of to get some much-needed sleep.

Just prior to this, the Akons had made contact with us and asked for a truce and I in my capacity as

Imperator of the Arkonide Empire had made my counter demands. I insisted on a political recognition of the Imperium, an official confirmation of my rank and a final relinquishment of Akon claims to power or jurisdiction, which had become illusory anyway. In addition I also demanded a submission of all data concerning the Akon linear spacedrive.

Rhodan had looked at me with a slight frown during this demand but he finally decided to say nothing. Only Col. Claudrin had chuckled at this because he also comprehended. Why should Terrans alone possess this marvellous translight equipment? I was convinced that I would soon be able to convert the Arkon 3 assembly lines.

It was some time later after I had slept that Krefenbac contacted us over the videocom. He informed us of the Ruling Council's response. They were in agreement with all conditions except one: they did not wish to surrender the details of the linear propulsion system.

This we rejected with icy finality and we gave them an ultimatum of 3 hours, Terra time.

Shortly before the termination of this deadline we received their final capitulation. All of our surrender terms were accepted. Shortly thereafter the space-jet brought us 4 authorized members of the Council. Rhodan and I received them with cool politeness. I had never seen such a troubled and crestfallen delegation.

The covenants of the accord were drawn up and signed. Auris was also present.

Once we had this taken care of, the first Terran and Arkonide warships landed on the central world of my true ancestors. I had arrived at the starting point where the first emigrants had begun their great peregrination. Rhodan personally inspected the area designated, according to agreements, for the commercial trading base—which of course would not take long to develop into a fleet stronghold at the galactic core. We figured it wouldn't hurt anything to meet the Akons face to face but after a few hours I withdrew. The reception of the Ruling Council did not interest me. Rhodan had worn his plain service uniform as usual. I called for a shuttlecraft from the Arkonide Fleet flagship and ordered the pilot to take me back out into space.

I remember shaking hands with Rhodan in the airlock of the commuter craft. The Blue System stretched above us from horizon to horizon. Number 5 was a beautiful, Earthlike world. The First Administrator was speaking to me reflectively.

"Do you know, friend, it's a beautiful feeling to have won without any bloodshed to speak of. Do you think these people have finally gotten the idea that they caught the wrong tigers by the tail?"

He went away chuckling to himself. As I watched him go my eyes were burning because I was only an Arkonide Imperator for whom the binding chains of ceremony were waiting, as ever.

I turned slowly into the airlock. After all, I was still a sad old hound dog!

ORDER OF THE ACTION

1/ SAD DOG DICTATOR

2/ THE BRAIN'S INNER SANCTUM

3/ THE GREAT HYPER-CAPER

4/ PURSUIT IN LIMBO

5/ PERRY'S ATYPICAL ACTION

6/ THE FIGHT FOR TIME

7/ IRONDUKE BREAKS THROUGH

8/ THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE BLUE SYSTEM

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