

## **BLIND LEADING THE BLIND**

*The Antis , servants of the galaxy-wide Baalol cult they have been busy with a 10-year plan of terror!*

*Investigations made on the planet Lepso by the agents of Division 3 have already clearly shown what terrible consequences this plan can have, affecting all Humanity as well as other galactic civilizations.*

*Once more the smuggler planet of Lepso is the scene of action—but this time it isn't a matter of minor intelligence missions. Now the entire Solar Fleet as well as the forces of Arkon are committed to a course which can lead to galactic war!*

### **Blockade: Lepso**

#### **1/ THE SMILING MAN OF LEPSO**

UNKNOWN.

He was a man unknown to himself.

Unexpectedly, on this day the old puzzle was brought to light by a new one.

Dr. Edmond Hugher had just settled quite comfortably in his favourite form-chair. He was nicely stretched out with his feet propped up on a footstool and was holding the weekend edition of the *Terrania Post* in his lap. About the only thing that interested him in this bulky Sunday paper, however, was the crossword puzzle.

This was the good doctor's little side hobby because it helped the quiet, friendly man to even forget his more serious labours at times—especially when he worked on really high-quality puzzles. In his opinion the *Terrania Post* carried the best puzzles available. This particular one had been a challenge to him but he almost had it completed—all but two words.

No.45 horizontal: decorative encasement for weapons... 9 letters. He already had letters R and T in the 3rd and 4th spaces. No.109 vertical: Icelandic form of wrestling... 5 letters. All he had was the letter I in 3rd position.

Dr. Hugher groaned aloud to himself. That's the way it always was with these puzzles in the *Terrania Post* : a couple of final sticklers, almost impossible to answer. Not unless a person were to turn to Centre and request help from the positronic lexicon. But that was what Hugher always avoided. He was determined to solve these puzzles by himself.

"Arkkonklegga! By the gods of Arkon!" he muttered. "What is a decorative encasement for weapons?" He was not aware of having spoken the exclamation in Interkosmo whereas the question had been uttered in English. "And what are they getting at with an *Icelandic* form of wrestling?"

He looked up from the newspaper for a moment and his thoughts drifted off. He was reminded fleetingly of his work which definitely had to be finished today.

"Oh for Heaven's sake, of course! *Cartouche!*" Pretty sneaky of them not to hint that the word would be French. He chuckled contentedly and used his finger to count the letters of *cartouche*. There were 9 of them, just what he needed, and it now gave him A as the 5th vertical letter. And even as he marked in the word, the name came to him which described the Icelandic wrestling: *glima*.

This in itself was a puzzle. "Glima," he said aloud. "Now where did *that* come from? How is it that I have such an unusual knowledge of Terran languages?"

He lowered the newspaper while his thoughts began to drift into his past. He recalled that he had once been a very sick man but just what kind of illness it was had never been explained to him by the doctors on Arkon.

"It's a miracle that you've recovered at all, Hugher," they had told him. "Unfortunately we cannot guarantee that other brain injuries won't show up with the passage of time."

At the time he had ignored the remark—which had been 58 years ago. True, people called him Edmond Hugher, but was he in fact such a person? Often he thought he had a recollection of his parents and brothers and sisters, yet he had never been able to actually visualize his father and mother. Their features had always been vague and indiscernible in his memory. Had he not had three brothers? But he wasn't even able to say what planet he had been born on and he was even less certain of whether or not he had ever really had three brothers.

Everything beyond or before those 58 years was obscured by a nebulous veil.

Where was I born?—he thought. Certainly I am not Arkonide, Ekhonide, Springer or Ara, yet I seem to have inherited something from each of those races. But what is the root source of the other part of me?

Dr. Edmond Hugher removed his feet from the footstool and the form-chair automatically adjusted itself to his new position. In the same moment the pressing thoughts of his past came to an end. He was not aware that an invisible shroud had settled over the door of memory that the word *glima* had momentarily opened.

Of course his thoughts still lingered in his yesterdays but now they were limited to only the past 58 years. He saw himself working on Zalit, at first as an assistant. Later they gave him more responsible assignments but he still remained an assistant, never seeming to advance very much. Always they put some dim-witted Arkonide ahead of him and his protests were of no avail. He could not fight their system of nepotism. Realizing this, he had sought to make contact with non-Arkonides and finally was pleased to accept the offer of a Springer clan, whereby he could work for them as a merchant chief in one of their planetary trading settlements.

But Arkon had put its foot down and ruined everything. They pointed out the binding clause in his contract which stated that one Dr. Hugher had voluntarily pledged himself to dedicate all of his labours to Arkon, on the planet Zalit. In those days he had already developed the smile that was characteristic of him today. With an almost disturbing affability he explained that he had forgotten about that part of the

agreement and so he returned as industriously as before to his activities on Zalit.

And then one day in his living quarters he was astounded to encounter his own smiling likeness standing before him. At first he could not believe his eyes and his natural reaction was to take hold of his second self and examine him from all sides. He finally had to admit that this robotic imitation of him was complete in every detail.

There in his room sat Laoo-o, who was supposed to have been dead for 20 years. Laoo-o, an official of the Baalol cult, had come here with the robot and forced an entry into Hugher's dwelling. He proceeded to lure him with an offer of a trip to Aralon, at the cult's expense, where he would be given the opportunity to study medicine on the central world of the Aras.

"Hugher, your absence will not be noticed," he said. "Your robot likeness here will insure that you will not be missed. It goes without saying, of course, that we aren't doing this out of pure altruism. After you've finished your studies we will expect you to work for the Baalol cult. For more than two years now we've been observing you here on Zalit and we've been able to secretly check your work. Edmond Hugher, your labours are misplaced. We, the god priests, wish to guide you into a field of activity which is more suitable to your natural capacities."

Dr. Hugher had never been able to forget that scene. Often as though in a dream the stern face of Laoo-o had appeared to him. What it had boiled down to was that after some back and forth discussion he had vanished in the direction of Aralon, helped by the god priest. On Zalit his robot imitation had taken his place. With the dreamy smile of a child he had begun his studies there.

Driven for months by the fear of being a failure in this advanced work, he had gradually and imperceptibly gotten well into the new studies, until in his second year he was publicly praised by the famous haematologist Ur-gif.

Now Hugher recalled how he had been scrutinized by his fellow Ara students from every side. So far they had not seriously considered this eternally affable and smiling dreamer in their midst. He had always remained in the background and had never once attempted to make a showing in any form. But now this Ara professor Ur-gif had praised him in front of everybody for his little treatise, *Hematophobia—Pathological Fear of Blood Among the Ekhonides*, and thus Edmond Hugher had been proclaimed as a gifted student who showed much promise.

Because of his shyness this praise had been embarrassing to him. He was teased more than ever after that by his fellow students who could somehow never quite reach this ever quiet, ever friendly man. And so Edmond Hugher had withdrawn all the more and came to know nothing except his studies.

But never once did he lose contact with the god priests. Laoo-o kept visiting him incessantly and it was only seldom that another came in his place—which was invariably the one called Tu-poa, a very young Baalol fanatic.

The normal study course on Aralon took 3 or 4 years but Edmond Hugher kept at it for fully 9 years. When he finally came up for his special oral examination he remembered standing before 20 famous Ara professors who congratulated him on his written exams and excused him from the oral. They all shook hands with him but the last hand he grasped was that of Laoo-o.

Ever since then Hugher had been here on Lepso and he had never regretted having worked for the Baalol cult. He finally came out of his daydreaming of the past and returned to the present. He smiled at himself and his musings until his gaze drifted again to the *Terrania Post*. He had not yet entered the word

*glima* into the squares.

"So," he said while printing in the letters, "we did it again!"

But he still wished he knew what quirk of fate had enabled him to know Terran languages so well. Of course there was only one answer: on Aralon he must have been exposed to more in the hypno-schooling than he had expected. They had probably run him through the extensive linguistic courses which had included all Terran languages and their colloquial expressions. *Glima*? An obscure Icelandic word. Almost impossible that he could have known it—but *hedid* know it and that was what wrapped up the fun for the day.

Dr. Edmond Hugher stretched his arms and yawned heartily. It was nice of them to always keep sending him the *Terrania Post* so that he could pursue his hobby. He was already looking forward to the next crossword puzzle.

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It was time for the commercials. Ever since television had come into use there had always been commercials. It made little difference whether the TV stations were located in the Solar Imperium or in the stellar empire of Arkon. On all inhabited worlds the various intelligences were in the grip of this suggestive salesmanship, from which they could never escape.

Yet it was surprising that today the 'braintrust' was suffering thin the commercials in a deliberate gathering, which consisted of no less than Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bell, Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant and Nike Quinto.

Just now the holo was extolling the virtues of *Fertilux*. This was a miracle fertilizer that promised uncanny results. According to the claim just made by the female announcer, the stuff could even replace the natural work of earthworms.

Nike Quinto was making a mental appraisal. The young lady had such a pretty appearance—with those big honest eyes and perfect gestures, how could she be telling a lie? Ye gods but they were slick with these swindles! Because they were effective!

Bell was strictly on the defensive. Not satisfied with silent analysis, he voiced his opinion out loud: "A heap o' rubbish!"

Then came the topper. The tradename *Yttigitt* appeared on the screen. *Yttigitt* was indispensable to any household.

"Consider what you would do if your son melted open your frigidoor with his toy blaster..."

"I'd tan his hide!" growled Bell angrily. "Great galaxies, Perry, nothing's changed in 150 years! Same old blonk!"

But the announcer was not disturbed by Bell's agitated objection. His presentation continued. "*Yttigittis* applied with our special applicator. It works almost with an intelligence of its own. Then you take the

spraygun, adjust it for colour, spray on the film and presto!—the damage has been erased! You don't even have to scold your son. Thus you see that *Yttigitt* can even avoid a childish trauma as the result of constant scolding—and naturally you want to have happy and healthy children. This is why *Yttigitt* belongs in every household!"

"They're all just as dangerous!" yelled Bell, completely beside himself. "That's not advertising. With this kind of idiocy they'll drive half the galaxy insane!"

"Hold it, my chubby friend," continued Rhodan. "I think it's coming now."

The face of a woman appeared who seemed to be quite withered with age. In this part of the commercial the sound portion appeared to be dead. But when the full name of the woman appeared on the screen and further undertitles explained where she was born, plus her present address, it was obvious that the sound and music had been suppressed for emphasis.

The picture changed and millions of viewers were suddenly looking at a young woman. Again the subtitles appeared, revealing what everyone had already guessed: it was the same woman, gloriously rejuvenated, without a wrinkle, beaming with health.

Then a single sentence was spoken: "You, too, should try *Liquitiv* ."

Superimposed over the young woman's face an elegantly designed bottle was seen to hurtle forward from the background into a full-frame view. It bore no label—just the faintly fluorescent monogram: *Liquitiv* .

There was a transitional dissolve and another product was presented. Mercant turned off the TV receiver.

"Well, Mr. Bell, was that commercial more proper and sedate for you?"

The stocky and temperamental Deputy Administrator glared at Mercant but contrary to expectations he remained silent. Rhodan picked up some papers from his desk and handed them to his friend.

"For your information, Bell," he said.

The first report was from the head office of the General Cosmic Company. There were only a few lines of text at the top, which left more room for the ensuing columns of figures. It was a clear and businesslike presentation of data showing how much *Liquitiv* liqueur had been brought into the Solar Imperium during recent years.

Bell's hand shook slightly as he laid the paper aside. The next document was a transcript of record which gave an abbreviated extract of the most important depositions from the 48 men who had been liberated on Lepso.

After a large number of the names was an 'X'

Dead.

Bell could feel the eyes of Rhodan, Mercant and Quinto on him as he read one of the transcribed statements:

*The first time I drank the liqueur was toward the end of the year 2090 or the beginning of 2091. When after the third time I could see for myself that there was an improvement, I went on with it. My whole appearance was youthful and I felt rejuvenated both physically and mentally. So I was taking Liquitiv regularly twice a day. As a doctor I kept myself under observation over a period of 6 months. When that period ended and I could not detect the slightest sign of any side effects. I knew that it was safe and effective. I was quite enthusiastic in recommending it to all my friends and acquaintances. I told them it was an extremely effective means of energizing and activating the cells of the body...*

To some extent Bell had already become familiar with these affidavits but somehow when reading them in this abbreviated and compact form they suddenly had the effect of an invisible threat. Each of the victims had emphasized one basic observation: *completely harmless, no side effects, astounding rejuvenation phenomena.*

Following these testimonies were technical reports in which the results of investigation of more than 20 clinics had been recorded. Bell skipped the issue dates of the data sent out by the clinics, so he failed to note that all reports were already a few years old.

He had only worked his way through half of the documents before he laid them down and heaved a sigh of discouragement "I just can't understand it—I mean this really loses me! What are these clinics thinking of?—excellent rejuvenator, completely harmless! They should have been with us on Lepso when we picked up 48 hopelessly incurable human wrecks—all of them strung out on *Liquitiv*. I just can't accept such a contradiction. Do you think maybe a different *Liquitiv* gets to the Solar Imperium than the kind that shows up in other interstellar markets?"

Nike Quinto answered him. "We've looked into that, Mr. Bell. We went even further and made a comparative study, using the same test samples but giving them another complete chemical analysis. This means starting with the first *Liquitiv* samples on the two-year rotation of testing in the clinic. Then finally we took two cc's from each of the last batch of 200 bottles and tested them the same way. Here you can see the results on the last page: *month in and month out, the same type and quality of Liquitiv comes to Earth!* The chemical composition is always the same.

"Hm-m-m..." Bell grunted sceptically. "I'd say this stuff isn't worth talking about—if most of the 48 addicts hadn't died on our hands. Anyway, assuming all these reports are valid as far as they go, why hasn't an attempt been made to test special control groups? I mean getting them to drop the stuff after they've been on it for a few years. After a few months if they stop showing signs of addiction, then at least we'd be one step farther along."

Rhodan laughed bitterly. "Listen, Reggie, the attempt was made a long time ago but there were no takers. You should read this little instruction brochure that comes with each bottle—then you'll see why. Go ahead—read it!"

Among other things in the brochure, the final statement caught his eye especially: *We call your attention particularly to the fact that if the scheduled course of treatment is interrupted the entire rejuvenating process may be jeopardized. Whether or not this would then result in injuries to the health depends upon the individual's physical constitution.*

"So on the basis of this there haven't been any volunteers so far?" asked Bell.

Quinto nodded.

A call came through from the hypercom station. The urgent signal code meant that Atlan—Arkon's Emperor Gonozal VIII—was seeking contact with Perry Rhodan. This was not surprising, however, because only 10 hours before Rhodan had cautioned the Arkonide for the first time concerning the mysterious Liquitiv.

The intellectually sensitive features of the ancient but still young Arkonide appeared on the slightly convex screen. At a single glance Atlan perceived who else was present with the First Administrator. So after a brief greeting he came to the point.

"Perry, at the present moment I'm being swamped with emergency reports. When I sent a general radio bulletin of inquiry to the worlds of the Arkon Imperium, I had not expected such a massive response. What's been pouring in here during the past hour is close to being a catastrophe. Without exaggeration I can tell you that the entire stellar empire is contaminated with Liquitiv—it's a plague! I found out that it's already deeply rooted on various colonial worlds where we have no scheduled space traffic or frequent contacts. The fears you expressed to me in our previous conversation have been realized long ago in all such areas. There is such a raging mania there for this liqueur that I was actually horrified. For example in the Fal System, planet 0.56 reports 218 cases of death in the past week, due to addiction—running amuck, screaming delirium, physical deterioration—everything you can imagine. They have a population of about 3 million there and two-thirds of them are yelling for this poison!

"That's only a sample, Perry. I could give you hundreds more. I've asked the robot Brain about it, without results. I've alerted the Aras and have engaged them in slightly more than just plain talk. They claim that they're faced with a mystery themselves because this mania is also evident on the worlds of the Galactic Medicos—except that no cases of death have been reported.

"More and more I'm inclined to agree with your suspicion that it's the Baalols. This is a planned assault of the Antis. And as for Lepso, we know it's a nest of swindlers and pirate racketeers. It wouldn't be the first time it's been the centre of dangerous agitation. But it will be hard to prove that the Antis are selling poison instead of a bio-elixir; and according to my own intelligence sources Lepso isn't the only planet that's shipping Liquitiv."

Rhodan broke in with a question: "Atlan, how many points of distribution have you located in star cluster M-13?"

"So far my Secret Service has only traced three transshipment locations. It's possible the Liquitiv is flown to such points from Lepso, Perry. But it's also conceivable that the liqueur may be produced on a planet we don't know about as yet. But whichever way this thing develops I'd like to support your plan to cut off the most important worlds of our respective stellar domains. With a concentration of fleet task forces we can make sure they don't get a single flask of that devil's juice from here on in.

"Solar Intelligence will be coming up shortly with a detailed plan for Terran zones of interest and they'll be passing it on to you for your information. In case it becomes necessary I'd like to handle Lepso myself. But what do your findings show for the other point in question, Atlan?"

This was the question that Reginald Bell, Mercant and Nike Quinto had been waiting for.

"Nothing of much importance, Barbarian," said Atlan. It seemed at this moment, however, that he was acutely aware of the vast distance of 34000 light-years that separated the Crystal Palace from the Earth. "Cardif is still on Zalit as usual and still tends to his work as an assistant. But you're still not satisfied with that information, I can see."

Rhodan stared gravely at the Arkonide. "Atlan, I'd be very happy with your report except for a certain fly in the ointment. Dr. Arnim Zuglert has told us about a very affable, smiling man on Lepso who goes by the name of Edmond Hugher. He happens to be in the service of the god priests there—and over 12 years ago he's been known to admit that he's been doing scientific work in connection with the liqueur."

"I'm aware of those facts, Perry." Atlan showed his concern because he was aware of this rate state of extreme agitation Rhodan got into whenever his son Thomas Cardif was involved. "I happen to have the photograph you sent me of this happy smiling man you mention, Perry. Perhaps you fear that he may be your son? Alright then, have a look at the real article and do your own comparing!"

On the viewscreen appeared the picture of a young man who had probably just passed his 30th year—at least by all outward appearances. Atlan's voice came over the hypercom speaker. "*This* is your son, Perry—the same person who's been observed working on the Arkonide planet Zalit for the past 58 years. Now, does that reassure you?"

Rhodan's three companions joined him in looking at the photo. It was obvious that the face of the man on the screen no longer possessed its amazing likeness to that of his father yet the unmistakable features still indicated plainly that this was Perry Rhodan's son. While the picture was still there, Atlan spoke again.

"Perry, I've had it explained to me why this tremendous similarity between you and Thomas has largely disappeared in the course of almost 6 decades. The synthetic alteration of his personality has turned him into another person. His dreaming smile is stronger than ever after 58 years. But this other photo now—the one you sent me that's supposed to be a certain Dr. Edmond Hugher—this is the face of a stranger. I can't understand Mercant, who took one look at it and insisted that it was Thomas Cardif. This vapid flat stupid smile doesn't reveal a single feature that has any relationship to you whatsoever!"

The photo disappeared from the screen, to be replaced by Emperor Gonozal VIII. "Well, my friend, so you veil yourself in silence? Very well, but I must call your attention to a fact that in my opinion you attribute too little importance to. Perry, you must not forget that an Arkonide psycholator changed your son's mind and personality. An alteration of this kind never changes! After 100 years it will be exactly as strong as on the first day. By the gods of Arkon, why am I doing all the talking, Perry? Since his old self was blocked out, your son has been living on Zalit. My Secret Service and your Solar Intelligence have had him under constant surveillance and that should be proof enough that Thomas could not have left the planet and that he is still there!"

"Atlan, I hope you turn out to be right—but whatever: send a special unit to Zalit and have them investigate Thomas—check him out by the most stringent methods if you have to. As your friend, I am asking this of you."

"Well, I'll be damned!" With that expletive the Arkonide again betrayed his long association with Terrans. "Perry, that unsurpassed stubbornness of yours has got me worried now! Alright, I'll have Thomas examined. We'll throw the book at him. I'll let you know the results. So now I'm waiting for the blockade plan from your Intelligence team. I'll want to coordinate my own activities with yours. Incidentally: is that commercial for Liquitiv still running on television in the Sol System?"

"Yes, Arkonide, but only until we announce our blockade and we have every planet so tightly ringed in that not even a one-man interceptor can get through."

"Then I'll do the same here."



The hypercom transmission came to an end. Rhodan went back to his place at the desk.

"Mercant," he said to the Solar Marshal, "give me that photo again that you got from Zuglert."

Mercant riffled through his files. He took out the picture and handed it to his Chief. How often Perry Rhodan had looked at this photo in the past few days and how often he had been assailed by doubts!

The man who looked at Rhodan from the print had slightly puffy features which were somehow empty and vague, accentuated by a fixed smile. He didn't seem to have any sign of real character—not the slightest similarity to his father.

"Mercant, to think of all the hours of worry this picture has cost me! And how often I've asked myself whatever made you think this was my son. I know you've told me that you don't know the reason for your hunch. I can accept that; it often hits me that way too... But that's all the further I get." He made a helpless gesture and handed the photo back to Mercant. "This man doesn't say anything to me; yet the uneasiness I feel is unusual. Alright, Mercant, go work out your blockade plan. Have Freyt work on it with you. I have to have it by tonight. Every hour we gain may save 10 or 20 thousand more lives. Col. Quinto, I still have to talk with you. Bell, I'd like to have you in on this. Anything else, Mercant?"

"Yessir." Mercant got up and reached for his papers but as he did so the photo fell out onto the desk. Dr. Edmond Hugher—according to Zuglert who had been condemned to die—a scientist working on Lepso, a specialist in the Liquitiv sector.

"Hold it!" yelled Rhodan. "Don't move! Stand where you are!"

None of the three men knew what the Chief was thinking of but then they noticed that he was staring intently at the photo. After a moment or two he slowly approached the desk.

"Gone!" his colleagues heard him say. He wearily stroked his forehead and handed the picture to Mercant. "Now I know why you recognized Thomas *atone glance*. Just now I also recognized him. Yes, gentlemen, in a single glance! And when I edged closer to the picture it was again the face of a stranger... But—what did you want to say, Mercant? I interrupted you."

Rhodan had recovered from his shock faster than the others. Bell stared wide-eyed at him, not knowing how poignantly his head-shaking was expressing his hope that Perry had been mistaken.

"Sir, I wanted to ask you to have the robot Brain on Arkon 3 send us everything it has in its registers concerning the Fering System and Lepso. That was all."

"You will have all the data in an hour, Mercant. Colonel, please come along with me now—and you, too, Bell."

He led the way out ahead of them. Mercant left Rhodan's office by a different door. He wasn't thinking just now of the task he had to perform; he was still shaken by the fact Rhodan had also recognized his son in the photo.

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Dr. Edmond Hugher left his living quarters, which were located at the end of the rectangular building complex. He stepped into the street and walked slowly toward the temple pyramid which loomed above the centre of the temple city as a massive monument. The vast pile exuded an aura of power, also advertising that the Baalol cult was obviously as wealthy as it was mysterious.

Hugher had never found any interest in such mysteries, however. He didn't even know what he was, whether atheist or believer. He might have been a fanatical follower of some religious sect or an eclectic open to any faith. If he had any life he saw it in his work. The mysteries he sought to unveil were those of Nature herself, through science.

Not even Tu-poa, the young fanatic, had tried to make him become a member of the Baalol cult. But he kept coming to visit him and was always discussing the progress of his series of experiments. Tu-poa was not only a priest, he was also a doctor of medicine, but he did not have that intuitive insight which had often enabled Hugher to reduce problems to their least common denominator—in fact with consummate ease and confidence. Besides the priests themselves, the quietly-smiling and ever-affable Dr. Edmond Hugher was considered to be the most important person inside the temple area.

So he walked leisurely over to the temple, passing out his usual friendly greetings to right and left. Almost everyone he met was an acquaintance of his but not a single one was his friend. He found no need to form any friendships, no more than he had during his student days on Aralon. And so he continued in his same self-absorbed existence.

However, where his position and work were concerned, these were in sharp contrast to his private life. He was Chief of the Medical Section and was in charge of the final production of pharmaceuticals. He determined and supervised all the production lots. Nothing went out of the temple area without his permission. He worked with the precision of a positronic inspection system. His perspective of all interrelated activities, whether pertaining to medicine or technology, was regarded as phenomenal.

In all the extensive area of the temple there was not one living creature, humanoid or otherwise, who had ever seen him go into a rage or shout in anger at them. His friendliness was dispensed to all in exactly equal proportions. And one other characteristic of Hugher was remarkable: his gratefulness to the Antis who had helped him to get away from Zalit and become a doctor on Aralon.

His appreciation was boundless and he placed it above all else. More or less unconsciously he had taken refuge in a state of dependency and had developed the false ethic that the Antis could do no wrong and that as a doctor it was his duty to carry out the assignments they gave him.

With a friendly greeting he entered his work laboratory. Two priests looked up from their labours and returned the greeting. He calmly took his place behind his desk and went through the foils of reports that had been neatly laid out for his inspection. At a single glance he picked out the most important items, which then became a permanent part of his memory.

Dr. Edmond Hugher did not suspect that there was one other in the galaxy with this faculty for grasping the essentials of many pieces of data at a glance and being able to process and retain them: his father, Perry Rhodan, First Administrator of the Solar Imperium.

Now he looked over at U-za. "U-za, batch-lots 10.X-399 to 11.X-999 have to be loaded in two hours so that they can arrive on Terra no later than tonight."

The priest looked at him in some confusion as though he thought he had misunderstood him. Hugher

could only have meant the liqueur batches since he had a habit of never referring to the product by its name. Each individual lot of Liquitiv consisted of 1000 flasks containing 2 cc's of the fluid each. And the shipment he was to consign to Earth thus represented 4/5ths of their entire stock: 16 million standard units.

"T-moll," said Hugher congenially to the other priest, "please get in touch with Tu-poa and advise him about this. Would you kindly take this foil-sheet with you?"

T-moll didn't know yet what he was supposed to talk to the fanatic Tu-poa about but when he examined the foil-sheet more closely he realized the great importance of his assignment.

"And please call me from Tu-poa's extension when you have finished your conversation with him," Hugher added with his usual smile but already he was mentally estimating how much time it would take to bring up the reserve stock again to 20 million standard units.

In the meantime, U-za put in a call to the main spaceport of Lepso. The wrinkled face of an old Springer appeared on the viewscreen. The Galactic Trader grinned with satisfaction when he heard U-za's order.

"I'll send you the freight gliders right away," he said in his deep voice. "50 loaders ought to do it—275 batches each, right?"

U-za did some rapid calculations. "Better make that 60 sky-loaders, Singoll, just to be safe. What ship are you using to take this freight to Terra?"

"The SIN 9," the Springer answered proudly. "My newest spacer—not even a year old yet. This trans-shipment, you know, will be under Tariff D. I can't make it any cheaper." The Springers had never been known to be easy traders and they had no compunctions about exploiting even the Baalol cult.

Freight tariff D was the most exorbitant rate of all. U-za was already protesting when Hugher intervened from his desk with his friendly smile. "Accept tariff D, U-za. Springer Singoll will kindly prepare the freight bill immediately, please, and transmit it to us by radio."

Then he got up and again ignored U-za's astonished expression. "I'm going over to the process plant, U-za. If anyone asks for me I'll be in section p-54. Also, please call in my change of location to Centre, and give my regards to Springer Singoll."

In spite of his unfailing friendliness, Dr. Edmond Hugher did not have a single friend. With calm deliberation he left the room and without revealing any particular haste he went to section p-54. Here were 28 automated packing lines with 30 processing machines in each row of conveyors. Every processor handled 10 flasks per second, filling them with the liqueur, sealing them, counting them and packing them into the plastic cartons rolling by.

The foreman of section p-54 was a sinister-looking man from the planet Zalit. He greeted Dr. Hugher with exceptional politeness but his morose expression did not change when he spoke. Hugher passed the Zalite without stopping and went over to a stack of sealed cartons. He opened three of them and took a flask of liqueur from each. Shoving the opened cartons to one side, he proceeded onward unconcernedly.

At the end of the filler assembly lines he left the processing plant through a security door which he had to open with a complicated magnetic key. With a faint pneumatic sigh, the door closed behind him. Hugher found himself alone in a small laboratory. The entire setup was designed for inspection and testing of the

liqueur.

With the concentration of a man who was aware of the importance of his work, he began his first inspection. He moved a switch into position, adjusted several dials and kept his eyes for awhile on an oscilloscope indicator, after which he turned his attention to a digital counter. When the counter stopped clicking over he was able to see two groups of numbers that equalled each other. He inspected the 2nd and 3rd flasks in the same manner and in the same length of time. After that he left the inspection room and returned to section p-54 and foreman Magitt.

"Magitt, please increase all lines to cycle 8. We have until tomorrow morning to bring up the stock by 16 million units."

The Zalite was somewhat startled. "Production for Terra, Dr. Hugher?"

"Of course, my dear Magitt. What's the matter? Do you have any problems?"

"Not personally but there aren't enough flasks. If I go to cycle 8 this place will be at a standstill in just 3 hours. The next shipment of flasks won't get to Lepso until tonight—and that still doesn't get them in here where I'll need them."

"You have my sympathy, Magitt," Hugher replied, as friendly as ever. "This means you've made another error in your stock levels and it grieves me to have to report you to Central. Let's see now—isn't this the fourth time you've gone against my instructions? Believe me, Magitt, it weighs heavily on me to have to fulfil my duty because it's going to be very unpleasant for you. At any rate, I wish you a pleasant day."

As unperturbedly as he had arrived, Dr. Hugher left section p-54. No sooner had the door closed behind him than the Zalite uttered a sulphurous string of curses. "If only somebody would come here and twist that cardboard smile off his face!" he growled menacingly.

Meanwhile, Hugher had returned to his work lab. Before him was the radioed freight bill and manifest from Springer Singoll. Once again the ever-smiling man scanned all details in a single glance. He shoved the papers to his right and gave them a light-seal by pressing a contact button. Thereby the freight contract was legalized and the 16 million units of liqueur were as good as delivered to Earth.

Hugher then spoke to his assistant. "U-za, tell Centre that Magitt has disregarded inventory instructions for the 4th time. Then make a call to the 3rd planet of System Go-123. Get in touch with Algo-Essa. Tell him we've got to have more than 50 million plastic flasks in 5 hours at the latest, standard time. In this case, transportation costs are immaterial."

"Immaterial?" queried U-za.

"Immaterial," replied the friendly doctor but in his reddish Arkonide eyes was a sudden gleam that U-za had never noticed before.

At this moment, T-moll called in on Tu-poa's extension. "I've discussed everything with Tu-poa, Doctor. He is in agreement with your plan to flood the Crystal World with a mass shipment of Liquitiv just before the blockade is closed. This directive has had the approval of the Council. In this case you may take over the operation directly and with carte blanche concerning the expense. Tu-poa would like to know when the Liquitiv can be delivered to Arkon 1."

"By Lepso standard time: tomorrow noon, T-moll." Even Hugher's voice sounded dreamy now—but

such were not his thoughts. In his mind's eye he could see that everything was meshing together precisely. His plan was rounding out as calculated. The Terrans and Arkonides would be too late with their dirty preventive actions!

He was not sorry for them. After all, they had always been enemies of the cult. Now the retaliation would strike them hard and Edmond Hugher considered himself fortunate to be able to place the weapon in the hands of the servants of Baalol.

In the next moment he forgot both Terrans and Arkonides. Basically neither race was of interest to him. He wished to absorb himself in his work so that he might show his gratefulness to the priests who had made it possible for him to become a doctor.

He looked out the window into the desert but did not see it. He was daydreaming, attempting to visualize Iceland—where there was a traditional form of wrestling known as *aglîma* .

## 2/ ONE SMALL VOICE

The second planet orbiting the yellow star Fering was known as Lepso—the El Dorado of racketeers, swindlers and shady dealers. So far this planet had managed to retain its independence. Its inhabitants boasted of having the greatest freedom within the galaxy and there was many a wealthy Springer clan who could attest to this fact.

One of the unexplained features of this world was the fact that there were many powers, special-interest groups and influential intelligences within the Arkon Empire who offered their protective support to Lepso and who maintained a strict vigilance to see that its autonomous self-sufficiency was not violated.

The soulless robot Brain had designated Lepso as *acentre of anti-social power groups* and had presented examples of how many criminal intrigues, had had their beginnings there. But so far not even Arkon had succeeded in eliminating this sink of iniquity and on Lepso itself there was more of a sense of security than ever before.

Nowhere was there to be seen such a strange mixture of hybrid people and hybrid dealings as here. However it was taken for granted by all concerned except, perhaps, by those who first set foot on Lepso. Here cargoes were black-marketed or illegally misrouted, marvellously genuine-looking shipping documents were produced, counterfeit money was printed and bills of lading falsified.

But Lepso was not only the safest ground for shady characters; it was also a gigantic merchandise transshipment centre. There was row upon row of spaceports with repair docks lying next to each other in a virtual network of shipping industries. Although new ships were not built here, the yards were always busy. Whoever didn't dare to be seen on any other Arkon world for fear of being apprehended could spend all day here at his leisure until his damaged ship was repaired—always provided, of course, that he possessed sufficient cash.

An unusual number of Ara spaceships and the long, cylindrical hulls of Springer fighters and freighters were to be seen. Even the mercenary Mounders were apparently fond of using Lepso as an interim ground base where they could discuss their next battle missions and haggle out their terms.

Within this mixture of races the members of the Baalol cult were completely submerged. They hardly ever made an appearance and lived almost exclusively in the silence of their temple domain, far out in the rocky wastelands. The data from the robot Brain did not mention them once, making only a slight reference to their temple. The whole fact of their existence on Lepso was passed over in a single sentence.

\* \* \* \*

Allan D. Mercant was going over the robot's report for the second time when he slowly stiffened with alarm. He turned to John Marshall, who had only dropped in to see him an hour ago and was still sitting there.

"Just take a look at this, Marshall!" he exclaimed. "Those are some pretty hefty figures! I don't have any reason for doubting them but if they're true then we can figure that there are always about 8 to 9000 spaceships present at Lepso spaceports—mostly for short ground times but that's an average! *8 to 9000 ships!* John, just imagine what a take that must be in terms of landing, docking and take-off fees! And if 50% of them are Springer longships, by our own comparison that's equivalent to a fleet of 4000 heavy cruisers!"

John Marshall shook his head so vigorously that the Solar Marshal fell silent. "Sir, you're leaving out something. You're basing everything only on the average number of ships that may be on Lepso at any given time. But in another 2 or 3 hours—even 10 hours—how many fighting units do you think could be on Lepso or in orbit around it?"

Mercant smiled. "I would not have overlooked that point, my good friend—yet without going any further than just what's on the ground to start with I'm stymied. Taking a basis of 4000 armed ships alone, I'm faced with the unpleasant task of advising the Chief that our plan is unfeasible in its present form! Marshall, you've known Rhodan almost as long as I have and you know what he'll tell me. At this stage, only Atlan's robot fleets can help us... What's the matter?"

John Marshall's expression had changed suddenly. Mercant knew what this particular staring look meant: either the mutant was receiving a telepathic call or he had just slipped into the thought stream of someone else's mind.

The situation put Mercant's patience to a hard test. One minute after another passed while Marshall continued in his *listening* attitude. A nervous fidgeting of his hands revealed that he was picking up something of extreme importance. Mercant was especially perturbed when he noted an increasing gleam of sweat on the telepath's forehead. He knew then that the Chief of the Mutant Corps was not receiving just an everyday type of alert signal.

But what could it be?

Finally John Marshall heaved a deep sigh and returned to normal. "Sir!" he blurted out. "The Thomas Cardif they examined on Zalit is a robot—and *not* of Arkonide construction!"

For the space of 10 seconds or so Mercant's face revealed his despair and resignation. "I knew it!" he

half-whispered. "I knew it the first moment I saw that photo! Marshall—what's going to happen now?"

It was no casual question induced by reflex action. Now Mercant himself was sweating and he glared at Marshall in real desperation. He had full justification for asking his question.

"Atlan is still in contact with the Chief. I only came in on the main part of the emergency report. They regard it as a catastrophe. The Arkonide can't say whether Cardif disappeared from Zalit ten, 20, 30 or even 40 years ago. Nobody had had any suspicions up till now. Even our own agents were taken in by the robot imitation.

"John—how is Rhodan taking it?"

Innocuous as it seemed, this question posed a serious problem. The Mutant Corps had been under a long-standing order which prohibited all telepaths from probing the minds of heads of the Administration without authorization. Violations of this command were rare, except in the case of mousebeaver Pucky who sometimes got into such escapades but always scraped by the threatened consequences with fairly light 'bruises' instead of banishment.

Marshall was fully aware of the thin ice he was treading on in this instance but Mercant's attitude was different than his.

"To hell with the rules, John! How is the Chief taking this news? Come on—out with it!"

"For awhile he was too shocked to be able to think, sir..."

"Can the spit and polish, John, dammit! Go on—what else!"

"The Chief has made up his mind. Cardif will be given no quarter. He's through with him."

Mercant supported his head with both hands and grunted "Hm-m..." That was all.

"The Chief wants to go to Lepso with the whole Fleet! Atlan is to send us heavy robot fleet units to protect the Solar System in the meantime."

"Hm-m-m..."

"Atlan has agreed to this. In the Arkonide Imperium as well as here, all supplies of the Liquitiv liqueur will be confiscated, all sales prohibited. Protective blockades for the important planets."

"So what about unprotected worlds?" commented Mercant bitterly. "This Thomas Cardif—what a thorn in our sides! Always stirring up major crises. It's beyond understanding. Marshall, has the Chief gotten hold of himself yet? Go ahead—dig into his head! I'll stand good for it. This isn't idle curiosity, for God's sake? So? Come on, what do you get?"

But in that moment he saw the telepath shake his head in some surprise. "Mercant—the Chief has screened off his thoughts."

"He's recovered alright—but it's a poor consolation, John."

It was more than an ordinary red alert to the Solar Marshal that Thomas Cardif had been gone from Zalit for an undetermined length of time. Cardif was Rhodan's son, so this was not just anybody who was

stirring up trouble. Unwillingly Mercant had to admit that Cardif's actions still followed the same old pattern. 58 years ago the life of the Emperor had hung by a thread. After being raided in his own chambers, Atlan had confessed that he was no longer in possession of his life prolonging cell activator. Although the Antis had stolen the mysterious device, the whole plan had been masterminded by Thomas Cardif. Through a collapse of the Arkon Empire he had hoped to destroy the Sol System and thus achieve his final objective, which was to eliminate Perry Rhodan.

His attempt was thwarted in the last moment For punishment, instead of being sentenced to death he was subjected to treatment under a hypno-machine which erased his knowledge of the past: who he was, where he had come from and what his life had been up to that moment. The hatred for his father lay buried for all time beneath a block of hypnosis. Or at least this is what Rhodan, Atlan and the closest assistants within the Solar Administration had thought For 58 years they had been deluded by this sense of security, only to suddenly be faced with a reality that was horrifying.

John Marshall interrupted Mercant's deliberations. "We're supposed to go see the Chief, sir. Rhodan's talk with Atlan has ended. I 'told' him that I had 'listened in' on the first part of the hypercom discussion and that I finally passed the information on to you. He made no telepathic comment about it, sir."

"Lets go!"

The Solar Marshal and Chief of Intelligence picked up his papers and left his office in the company of the telepath. The antigravitor carried them to the upper levels. In the corridor leading to Rhodan's suite of offices they ran into Bell, whose embittered face spoke volumes.

When they entered Rhodan's main office they were in time to hear him issue the emergency ordinance prohibiting the sale of the liqueur. All supplies of Liquitiv were to be confiscated immediately. A cessation of all commercials and all forms of advertising connected with the product was also decreed.

"Have a seat!"

He had no time to say more at the moment. He seemed to be his usual self except that the gleam in his grey eyes betrayed his high state of agitation. Stabbing another control button he made contact with Solar Fleet Headquarters.

"General alert for all units of the Fleet! Order No.6 is now in effect. This alarm is to be beamed out under highest emergency coding. Effective immediately the following applies to all ships in space: stand by for course change; make all preparations necessary for transition to the Fering System. You will receive individual orders for the jump. Activate full fire readiness. Prepare special crews and hold all gazelles, spacejets and destroyers ready for action. That is all!"

Mercant tensed especially when Rhodan contacted Solar Intelligence which he himself was in charge of.

"Rhodan speaking! I trust you've heard my command to Fleet Headquarters? Put out an alert to our Lepso agents—use half a dozen relay stations so we'll be sure it gets to them. That's Lepso, the 2nd planet in the Fering System. Here's a photo of the man they are to look for."

A call came back from Intelligence Headquarters: "Sir—that is your son!"

Not a muscle quivered in Rhodan's controlled face. He stretched out his hand without turning his head, addressing Mercant: "Give me that picture, please—the one from Zuglert!"



Mercant pulled it from his folder and passed it to Rhodan almost in a single movement. The latter held it up to the vidcom camera.

"That's the way Thomas Cardif looks today! You're copying this, aren't you?" He handed the photo back by way of Bell, who sat behind him. Ignoring the flabbergasted expression of the man on the other end, he continued: "Our agents are to look for this man who apparently lives on Lepso under the name of Dr. Edmond Hugher. There is a strong suspicion that he's a collaborator of the Antis and is living in the temple region itself. Special order to all agents on Lepso: under no circumstances are you to take any forceful action against Thomas Cardif! I repeat that again: under no circumstances will you take forceful action against Thomas Cardif, alias Dr. Edmond Hugher! That is all!"

When he got up from the intercom console, Deringhouse and Julian Tifflor entered the large chamber, which was a combination main office and briefing room. They silently took seats behind Mercant and Marshall. On his way back to his desk, Rhodan was suddenly blocked by a shimmering in the air and then the mouse-beaver Pucky appeared. He was the only one who had not been ordered into this meeting. He quickly got out of Rhodan's path and retreated to the couch that stood next to the wall in the background.

Rhodan had looked questioningly at Marshall but the mutant shook his head negatively almost immediately. Rhodan's weak telepathic perception picked up his answer: "*Pucky has screened off his thoughts, sir.*" Rhodan sat down.

"Gentlemen, I'm only waiting for Atlan's next message, which should give us the expected arrival time of 5000 Arkon robotships in our system. As you may have gathered from my instructions just now, the Solar Fleet will make a closed-formation appearance over Lepso and will seal it off hermetically. Meanwhile, Arkon's robot units will take over the defence of the Solar Imperium. Mercant?" He had noted the sceptical expression of the Solar Marshal.

"Sir, the minute we try to clamp down on Lepso we'll have to be ready to face about 4000 ships there with battle capability. In all probability they'll meet our move with defensive action."

Rhodan's raised hand interrupted him.

"Mercant, we're taking the risk of a galactic war. What you mention is penny ante compared to the rest of it. We may be facing not only open hostility from the Springers as well as the Mounders but also dissatisfied colonial races and the anti-mutants, to top it off. All of them may throw everything they've got against us if we make an attempt to alter the current state of affairs on Lepso. If we just give them the argument that this is only a police action to arrest a single individual, they'll see it as a camouflaged occupation of their whole smuggler's den and they'll react accordingly. That's why Atlan and I have agreed that the Solar Fleet will not be the only force going into action. Using additional Arkonide robotships we'll be building a two- or three-ply blockade ring around the planet, in a wide radius outward into space. In reserve, you know, we also have the *Imperial Guard* Storm Fleet at our disposal.

"From a military point of view we are going into this action on a minimum risk basis but of course wars are seldom won on the battlefield. In an economic sense we can't equal the combined power of the Springers, the Mounders and the Antis, unless Operation Lepso can be terminated within 3 days, standard time. I'm convinced that we won't even require that much time to wrap it up.

During the past few minutes Bell had been staring fixedly at his friend. Now he used the slight pause to give a prepared rebuttal. "Suppose the Springers and Mounders and Antis have a different idea?" he asked. "What if instead of defending Lepso they all suddenly decide to attack the Earth? What would

5000 robotships amount to under those conditions, Perry?"

Perry seemed to meet this question with the hardness of steel. "What's the difference? They've had Earth under attack already for more than a year but this time not with conventional weapons. This time it's poison! Don't you think we have more to win than we have to lose, at this rate? Do you know what the confirmed statistics are on the number of addictions we have, right here on Earth? All they're arguing over is whether its 20 million or 30 million! Oh, they're mostly quiet now but sooner or later, right here at home, we'll be facing a massive army of raving addicts, all condemned to a living death. These millions were promised youth and health; the hook was baited with Liquitiv and they all fell for it. But instead of getting what they'd been promised, what they're *really* hooked with is lingering illness, addiction, delirium, suffering and death.

"Bell, I have said again and again: it is our duty to do everything we can to protect life, no matter in what form."

Terrania's hypercom station signalled urgently that they were holding a new connection with Atlan. Rhodan moved back to the viewing console again, just as the Arkonide's powerful voice rang from the speaker: "Perry, at 17:20 hours, Terra time, the robot fleet will emerge from transition and start its approach flight into the Sol System. The other fleet units have been alerted and are standing by for your orders."

The intercom blared out an interruption. It was Pattizius Augustus whom Rhodan had commissioned to make a concerted blitz raid on all worlds of the Solar Imperium to confiscate the Liquitiv. The man virtually shouted his message: "Sir, we have just determined that yesterday another 16 million units of Liquitiv were brought to Earth from Lepso—yet this massive shipment has not been located so far!"

Rhodan turned pale. He looked at the intercom screen as if in a trance. "Augustus, get in touch with Intelligence and all police agencies available. The poison must be found! Use all the forces you think necessary for this operation. Forget the expense! But I shall expect you to locate it—that is all!"

Rhodan took a long, deep breath and stretched himself in an effort to calm himself. "Did you hear that, Arkonide? 16 million flasks of Liquitiv arrived yesterday and vanished without a trace. Alright, why are you waving your hand?"

"Why, Perry? Because just about three hours ago by Arkon time my Secret Service learned that 41 million flasks of the liqueur arrived on the Crystal World! Also, not a flask has been found, as yet. Our opponents aren't just playing games—they're using battering rams against our defences. Don't these tactics indicate to you that they are aware of our plans—or that they at least have a suspicion?"

Rhodan's voice was almost metallic. "Atlan, I hope they underestimate us on Lepso!"

Over the distance of 34000 light-years, Emperor Gonozal VIII regarded his friend through narrowed eyelids. He merely nodded as the hint of a grim smile touched his lips. "Perhaps, Perry, at this moment I am also underestimating you. . ." It was the last thing he said before he cut off the hypercom connection.

Destiny had once more been placed entirely in Perry Rhodan's hands.

The intercom screen lit up with the face of Col. Nike Quinto, Chief of Division 3 of Intercosmic Social Welfare and Development. He was not in agreement with Rhodan's policy of cutting off all sales of Liquitiv immediately. "Sir, you must remember the affidavits we obtained from the 48 addicts on Lepso. They all agreed on the fact that a lapse of 6 days in taking Liquitiv will bring on an attack—a craze for the

stuff that ends in death if not satisfied. The whole process, from the time of an attack to the state of mental derangement and death, is supposed to take about 4 weeks. Then it's curtains!"

"Quinto, don't worry about it now. We'll be through with Operation Lepso in 3 days and we'll be back here. Then we'll go into this entire matter again—but when we do we'll surround ourselves with the experts. I assure you I didn't order a clamp-down on sales of the liqueur until after I had consulted with the medical authorities. Anything else, Colonel?"

Nike Quinto hurriedly switched off. He didn't need a signboard to tell him the Chief had rapped his knuckles for him.

Rhodan turned back to his assistants. "Atlan's report on that latest import of 41 million flasks is something that speaks for itself—but it makes our final decision easier. If they drive us to it I'm going to have to consider galactic war. After all, from their side we've been in such a war already and they're the ones who opened the offensive. From today forward, this is as far as they get. That goes for the Springers, the Mounders and the Antis—and if the Aras want to join them then I'll not end this war until I've pounded some sense into all of them. I am well aware of everything that is at stake here but all I have to remember is that on Earth alone there are multi-millions who have been addicted to this death drug. Then I feel compelled to go all out and risk everything—to guarantee that such a crime will never again be possible!

"The Fleet units present at the Terrania spaceport will be taking off in an hour and a half from now. We'll be going on board the *Ironduke*, which is faster, so that will give us an extra 3 hours before we take off. I still have a few chores to wrap up. Thank you, gentlemen!"

This was a Perry Rhodan whom they had never seen before. And it was a Perry Rhodan who didn't exactly please them. He had become a man who had drawn within himself and Out of his isolation he came to decisions which he had formerly been in the habit of discussing first with his closest colleagues and confidantes.

Yet there was someone else who had also acted differently than usual. This was Pucky the mousebeaver. The little rascal was famous for what Bell always referred to as 'smarting off' at such meetings but in this one he hadn't made a sound. So he departed as he had come—by means of teleportation.

Rhodan's colleagues had come to a halt in front of the antigrav lift, clustering around Bell, who kept shaking his head almost incessantly.

"Well, did you notice anything peculiar in there?" he asked them angrily.

"Yes," said Julian Tifflor. "The Chief didn't once mention the name of Thomas Cardif in front of us nor did he speak of this Dr. Edmond Hugher or even make any reference to the subject."

Mercant, Marshall and Deringhouse were of the same opinion.

"And our Mickeymouse friend in there," added Bell. "He was always such a rooter for Cardif but this time he was especially strange. Either he's sick, because he didn't let a peep out of him, or the rascal has something on his mind again that he'll keep to himself till the facts are out. Mercant, it would be a good idea to keep him under close observation at all times."

Mercant laughed with a note of exasperation. "Thanks a lot! But I'm handing that one back to you right

now! How do you think anybody could ever keep an eye on Pucky?"

At that moment the air shimmered and Pucky materialized. He drew himself up confidently between Bell and Mercant and his normally sincere big mouse eyes flashed in anger. In his shrill, chirping voice he turned on Bell. "You've got your nerve to stir up everybody about me but I'm going to tell you something you'd better remember: you can't even badmouth Thomas Cardif without my knowing about it! Nobody can condemn him in spite of every suspicion to the contrary, you—you bunch of pharaohs! (He obviously meant Phaxisees)"

Enraged, Bell reached for him but grasped only air. Pucky had elected to teleport out of a hot spot.

"That crusty little freak!" exclaimed Bell. He ran both hands through his red stubble of hair in a gesture of vexation. "Sometimes he comes on just a bit too cute to suit me! It gets a little old! Alright, Mercant—why so unhappy? Has Pucky moused his way into the cockles of your heart?"

"It's not that, Mr. Bell," replied the Solar Marshal, "but I think there's cause for being ashamed at this moment. Our mousebeaver friend gave us a moral slap in the face and I think we all deserved it."

"Is that so?" retorted Bell belligerently. "When those 20 million addicts are dead, Mercant, you may be talking out of the other side of your mouth—and maybe then you'll have another opinion of Thomas Cardif."

"Perhaps, Mr. Bell, but only after it's been determined in the first place that Cardif is completely in possession of his mental faculties again—and in the second place that during the past 58 years he obtained a medical degree somewhere and has been able to take an effective part in producing the Liquitiv."

Bell turned impulsively, staring at Marshall for support, but the telepath avoided his gaze. "Oh ho! So you guys are all in Mercant's camp, are you? Very interesting. But this is one time I'm not ready to go along with you. I'm telling you, once and for all, that Thomas Cardif is behind this whole poison business. It doesn't make any difference whether he's in it with or without the help of the Antis. And if we don't pull him up short, for all time to come, one of these days he's going to dump the whole Solar Imperium down the tubes! If you don't think he can do it, just don't forget he's Rhodan's son!" At this point he turned on his heel, entered the antigravitor and let it carry him down below.

"There's another question," said Julian Tiffloor. "How do you explain the fact that in almost 6 decades Cardif doesn't seem to have grown any older—and yet his facial features have changed almost enough to make him unrecognizable?"

"That's been bothering me ever since I got that photo from Zuglert. Tiffloor. Cardif's mother was Arkonide and their life-expectancy even today is greater than ours. It could explain why he hasn't aged much in the past 58 years but I can't figure what's caused his expression to change so much—I mean there's something almost hideous about its blankness."

"Maybe a plastic mask?" suggested Deringhouse.

Marshall contradicted him. "That's unlikely, General. Even the Aras advise against wearing a facemask more than a year. It causes serious tissue deterioration that can hardly ever be healed again."

Tiffloor shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe Cardif really looks different than he does in that old picture..."

"You may be right—so let's all be surprised," said Mercant. It was obvious that he wasn't interested in discussing the subject any further.

John Marshall was the only one to continue along the corridor. Mercant, Deringhouse and Tiffloor drifted slowly down the antigrav shaft to the lower levels where their respective offices were located.

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan had left his office suite and gone to his living quarters on the top floor of the administrative building. Here he stood at his window and gazed out over Terrania. After awhile he made a helpless gesture with his hand. Here, too, was a city that had been victimized by the liqueur.

"Thomas, I'm coming," he spoke half aloud to himself. "I'm on my way to find you! You will soon have to confess and hold nothing back. After that there will be nothing more for you, if it is true that you've had anything to do with the Liquitiv..." Thus his thoughts came audibly to the surface and in spite of their dire import it seemed to relax the knot that had been forming in his solar plexus.

The thunder of pulse-engines came to him from the spaceport. He saw three heavy cruisers race into the sky and disappear. He looked at his watch: 2 hours and 20 minutes yet before his take-off.

Standing on its pad apart from the major Fleet units was the battleship *Ironduke*, which was equipped with the new linear space-drive. In comparison to the giant superbattleships out there, its 800-meter hull seemed almost insignificant yet there was a gleam of pride in Rhodan's eyes as he looked at it.

It was the fastest ship in the Solar Warfleet and also the first to be fitted out with the fantastic hyper-propulsion system. Linear drive made it possible to reach transligh velocities which were unimaginable and so far no absolute limit had been determined. Aside from eliminating transitions and their accompanying shockwaves, this system also had the advantage that the firmament did not disappear at transligh speeds and so the target star was always kept in sight.

In addition to that, even at a million times speed a linear ship did not enter the 5th dimension; it remained instead in an unstabilised semispace zone between the 4th and 5th dimensions.

A renewed thundering of engines warming up brought Rhodan back out of his own 'hyper' realms—into the world of raw reality. He also had a sudden presentiment that he was no longer alone and he turned around. Pucky was squatting there behind him. How long had he been here, Rhodan asked himself. Undoubtedly the scamp had been reading his mind again.

"Perry, will you forgive me if I tell you you guessed correctly?" chirped the mousebeaver, inclining his head to one side with his typical pleading look.

"What are you doing here, Puck?"

This sounded ominous. Perry had dropped the "y" from Pucky's name again, not even addressing him as *Lieutenant* Puck, which was his normal habit when angry. The mousebeaver had been a lieutenant for many decades now. Others who had received this commission had meanwhile climbed the ladder of success in their military careers. Not Pucky. He was satisfied to be a lieutenant in the Mutant Corps.

Having no particular military ambitions he was content to do without the usual clutter of stars, wings, or comets on the epaulettes of his uniform. But if it came to that he always managed to disregard rank or official red tape and back himself up with the facts.

"What do you want here?" Rhodan repeated his question sharply.

"I just wanted to be with you, Perry, to join you in looking out of this window at Terrania. I guess I could have picked a better time for it, wouldn't you say, Chief?" But he wasn't showing his incisor tooth this time. It was an unmistakable sign that the mousebeaver was in a serious mood—neither jesting nor planning his usual tricks.

"Then come," Rhodan invited. He was aware that Pucky had come with something definite in mind. "But just don't crush the flowers there, my little friend."

The mousebeaver reached the bench under the window in a single jump. He gazed down at the sea of buildings below as he prattled on. "You could have saved yourself the remark about my crushing your flowers. I am not a vandal, even though others may be hypocrites."

"Who?" asked Rhodan quickly. He knew the mouse-beaver had not made the remark unintentionally. But when he attempted to scan Pucky's thoughts he was obstructed by a powerful defensive current which set up a complete resistance against his weaker paranormal probing.

"Fatso, first of all! Mercant, Marshall, Deringhouse and Tifflo are next. I even told them what they were, Perry. And then I left them standing there.

"So why did you call them that?" Rhodan's voice took on a sharper tone again.

"Because in their thoughts they have no use at all for Thomas, Chief. To them he's all bad!"

"Hm-m... Now don't tell me you think you can talk me into any leniency for Cardif!"

"No," Pucky answered, but he turned on the window seat so that he could look up at Rhodan. "But I will tell you I think that you and I have the same suspicion—that is, that this whole thing about Thomas doesn't set right. Don't get mad at me, Perry, when I tell you that in this situation I've been a bit sharper than you now and again. You know that I can be as silent as a tomb and you have yet to hear me blowing my own horn over a good idea. For example..."

Rhodan grasped him firmly by the shoulder and glared at him. "Alright, Puck," he said severely, "no more beating around the bush! Quit your babbling and tell me why you showed up here—or I'll toss you out into some nice fresh air!"

"OK, Boss. You're in command here, not me." But the little one remained unmoved by the threat. "Perry, I have an uneasy feeling that Thomas has gone completely off his rocker!"

"Then are you saying, Pucky, that Cardif is behind this villainy? Then why did you say that Bell and the others were hypocrites?"

"I don't know why. I think I lost my temper when I read their thoughts and saw how prejudiced they were against Thomas and so I simply had to jar them to their senses. That's the best way to get a little juice to flowing through their brains."

"You mean that's the way you could get them to think?"

"You might put it that way. And now they're mulling over this whole narcotics situation, shoving it back and forth in their minds, and now even Fatso is convinced it's impossible for Thomas to be to blame for all of this."

Rhodan looked off into the distance, lost in thought for a moment. So the little tyke had come here to whitewash Thomas Cardif. He finally looked back at Pucky with a hard gleam in his grey eyes. "Doesn't it mean anything to you that 20 or 30 million humans may die a slow death because of this drug? In view of that, how can you still speak for Cardif?"

But this was one time when not even Rhodan could shake up Pucky. "Perry," he pleaded, "don't keep saying *Cardif!* At least refer to him as Thomas—he's still your son, even though he doesn't wish to use your name."

"Don't get off the track, Pucky. I've asked you some questions and I demand that you answer them right here and now!"

"I've already told you you're the boss but you can glare at me and yell at me all you want—I'm not going to turn tail and run. So you're asking how I can still speak for Thomas Cardif? Am I really doing that, Perry, or am I trying to warn you? You know at any other time you have such a marvellous faculty of judging people and discerning things in general but whenever it comes to your son you don't see things that may be right under your nose. For instance, can you tell me why the Thomas Cardif of today neither looks like you or his old self?"

"You sneaky little devil!" muttered Rhodan. He realized the mousebeaver had neatly put him on the defensive. In the next moment, however, he tensed. "Pucky—what are you trying to tell me?"

"I could almost swear that Thomas is still under the hypno-block. I think that's why his features have that vacuum look that sort of curls your spine when you see him now. But if that is so, can he be held responsible for the Liquitiv?"

"Come on now, Pucky—are you still trying to get Cardif off the hook with me?" retorted Rhodan gruffly.

"No, I am not!" His sudden exclamation was startling—especially since he actually did not return to his original theme. "The main thing I'm asking myself is how we're going to trace down his thought impulses on Lepso if he's still under that hypno-block. It's highly possible that neither Marshall nor Lloyd will be able to pick up his vibes. So what happens if we telepaths let you down or even Lloyd fails to track him?"

"Hm-m... I hadn't thought of that." Rhodan confessed the fact quite frankly. "It's a good thing you brought it up. If you hadn't had that little brainstorm, you know, we might have drawn a blank on Lepso—no Cardif! They say that when men have been even partially brain-blocked their output of thought-impulses is very weak as far as any exterior detection is concerned. The only ones who can help us on this short notice would be the Swoons—the cucumber people."

"You mean the individual pattern detector? Those micro-mechanics really came up with a wild one when they made that gadget!" For a moment Pucky was enthusiastic but then he suddenly slumped again. "But if you're still intending to put Thomas through the meat-grinder..."

"Get out of here, you scamp. I have things to do."

"It's a good idea!" replied the mousebeaver.

Just before he teleported out of sight he had shot a probe into Rhodan's mind. He caught him deliberating whether or not a man could be held responsible for his actions when even partially under hypnosis.

That was all Pucky had hoped to accomplish with his visit.

### 3/ THE DOGS OF WAR

Tu-poa's eyes gleamed in his ascetic face. The Anti walked back and forth excitedly in the room. Dr. Edmond Hugher sat in a chair, smiling as calmly and pleasantly as ever.

"Who is this Rhodan, then, Tu-poa?" Hugher was saying. "An enemy of Baalol. Very well. Then Baalol will destroy him. However peaceloving I may be, even to that extent are they my enemies who are the enemies of Baalol. How can you ever doubt, Tu-poa, that my gratitude knows no bounds?" Although he spoke with gravity the smile never left his face.

Since the death of Laoo-o, Tu-poa had become one of the most influential priests on Lepso and today he could no longer abide the doctor's perpetual smile. The galaxy itself was trembling: 10,000 space battleships must have gone into transition. Lepso's detection centres were reporting so many warp shockwaves that from time to time they had even lost count of their number.

Tu-poa and the other servants of Baalol suspected what the objective of the onrushing giant fleets might be but so far they knew nothing definite. Their espionage connection on the Crystal World had suddenly failed them. And for that there could be only one explanation:

Imperator Gonozal VIII had arrived at decisions without advising a single member of the Supreme Council of Arkon. In addition to this an incredible number of powerful warp-shocks had been detected from the area of the Solar Imperium. This meant that Rhodan's warships were on their way to join the fleet forces of Arkon in the same mission.

Tu-poa had to force himself to look at Dr. Hugher. The man's vacuous smile came close to driving him mad. He suddenly shouted in tones of anger which Hugher had never experienced with him before. "Don't take all this so calmly, Doctor! You certainly know Rhodan better than we do. You must have known, more than anybody, that we were heading into this crisis!"

The dreamy smile remained fixed in the vapid face. Dr. Edmond Hugher was not perturbed by Tu-poa's outburst of temperament. "I am grateful for the compliment, Tu-poa, but Rhodan is not as formidable to me as you have presented him to be. If he has emerged into prominence, he can as easily vanish again. Do you fear for Lepso and the temple?"

Tu-poa suddenly halted in front of him. "Hugher, how do we get rid of the huge multitude of addicts out there in the desert?" His voice rose demanding. "Where is that phenomenal faculty of yours for always making the right decision at the right moment?"



"You expect too much of me, Tu-poa. I am of a peaceful nature. As long as I worked within a certain framework the decisions were not difficult for me to make. However this is a situation which is not in keeping with my character."

"Stop it! Stop that, once and for all!" Tu-poa shouted at him. "*You* invented the Liquitiv! Do you call that peaceloving? Or do you want to call it what it is—a deadly narcotic, Hugher!"

The dreamy expression in the doctor's red Arkonide eyes remained the same. There was no change in their steady, quiet gaze. The fiat-featured and slightly puffy face retained its eternal smile. "Tu-poa, you are the cult's fanatic. You should know that in my grateful devotion I have thus placed a flaming sword in the hands of Baalol."

The priest looked at the doctor as though seeing him actually for the first time. "Hugher, either you have always been insane or you've lost your mind in the past few hours," he told him despairingly.

"That's not very friendly of you," was Hugher's calm reply. "Wasn't it you who always told me that Baalol was the one and only power in the galaxy and that I could not show my gratitude in any better way than to help increase the might of Baalol? And did I not do just that when I developed Liquitiv? Will it not reduce Baalol's enemies to a bunch of harmless idiots? Why shouldn't they remain in the desert? They're being taken care of—it's the best place for them."

A sense of horror came over Tu-poa. But he was not thinking of the incurable addicts who were languishing away in the Lepso desert. He was not thinking of the many hundreds of millions who had become victimized by the liqueur. At this moment he recognized the greatest danger of all—that Perry Rhodan's son was mentally deranged.

The anti-mutant asked himself why he and his colleagues had not detected this before. Why had it never appeared strange to them that Thomas Cardif revealed hardly any reaction whatever when Perry Rhodan was mentioned in his presence? He decided to make a test with Hugher right there on the spot. But in his excitement he overlooked the fact that only one question could produce a definite result.

Tu-poa did not ask Hugher: *Do you know that you are Rhodan's son?* This thought did not occur to him at all. Instead he asked, "Hugher, do you know how old Rhodan is?"

Still in his smiling rapture, Hugher answered him with a question: "Can you think of a more senseless question, Tu-poa? What are you getting at? Or are you trying to deny that Rhodan has found the secret of eternal life?"

Fate stepped in with a sound of alarms. The interruption prevented Tu-poa from asking the other question, which had just occurred to him: Do you know that you are Perry Rhodan's son? Ironically, the loudspeakers were blaring news of Rhodan.

"Rhodan entering Fering System with a gigantic fleet. On course for Lepso: 30 superbattleships detected! About one light-hour outside farthest orbit, powerful warp-shocks indicate further fleet formations arriving..."

"Further notice: the additional squadrons consist of robot warships of the Greater Imperium."

Tu-poa had been staring fixedly at the nearest loudspeaker. When it became silent he turned back to Hugher, shuddered at sight of the doctor's unchanged smiling face. It reminded him, however, that this

was a major crisis situation—in which case he knew what he had to do. Without a word he left the room, which was deep within the temple pyramid. Taking the antigravitor he headed for the peak of the pyramid itself. He was no longer thinking of Dr. Edmond Hugher, alias Thomas Cardif. Even while he rose upward in the shaft he smiled maliciously.

He was thinking that for Perry Rhodan his last hour had come. For they, the servants of Baalol, had made their preparations. This time they would win the final round in the battle against the hated Terran.

When he entered the large room under the peak of the temple he encountered more than a hundred devotees who had gathered there already. All he heard was a low murmur of voices. No one seemed to be highly disturbed by the fact that Rhodan and his fleet had appeared over Lepso. This casualness of attitude strengthened Tu-poa's conviction that Rhodan's demise was near at hand.

\* \* \* \*

Amidst the thunder of its impulse engines, a *Stardust*-class heavy cruiser rose from the spaceport at Terrania. It was the *Ironduke*. As the last of the Solar Fleet to depart, it also set its course for the Feting System.

Col. Jefe Claudrin, a native Epsalian, was the commander of this first of the new ships to have linear space-drive. As a cosmonaut and commander he was unexcelled. He sat calmly in his oversized, custom-designed flight seat in the Control Central and listened to the rumble of the regular propulsion system. By means of small monitor viewscreens he could see the ring-bulge engines while they pushed the 800-meter ship into space with an acceleration of 500km/sec per second.

All around Claudrin was the normal bustle of activity that was customary for any such flight yet on every deck of the *Ironduke* there was a feeling of suppressed tension and even the hardened veterans on duty in the Control Central could not get rid of it.

The Chief was on board along with Reginald Bell, Mercant and Deringhouse. Marshall was also there with the entire Mutant Corps plus a few special agents of Solar Intelligence. Only Rhodan and Bell had come to the Control Central as the rest of the special contingent had elected to go to their cabins. The fact that they faced a difficult mission did not deter them from first getting a little sleep.

The tension pervading the ship was related to the mystery of the Antis. These so-called god priests of Baalol were descendants of the Arkonide race who had mutated long ago. They possessed the capability of strengthening their defence screens mentally to such an extent that energy weapons hardly had any effect on them. Moreover, they also had the ability to make the paranormal powers of other mutants ineffectual.

Only in the last few decades the Antis had shown a tendency to emerge more and more from their seclusion. They had not only demonstrated that they were anti-mutants and the devotees of a cult, it had also become apparent that their main purpose was the pursuit of political goals of power—a massive plan which was to culminate with a take-over of the Greater Imperium.

Col. Claudrin suddenly bellowed in his thunderous voice to Rhodan, which startled the latter out of his thoughts of the moment. "Sir, I might as well cut in the Kalup now. That'll probably bring us through

maybe 10 minutes *ahead* of the Fleet but that's never been a bad idea in a setup like this."

Rhodan understood what Claudrin intended to accomplish with the manoeuvre. It was to hold the risk of a galactic war at a minimum. If the flagship of the Chief of the Solar Imperium could reach the first positions ahead of the Fleet, it might avert the chain reaction of an accidental skirmish.

The Kalup compensating converter was the heart of the linear space-drive system yet it was not a propulsion mechanism. It was a device for enclosing the *Ironduke* in a spherical field. This special field shielded out all electromagnetic and gravitic influences of the 4th and 5th dimensions by either absorbing them or reflecting them. By this means the ship was able to penetrate the so-called libration zone, which was a semispace continuum lying between the 4th and 5th-dimensional universes. In this state the warship could accelerate to velocities that were millions of times the speed of light.

When Rhodan nodded his assent, Claudrin proceeded personally with the conversion switching. The thundering of the engines subsided as the ship's impulse-converters died down. For some seconds the *Ironduke* hurtled onward in free fall at 0.6 speol. Then all the internal machinery appeared to come alive at once and out of the thundering inferno in the heart of the ship there emerged a new sound that struck the keynote.

"The Kalup!" said one of the officers in the Control Central.

Others around him nodded expectantly. The men of the Solar Fleet simplified everything. In the first place, Kalup referred to Dr. Arno Kalup, the greatest hyper-physicist in the Sol System, and in the second place it referred to the compensating converter that he had developed and which was now enveloping the *Ironduke* in the spherical field, thus opening the way for it into the zone of semispace. The Kalup distorted the field-energy structure of the impulse drive so that the thrust was independent of either 4th or 5th-dimensional space. This resulted in an emission velocity that was about 25 million times the speed of light.

The spherical spaceship's great panoramic gallery of observation screens—otherwise known as the "panob"—was at a loss in this new environment, unable to reproduce more than a muddled impression of the universe. The usual points of light had been replaced by blurred streaks of illumination, nothing more.

"Activate 3-D sensor!" bellowed Claudrin. It was neither a sign of excitement nor of anger: he was simply unable to speak softly.

Next to him his co-pilot switched on the special sensorviewer. Its screen flamed to life and became stabilized. Under control of the compensator's tracking the 3-D system focussed a star at the centre of the screen. It was the sun of the Fering System.

"So," rumbled Jefe Claudrin again in his deep voice, "we made short work of 8467 light-years—at least visually." He turned to look at everybody in the Control Central. They all knew that they had not yet conquered the distance physically but that through the special viewing system they had their target star constantly in sight. The colonel swung back to the flight console. "OK!" he thundered. "Let's keep her flying, gentlemen!" It wasn't a mere figure of speech. He had deliberately used the plural form of address, thus not only including the men but himself as well.

Unchanged in colour and light intensity, the Fering System's sun held steadily on the 3-D sensor screen. Within that system the second planet bore the name of Lepso. The men in the *Ironduke*'s Control Central were looking at their target star over more than 8000 light-years of distance. This was one of the miracles

of linear space-drive: to be hurtling millions of times faster than light through semispace toward a target that was always in plain view.

Time passed. When the star on the relief screen suddenly grew large and revealed its disc, Col. Claudrin switched back. Without the least transitional jolt the *Ironduke* dropped back into the normal universe. Simultaneously the great panob screens cleared up and there was the ancient glory of the Milky Way before them. Somewhere among those millions of stars was the Fering Sun.

"Heavy warp-shocks coming through!" announced an officer at the hypersensor console.

From another sector of the great room the galactic positions were being announced. The tracking registers were counting the ships that were spilling out of hyperspace from transition.

"180 spacers. We're getting an identification, Colonel: a fighter squadron of the Mounders!"

The Mounders were the mercenary warriors of the Galactic Traders. They were also offshoots of the Arkonide race but they had developed differently because of the heavier gravitation of the planets they had chosen for their home bases. In the course of time they had evolved into massive giants who weighed anywhere from over half a ton to a ton. In contrast to the Springers they followed the trade of war. Whoever paid them could be sure of their help. Whoever called them, however, was fully aware that enormous payments would have to be passed across the table beforehand. For the Mounders there was only cash; they did not deal with promises. But once they had been paid their battle fee they were as good as a 'fire brigade' as they were stormy rum guzzlers. They fought with a ruthless courage that was unexcelled.

When the last of the incoming data concerning the Mounders had come through, Rhodan gave an order. "Claudrin—alert the Mutant Corps."

One of the officers took up a microphone and asked for Com Central, after which he requested a connection with the mutants' wardroom.

Rhodan was slightly irritated by such red tape. "Is all that necessary?" he asked.

The young officer appeared to be embarrassed by Rhodan's criticism but Col. Jefe Claudrin answered for him. "He's following my orders. As long as time allows, we go by the regulations. If not—my men will go to the other extreme, as necessary. Do you agree, sir?"

"Do I have a choice, Colonel?" Rhodan smirked. "You're the Commander of the *Ironduke* —I'm just along for the ride."

"I'll make a note of that, sir," Claudrin grinned back at him. But then he returned his gaze determinedly to his flight board.

He knew he was just passing the 4th planet of the Feting System and was now racing at 0.8 speol toward the orbit of the third planet. With surprising swiftness he grasped his own microphone and simultaneously flipped a Com switch.

"Alkher? Are you asleep or something? How come no ready signal from Fire Control?"

Brazo Alkher was the youngest officer on board the *Ironduke*, a somewhat lanky type who was outwardly modest and shy. But when he was called upon to perform there was no more cold-blooded

weapons officer than he—nor did he panic with all guns gone except one.

Brazo's voice rang from the loudspeaker in Control Central. "Colonel, I recall that I reported fire-readiness when we took off. I don't think I've since given any announcement to the contrary."

Col. Claudrin cast a quick glance at the Chief, who nodded with a knowing smile.

"Don't sweat it, Colonel—that's also happened to me before."

An announcement came from the hypersensor station again: "New ship sightings! It's the Fleet coming out of transition. Average approach velocity—0.85. Now the last formations are coming through!"

Com Central reported, addressing Rhodan: "Sir, we're being hailed by the planetary government of Lepso. They're threatening us with military retaliation if the Solar Imperium's fleet doesn't change course immediately!"

Rhodan calmly approached the intercom panel. "Inform the government in my name that the Solar Imperium has no hostile intentions. We are only interested in apprehending a few criminals. And operator—just tell them that—don't get into any other conversations with them."

Col. Claudrin gave him a broad grin. "Who's going to swallow that?"

There was another report from the hypersensor station: "Robot fleet coming through. We have a strong cross-interference of simultaneous shockwaves—variable factor of quantitative estimate:, about 1000. Registered ship count between 5 and 6 thousand."

The location of the emerging robot fleet was given. During this time the *Ironduke* was braking its speed further. It had crossed the third planet's orbit and was now approaching Lepso. As seen from the linear-drive warship, the planet stood off to the left of the sun, which grew larger and shed its gleaming yellow light ever more intensely across the big screens.

Across 100 million kin, Rhodan then sent his hypercom message to Lepso. His voice had a metallic sharpness to it as he spoke into the microphone: "In the name of the Solar Imperium and by order of First Administrator Rhodan—effective immediately all take-offs from Lepso are hereby prohibited. In case of violation, each ship entering outer space will be forced to return to Lepso. This is the *Ironduke*, under orders of First Administrator Rhodan."

Col. Claudrin nodded his satisfaction. He was pleased to note that Rhodan had given the order without using visual contact. He had also used a deeper tone of voice than usual. It was unlikely that they had recognized him by his tone.

A Com officer called through: "Sir, the Fleet reports fire-readiness. The super-class ships are overtaking us and will be with us in about 5 more minutes."

At this moment, John Marshall, chief of the mutants, came into the Control Central with the best telepaths in the Corps. Only one of them had dispensed with physical locomotion and that was Pucky the mousebeaver. The target of his short tele-jump was none other than the broad lap of the Epsalian commander.

In reflex action, Claudrin caught him but the mousebeaver chirped a warning. "Control your natural instincts, Jefe—if you have to hug me, just watch those muscles, will you?"

"Get out of here, you little pest!" the colonel shouted at him.

He had to smile secretly when his first bellow caused the mousebeaver to disappear. But he could hear him grumbling somewhere behind his broad back.

"Good thing I'm well-behaved," Pucky muttered. "Otherwise I'd make fast work of that overgrown gorilla!"

Claudrin had no time to take up Pucky's remark. The tracking centre reported that 8 ships were attempting a crash take-off from Lepso. Nevertheless, Rhodan decided to take the mousebeaver in hand.

"Come here to me, Lt. Puck."

Pucky avoided the sharp look in Rhodan's grey eyes but he quickly stepped up to him and reported. "Lt. Puck reporting as ordered, Chief! What's cooking?"

His impudence was unbelievable. A few of the officers broke out laughing and of course Bell couldn't hold a straight face at the moment. The mousebeaver revealed just the tip of his incisor to produce a hesitant smile.

But there was no answering smile from Rhodan. "Now you listen here..." he began sharply—but he was interrupted.

The mousebeaver's salvation was an incoming hypercom message that was relayed directly to the Control Central. As the viewscreen flickered to life, Rhodan stepped out of range of the pickup camera so that no one would know he was on board the *Ironduke*.

An unpleasant nasal voice rang from the loudspeaker. "This is Gal-Tan, Prime Minister of the Government of Lepso. We demand that the fleet of the Solar Imperium leave the Fering System at once—otherwise we shall open fire on the Solar Fleet with all weapons and ships at our disposal. If the Solar Fleet holds to its present course another five minutes, then the ultimatum of this government will be in effect!"

Prime Minister Gal-Tan did not even wait for a confirmation of the ultimatum before he cut the connection. Galactic war appeared to be unavoidable.

\* \* \* \*

At a distance of 50 million km from Lepso, the Solar Fleet armada suddenly spread out in all directions. Only the *Ironduke* escorted by the 30 superbattleships held its course for Lepso. The other fleet units raced away at various accelerations in order to reach the planned positions of deployment at the correct moment. Three minutes after the time stipulated by the ultimatum, Rhodan's ships had formed a blockade ring around Lepso. The 8 enemy ships that had tried crash take-offs in order to get away from Lepso now hove to and prepared once more to land at one of the numerous spaceports.

The *Ironduke* was receiving very little radio traffic under the circumstances but none of the officers on

board were overly surprised. This precision of manoeuvres into battle array was taken as a matter of course. They had not only practised it well but had often put their training to practical use on many a mission. Many of the men only regarded the Lepso action as a routine operation but some who were more informed concerning the Antis had another opinion. Thus far Rhodan had given not the slightest sign of apprehension. He had been practically a mere observer in the Control Central and he still issued no instructions as the ball of the planet appeared to rush up toward them.

The *Ironduke* and its escort of Titans made a high-speed entry into the upper levels of Lepso's atmosphere. Through a thin cloud layer the surface of the planet became visible: the great cities, the vast stretches of desert, rivers, spaceports in astounding numbers and of tremendous size, with jungle-like primitive forests between and still more cities beyond.

The energy detectors came to life. There was a general expectancy of defensive action from Lepso yet on every Sol ship men were waiting for another kind of event.

And it had happened.

Arkon's robot fleet, now blockading the entire Fering System, was the first to experience enemy contact. The 180-ship Mounder squadron opened fire on a formation of Arkonide robotships from a distance of 40,000 km.

Three of the 10 heavy Arkon cruisers burst into flame under the first beam attack. Robots were destroyed but no living crewmen. The defence screens of the other heavy cruisers had withstood the energy bombardment and now they raced toward the vastly superior opposing force. Their robot crews knew only their programmed instructions.

On 7 heavy-class robot cruisers 7 communications robots signalled to all ships of the Arkon fleet, telling them to attack the 180 ships of the Mounders.

Another of the small group had just exploded in a glowing cloud of gas but while the remaining 6 held steady on course, more than 300 additional robot spacers shot in from various directions. It did not concern the mechanical crews that no further signals were being received from the small formation. They now had the Mounder squadron in their target optics and they opened up with a concerted broadside.

The fate of the Mounders appeared to be sealed when the structure of space in the battle area was heavily shaken by shockwaves. Pouring out of the void of hyperspace came the battleships of the clan of Selfun. They moved into the conflict immediately with more than 350 of their heavily-armed long-ships. Although these far-ranging warships were a cross between heavy cruisers and battleships, in terms of armament they were battleships of heavy calibre.

The battle lasted for half an hour. During the first 5 minutes it seemed that the last robotship would go down in flames but the longer the duel continued the more robot-manned Arkon cruisers appeared. For every ship destroyed there were four more to take its place. Clan Chief Selfun the Elder suddenly realized that if he fought the robots any longer he'd be plunging his ships into destruction. Gritting his teeth in anger, he gave the order for a retreat.

But he was not surprised when his heavily-battered fleet was not pursued by the Arkon ships. It wasn't a part of the robots' programming. Their registered instructions told them: close off the Fering System except for ships of the Solar Fleet; let no other ship pass in or out of it. Therefore they were completely indifferent to whatever might occur either outside of the system or within it.

Meanwhile Rhodan continued to orbit around the planet with his superbattleship task force. On board all ships all listening posts in the Communications Centrals were manned to the last console. Lepso was beaming one distress call after another into the galaxy and from all directions came one standard reply: *We are coming to help you! Try to hold out until we get there!*

From minute to minute a pattern began to form with increasing clarity. It was a picture that even Rhodan had hardly expected to see. Not only were all the worlds of the Galactic Traders and the Mounders unanimous in their response but also a frightening number of purely colonial Arkon planets. These latter were worlds and federations of worlds which had formerly been considered loyal members of the Imperium but now they were threatening to withdraw from the greater stellar alliance and they also pledged their support to Lepso.

All intercepted messages of this kind were fed immediately into the *Ironduke's* main computer. Then from its data registers a series of coded hypercom reports were sent out which it would take the Springers, Antis and Mounders at least several weeks to decipher. The summarized reports were beamed directly to the giant Brain on Arkon 3. In such a dangerous situation Rhodan did not want to run any additional risks and if possible he did not prefer to make any weighty decisions until he had the positronic evaluation of all reports in front of him.

The telepaths appeared to be standing around uselessly in the Control Central but whoever knew them was aware of the fact that at this moment there were none who were working more concentratedly at their tasks than the mutants—nor was Pucky any exception. Among all the billions of mental emanations they were straining to pick up one particular mental pattern that had become only too familiar to them. They were searching for the thought tendrils of one Thomas Cardif, alias Dr. Edmond Hugher.

Aided by the incredibly powerful optical system of the *Ironduke* they were able to pull in such a close view of the Baalol temple that the immediate area seemed to be only a few hundred feet beneath them. With heightened concentration they sought to probe this particular location. But they did not detect that which they were seeking.

Ground fire from Green 15:43, Yellow 56:09! came the precise announcement from energy-tracking.

The *Ironduke* did not have to take action. The supergiant *Wellington* turned its sights on the ground batteries lying north of one of the major spaceports and silenced them with a single bolt from its thermo-guns. Which was of course a new provocation for Lepso to renew its frantic distress calls.

Standing next to Rhodan, Bell half-whispered what was on his mind. "All we need now is for the Akons in the Blue System to join in!"

"That's what I've been thinking about for some time. Ah, here comes the analysis from Arkon 3!"

The linear pattern that formed on the slightly convex screen revealed the insignia of the giant Brain of Arkon. Rhodan and Bell waited tensely for the decoded signals to follow. Nor did they have long to wait; the vast mechanical intelligence proceeded at once to deliver its information. The greatest positronic creation in the galaxy made no allowances for the fact that its interrogators were human. But in this decisive moment both Bell and Rhodan outdid themselves and met the challenge, hanging on to the rapid series of data until the mammoth positronic signed off with its usual insignia symbol.

Both men looked at each other in mutual comprehension. Their premonition had been confirmed. This all-around military support being offered by most of the worlds and races of the stellar alliance of the Empire had not developed by chance. The whole affair was the result of planned and guided action.



"The Antis," said Rhodan succinctly.

"Here we go again!" muttered Bell resignedly.

Behind him Pucky announced himself with a pitiable squeak. As Rhodan turned to him the mousebeaver showed visible signs of exhaustion. "Perry," he said dejectedly, "I can't find Thomas. I've tried everything. Lloyd has given up already."

When Rhodan looked questioningly at the mutant tele-tracer the latter nodded in resignation. Marshall was wiping sweat from his forehead.

"Alright," Rhodan decided. "Spare your strength!" He stepped to the microphone. "This is the Chief. Coded command to the Fleet. All ships of the first wave will proceed at once into landing manoeuvre—top speed, combat deployment. Ground rendezvous in 300 seconds. That is all!"

A half minute later the duty officer called through from Com Central. "Sir, the command has been beamed out. We are 8 seconds into countdown."

Col. Jefe Claudrin knew that he was also included in the general order. "So now it's our turn," he rumbled. He calmly depressed a red button and alarms rang through the *Ironduke*. The ship dropped like a stone toward Lepso as his thunderous voice rang out on every deck: "Attention all hands! Blitz landing in approximately 250 seconds! Code El Dorado is now in effect. Over and out!"

Then the calm voice of weapons officer Brazo Alkher was heard on the loudspeaker: "Colonel, the Chief is on board. Will Fire Control be affected by special order 0.3?"

Rhodan took over instantly. "Under no circumstances, Alkher! You have the same firing orders as the major battleships. Today, special order 0.3 is to be ignored!"

The officers present cast respectful glances at their chief. Many of them revealed their admiration openly. Special order 0.3 provided that the life of the First Administrator was not to be endangered, at all costs. Brazo Alkher had more or less inferred from Rhodan's presence on board that he was automatically on open firing orders but now the Chief himself had confirmed it by lifting the special restriction, which overrode the authority of Fleet Headquarters which had issued 0.3 in the first place.

Accompanied by more than a thousand warships of every class, the *Ironduke* plunged downward through the thick air masses of the planet. Escorted by 5 superbattleships the heavy cruiser landed at the great spaceport of the capital city. At altitudes of from 3 to 5 thousand meters the spherical spaceships had briefly opened their giant locks to disgorge a virtual shower of combat robots with antigrav equipment. Computer-integrated timing signals from the *Ironduke* automatically controlled the swift sequential periods in which the battleships opened their defence screens. This allowed the ponderous fighting machines to float downward toward their programmed task positions in the city below but each 14-second period of screenless operation was a high moment of tension. Each ship approaching its landing site had nothing more than its steel hull to protect it from a chance ground shot when its screen was momentarily inactive. But then all protective shielding came back on while the clouds of combat robots rained down toward the surface. They scattered swiftly in all directions and swept in over the sea of houses and buildings in preparation for a landing.

Simultaneously a similar landing operation ensued at all other sites of the more important settlements on Lepso, always accompanied by a descending storm of vast robot contingents. It was only somewhere to

the north of the rocky desert regions that an ominous event occurred.

8 heavy cruisers escorted by the battleship *Winnipeg* had just rebuilt their field screens when it happened. Here there were 3 well-camouflaged ground batteries under exceptionally powerful security screens. Suddenly a series of great disintegrator beams as thick as silos thundered against the *Winnipeg*'s screens and caused the giant hull to be stressed within 93% of its capacity, thus bringing the battleship close to the brink of destruction. With the exception of the crews on 3 heavy cruisers, however, no fire control officer in the engagement was shaken by the surprise attack—and especially was this true of the *Winnipeg* itself. All polar gun positions of the spherical warships sprang into action and released a concerted salvo of fire toward the target. Where a second before a super-powerful ray battery had existed beneath the boulder-strewn desert, now there was only a gaping pit where the molten earth flowed down the steep sides to form a boiling pool of lava at the bottom of the crater.

A report came through from the *Winnipeg*'s tracking sensors: "This defence position was robot-controlled."

The battleship's commander breathed a sigh of relief. Rhodan's top order was to spare all human or humanoid life where possible. He leaned over his microphone and calmly issued an order. "Report this action to the Chief. No further resistance encountered."

Whereupon the *Winnipeg* joined the 8 heavy cruisers in their landing manoeuvre in the northern desert wasteland.

And the second phase of the operation began.

Rhodan's second wave was circling at 10,000 meters and 5000 meters above this battle echelon the third wave had also come into formation. The thunder of countless impulse engines, the complaining howl of compressed air masses and the nerve-shattering shockwaves resulting from breaking the sound barrier must have caused the people on Lepso to think that the legions of Hell were descending from the void.

With its extended ring of landing struts the *Ironduke* hovered weightlessly over the landing field and finally touched down with a feathery lightness on the solid plastic surface of the port. The panob gallery revealed a virtual sea of spaceships of all descriptions. There were few of the Mounders' heavy ships to be seen but this was more than compensated for by the great number of Springer long-ships and the cylindrical hospital ships of the Aras, which were interspersed with a few alien types seldom seen in the known reaches of the galaxy.

With the exception of the Ara ships, all vessels were armed, yet none of them dared to enter in combat with Rhodan's super battleships. They were also well aware of the added danger hovering above them at altitudes of 10 and 15 thousands meters. Nevertheless one of the Galactic Traders must have lost his mind. A minute after the *Ironduke* landed, a smaller long-ship measuring only 100 meters in length attempted a crash take-off. It shot into the sky like a bullet but the first blockade ring overhead showed its teeth in the form of Rhodan's attack destroyers. The Springer commander of the little cylindrical spacer opened up with impulse and thermobeams, striking three of the oncoming destroyers.

But practically in the same moment the runaway was surrounded by 16 more destroyers. A group of them brought the vessel's propulsion system under concerted beam fire while the remaining fighters built up a cross-grid of destructive rays as a barrier of death. Then part of the fugitive's engine section blasted into brilliant flames. Instantly the ship lost its speed and made an alarmingly narrow turn, after which it twisted downward in a precarious attempt to land.

In the *Ironduke*'s large launching lock the officer in charge of combat robots dispatched 2 dozen of his fighting machines. Their programmed command: to surround the landed fugitive ship and prevent all Springers from leaving it.

On board the *Ironduke* the last of the messages had come in. All formations of the first wave had landed on Lepso. Meanwhile the robot forces had occupied the most important locations. For Perry Rhodan this meant that it was time for him to make a personal contact with the planet's government.

His radio call went unanswered. The second challenge also failed to raise an echo. However it raised a cry from all the transmitters on the planet as they renewed their calls for help to their allies in the outer void. In their messages they called the Solar Fleet a pirate invasion force and the Terrans were branded as bandits.

In the wake of the barrage of distress calls, more and more answering signals were coming in from all parts of the Greater Imperium. All the Mounder clans announced that they were on their way. Also the giant fleet of the Springers was racing toward the Feting System. Even rebellious factions among the Ekhonides were promising help. In the midst of these messages were undisguised threats against Arkon. Emperor Gonozal VIII had to endure the accusation that Rhodan had become his stooge.

Perry's sharply-chiselled features remained under control. His grey eyes revealed no spark of agitation. He turned calmly to Bell. "I think the time has come to set the record straight around here once and for all. It's a pretty sure guess now that this damnable narcotic is being produced here, somewhere on this planet. Otherwise I can't quite explain the extremes they've gone to in protesting our occupation."

Instead of waiting for Bell's opinion he looked across the Control Central to where John Marshall was conversing in whispers with Fellmer Lloyd. Telepathically he called to him: *John, start using the Swoons' pattern tracer. Take along your best tele paths. Whatever happens in the next hour is not to distract either you or your group.*

OK, *Chief*—Marshall telepathed back. *I hope we find him!*

*Hopefully, yes*, he answered. But it was not a wish that he was pleased about.

Then he turned to Claudrin. "Take off, Colonel! Land the *Ironduke* in the main plaza in front of the Central Government building. Evidently I have to show the lords of Lepso that I intend to be answered."

Claudrin leaned over to his intercom and instructed weapons officer Brazo Alkher.

#### **4/ RETURN OF THOMAS CARDIF**

Dr. Edmond Hugher had become aware of the new events taking place which had unleashed such a wave of fear and panic in many of the cities on Lepso and yet he seemed to be indifferent to most of what was going on. In keeping with his unexcitability and his almost psychotic complacency, he waited quietly for certain further developments of his experiments in the temple laboratory.

He had only issued one instruction that was directly related to the Solar Fleet's presence in the Feting

System: the swift transfer of the Liquitiv's bottling and packaging process to sector TT-1.

Sector TT-1 was located in the barren fastnesses of the Cif range which divided the rocky desert wastelands. Here a tunnel more than 10 km long led into a series of natural caverns where the Antis had made a maximum expenditure to create the most modern pharmaceutical processing plant in the galaxy. A small staff of technicians monitored the positronic equipment and the robot activities but other than that there was no humanoid labour performed here, neither by Antis, Aras nor any other form of living intelligences.

The technical staff consisted of 8 persons. For more than 10 years now they had been supervised by the astro-medical specialist, Dr. Nearman. Some 38 years before this time, officials of Solar Intelligence had attempted to apprehend him and deprive him of his freedom forever so he had disappeared permanently from the higher ranks of the Sol System's official hierarchy.

His fugitive odysseys clear across the Greater Imperium had not done him much good as far as any anchorage was concerned. Being unstable in his character he had gone from bad to worse until finally he had been hard put to it to even elude the jurisdiction of the Arkonides. But about this time, a good 10 years ago, several devotees of the Baalol cult had approached him. They surprised him with their detailed knowledge of all his criminal activities and general misdeeds during the previous 28 years; but on the other hand he also surprised the Antis by immediately accepting their offer to work with other unscrupulous men in the supervision of the Liquitiv production. For after all, with his record what did he have to lose?

It was a tragic destiny, however, for a man with his outstanding medical knowledge and his former fame in the field of biology, for whom also galacto-astronautical calculations were simple child's play.

A few hours ago Dr. Nearman had been in direct communication with Hugher and had learned that the final processing stages of the liqueur production were to be transferred to sector TT-1. In addition he had been issued orders to drain all remaining supplies of pure Liquitiv into the main storage tank. Without further comment, Edmond Hugher had cut off the connection. Nearman carried out the instructions and watched to see that the small tanks were all emptied into the main reservoir. Having then confirmed to the temple that he had accomplished the task, he proceeded with his routine rounds of inspection.

Although Hugher did not seem to be disturbed by events, this was not true in his own case. He was highly apprehensive of what was going on. Rhodan had landed on Lepso with his fleet and placed the whole government under arrest—all this merely to carry out a police action, as he had implied, to catch some criminals who were fugitives from the stellar empire of the Terrans. Therefore he himself might be in danger of being caught.

But on second thought he smiled disdainfully. He was betting on the Antis. He was sure that they would make short work of Rhodan, which meant in turn that he'd run very little risk of being apprehended by Solar Intelligence. Otherwise Hugher would have warned him because after all he was more or less in the same boat. In this regard Nearman had once heard some curious things whispered about him but when he had then questioned Hugher himself about it he had been met with uncomprehending surprise.

"Why no, Nearman," the scientist had told him at the time, "I am certainly not of any Earthly origin. I was born on some other planet but nobody can tell me where. Hm-m... Ever since I left Zalit, I haven't concerned myself much about it. For some reason my parents and brothers—if I had any—have become faceless strangers to me. What would be the use of searching into the matter at this stage?"

This Hugher was a strange duck alright, thought Nearman. He reached for a flask of Liquitiv, unsealed it

and lifted the plastic container to his lips. Like a bon vivant he drank the two cc of liqueur, wiped his mouth casually and tossed the empty bottle aside.

Almost at once an astounding change came over him. His dragging steps became feather light. His features firmed up. The things that had been weighing on his mind seemed to evaporate under the spell of a new euphoria. Feeling as though he were in the prime of his life, he began to whistle a tune.

Sector TT-1 was being supervised by a drug addict

\* \* \* \*

The plaza before the government building was a scene of devastation. The shattered and melted remains of fighter robots lay everywhere, with a fairly equal distribution of Terran, Springer and Mounder types. The metal monsters had fallen in a pitched battle during the occupation of the area.

Shortly after the *Ironduke* landed, the Lepso governmental staff had surrendered in the diplomatic quarters of the palace. Prime Minister Gal-Tan renewed his protest against this 'illegal' occupation by the Solar Fleet yet was cowed somewhat by Rhodan's cold steady gaze.

Perry spoke to the Lepsonian in perfect Arkonese. "You know why we have come."

Just then his micro-transceiver buzzed an emergency signal. He reached for his left arm, where he carried it, and quickly turned on the receiver portion.

The mini-speaker brought him the sound of a familiar voice. "Sir, there is a heavy engagement both outside and inside the ring of robotships. More than 3000 Mounder ships and about 4000 Springer units are trying to break through. The robot fleet is taking a very bad beating. Atlan has authorized additional reinforcements but they can't get here in under 6 hours. Sir, will you give the order for our third-wave task force to support the Arkon fleet?"

The message was from Gen. Conrad Deringhouse on board the *Ironduke*. It was a deviation from standard practice that in this operation he was not commanding the *Drusus* as usual.

Rhodan hesitated but it was not because of any uncertainty on his part. His gaze seemed to pass through or beyond the rulers of Lepso—these men who together with their predecessors had made of the planet a hideout for criminals, racketeers and pirates, unscrupulous miscreants who had made Lepso the centre of a galactic narcotics organization. He was looking beyond them at the telepathic mutant John Marshall, to whom he sent a mental message:

*Marshall, when I speak to you now in English, check their minds to see if any of these Lepsonians can understand it.*

Almost simultaneously he spoke into his microphone: "Wait!" Then he made up a test question for Marshall in English: "Haven't you also forgotten to order the attack against object 4?"

Marshall made a pretense of being surprised and confused but at the same time he probed the thoughts of the Lepso government men. He soon telepathed to Rhodan:*Four of them understand English, sir!*

Faced with this problem, Rhodan turned to a last resort. Both he and Deringhouse had been born in North America and they still knew their slang. To the aliens what he said must have been a ghastly hodgepodge of gibberish but he was able to transmit his command to the general—something about a Day in May, the Alma Mater and a Donnybrook, red-eye cement mixers, a ‘beef trust’ and the sheenies—all of which was decipherable as: no Terran engagement in the battle between Arkon robots, Mounders and Springers except in case of catastrophe.

Even Marshall complained by means of telepathy:*Sir, that slang was awful. I didn't understand a word!*

Following this little sideplay Rhodan was about to continue with the Prime Minister when he was again interrupted mentally by Marshall.*Sir, this staff is a camouflage to deceive us. They all take orders exclusively from the Antis. The local headquarters of the Antis is in the trading house of the Springer clan of Guvtjol. From the way the streets are laid out here, that would put it at the corner of streets 33 and 107...*

Rhodan swept his gaze to Julian Tiffior, who had once operated as a ‘cosmic decoy’ in the beginning of his career. Sensing that he was being summoned by the Chief, Tiffior came over to him.

Rhodan whispered to him. "Tiff, place these crackers (characters) under guard and pass out orders that the local Antis are not to be allowed to escape, They're located in the trading house of the Springer clan of Guvtjol." He then told him how to find the place. "But while you're about it, don't forget the mental powers of these fanatics. Stay on your guard, Tiff, as if you were dealing with the fiends of Hell!"

He gave the rest of his companions the signal to leave.

Prime Minister Gal-Tan suspected what lay ahead for him and his government. "Rhodan!" he shouted after the First Administrator. "This whole planet will be a Hell for you if you dare place us under arrest!"

Rhodan did not so much as turn to look at him. Escorted by 30 ponderous Terran robots he left the presidential palace and returned to the *Ironduke* without further incident.

The watch officer at the airlock saluted him as he gave him an order. "Advise Deringhouse and Claudrin that I'm back on board. I will be in Marshall's cabin but I am not to be disturbed except in an emergency.

\* \* \* \*

The Swoons' individual pattern-tracer was sitting on Marshall's small magazine table. The compactness of the device alone was an indication that only the cucumber people could have made it. It was no more than 5 cm long. Its 12-inch antenna ended in a clear glasslike ball, the secret of which could only be seen under a microscope. Its surface was covered with more than 300,000 mathematically-precise lines. Except at the poles of the sphere, not one of the lines touched each other.

6 of the best telepaths in the Mutant Corps were standing around the small table. Each of them appeared to be in a state of trance as they held their concerted gaze on the ball antenna. Rhodan sat in the background, stretched out calm and comfortably with his legs crossed and trying to breathe without a sound.

The personality tracker was working.

Without telepaths it was nothing. Only the paranormal energies of an esper could start it functioning. Without moving a finger the 6 mutants had adjusted it to Thomas Cardif's brainwave pattern. Like a defruiter system in space traffic control but on a much more complex level, the sensor device could differentiate one single wave pattern from billions of others and respond to it. As opposed to all other types of tracers this device worked only in relation to paranormal forces. Basically it was a form of rectifier and amplifier of mental vibrations and it could scan the sea of billions of different brainwave frequencies. Thus all patterns and frequencies not related to the specific one it was seeking became blank to it, even though they might still continue to come in. Although this process was unexplainable from a mathematical standpoint, it was the only means of guaranteeing that Thomas Cardif's wave-pattern had to be found. And although it only had 300,000 lines on its antenna globe, it covered billions of variables on the basis of a microsecond strobing cycle.

Rhodan noted that all 6 telepaths suddenly seemed to tense at the same time, as though they had been jolted by something. He sat up instinctively and leaned forward with a tension of his own on his face. He recognized the strange attitude of the mutants which they always exhibited when they were straining with all their energy to hang onto an impulse source that had come within their range. Even the mousebeaver was no exception.

Nevertheless, Rhodan suspected that something had just gone wrong. Which was confirmed when Pucky abruptly turned around, shaking his head in exasperation—at the same time avoiding Rhodan's eyes. This was followed by John Marshall, who also gave up. In sheer exhaustion the latter approached Rhodan and slumped into a seat.

"Sir, I just don't understand it!" Marshall leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and stared at the floor while he supported his head in both hands. "We had several seconds of contact with Thomas Cardif—the reception was perfect I could even read his thoughts but since we contacted him just at the end of some deliberation I couldn't understand what came through. Who in the heck could somebody named *Luel* or *Liii* be? Anyway, in the next instant it was as if a wall had dropped between us."

As Rhodan watched him, Marshall slowly began to relax from his tension. Apparently he was recovering from the ordeal. Pucky waddled up and was followed closely by tele-tracer Fellmer Lloyd.

The mousebeaver stopped in front of Rhodan and complained plaintively: "If those Antis didn't just pull a trick on us, then I don't know an Anti when I see one!"

Fellmer Lloyd corroborated the little fellow's conclusion. "Sir, Pucky is right! I think the Antis' para-mental faculties enabled them to detect our trace attempt, and they've blocked it. We were right on Cardif's wavelength. I could see his brainwave pattern perfectly—even recognized his mental block..."

He got no farther because Rhodan sprang to his feet before him, almost knocking Pucky out of the way. The Chief stared at his tracer mutant who was not only capable of *seeing* brainwave patterns at a distance but could also detect whether or not the person generating them was menacing and in what way.

Rhodan's grey eyes were flashing now in his new intensity. "Are you certain, Lloyd, that Thomas is still

under the hypnosis?"

Behind him Pucky was heard to sigh as though a great weight had been lifted from him. Rhodan had just referred to his son as *Thomas!*

The tele-tracer answered without hesitation: "I'm absolutely sure of it! He's not only hypnotized but it's the same unchangeable state he was put under by the Arkonide psycholator."

"Thank you." Rhodan turned back toward his seat but took time to pat the mousebeaver on the head. "You were right again, little one."

The ship's intercom buzzed an alarm. The screen lit up to reveal Col. Myler, chief of the Solar Fleet's third-wave task force, which was still circling Lepso at the 15000-meter level. He was visibly agitated. "Sir, the outer blockade force of robotships has suffered 50% casualties. Three groups of Mounder warships—about 600 of them—have broken through! They'll reach Lepso in 30 minutes!"

"They *could* reach Lepso in 30 minutes, Colonel," Rhodan corrected him. "But you keep the third wave out of it! Just don't worry about it—stay with your firecover assignment. That is all."

For Myler this meant he had to cut off the connection but the *Ironduke's* inter-ship channel remained open.

"Deringhouse?" Rhodan said into the mike.

The battle-wise features of Conrad Deringhouse appeared on the screen but he didn't have a chance to say anything.

"Deringhouse, order an offensive attack on the Mounder forces which have broken through. Use all superbattleships except the *Drusus*. Thank you."

He shut off immediately and seemed at the same moment to forget all about the fact that the situation was getting more menacing for the Terran Fleet with each passing minute. He turned again to Fellmer Lloyd and asked him the same question. "Can you swear that Thomas Cardif is living under the same hypno-block that was impressed on him 58 years ago on Arkon?"

And again the tele-tracer confirmed without hesitation: "Sir, I am able to swear to it!"

Rhodan wiped his eyes for a moment, then shook his head. "I find it difficult to believe that but I have to. Lloyd, what I have to do..." He trailed off, leaving the rest unexpressed, and not even Pucky dared at this moment to invade the Chief's private thoughts. Rhodan stared at each of them in turn. "Men, hasn't anybody been able to determine *where* Thomas Cardif is located? With the Swoon tracer you should have gotten some indication."

Marshall explained this. "Sir, there's a false assumption there. The personality-tracker is a high-powered amplifier. It pulls in the brainwaves but it doesn't have any directional capacity. Its spherical antenna bulb isn't designed for it. Only we could have figured it out—but we didn't have enough time. So unfortunately we don't have the direction."

"I think I know!" chirped the mousebeaver, to everyone's surprise. "It's just come to me now. Direction of brainwave emanation is north-north by west—provided that my sense of direction isn't playing any tricks on me here on Lepso..."



Rhodan was already channelled in to the Control Central, demanding to know what lay in a north-north by west direction.

After only a few seconds the metallic voice of the *Ironduke*'s positronicon was heard on the speaker. "City of Tu-ki; 30,000 inhabitants. Sea of Frugid, 210 sq km surface area. Then the Glogu mountain chain. Finally the great desert of rocky wastelands. The Temple of Baalol. Beyond are the Cif Mountains, which divide the desert region; 518 km beyond them begins the jungle of Morw..."

Rhodan reasoned he had received enough information so he cut off. When the computer brain mentioned the Baalol temple, everybody in Marshall's cabin had suddenly tensed.

"*Thatgang!*" chirped Pucky menacingly.

The ship's telecom lit up and the face of Julian Tifflo was visible on the screen. When he saw his expression, Rhodan knew what he had to tell him.

"Sir, more than 80 Antis have gotten away from us. We weren't able to catch a single anti-mutant at the Springer's trading house. They went off in 4 high-speed gliders and flew away in a north-north-west direction. The *Ghandi* struck them straight on with 3 beam shots but they still weren't powerful enough to break through their defence screens.

Rhodan was able to give him some consolation. "Tiff, in spite of that your operation was a success. You noted their direction of flight: *to the north-north-west*. The Antis couldn't have done us a better favour." As he switched off he turned to his telepaths. "I want all of you to keep at it—make another concerted effort to use that tracer and try to find Thomas Cardif's brainwave patterns."

Perry Rhodan did not realize then the consequences that would result from his command.

\* \* \* \*

When the para-mental powers of the anti-mutants in the Baalol temple enabled them to sense that other mutant forces were reaching out in search of them, they did not reveal the slightest trace of panic. Only Tu-poa sprang into sudden action. Since he had been in closest contact with Dr. Edmond Hugher for many years, he knew what he had to do. He rushed into the laboratory where Hugher sat unsuspectingly at his scientific work.

The doctor had just been thinking about a certain catalyser but now he looked up in startlement as he saw Tu-poa burst in on him. "Tu-poa, what's the matter?" he asked, gazing at him with his usual entranced expression.

"Nothing," the fanatic lied to him. "It's just that conditions are becoming too unsettled here on this world. It appears that we'll be forced to vacate the temple and leave Lepso as well." While he spoke he unleashed his Anti-powers and threw an impenetrable screen around Hugher. He knew it would block any attempts to penetrate the scientist's thoughts.

"Has this anything to do with me, Tu-poa?" Hugher asked almost indifferently.

"That's what we want to discuss with you. It's why I've come. Please drop your work and follow me. Every minute is going to be precious to us—I don't want to keep my brothers waiting for us too long."

But the dreamy and peaceloving Dr. Edmond Hugher only had one leisurely speed. He slowly shoved his work papers to one side and after taking a careful look about him he finally got to his feet. "Tu-poa, please don't walk so fast!" he admonished, ever smiling, and he followed with measured tread.

The fanatic's red eyes flared up in uncontrollable rage but he managed to turn his face away so that Hugher wouldn't see his grim expression. They left the laboratory area together and went across the temple courtyard past a long stretch of other buildings. Their goal was the towering pyramid structure which in its imposing size and form stood out uniquely from every other building in the temple compound.

While the two were floating upward in the antigrav shaft toward the third level of the pyramid, Hugher raised a question: "Why don't we simply withdraw into sector TT-1 in the Cif Mountains? Certainly Rhodan couldn't bother us there."

The Anti controlled himself with an effort. An uncomfortable suspicion had awakened within him. He avoided the scientist's gaze and evaded the question with a simple explanation: "The Council has decided to leave Lepso."

They left the lift shaft together and traversed the wide corridor that led to the door of the great hail where the Antis were accustomed to holding their Grand Assembly. Edmond Hugher was surprised to see the servants of Baalol gathered here in somewhat disordered array. The ever-smiling dreamer, accustomed to an eternal unruffled calm, could not understand these cult members now as they stood about in small groups and conversed in livelier tones than was their custom. When he turned to find Tu-poa he discovered that his companion had left him.

At this moment Tu-poa was standing before the head priest of the temple, whispering an important message to him.

"What?" asked the priest, obviously shaken.

Tu-poa confirmed what he had said. "Yes, Master! It is only a suspicion. I should have thought of it much sooner but now it has come to me because Rhodan's mutants are trying to reach Hugher's mind."

The ancient Anti's face was wrinkled and inscrutable. His eyes narrowed suddenly. "Tu-poa, it would not be too difficult, would it, to alter Hugher's brainwave frequency? In that way it would become impossible for the Terran mutants to ever trace him again. In the course of the forced readjustment of frequencies it might be possible to verify your suspicions or to disprove them. But do we have that much time? Just before you came in we received a message from the trading house that all of our brothers there were put to flight by Rhodan's robots. Thanks only to their anti-powers were they able to survive a heavy energy bombardment. They should be here any minute now."

For the first time a real panic seized Tu-poa. "Master, we must make the time for it! For the time being, Hugher is indispensable to us!"

The ancient Anti met this hectic outburst with stoic calm. "Then we have been in error. He should never have been allowed to become indispensable. If your suspicion is correct, why didn't Laoo-o ever inform us concerning it?"

"Master, Laoo-o died unexpectedly. At that time, Hugher was still studying on Aralon. Laoo-o had no close friends among the true servants of Baalol. Master, if there is any error it did not begin with me!" He spoke the last sentence as though to exorcise an evil spirit.

The ancient one came to an immediate decision. He had noticed that the scientist was approaching them. His lips hardly moved as he gave instructions to his assistants. "Place Hugher under the frequency changer and while you're doing it check out Tu-poa's suspicion."

This was the moment in which Rhodan's telepaths renewed their attempt to locate the thought-impulses of Thomas Cardif, alias Edmond Hugher, among billions of mental vibrations.

The ancient one froze. His mental forces concentrated entirely on this alien invasion from outside. His assistants as well as Tu-poa created a barrier around Hugher's brain. Now the screen was so strong that not even technically-amplified probes could get through.

"Make the alteration at once!" ordered the old priest. His withered lips had thinned to a narrow line.

Edmond Hugher suddenly saw himself surrounded by priests. He had already been wondering about Tu-poa's strange behaviour but even when they pulled him gently but firmly from the great hall his objections were made in his usual peaceful manner.

He looked at Tu-poa with a smile. "Aren't you going to explain what this is all about?" he asked, still in his dreamlike state.

"Later, Hugher, later. You aren't aware of it but you are in the greatest danger right now. You probably know that any person's brain impulses can be violated by means of para-mental forces. Do you want this Terran, Rhodan, to rob you of the Flaming Sword that you have placed in the hands of Baalol?"

While Hugher walked along the hail accompanied by 8 Antis, he nodded thoughtfully and smiled. "So Rhodan wants to snatch the secret of the liqueur from me? Interesting. It suddenly interests me very much to have Baalol be mightier than this aggressive Terran and so I'm quite ready to do anything I can to keep Rhodan from stealing my knowledge."

Hugher did not suspect how much his words brought a feeling of relief to the Antis who were with him. However, in Tu-poa his awful suspicion had turned to certainty. Secretly he cursed the Arkonides on Arkon who had spread the news throughout the Greater Imperium, 58 years ago, that Perry Rhodan's son had suffered a near-fatal brain injury in an accident. They had said then that it was doubtful that he would ever regain his full mental faculties again. Everybody had believed it and those who knew his identity as Hugher even believed it because of the astonishing changes that gradually appeared in him after his convalescence.

The main problem was that the Antis had fallen for the story, nor had they known that Hugher was Cardif. To them, Rhodan's son had met with a near-fatal accident; he would never be the same again; they did not know exactly where he was or if he were alive at all.

Only one of the Baalol priests must have known the truth or at least surmised it: Laoo-o. But why hadn't he shared this knowledge with his cult brothers? Had he been carefully waiting for Rhodan's son to complete his medical studies on Aralon before revealing to him who his father was? Had Laoo-o been working on secret plans of his own? If so, then his unexpected death had been an ironical twist of fate which had turned the results of his labours to an entirely different goal.

A wild excitement possessed Tu-poa now as he and his cult brothers led Hugher into the most secret room of the temple pyramid. With a haste that was very unusual for the Antis, they urged Edmond Hugher to take his place in the psycho-converter chair. To the scientist the hurried attitude of the Antis was becoming more and more of a mystery. He felt there was more behind their actions than they had revealed to him thus far. Yet he still persisted in suppressing such apprehensions because of his overriding gratitude to the cult which had enabled him to get away from Zalit and escape from a clique of decadent Arkonides.

He submitted to being strapped in. Metal contact discs on flexible leads were attached to his temples while a third contact device was fastened by means of suction to his ribs just over the heart. His hands were placed around two glistening metal cones and instantly two clamps snapped over his wrists so that he could not let go.

Somewhere behind him a transformer began to hum. Two other Antis joined Tu-poa at the control console. As Tu-poa made finer adjustments the humming sound increased. Still in his lotus dreaming, Dr. Edmond Hugher smiled as ever while watching every switch adjustment on the panel. So far he had not felt the slightest change come over him. Even the cold metal contacts at his temples had begun to warm up to his bodily temperature.

Suddenly, however, the world seemed to come apart. There was a searing flash seen only by his mind but that was the last sensation he was aware of—at least for awhile.

Tu-poa stood at the console panel as if frozen in time. His eyes focussed with burning intensity on an oscilloscope screen. The broad brainwave curves were indicated there with amazing clarity but in the lower third of the graph was a prominent spike.

"Brain-blocked!" he called out tensely. There was a demoniacal expression on the fanatic's face. "They've blocked his personality! He doesn't know he is Rhodan's son! Summon the Master!" This last was shouted over the rising hum of the transformer.

3 cabinet-sealed devices nearby were crackling with new sounds which were suddenly drowned in the rising howl of a motor-generator. All of which made the hurrying footsteps of the Anti inaudible as he went away to summon the Master.

Tu-poa had come out of his frozen trance of concentration. In panicky haste he rechecked all of his control settings. He snapped out one order after another like a spaceship captain in a battle crisis. Other equipment was turned on and soon the room was thundering with the sound of operating machinery. Through it all, Dr. Edmond Hugher remained unconscious in the psycho-converter chair.

Then came the Master, the highest cult authority of the Baalol temple on Lepso. Tu-poa only realized he was beside him when he felt himself pushed to one side.

"Master, please don't disturb me just now!" he pleaded anxiously.

The ancient one complied. He was content to merely look over the other's shoulder as he worked. His tense attitude was a silent tribute to Edmond Hugher's importance for the Antis. The block-sensor was activated. It was a device which could probe Hugher's brain electronically, enabling the operator to determine where the hypno-block was located and to what extent it was influencing adjacent nerve centres.

The still unconscious scientist in the converter chair could not know that this was the most dangerous

moment of his life. The slightest mistake at the console or the slightest error in evaluation could cause him to wake up as a mental derelict.

Tu-poa's fanatic eyes saw only the oscillating needles of the instruments, the racing numbers on the colour-coded digital meters and the changing comparison diagrams on the double scopes. The left-hand oscillogram indicated the strength of Hugher's hypno-block whereas the one on the right gave a curving indication of how much energy was needed to break the block.

Toward the lower edge of the small control panel was the target-focussing device. This was a kind of 'frequency sight' which made it possible to adjust the block-rupturing beam to the fraction of a millimetre so that it would precisely impinge upon the hypnotized area without endangering the unaffected portions.

Time seemed to race by alarmingly but actually only a few minutes had been consumed by the operation. Tu-poa again checked all settings of the block-sensor equipment. Then he took a deep breath and threw the main switch.

Behind him the man in the converter chair suddenly screamed like something inhuman. Tu-poa and the other Antis turned toward him in a panic. Dr. Edmond Hugher's half-breed yellow-red eyes glared at them with a new light of awakening.

Tu-poa had instinctively pulled the main switch back to zero, not realizing that he had cut off at the moment of the scream. As though to confirm his action, he turned briefly to the panel and observed with relief that the sensor was no longer in operation.

"Release me!" The voice rang thin the room in the harsh tones of one accustomed to command.

The Antis stared at the scientist in speechless amazement. Where was Edmond Hugher's dreaming smile? Where was his peaceloving diffidence and moderation now? Or his unassailable calm?

"Dammit I say—are you going to let me loose?!" he insisted angrily.

The Antis did not move. A stranger sat in the psychoconverter chair. They had strapped in a man named Dr. Edmond Hugher but now this other man's features were changing from moment to moment and he rattled his fetters in an impatient rage, demanding to be set free. More and more the weak and expressionless features of his face disappeared, to be replaced by the hard lines of an unyielding will.

"Unbind me!" His voice had an icy, brittle ring. His eyes flashed commandingly, almost hypnotically. "Tu-poa, do I have to tell you again?" he demanded.

Tu-poa stepped to the chair and activated a release switch. The bonds sprang free. Without a word, the man formerly known as Hugher got to his feet. At the level of his head the gleaming metal canopy over the chair reflected his face clearly. When he saw himself he tensed as though shocked. He raised a hand to his face and hesitantly ran his fingers over his features.

"Is that me? You have brought me to this, Rhodan? First you murder my mother and then top everything off by stealing my very life away from me—58 years!"

He turned slowly to look at the Antis who were standing around him in breathless suspense. He addressed each of them by name and finally Tu-poa himself.

"I have not forgotten a thing, Tu-poa. I still remember when you first came to Aralon and visited me. I

still know everything that's happened during the last 58 years nor have I forgotten what went before or who I am. *My name is Thomas Cardif!* My mother was Thora, an Arkonide princess, and Rhodan—that unscrupulous Terran!—was the one who sired me and became my own mother's assassin! Enough, then—you know the whole story!"

Cardif looked again at his reflection in the gleaming canopy panel and saw himself as a stranger. "You have made me a mockery of myself, Rhodan, but for that you will receive your reckoning from me!" While speaking he began to look down at his body. "My physique hasn't changed too much..."

Gripped by a fanatical excitement, Tu-poa cried out to him: "But Hugher—since we released your hypnoblock your face has changed!"

"Cardif is my name, Tu-poa!" came the sharp correction. "And now? Are we going to wait around here until Rhodan brings his fleet over the temple and forces us all to throw our hands in the air?"

It was difficult for even the Antis to make an adjustment in just a few minutes to this new Edmond Hugher, alias Thomas Cardif. It was still more difficult for them to realize that he had not forgotten a single event of the past 58 years.

However, the ancient head priest wanted to be sure of one point in particular. "Cardif," he asked, "are you aware of what you have done for Baalol out of gratitude to our cult?"

"Gratitude? Yes, why not? That's right—it was gratitude, Ancient One!" He stretched his arms while pondering this question for a moment and then he demonstrated the real change in him for the first time. "But I want the Flaming Sword back, priest! With the help of Baalol I want to wield it so mightily against the Solar Imperium that it will be turned into nothing but raving madmen! Rhodan must have pulled all his fleet units into this action, so that leaves his colonial worlds defenceless. Have they been well-saturated with the Liquitiv?"

Having been released from his synthetic personality, his real self was revealing the heritage of his genius father. He had almost been equal to Rhodan in terms of planning and strategy. More than once he had thrown the Solar Imperium into its gravest crises. Almost always his shrewd manipulations had served to block Rhodan's countermeasures.

The ancient priest stared at him in some confusion.

Cardif smirked at him critically. "Are you telling me no? You failed to see your biggest chance? But there's still time! Beam out an order to flood the colonial worlds of the Solar Imperium with Liquitiv. Make it a gift to all those Terrans who have such a thirst for eternal youth! Do you still fail to see that we're on the verge of losing a unique opportunity?"

He spoke compellingly and with a minimum of gestures. After being under the most powerful type of partial hypnosis for 58 years, Thomas Cardif had become once again the bitterest enemy of his father. He hated and despised him more than ever and in the moment of his awakening he had sworn to make Rhodan pay for the years that had been stolen from him.

Tu-poa was startled as Cardif stepped closer to him. "Tu-poa, why was I brought in here to the psycho-converter?" he asked.

Under the forceful gaze of Cardif's reddish Arkonide eyes the Anti was compelled to speak but during the explanation Rhodan's son did not reveal any trace of surprise. He only alluded to it after the Anti had

finished.

"So he still has his Mutant Corps. Well, Tu-poa, have my brainwave patterns been altered or haven't they?"

The god priest had to admit that he didn't know.

In 3 steps Thomas Cardif was back in the chair. "Find out, Tu-poa!"

Two of the priests rushed forward to set up the contacts again while Tu-poa turned to the controls. It suddenly seemed as if there were only one man left in the room who was capable of giving commands and that was Thomas Cardif. Minutes later it was determined that the forced breaking of the hypno-block had altered his frequency pattern by a very slight margin.

"Thank you," he said as he got up from the chair again.

He smiled triumphantly. From now on Rhodan's precious mutants would not be able to trace him. A frequency distortion of merely one cps would be enough to conceal his thought-impulses in the endless sea of billions of others.

"Rhodan!" He laughed when he spoke the name, and he thought of the biological rejuvenation liqueur—his Liquitiv!

But his triumph was short-lived.

The Solar Fleet had not yet taken over all transmitter stations on Lepso. News came through from one of them that the Mounder squadrons that had broken through the blockade had been put to flight by Rhodan's superbattleships. A second announcement stated that a spherical spacer of the Solar Fleet had just taken off on a course for the Baalol temple! The Lepsonian's excited voice had no sooner gone off the air than the temple's own speaker system came to life with a sudden announcement. The Antis who had escaped from the Springer clan's commercial house had just arrived in 4 high-speed gliders and had landed in front of the temple.

The head priest was about to order an evacuation and flight.

"Wait!" ordered Cardif sharply. The dreaming smile of many years was gone forever now. "We have time! Don't you know Rhodan yet? Have you made such a poor study of his methods? The big hero's weakness is that he goes by the rules! Before he'll give an order to open fire on the temple he'll give us an ultimatum. Even if it's only 30 minutes, that gives us enough time to destroy anything here that could be important to him, and also to think of our escape.

They stared at him as if mesmerized, still not able to believe that the smiling dreamer, Edmond Hugher, had become the master strategist Thomas Cardif—a genius equal to his father, Perry Rhodan.

## **5/ TRAIL'S END—AN OLD BEGINNING**

The *Ironduke* hovered about 30 feet over the plaza in front of the government palace, as if to find its bearings. Then with a swelling thunder from its impulse engines the 800-meter battlesphere soared upward, diminishing skyward to an altitude of 10,000 feet or more, after which it veered away in a north-north-westerly direction, having set its course for the Baalol temple in the desert wastelands.

The third and last attempt to locate Thomas Cardif's mental emanations with the Swoon tracer failed completely. But even Rhodan did not suspect that the consequences were going to cause him a greater loss than he anticipated.

He had just returned to the Control Central and taken a seat next to Bell when the hypercom message came through reporting that the 600 Mounder ships had been put to flight. After that an unexpected announcement came from the main blockade front out on the edge of the Fering System—this time much more reassuring. The reinforcements from Arkon had arrived ahead of time: 3210 heavy cruisers completely manned by robots. Now the blockade forces would be able to repulse any attackers.

Rhodan noted Bell's worried look. "Not a thing," he said, anticipating his question. "We made only one brief contact with Cardif. The Antis must have sensed the probe immediately. They seem to have used their counter-forces to screen off his mental impulses."

"Nothing more?"

"Well—Fellmer Lloyd is willing to swear by what he claims to have detected: Cardif is still under the original mental block."

Holding itself to a comparative crawling pace, the *Ironduke* kept its course at just under the speed of sound. At this low altitude the massive ship could not push itself faster through the heavier air mass without causing severe disturbances on the surface of Lepso. Colonel Claudrin understood the Chiefs policy in this regard and was careful not to break the sound barrier before reaching the rocky desert.

Once more they flew over a vast spaceport area which was also occupied by star ships of every make and description. This seemed to confirm the earlier reports that a tremendous number of spacecraft were on Lepso at present. They probably totalled some 4500 to 5500 vessels on the entire planet, which was a clear indication of Lepso's importance as a galactic distribution point. It was also at least a partial explanation of why a great percentage of the inhabitants of the whole Milky Way were showing such a strong reaction to Rhodan's operation here. But positronic evaluations were not the only evidence that this general uproar had been carefully planned. Now there was the fact concerning the hurried flight of 80 Antis from a galactic counting house of one of the Springer clans.

Bell was still looking at his friend in wondering amazement. How could Thomas Cardif have been under the Arkonide hypno-block continuously for the past 6 decades or so? His old personality had been altered to keep him from being the most dangerous troublemaker in the galaxy—and yet...?"

Bell tried to hold his voice steady. "Perry, if what you say is true, then I can't understand how he got away from Zalit or why he even tried to leave. On the other hand, if he's still under the hypno-block can he still be held entirely responsible for the discovery of the doped liqueur?"

Rhodan remained silent. He gave no outward sign of the fact that a new apprehension had seized him. He was thinking of what might happen if the Antis discovered that Cardif was under a mental block—especially if they were to free him from it! After 6 decades of deceptive peace, wouldn't things then be worse than before?



Bell still persisted. "Perry? You're not giving me any answers." He glanced involuntarily at the great panob screens and noticed that they were flying over a smaller city, beyond which a long inland sea extended into the distance.

The city was known as Tu-ki and the Lepsonians referred to the landlocked sea as Frugid. Tu-ki was the last settlement between here and the Baalol temple, but before that came the Glogu Mountains and the first stretch of the rocky desert.

"Bell, what answers can I give you? Instead of that, let me ask *you* something. Assuming that the Antis discover Thomas' hypno-block and remove it—what will my son think of me when he suddenly returns to himself after 58 years? Won't he find all the more reason to suspect me of treachery and be all the more convinced that I sent Thora to her death?"

Even before he finished speaking to Bell, the latter had jumped up and gone over to Col. Claudrin. "Colonel, why don't you step on the gas?" he asked gruffly. "Do we *have* to crawl like snails?"

The Epsalian calmly pointed to the viewscreens, on which the Frugid Sea was visible as well as several surface vessels. Claudrin's mighty voice replied with a counter-question: "Do you want me to capsize those boats down there, Mr. Bell?"

The Ship's Com came through with an announcement from Col. Myler, chief of the 3rd echelon task force. In spite of all efforts to hold the inner blockade, three Springer ships had succeeded in taking off from Lepso. "One of them blew up under our beam fire," he reported. "The other two have surrendered. We've sent them over several robot units to keep them under arrest and pilot them in between our ships to a landing. Their cargoes are made up of nothing but Liquitiv. Over and out..."

Meanwhile Bell had seated himself next to Rhodan again. Perry was still sitting unmoved in his flight seat, apparently gazing away into a distance.

"Don't say anything more, Bell!"

That was all there was to it—a flatout command. Reginald Bell could say nothing. Several thousand questions whirled in his mind and every single one of them had to do with Thomas Cardif. But the main question was: after 58 years, what would Thomas think of his father if he were to awaken from his hypnosis?

Neither of the two men suspected that just a few minutes before this, Thomas Cardif had already answered the question.

\* \* \* \*

The *Ironduke's* radio officer was shouting so loudly through the intercom system that the speaker in the Control Central was hardly necessary as an amplifier. "Sir—radio traffic from Antis intercepted and decoded! It's a hypercom message to an unknown receiving point. All Terran colonial worlds to be saturated with Liquitiv! The liqueur is to be distributed free to all comers!"

Even while this was coming through, Rhodan had stretched out a hand gropingly to Bell, seeming to

grasp him imploringly. No one else had caught his reflex action. No one heard him whisper to his friend: "That is Cardiff's first strategic chess move! Bell, he's back again—I can feel it!"

Bell was just about to agree with him but just then the air shimmered nearby and the mousebeaver suddenly appeared. There was no sign of his smiling incisor now. His reddish pelt had a dull flat appearance which was always a sign of inner agitation.

The officers in the Control Central were still digesting the frightening news that the colonial worlds of Terra were to be flooded with Liquitiv. Pucky was able to chirp his fervent plea to Rhodan without being observed. "Let me jump for it! I'll find him among a thousand Antis and haul him on board!"

Obviously he referred to Thomas Cardiff. Again without permission the mousebeaver had tuned in to the thoughts of Rhodan and Bell, as his words clearly implied. This also explained why he had chosen this particular moment to teleport into the main control room.

Rhodan placed his hand on Pucky's head. The mightiest man in the Solar Imperium smiled sadly at the little one as he shook his head almost imperceptibly. The desperate gleam faded from Pucky's big grey eyes. The rascal had read Rhodan's thoughts again and had seen that his suggestion wasn't feasible. He had not taken the Antis paranormal strength into consideration. Their mental faculties enabled them to fortify any synthetically-generated defence screen to the point where even the most powerful energy beams could not get through. Unquestionably his teleport jump would go no farther than the Anti-screen and he would be hurled back to his starting point.

"Damn those Antis!" exclaimed Bell angrily. And he continued with more spectacular curses, half under his breath.

Rhodan took no note of the outburst and even Pucky remained silent, though he had always been the first to be amused by Bell's cussword artillery.

On the panob screens Perry could see that the inland body of water had almost been traversed. The farther shore appeared, on which were a number of magnificent buildings, but that also moved onward to the middle of the screen and at the upper edge could be seen the first elevations of the Glogu Mountains. Colonel Claudrin leaned forward in his custom-made flight seat and lightly touched the buttons on the impulse engine panel. There was a rising howl from the ring-bulge as the *Ironduke* finally moved forward at a greater speed.

Rhodan got up and went over to Claudrin, where the ship's intercom was located. He put in a call to Allan D. Mercant, the chief of Solar Intelligence. "Mercant, don't we still have a number of agents on Lepso? I remember sending your men an order from Earth, telling them to concentrate all of their efforts on finding Dr. Edmond Hugher. Why have I not heard from them, Solar Marshall?"

Whenever Rhodan used this tone it reminded one of lightnings that bring warning of a storm. In spite of the obvious rebuke, however, Mercant's face on the screen revealed no sign of insecurity.

"Negative report, sir. I deliberately refrained from passing my agents' reports on to you. They were all quite frank in confessing that their investigations concerning Hugher, alias Cardiff, had run into a detour because of falsified information at central data centres. If Thomas Cardiff is actually in the Baalol temple, it proves that the opposition managed to deceive my men 100%."

After a slight pause, Rhodan answered with unmistakable sharpness. "Solar Marshall, the next time I'd also like to be informed concerning unsuccessful operations of Solar Intelligence. That is all."

Rhodan looked up again at the panob gallery of viewscreens. In the interim Claudrin must have raised the *Ironduke's* speed close to 2000 km per hour. The mountain chain had disappeared. Beneath the ship lay the bleak Great Desert of Lepso, an ocean of sand and rocks, here and there relieved only by flat-topped ridges and mesas.

A frantic call was heard from energy tracking: "Sir!"

"Yes?" Rhodan turned toward the station, which was located in the vast room that constituted the ship's 'Bridge'.

"Sir, I might be wrong but what I'm getting tells me there's a spaceship warming up—somewhere near the Baalol temple!"

It was a challenge to Bell. He had to see the energy graphs for himself. His prime forte had been electronics and in the course of many decades of experience with positronic detection he had developed a fingertip feeling for it which had made him an incomparable specialist in such evaluations.

"Give me some room, please," he told the duty officer. Both his hands went to the trace controls and he watched the scope diagrams in close concentration for a moment. Then he turned to Rhodan significantly. "Perry, that's what it reads! The Antis have a ship at the temple and it's ready for take-off now. Colonel, can't you give us a little more speed?" He relinquished his seat to the officer and went back to Rhodan. "Those Antis are about to show us their staff, Perry. You still going to give them an ultimatum?"

"That's right, but we'll try to avoid what you're thinking." Rhodan turned once more to the intercom. "Com Central—coded dispatch to all superbattleships! Deploy in guard position at 100,000 km. Effective immediately, sole observation target is the Baalol temple. A spaceship take-off is probable. Presumably Antis will be on board. Estimated number between 100 and 120. If any ship in temple vicinity actually tries to take off, you are to prevent its escape by any and *all* means at your disposal! Rhodan, First Administrator, Solar Imperium."

He turned slowly to Bell who stared at him dumbfoundedly. "Bell, don't say it! You don't have to remind me that Thomas Cardif might be on board that ship. Please don't make it any harder for me!"

The crew in the Control Central had overheard him. None of the officers on duty was old enough to have known Thomas Cardif as their Chief's bitterest foe but they all knew what Cardif had attempted in his efforts to destroy Rhodan. There was not a man among them who was sorry for him now.

But there was a mousebeaver named Pucky.

He waddled up to Rhodan and touched his left wrist with his paw. "Alright!" he chirped. "Now for the first time I'm glad that these Antis can supercharge their screens enough to hold off the heaviest disintegrator beam. You want to bet Thomas gets away with the Antis, Chief?"

Com Central called through to announce that Rhodan's order had been beamed out to the superbattleships. Immediately a second report was heard: "Baalol temple is now under their sights."

Suddenly the mousebeaver's eyes went wide. Rhodan had sent him a mental answer: *It's nice the Antis' mental powers have been able to make you think so, Pucky!* Whereupon Rhodan screened off his mind and left the curious mousebeaver standing there in confusion.

"There's the temple!" called Bell, pointing to the screen. The temple complex appeared as a tiny rectangle but seemed to be rushing toward the *Ironduke* .

"A spacer!" exclaimed Claudrin in his thunder voice. "A Springer long-ship—but not as long as usual. What's the objective reading? Gentlemen, do I have to ask you again for the data?"

The reading came through: "The ship is 150 meters long, 30 meters in diameter. Type: Galactic Trader, cylindrical hull."

The energy-trace officer hurried to report: "Confirmed energy trace. Long-ship ready for take-off. Impulse engines have completed run-in cycle."

Com Central received another order from Rhodan: "Transmit the prepared ultimatum to the temple but with one change... We will expect their capitulation in 15 minutes."

"Why not make that 5 minutes, Perry?" asked Bell disappointedly. "Even that's way too much for these devil priests!"

Rhodan turned thoughtfully to his friend. "If that's the case, Bell, then hitting them with no warning at all wouldn't get us anywhere either. You give them too much credit, Chubby..."

\* \* \* \*

Thomas Cardif looked on dispassionately while the processing and packaging assembly lines for the Liquitiv were destroyed in the searing beams of energy guns. With the cold-blooded calm of a man who knew there was plenty of time for his escape, he made a careful inspection of the laboratory area to make sure that nothing had been overlooked in the destruction.

In a matter of mere minutes almost 500 Antis were annihilating the investment of millions of credits over the course of many years. However they did not appear to regret their action nor did they reveal any anxiety over the advent of Perry Rhodan. Among them was a man who was a living proof that Rhodan was not to be feared: Thomas Cardif, his son.

Cardif spoke by direct wire to TT-1, the Liquitiv plant in the caverns of the Cif Mountains. Dr. Nearman was on the other end of the line. The addicted astro-medico stared at Edmond Hugher's face in wide-eyed amazement. He looked in vain for the stereotyped smile and the dreamy expression. Nor could he ever remember having heard Hugher speak with such energetic firmness.

"Stop gaping, Nearman," Cardif was saying. "From here on you're going to have to keep a sharp lookout. In a few minutes Rhodan is taking over the temple. We've already received his ultimatum. Leave everything in TT-1 as it is but just take care that Rhodan or his men don't find you."

A wild excitement seized Nearman. "Does that mean the priests are going to make a run for it, Hugher? You're leaving us here—to be hounded like rats into our holes in the ground?" He shouted in his naked fear, his wasted features trembling visibly.

"The priests are not running from Rhodan," replied Cardif calmly. "They are merely withdrawing from

here because they have no desire to communicate with this Terran pirate. That is all."

He did not hear Nearman's shout of despair and his curses. He had cut the connection, completely indifferent to what might happen to the technicians in Sector TT-1. He turned to look for Tu-poa, who was the only one besides himself now in this area of the installations. Cardif saw the priest come through a doorway from laboratory 3. The fanatic carried a heavy-calibre disintegrator in each hand. Sensing Cardif's gaze, he turned toward him—but in that moment he stumbled.

Cardif didn't have a chance to even shout a warning. Tu-poa tripped over some pieces of fallen debris and his arms flailed out wildly for support. One disintegrator struck the wall and his wrist must have turned back upon him. Thomas Cardif saw the brilliant flash of the weapon, saw the priest collapse to the floor, and instantly realized that Baalol had been deprived of another of his fanatic servants.

The communication system was still intact. It was the last equipment that was to be destroyed so that the direct line to TT-1 would not be discovered immediately. Cardif used it to make a report of Tu-poa's death. The priest's demise was acknowledged but otherwise the news was lost in the whirl of emergent events.

The videophone console was just dissolving under Cardif's energy beams in a coruscating spray of molten metal and plastic vapours when two Antis appeared in the main doorway and shouted to him.

"Cardif, we only have five minutes before the ultimatum takes effect! You must hurry!"

He knew what the next move was. He calmly holstered his weapon and joined the other two but he was surprised at the strange direction they were taking as they led him away.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

One of them smiled maliciously. "We don't want to make it obvious to Rhodan that we're all heading for the spaceship at once, even though it's under as strong a defence screen as the temple is.

"A subterranean passage?" His wonderment grew. It was hard to believe that the priests would resort to such primitive methods.

"That's right," answered the same Anti. "Often primitive methods are more effective than the most refined technology."

But first their course took them into the open where Cardif was somewhat startled by the nearness of the enemy. Off to the left of the pyramid's peak at an altitude of some 500 meters, the *Ironduke* hovered motionlessly. The name of the ship was dearly visible on the vast spherical hull but this was not what attracted Cardif's attention. He was mystified by the strange appearance of the ring-bulge.

"What type of ship is that?" he asked curiously of his two companions.

They were looking at their chronometers and urging greater haste. They didn't know what the odd design of the Terran flagship could mean but it seemed of little concern to them. Cardif refrained from asking more about it yet he could not explain why this discovery had filled him with a strange uneasiness.

As they hurried across the court the mass of the pyramid began to obscure the hull of the ship more and more. They approached the temple entrance, which was standing wide open now in opposition to the strictest rules of security.

Another priest was waiting for them. "Hurry!" he urged, and he led the way inside.

At a glance Cardif could see that everything here had also been destroyed. The great main hall on the ground floor had been gutted by beam fire and was empty. Behind the metal obelisk, which had also been damaged, the entrance to the underground escape route was located. A spiral staircase led downward.

While they were descending, Cardif touched the Anti he had questioned before. "La-ger, they must have spotted me and recognized me on the *Ironduke* as I came with you across the temple courtyard. Wouldn't that have given them a chance to get a fix on my new brainwave pattern?"

La-ger gave him a superior smile. "Have you forgotten that we possess mental powers against which Rhodan's mutants are helpless? They can neither measure your frequency nor penetrate your thoughts. We've provided for that because by now we know that Rhodan mainly wants *you*. When unknown agents set free those 48 Terran prisoners we had and took them away with them, you know, Rhodan must have found out that you are the one who discovered and developed the Liquitiv."

They had come out of the stairwell by now and were hurrying along a straight lighted passage.

"A tremendous compound, that Liquitiv," commented Cardif grimly. "All their medicos can rack their brains about it and never know its secret but in 30 years there won't be any more Terrans left. You know Liquitiv can be produced in forms other than liqueur. It can also be infused into certain grains and cereals, once a few difficulties have been overcome."

The three Antis forgot in this moment that they were fleeing from Rhodan. In silence each of them decided that their leader must be advised of this information at once. It was a final confirmation that Thomas Cardif was their weapon for reaching their ultimate secret goal—the rulership of Arkon.

Of course they told themselves that he was only a temporary means to achieve their purpose. Others before the Antis had thought the same thing, however, until they suddenly realized that a man like Thomas Cardif was not to be exploited with impunity. He was not only an Arkonide but also a Terran. And his father was Perry Rhodan.

At the end of the passage they hurried up another staircase. The upper exit was only dimly illuminated and as they emerged they found themselves beneath the spaceship, exactly under the keelside airlock. A temporary structure of plastic panelling obstructed any observation of the lock from the outside.

A grey-bearded Springer was already waiting for them, impatiently signalling to them to hurry. "Only one minute to go!" he told them as he pushed them inside.

The lock clanged swiftly behind them.

The Galactic Trader shouted into a wall microphone to the Control Central: "Everybody on board—including Cardif!"

The Antis stared in silence at the Springer commander as he laughed in sullen triumph. He looked at the view-screen which revealed the great hulk of the *Ironduke* above the temple and after uttering a hateful curse he called into the intercom: "All hands into heavy spacesuits! Take-off in 20 seconds!"

This announcement caused about 150 Antis to go into a deeper silence. Each of them drew upon his last

reserves of mental power to strengthen the long-ship's defence screens to an unimaginable degree.

Mighty machines came to life in the engine room. Under the control of the Springer clan's best pilot, tremendous forces were unleashed that drove the impulse engines to their limit of power. And finally in plain view of the *Ironduke* the small cylindrical ship dared defy Rhodan's ultimatum. It took off from the surface of Lepso.

\* \* \* \*

Brazo Alkher heard the alarm from energy-tracing in the Control Central. From his Fire Control Centre he too had caught the starting movement of the Springer ship in his target optics. He did not open fire with pulse cannons, thermo guns or disintegrators. Instead, he unleashed super-powerful tractor beams from five of his gun turrets. They were to force the fugitive ship to the desert's surface, after which the beams would hoist it right to the hull of the *Ironduke*. He had glanced at three of his instruments and he knew the horrendous power behind the combined beam force—but in the next instant he couldn't believe his eyes.

The Trader ship was getting away!

It rose up in spite of the traction beams. In a wild surge of acceleration it sped into the sky as though its crew expected the world beneath it to burst into a nova at any second. Direct sight was impossible now because the take-off had kicked a few thousand cubic meters of sand and gravel into the lower layers of the atmosphere.

But that part was no deterrent to Alkher. The optical system of his target sights did not depend alone on visible light. In a lightning move he hit the master switch, which was programmed to open a concentrated fire from all weapons against the fleeing ship. Within the *Ironduke* two power stations suddenly came to life which were for exclusive backup of the weapons section. The great spherical hull was shaken by the howl of silo-thick energy beams which tore through the heavy atmosphere of Lepso and unleashed hurricanes in their wake.

"What the devil!" yelled Alkher, unable to comprehend what he saw.

Under the giant beam-fire of the *Ironduke* the Trader long-ship only gained speed. Neither disintegrators, thermo or impulse beams succeeded in ripping the enemy defence screen asunder. A tremendous cascade of ravaging energy virtually sprayed off the screen in all directions. For a moment the rocky desert wasteland was bathed in the glare of an artificial sun.

Almost with the swiftness of a positronic brain, Alkher realized what his ray-fire was causing. The gun crews in the turret emplacements imagined there was a heavy short in the power-feed system when their combined salvos failed them.

But Brazo had struck the main power switch to zero. He had no intention of using the impact of the *Ironduke*'s beams as a means of accelerating the fugitive ship. He had made a rough calculation of the probable thrust value of the mighty energy beams as they crashed against the Anti-reinforced defence screen of the enemy. All the *Ironduke* had accomplished was to help the other ship's engines to hurl the fugitive at still greater speed into space.

"Attention, Commander!" Brazo shouted into the intercom mike. "Our beam-fire has only given the fugitive additional thrust. It's reached the upper levels of the atmosphere. In view of circumstances, firing operations have ceased."

"Glord!" It was a bewildered cry from Control Central—quite recognizable as coming from Reginald Bell.

Rhodan followed up his exclamation with a pointed remark: "If the commanders of our super-battleships don't have such clever weapons officers, their world-buster bombardments will only give extra wings to our fleeing bird! Hello Com Central! Open channel to all super-battleships. Are you sending?"

"We're on the frequency, sir!" came the answer.

Then Rhodan relayed to the giant ships what Brazo Alkher had realized in the fraction of a second. When he was finished he felt the gaze of Col. Claudrin turned upon him.

The commander's voice thundered proudly: "Sir, there's no other weapons officer in the Fleet who can match him!" Nor was he wrong.

Somebody shouted: "The *Barbarossa*'s got it!"

Energy-tracing confirmed: "Direct hit! The ship's spinning in space!"

But then nothing more. The Imperium-class battleship *Alexander* opened with all guns from its pole turrets, firing directly at the cylindrical ship wobbling above it. The resulting direct hit was powerful enough to blast thin any defence screen known. But it accomplished nothing more than a giant display of pyrotechnics as the energy bombardment sprayed from the enemy's screen. In fact the weirdly-stable screen seemed to have the effect of halting the ship's spinning motion as it virtually absorbed the extra power, causing the fugitive vessel to straighten out and ride a catapult of extra thrust into the outer void.

The *Ironduke*'s hypersensor detected a transition jump.

It was not possible to determine the Trader ship's point of re-entry into the normal universe. For Bell and Rhodan there was no mystery to it: they knew that the Antis' mental powers were also capable of absorbing a hyper shockwave.

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Nearman started from a narcotic stupor. He thought he heard something—but such a sound had never been heard before in TT-1.

"Nonsense!" he muttered half under his breath.

He turned on his side to surrender to the first quickening phases he always enjoyed after taking two flasks of Liquitiv within an hour.



"Wonderful stuff!" he mumbled contentedly.

He wasn't thinking of Perry Rhodan nor was he worried about the fact that he was the only member of the technical staff left in Sector TT-1. The others had fled. He had also prepared himself for flight already but he didn't wish to leave TT-1 until the first wave of drug euphoria had subsided and he felt sufficiently strong again.

He was still lying on the bed half-dreaming when he was again startled by a distant jangling sound. He raised up and listened. Then he heard the heavy marching tread of a column of robots! The noise was coming from the long corridor. *Rhodan!* With that single thought he was out of bed in a single motion,

On the table was a plastic bag containing 50 flasks of Liquitiv together with some food tablets and money. He snatched this up on the run and went out of his room toward the emergency exit. This was an antigravshaft one meter wide which would bring him up 800 meters to a plateau that was close under the peak of the Cif Mountains.

The distance to the exit was 200 meters but he figured he was not yet in any danger. He was still moving along at a slow trot when he was suddenly horrified to hear the metallic footsteps of a robot behind him. When he heard the machine call out to him and order him to stop he didn't even dare look back. He sprinted toward the safety of the shaft with the desperation of a madman.

*Made it!* Or so he thought as he jumped for the door but at that moment he yelled in pain. A ray-beam had struck his thigh. The second shot missed. Pain shot through his body. He would have yelled in agony if he had not still been under the influence of his drug intoxication. In fact it was the only thing that enabled him to stand the pain. While he floated up the hidden shaft he was able to examine the severe injury he had sustained. As a doctor he knew the wound was in a very bad place for haemorrhaging. He came close to fainting when he saw the damage the robot beam had caused.

All he could think of now was to get to the high-speed glider.

This emergency gravitor had been provided exclusively for just such cases as this when a secret fast getaway was required. The shaft had three speed zones. The first and last 50 meters generated an antigrav field that maintained a speed which was standard to similar Arkon installations. Between these two zones, however, the user of the lift was swept upward at four times the normal speed.

Which was lucky for Dr. Nearman.

Once on the plateau, he grasped the plastic bag in one hand and crawled painfully to the glider. It took every reserve of strength to pull himself up inside the craft. He ripped open the first-aid kit and groaned in relief when he saw the plentiful supply of medicines and bandages. He began at once to dress his wound.

It was only an hour later that he was able to fly the glider. Keeping close under the cliff walls of the Cif range, he hoped to escape the clutches of Perry Rhodan.

\* \* \* \*

But Rhodan was standing in front of the main tank installation in TT-1 while his combat robots were

searching through every part of the system of caverns for living beings. A team of doctors from the *Ironduke* was busy with unfamiliar inspection equipment. A group of engineers was trying to determine how much Liquitiv was still in the giant tank. All the smaller tanks they had inspected had been empty.

They arrived at an estimate of between 30,000 and 35000 litres.

"No more?" asked Rhodan. "Is that actually all of it?"

About 50 men stood around him and waited for him to continue.

"Well, gentlemen, unfortunately that proves conclusively that Lepso is not the main narcotics source of the Antis—it's only a distribution point." Rhodan eyed them all gravely. "The Liquitiv supply we've found here wouldn't even be enough to cover one day's needs for all the addicts in the Solar Imperium alone."

Col. Claudrin stared incredulously. "What?—30,000 litres of this filth—absorbed in one day? In the Solar Imperium?"

"Much more than that, I'm afraid, Colonel—no doubt very much more. Now maybe you can understand my disappointment. We haven't yet found the main source.

They had been here two hours now and during that time Rhodan had not discussed his son or even mentioned him by a single word or inference. He only discussed the Antis.

One of the *Ironduke*'s medicos approached him. "Sir, we finally got the hang of the Antis' inspection and test equipment. We checked out this local Liquitiv and made a comparison with our own data. It's the same stuff alright, to the last drop. Identical with the rejuvenation liqueur they've been selling on Earth."

"But—no trace of what this hell-juice is made out of, doctor?"

50 pairs of eyes turned to the doctor as he slowly shook his head. "No, sir—we have found no derivative trace."

"You also tested whatever you found in the smaller tanks?"

"Yessir. There were only a few dregs left in the bottom of the bottling tanks but every drop was identical with the main supply."

With those words the doctor buried one more of Perry Rhodan's hopes.

The minicom transceiver buzzed on Rhodan's wrist. A voice came thin the micro-speaker announcing that the message was from the *Ironduke* and that Alan D. Mercant wanted to speak to him. Rhodan switched on and frowned sharply at Mercant's face on the tiny screen. "What's the matter?" he asked.

The Chief of Solar Intelligence appeared to be excited. "Sir," he said in a slightly hoarse tone, "we've just received a report from one of our agents on Aralon. Over 40 years ago Edmond Hugher was a student at their biggest university—on a scholarship paid for by the Antis. He made top grades—even was excused from final specialist exams because of his genius. There has been no record in the annals of the university to equal it since. His specialty was—"

Rhodan cut in swiftly. "Mercant! Millions of addicted victims throughout the galaxy know what his *specialty* was far better than we!"

He snapped off the connection and turned away as though to leave. Pucky was about to follow him but Bell held him back.

"Stay here, short stuff... Now's the time to leave him alone."

"So what happens now?" Pucky chirped as Rhodan disappeared into the outer corridor.

"That's a good question." Bell sounded very depressed, which was hardly characteristic of him. "We've lost Thomas Cardif's trail. They've confirmed that the Traders' long-ship has given us the slip. I'll lay you odds there's not a single Anti left on Lepso."

\* \* \* \*

Meanwhile the small cylindrical ship of the Springers steered a course between two brilliant stars and hurtled toward its goal at almost the speed of light. In one of its cabins sat Thomas Cardif, who was immersed in deep concentration.

"*Glima*," he said, suddenly startled that he had spoken his thought aloud. He shook his head slightly. "Now I finally understand why I always enjoyed doing those Terran crossword puzzles. Icelandic wrestling—5 letters. That's *sglima*. But I know 2 stranger words."

He stared long into space while his hands tightened into fists.

He seemed to savour the name as he shouted it aloud: "THOMAS CARDIF—*that's who I am!*"

## **HERE'S HOW IT HAPPENS**

### [1/ THE SMILING MAN OF LEPSO](#)

### [2/ ONE SMALL VOICE](#)

### [3/ THE DOGS OF WAR](#)

[4/ RETURN OF THOMAS CARDIE](#)

[5/ TRAIL'S END—AN OLD BEGINNING](#)

[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

BLOCKADE: LEPSO

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**THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME**

50 MILLION HUMANS—*more than* 50 million humans were threatening to break out in revolt.

Earth had become a madhouse.

Things were not much better on the colonial worlds.

And Atlan was fighting the same problem on the Arkon planets.

Rhodan felt a restriction in his throat. It was not due to any sense of fear but more to a feeling of deep depression. He had got himself into a very unenviable position: humanity identified itself with him. He had

become an almost mystical figure. In the thoughts of billions of humans Rhodan moved on a higher plane of existence.

There was practically only one possibility of descending from this imaginary Mount Olympus.

And that was to die.

\* \* \* \*

Join us next time when the main treat is William Voltz'

SPOOR OF THE ANTIS