

## OVER 200 MILLION DISCIPLES

"A potent force."

"The sect has a temple for its followers on every planet."

"They are mutants, yes, and—even worse for us—Anti-Mutants!"

"With their mental powers they can frustrate the deployment of our own Mutant Corps."

"Things get worse. Somewhere on the planet Okul, Cardif and 250 Antis are hiding on the bottom of an ocean and we are unable to flush them out..."

Now you can read of the pursuit "Into Unknown Depths", of the "Countdown to Conflagration", of "The Evil Alter Ego". All in—

## FALSE FRONT

### 1/ DREADFUL DILEMMA

THE SURFACE OF THE SEA stretched like a mirror in the silvery light of a full moon. There was no surf and if it had not been for the noise of the people on the patio and the park-like grounds it would have been a beautiful moonlit night on a tranquil Florida beach.

A party was in full swing.

The party was given by Sr. John Rengall, who had invited his friends to a farewell dinner before leaving his vacation home the next morning to return to Terrania. His spouse, Lady Lydia, was to accompany him on his return to the comfortable ranch house awaiting them on the shores of Lake Goshun near Terrania.

The host, a tall dark-haired Briton, attended to his guests, who were mostly Americans in whose country he customarily spent his vacations. Florida's beach, its warm climate and pleasant water made life highly enjoyable to him.

At the bar, which had been set up in the open air where it afforded a magnificent view of the silver-lit sea, he met Dr. Phillip Norris, an English physician who had lived in the United States for many years.

"Hello, Phil!" his host greeted him. "Having a good time?"

The doctor nodded and laughed, his eyes sparkling vivaciously, although Sir John thought he could

detect a hint of something else. "It's great fun, John. Thank you. But why didn't you invite a few more girls?"

Rengall laughed, reaching for a bottle of whisky and two glasses. "May I pour you another one or did you already have more than enough?"

Norris looked disapprovingly at the bottle. "Don't you have anything better to offer..."

"Now listen," Rengall replied, a little offended. "This is the best whisky you can buy. If this isn't good enough for you, what else can I give you?"

Norris answered with the single word: "Liquitiv!"

Rengall put the bottle abruptly down on the bar. "That damn poison! You too?"

The physician took his friend by the sleeve. "Not so loud! Don't let everybody know that I am addicted—I, a physician! But, on the other hand, what does it matter? Millions of people are addicted to the stuff—and soon we won't be able to get it anymore. You ought to know that better than I, being an official of the Solar Security Service."

"Only a very minor one," Rengall rebutted. It disconcerted him when his job with the Secret Service was mentioned in public. "I don't know any more than others."

Norris pulled Rengall to a little bench overlooking the sea. It was concealed from the guests in the garden by a few palms. The music was muted enough so that they could talk to each other without shouting. "What is your official opinion, John? You've got to tell me! I've got more than a dozen prominent patients who are hooked on this drug just like myself. They came to me for help since their supply of Liquitiv stopped a week ago. It's only obtainable on the shady side of the street at exorbitant prices. A thousand dollars a bottle with no more than 2 cubic centimetres—just a sip, that's all. But it helps 6 days if you're lucky."

"I tasted that sweet liqueur once and never will again, Phil. I just didn't like it. That was the end of it. I suspected the danger as little as anyone else and was simply lucky that I didn't become hooked on it. When I later saw that those taking Liquitiv regularly became rejuvenated and increased their vitality I almost took up drinking the stuff. Who could have imagined at the time that a harmless-looking liqueur would turn out to be the most horrible poison in the Galaxy?"

"Please tell me what you know," Norris urged him. "I would like to apply your knowledge to the experiments I have conducted. I've tried to withdraw from the drug but I failed dismally, John. After a week I couldn't stand the headache and nausea anymore. It nearly drove me rocko (nuts)."

Rengall looked at him with deep compassion. All joy had disappeared from his face as if it had been wiped off. He was aware of the ominous cloud he faced upon returning to his duty tomorrow, a peril which threatened all humanity—unless a solution to the dilemma could be found.

And what a terrible dilemma it was!

Rengall put his hand on the shoulder of his friend. "We still don't know very much, Phil. Although we followed up the details of thousands of cases with painstaking work, only one point has been established: after the 2nd or 3rd dose of Liquitiv, a radical process of rejuvenation commences. A person not only feels younger but their fresh looks tell them they're getting younger. This obvious success has induced all

Liquitiv drinkers to consume more than the label recommended. Drinking frequently to such excess only served to hide the symptoms of an acquired addiction. Even people who could afford the expensive habit of getting drunk on Liquitiv suffered no damage to their health or unpleasant side effects. However by analysing numerous individual cases one result clearly became apparent: anyone taking Liquitiv six times had become incurably addicted to it. When this fact was revealed, we suddenly had the explanation for a series of mysterious fatalities in emergency clinics and hospitals of people whose last stage was spent in a delirium. The addiction is incurable and if the patient is deprived of Liquitiv for some reason or other, he is condemned to die in agony."

"I have had nothing to drink in 5 days," Norris admitted. "Simply because there is nothing for sale. Why is that? The government should..."

"The government has not restricted the import but there is much less of it available now. They want to put us under pressure."

"Are all of us to be driven mad?" Norris cried out in desperation. He had dropped his mask and no longer resembled the reputable physician who inspired so much confidence in his select clientele. "It affects millions of people..."

"...none of whom can hope to live more than 7 or 8 years after they took the first drink of Liquitiv," Rengall interjected. "You may know that 12 years and 4 months after the start of a regular use of Liquitiv they enter the final phase of decay. The initial rejuvenation ceases and the process reverses itself. I have seen the dead of Lepso, Phil. It was not a pretty sight. If we don't find something to stop the habit it will be just as sordid on Earth. Once they are hooked, they can't stop taking the dope or they will wind up insane. And if they keep drinking it, it is certain to kill them. There seems to be no alternative."

"It is better to die in 8 years than to be mad in 4," Phil Norris groaned. He straightened up as he heard footsteps approaching. He pretended that nothing was wrong and changed the subject. "A gorgeous night, John, wouldn't you say?"

A woman walked between the palms and stopped before the bench. "Oh, this is where you are! And talking about moonshine? I didn't know that you appreciated such romantic scenery, John. And you, Doc, you astonish me even more."

The voice of the woman sounded a little sarcastic and supercilious. She wore a low-cut evening gown which enhanced her beautiful and youthful figure. She bent down and kissed Rengall on the forehead.

"Ali... this romantic mood is so alluring, my love," Rengall sighed, pulling his wife onto the bench. "But our friend Phil is in great trouble."

"Trouble? Aren't people getting sick anymore?"

However Norris was not in a mood for joking. "It's much worse than that, Lady Lydia," he explained in a painful effort. "It's been 5 days since I had any Liquitiv."

Rengall was jolted by the surprise. It was too late to warn his friend. The secret was out.

Lydia gave her husband a pert glance and turned to Norris. "5 days? That's a long time to do without your favourite drink. Did you run out of it?"

"I don't know where to buy it anymore."

"If that's all that's troubling you, I'll be glad to help you out, Phil. How much do you need?"

"Lydia!" Rengall admonished her in a sharp tone. He got up and stared at the water of the gulf.

"What's the matter, dear? Isn't Phil supposed to know?"

"Was it necessary?"

"You can't leave an old friend like Phil to his fate and watch him die of thirst. I didn't know you were that sanctimonious. Now please go and get a few flagons from my room. You know where they are."

Phil Norris rose and put his hand on Rengall's arm. "Your wife, John she's also addicted. Why didn't you tell me?"

Lydia shook her head. "Addicted Since when do you call it an addiction if you like to sip a fine liqueur?"

Rengall looked at Norris. "You better explain it to her. I was afraid you might learn the sad truth. Sorry, old boy, to have deceived you. But now you'll get your medicine again."

He left without saying another word. Lydia followed him with her eyes in astonishment. "What do you mean, Phil? Addiction? Speak up!"

"Are you really that innocent, Lady Lydia? Didn't your husband explain it to you? Or have you began to indulge in Liquitiv without his knowledge?"

"Of course! Husbands don't have to know everything."

"In this case it would have been better to be frank," Phil Norris sighed and then explained to the wife of his friend the facts of the insidious liqueur and its distribution by a power-mad race in the Galaxy.

When he ended there was a long silence. Before Lady Rengall could utter a word they heard the sound of quickly approaching steps. It was Sir John. He stopped in front of them and stared in disbelief. "There is not a bottle of Liquitiv left in your room," he said in a toneless voice. "The drawer in your desk has been forced open and your whole supply was stolen."

Phil Norris saw his last hope fade away. He got up slowly and walked away without uttering a word.

"Who could have known that we hid the Liquitiv in the desk?" Lydia whispered, disturbed. "We kept it a secret because that's what you wanted. Although I never knew why you were so upset when you first learned that I was drinking the liqueur regularly, I abided by your request. You must admit though, that the stuff made me look younger—and you liked that. We have learned too late that it is a devilish poison and I was the last to know."

Rengall sat down and embraced his wife. "I've lost my interest in the party. I wish everybody would go home. We can't expect to find help anywhere. Liquitiv is more precious than gold because it means life itself to those drinking it. Even if one of our friends has an abundant supply of Liquitiv, he won't part with it. Besides, I don't want anybody to know about it. As a government official..."

"Even if my life depends on it?"

He caressed her arm. "We'll be in Terrania before then, darling. I just would like to know who the scoundrel is who stole the stuff. It must have been an inside job. Maybe one of the servants. These drug fiends will try anything to get their hands on their dope."

The music broke off abruptly with a sharp discord. Somebody screamed loudly and desperately. Another man cursed. There was a slapping sound followed by a crash on the floor.

Rengall jumped up. Leaving his wife behind he ran across the well-kept lawn in the direction of the house. In the lantern light he saw his guests crowding around the bar and the podium of the orchestra.

Somebody had struck down a man. Rengall recognized Dr. Norris lying on the floor. "What happened?" he demanded.

One of the musicians pointed to his broken bass fiddle. "He went crazy, sir. He tore the instrument from my hands, jumped on it with both feet and demolished it. He was ranting and raving like a madman, shouting that it's all over and useless. I'm ordinarily a peaceful man, sir."

"Maybe you should be a boxer instead of a musician."

A man in a tuxedo stepped forward, smoothing his hair. "I did it, Sir John."

It was Gary Bascall, the manager of the Golf Club. "What else could I do? He acted berserk and would have smashed the entire orchestra. Somebody had to restrain him. I don't know what came over him but..."

"Don't worry, Gary. It's not your fault." Rengall looked at Phil and saw that he was unconscious. "Gary, help me carry him into my room. We'll put him on the couch and if he recovers..."

They carried him upstairs. Then Bascall inquired: "What do you mean... if he recovers? Why shouldn't he come to? I admit it was a sharp blow but nobody ever failed to wake up after I put him to sleep like this."

"That's not what I meant," Rengall explained. "Dr. Norris is a dope addict. He drinks Liquitiv."

"So what?" The manager was unimpressed. "Who doesn't nowadays?"

Rengall saw a glimmer of hope on the dark horizon of his depressed mood. "Are you taking it too?" he asked, and continued when Bascall nodded affirmatively: "Could you get me a few small bottles? When Phil wakes up, he must have his dose or he'll rock off again. I had a little stashed away but somebody stole it."

"Stole it?" Bascall was astounded. "Some people get the donkest ideas nowadays. Of course we have plenty of it at the Club. Our members drink hardly anything else, except occasionally some whisky or Vurguzz. But nothing can beat Liquitiv. If I'm not mistaken we have more than a thousand flasks in stock. How many would you like?"

"If you can spare a hundred small bottles, Gary...?"

"Why not?" the manager said. "I'll get my car and drive over right away. Do you have the money?"

Rengall handed him the customary price and added a generous tip. Had he known the truth, Gary

missed his chance that evening to become rich. The least Rengall could do was to reward him with a well-deserved tip.

When Phil Norris woke up a few hours later, he failed to remember his paroxysm. His hands still trembled as he took the flask offered by Rengall and gulped its contents. The effect was almost instantaneous: his tired eyes shone brightly again and his nausea abated. "Where did you scrounge this up, John?"

"I'll tell you a secret, Phil: I advise you to get up first thing in the morning and drive over to the Golf Club. Gary Bascall, the manager, has a bar loaded with the stuff at the usual price."

"Doesn't he know about the shortage?"

"Apparently not yet, Phil. He probably buys his supply once every few months and doesn't keep himself informed about the changing market. If he finds out the truth, he'll be mad as hell but by that time the narcotic may be plentiful again. Nobody can foretell what will happen."

"Maybe so but I'm going to be prudent and take my dose only every 5 or 6 days," Phil replied. "It'll be enough to stay normal."

"Yes," Rengall agreed. "You will be normal and stay alive." He laughed grimly. "You can go to Bascall and assure him that you have no hard feelings because he knocked you out and use the occasion to buy some more Liquitiv from him."

Phil Norris got up and paced the floor. All of a sudden he stopped before his friend. "You will be flying to Terrania tomorrow, John. If there is any remedy for us, it will have to come from there. I hope you won't forget your old friends."

"If we succeed in developing an antidote, it will benefit everyone, Phil; nobody will be forgotten. Now take care of yourself. I hope you make it home safely."

\* \* \* \*

The rocket clipper raced through the uppermost layer of the stratosphere and soon descended on the Asiatic continent to land at Terrania, the capital of the Solar System. Here, where the largest spaceport and the mightiest metropolis of the terrestrial globe were situated, a US Airforce pilot named Perry Rhodan had once landed upon returning in his Lunar rocket from the Moon, where he had gained the powerful support of his Arkonide friends. From here, in the middle of the ancient Gobi Desert, humanity had taken its first steps on the way to the stars.

Sir John Rengall shunned the other passengers on the flight and took an airtaxi to his home on the lake as soon as he had gone through the customs facilities after arrival. He found a recorded message requesting him to report to his office as quickly as possible after his return.

When he faced his boss half an hour later, he was greeted by him, saying: "I knew I could depend on you, Maj. Rengall. *The Ralph Torsten* is ready to take off in 2 hours. You will report aboard to Commander Maj. Heinrich Bellefjord. You are assigned together with 3 other officers as an escort team

for this operation. The cruiser will fly to the United States where a cargo-spaceship will take on a shipment from the National Museum. Then you will transfer your team to the freighter and it will be your responsibility to see that the cargo is safely delivered to Rhodan..."

"...to Rhodan?"

The general nodded. "The *Torsten* and the cargo-spaceship will proceed directly from the United States to Okul. Distance 41,386 light-years. Rhodan is expecting you. You will be given further instructions at a preflight briefing. Maj. Bellefjord is informed about all details."

Rengall saluted. Joined by the 3 other men, he went to the spaceport where the *Ralph Torsten* was already waiting for them. The heavy cruiser had a spherical shape and measured 200 meters in diameter. The newly installed linear drive did away with the necessity of transitions through hyperspace because the ship was capable of flying a million times the velocity of light and maintaining direct visual observation.

Maj. Bellefjord's figure was a little stocky and he made a jovial impression. He greeted the 4 agents of the Solar Security Service and checked his watch. "We still have a good hour, gentlemen. Time enough to acquaint you with all pertinent events. You were on vacation, Maj. Rengall?"

"Yes: 4 weeks."

"Then you are probably still in the dark about the latest developments."

"2 weeks ago I received a secret report, bringing me up to date on the devastating effects of the consumption of Liquitiv. That's all I know."

"Please listen closely," Bellefjord said after making sure that his First Officer Capt. Raldini commenced the starting preparations. "In February of the year 2103, Rhodan discovered on Lepso, which is 8,500 light-years from us and serves as a trading port for goods shipped from all races, the ghoulish end result of Liquitiv. He unmasked the original producers: the Antis, members of the Baalol cult. It is a sect of priests which numbers over 200 million disciples throughout the Galaxy. This seems few but it is actually a potent force when one considers how widespread they are. They have a temple for their followers on every planet. They are mutants, yes, and even worse for us, Anti-Mutants! With their mental powers they can frustrate the deployment of our own Mutant Corps."

"Damn shame!" Rengall exclaimed in consternation. His 3 companions looked perturbed.

Bellefjord nodded. "That really hits us between the eyes. Our best weapon is just about useless when it comes to the Antis. But let me continue my report." He cleared his throat and glanced at a piece of paper which he had until now hidden in his hand. "In March the escape of Thomas Cardif was detected."

Maj. Rengall was startled. "In March? I was still on duty at that time and..."

"The fact of Cardif's flight was kept secret, Maj. Rengall. After all attempts of Rhodan at reconciliation with his son had failed, he was given a hypno-block that turned him into a new personality. For the following 58 years Cardif lived as a merchant on the colonial planet Zalit. He had forgotten his past and identity and was considered to be harmless. Now it turned out that Cardif was no longer Cardif but an unusually well constructed robot, the perfect image of the living Cardif. Thomas Cardif himself had vanished."

"Incredible!"

"Just wait! Things get even worse." Bellefjord grinned, looking at his watch again. "Rhodan received information from a person who knew the whereabouts of Cardif and gave him at the same time the name and the galactic position of the planet where the ingredients for the production of Liquitiv could be found. Rhodan assumed quite logically that an antidote could be discovered if the basic ingredients were known. The Spacefleet was alerted and the mysterious planet in question was located and thoroughly blockaded. A tough fight ensued. Thomas Cardif had indeed thrown in his lot with the Antis to further his plans of revenge against Rhodan and Terra and to eventually put them into action. The planet Okul orbits a small yellow sun in a heretofore-unexplored part of the Milky Way. It is a world of hot steaming jungles and primeval oceans. The atmosphere is breathable but no intelligent life has developed on the planet. Okul was one of the few central worlds of the Baalol cult, More than a thousand of its priests lived there in a gigantic fortress which was attacked by Rhodan. By the ingenious means of using antimagnetic missiles Rhodan succeeded in breaking down the protective body screens of the Antis and invading their fortress. However Cardif managed to escape with 250 of the Antis. Now they are hiding somewhere on the bottom of one of the oceans and we are unable to flush them out."

"That should be fairly simple..." Rengall began but was immediately interrupted by Bellefjord.

"But it isn't, my friend! Rhodan's ship lacks the special equipment required to hunt down and destroy an enemy under water. You mustn't forget that the Antis can only be attacked by primitive methods because their defence is specially geared to the highest stage of technological weaponry. In other words they are impervious to energy rays because their body shields can reflect them; whereas an ordinary wooden arrow with a plastic tip can kill them. Likewise, their underwater hideout cannot be detected and attacked with the most modern spaceships but will have to be ferreted and smoked out by old-fashioned U-boats."

"U-boats?" Rengall repeated flabbergasted. "We don't have U-boats any more!"

"Oh, yes, we do!" Bellefjord declared with obvious satisfaction. He seemed pleased to be able to tell the officers of the all-knowing Secret Service something new. "In the National Museum."

Rengall breathed excitedly. "Ah—I see. Excuse the interruption. Please go on!"

"There isn't very much more to relate. Rhodan gave orders to bring 20 U-boats with atomic engines to Okul as quickly as possible and to train an armed crew immediately. We should be able to accomplish this without a breakdown. The operation of the boats is much simpler than a spaceship because the danger is greatly reduced. We will deliver the requested boats with full complements to Rhodan in 2 days."

"Why were we called in to escort the transport? This is not the job of the Security Service." Rengall was puzzled.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Bellefjord replied with a mischievous grin. "You are supposed to stand by for a contingency. If we succeed in apprehending Cardif alive, you will have to guard him and take him back to Earth. That's all."

Rengall looked at his men. "So that's what it's all about." And, consulting his watch, he turned back to Bellefjord. "I assume you will start very soon."

"In exactly 20 minutes. Come with me, I'll show you to your cabins."

"One more question," Rengall said as he got up. "Why do we have to change ships if all we have to do is



guard Cardif?"

"These are Rhodan's instructions," Belleford replied.

The answer sufficed.

## 2/ INTO DEPTHS UNKNOWN

Okul, the second of 3 planets, circled around a lone fulvous sun. A lush, primeval world, Okul had been fortified by the Antis to serve as a secure base. It was the place where Cardif had found the derivative from which the Liquitiv liqueur could be produced. With the help of the Antis and Springers he had succeeded in distributing the horrible poison all over the inhabited worlds of the known Galaxy.

The fortress had fallen. It contained the purification equipment for the unrefined narcotic, a glandular secretion from the 2-meter-long armoured caterpillars that proliferated on Okul. These otherwise harmless animals were called 'Mud Borers' by the Terrans because from their horn-plated heads grew a regular boring ring which they used to dig into the earth in a hurry.

The fortress had fallen but Cardif had been able to flee. However he still was certain to be on the planet since it had been hermetically sealed off. More than 5,000 units of the Terran spacefleet formed an impenetrable shell, barring his exit.

Rhodan circled Okul aboard the *Ironduke* on a fixed path and kept its surface under constant surveillance. He was firmly convinced that Cardif would not slip through his fingers again.

The *Ironduke* was a vessel of the Stardust class, a sphere with a diameter of 800 meters, possessing linear drive and the latest armament. The crew consisted of the same men who had discovered the Blue System aboard the *Fantasy*.

"Dr. Gorl Nkolate has studied the mud borer with great care," Commander Col. Jefe Claudrin stated. He had come to the briefing in Rhodan's cabin, leaving his First Officer Maj. Hunts Krefenbac in charge at the Command Centre. In addition to Rhodan, Reginald Bell and the computer programmer Robert Rosenberg were also present.

"And what were his findings?" Rhodan inquired tensely.

Jefe Claudrin twisted his leather-tight face in a grimace. He seemed to feel ill at ease. "Dr. Nkolate succeeded in isolating the secretion of the mud borers which is added to the liqueur and is thought to be the cause of the narcotic effect. Yet he is very frustrated because he harbours the suspicion that the substance might be a hormone. He tried to explain the specific physiological differences to me but I'm afraid it went over my head. At any rate he has assured me that he will be able to extract a pure form of Liquitiv in a short time."

"It's a small comfort," Rhodan declared, "but it gives rise to the hope that an antidote can be developed before long. Since time is of the essence it will be necessary to ship a sufficient number of mud borers to Terra where our scientists can examine the potent substance. Will you please take care of it, Claudrin."

The Epsalian whispered his instructions to an aide while Rhodan talked with the others. The aide got up and left the room. When he returned a little later Col. Claudrin was able to report that the Antilles, a ship of the State class, would take the mud borers to Terra within the hour.

The intervideo buzzed its signal. Rhodan stared at the set for a second before he depressed the button.

Krefenbac's face appeared on the small picture screen. "Sir, I have received a long hyperradio communiqué from Terrania. Shall I play back the message for you?"

Rhodan hesitated a moment. Then he shook his head. "I'll send Bell over to get the report."

Bell rose with a disgruntled expression. "Alright, I'll go but why does it always have to be me? Now I will miss what you are discussing here."

"Maybe you will learn something more interesting in the radio room," Rhodan tried to mollify his friend without realizing how right he would be. He waited till Bell had left and then continued. "Even more urgent than finding the antidote will be our catching the ringleader and preventing him from doing any further harm. The Antis present an unprecedented danger to the civilization of the Galaxy. The members of that secret society have pursued merely economical advantages in the past but lately the trend seems to have changed radically. We can thank my... we can thank Thomas Cardif for this new course. He seems to have found the Antis to be convenient tools for seeking revenge on me and Terra. I don't know if he still adheres to that frightful fallacy that I was responsible for the death of his mother but I have given up all hope of making him see the truth." He looked at Claudrin and added: "Nonetheless I insist that we take him alive if it is at all feasible."

"I have given the necessary instructions," the colonel stated without further comment. He sat in a wide chair which had been specially made for him since he was a native of Epsal, the son of a colonial officer adapted to his environments. His height measured little more than 1½ meters but he was almost as broad. His homeworld had twice the gravitational force of Terra, which enabled him to move with amazing facility in surroundings normal on Earth. His red hair and brown leathery skin blended well with his general appearance.

"20 U-boats should do the job," the dusty-blond-haired Rosenberg said in his usual careful manner, tugging on his beard for emphasis. "At least they should be able to locate the underwater hideout. What happens after that can't be predicted by the laws of probability."

"The *Ralph Torsten* and the cargoship will arrive tomorrow according to the latest reports." Rhodan looked impatiently at the door as if he were anxious to hear the news Bell would bring. "We will put the boats out to sea at once so the search can begin immediately."

The sound of hurried steps could be heard down the corridor. Then the door was flung open and Bell stormed into the cabin with a piece of paper in his hand. He dropped into a chair and held up the note like an accusation. "This is a hell of a mess!" he roared in a voice so loud that Rosenberg's hazel eyes went wide and he covered his ears protectively. This made Claudrin grin because shouting was a normal way of communication for him. "We should have been able to think of this sooner."

"What's the trouble?" Rhodan asked impatiently. "Give me the note!"

"I merely jotted down a few single words." Bell refused to let the slip of paper out of his hands. "Nobody else could make sense out of it. The radio message was much too long. You can listen to it

later, Perry. I'll just give you the highlights. The Central Office of the General Cosmic Co. reported that the supply of Liquitiv has dried up. Although the Springers and other races still furnish goods to Terra and the colonial planets, not one ship has brought a load of Liquitiv. It seems that production has stopped. There are more than 200 million addicts on Earth who are suddenly left not high but dry without their beloved poison. The price of Liquitiv has jumped sky-high. Those who have hoarded the stuff are selling it for a fortune, ignoring the dread of depriving themselves tomorrow. Nobody can survive without it for more than 4 weeks. There are already reports of riots and the Solar Security Service had to intervene with strong measures in several cities. The Earth is facing the threat of a widespread panic."

Bell paused. He glanced at his notes, thought for a moment and then crumpled up the paper.

"Is that all?" Rhodan inquired.

Bell nodded. "Isn't it enough?"

"It's more than enough—and precisely what I have been afraid of. It is the most logical thing the Antis could do under the circumstances. They are withholding the narcotic drug from 200 million people to drive them crazy and they expect to create utter chaos which would bring us under their thumbs."

Jefe Claudrin said in his sonorous voice: "I wouldn't worry about it too much. We still have a great quantity of Liquitiv on Lepso and the Antilles is already en route to Earth with plenty of mud borers."

"You are right, Colonel," Rhodan agreed. "Never give up hope without considering all alternatives. Our people have seized enough Liquitiv on Lepso to supply the whole Earth for many days. We have not yet reached a crisis. Will you please instruct the Commander of occupied Lepso to ship his entire available stock of Liquitiv to Earth for disposition by the Cosmic Company. The distribution should be supervised by the Security Service. Each addict is to receive only the necessary dose and free of cost. Shady street dealers will be punished by heavy fines. Please put this call through at once!"

The colonel left the cabin.

"That damn stuff!" Bell muttered. "I'm glad I never touch sweet goo like that or I would have been hooked on it too."

"Many of our best friends have been trapped by it," Rhodan commented, "because nobody could have suspected that the harmless-looking liqueur would turn out to be a most dangerous drug. Even here aboard the *Ironduke* we have more than 20 addicts. Fortunately our ship has stocked up enough of the liqueur. It is grotesque that we depend on this dope which might cause our ruin. They have caught us in a two-way trap."

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Despite the considerable damage which the *Ralph Torsten* had suffered during its attack on the time-transformer of the Akons, the heavy cruiser was put back in full operation after repairs. Its commander Bellefjord escorted the big cargoship through the spiral arm of the Milky Way to the distant unknown sun which was circled by the jungle planet Okul. Both ships were propelled by the linear drive system, affording them uninterrupted visibility. They covered the distance without incident and reached

their goal in safety.

Protected by the huge warfleet of Terra, the *Ironduke* and the *Ralph Torsten* landed together with the freighter near the shore of the largest ocean. The Antis were nowhere to be seen or felt. They sat it out somewhere on the bottom of the ocean and nobody knew whether it was possible for them to observe the events taking place on the surface of the planet.

The 20 atomic U-boats were unloaded and put into the deep water in an antigrav field. It was at a large bay which had been selected after previous reconnaissance by air. It was enclosed by steep walls of rock except for a narrow exit leading to the open sea and deep enough to permit safe passage for the submarines.

The crew spent 2 days practicing manoeuvres. Then Rhodan summoned all commanders for a briefing aboard the *Ironduke*. "This presents an unusual task for you," Rhodan opened with a kind look from his grey eyes at the attentive men. "You are used to piloting spaceships and now I have put you in U-boats. In a way the difference is less than you might think. Both vessels were constructed to penetrate spheres that are hostile to man. One is a vacuum and the other is water. Waters whose possible dangers are unknown to us because they are on a foreign planet. The elite of the Antis has retreated to its depths where they continue to plot our destruction."

He paused but nobody asked a question. "Now we come to your special part in our endeavour. Each Commander of a U-boat will receive a map of the planet's surface. It doesn't show any more than the outlines of the continents and, naturally, of the oceans which are all interconnected, similar to those on Earth. You will be assigned a certain sector which you will have to search. We will maintain constant radio communication with my Command Centre, which will also serve as your contact with all other U-boats. As soon as somebody has reason to believe he has found the enemy he will immediately report the location. The other boats will break off their search and converge on the spot. However you must wait with the attack until I give the order. Is that clear especially the last point?"

The men nodded in silence.

"Fine. One out of 5 boats will be assigned a security officer who will be in charge of all arrests in case the Antis put down their arms. We must proceed in a correct manner so that the Antis will have no justification to accuse us before any court in the Galaxy. I know this sounds ridiculous but I am very serious about it. Therefore I must urge you to follow the instructions of the 4 security officers. Did you understand me correctly?"

One of the commanders inquired: "Do the instructions of the security agents also include the operations of the submarines?"

"No, of course not. I referred only to the possible arrest of Antis and their ringleader."

Rhodan avoided mentioning the name of his son but everybody knew whom he meant. He spoke about 10 more minutes and then set the starting time for the U-boats for the following day.

The *Ironduke* lifted off the same evening to resume its observation in orbit while the *Ralph Torsten* stayed behind to guard the cargoship.

\* \* \* \*

Prof. Gary Stewart, only 24 but already an expert in the field of secretions and hormones, shook his dark brown head, refusing to give in to despair although his colleagues were ready to throw in the towel. The news coming in from all parts of the world was as discouraging as the result of their examinations. Nobody could explain why the substance from the proboscis of the mud borer acted like a narcotic drug. Their findings indicated that it was not a narcotic drug but a first-class high-speed cell-renewal agent. Whether secretion or hormone was a question yet to be decided but a question of secondary importance.

"Is this substance really the same as the active ingredient we found in Liquitiv?" questioned Dr. Koatu, the physician in Terrania who had played such an important role in the control of the plasma monster.

The Microscopy Department announced its analysis of the toxin: "Inspection of specimen inconclusive!"

One of Dr. Koatu's colleagues sighed morosely: "Inconclusive! What else could we expect?"

Terra's medical science was at the end of its wits for the moment.

\* \* \* \*

It was several days before the submarines moved into their sectors and began the coordinated search.

On course to its sector the U-35 ploughed with top speed along the fairly calm surface of the tropical warm ocean. The platform on the upper deck, which was protected against breakers, had room for several men. A telephone line kept them in direct contact with the engine room. If necessary the U-35 could submerge within 30 seconds.

However there seemed to be no reason for doing so. Captain Alf Torsin scanned the horizon with his powerful binoculars but failed to see the mainland or any islands. Their theatre of operations lay several nautical miles ahead. It stretched north and west as far as the mainland and the southern line was far out in the open ocean.

So far the ocean appeared to be no different from a terrestrial ocean, if one disregarded the absence of steamers or strato-clippers flying high in the sky. However nobody knew as yet what lurked in its depths.

Continuous echo-soundings determined the average depth of the ocean to be about 2 kilometres with minor changes of the ground level. However this fact proved nothing. If a fortress existed down there it could have been built below the level of the bottom.

Torsin turned to his Navigation Officer. "Well, Brischkowski, what is your opinion?"

The young lieutenant was undecided. "It is difficult to make a guess from up here. Perhaps after we dive..."

"We will reach our perimeter in 10 minutes. Then you can watch the detection instruments. Any metallic object will be registered far away. I'd sell my soul to the devil to find these priests."

Rengall, who had been gazing at the rolling waves, said with amusement, "Some choice, Captain! It would be fair to say that there is not much difference between the devil's demons and these priests. The Baalol cult has nothing to do with religion. If I had anything to say about it, none of the Antis would escape with their lives."

"First we have to find them," Torsin said, casting a damper. He consulted his chart. "Here we are. Let's go down!"

As they passed down through the hatch the boat began to dive. The tanks were filled with water and pulled the vessel into the unknown depths. The hatch shut with a clunk. They were cut off from the outside world and as isolated as in a small spaceship. The U-35 was nearly 50 meters long, it was streamlined and displaced 2000 tons of water. The atomic reactor was located in the stern and shielded from the rest of the vessel by a thick sheet of lead. The 30 men of the crew were quartered in cabins with plenty of room to spare.

The observation screens in the control compartment lit up. They were mounted so they pictured everything within 180° in the forward direction.

The boat held steady as it descended slowly. Torsin shut the tanks off again. The water became gradually darker and finally totally black. There was no sign of fish or other living creatures.

When the searchlights were turned on they were momentarily blinded by the glare. When they opened their eyes again, the water had become translucent but nobody was able to estimate the distance because there were no reference points. Did they see as far as 10 meters? Or 100?

When the depth gauge registered 200 meters the submarine received a slight jolt as if it had touched ground. However this was impossible since the Fathometer concurrently indicated that the ground level was almost 2,000 meters deep.

"What was that?" Rengall asked with a pale face. Although he felt no real fear, the water seemed more dangerous to him than the vacuum of outer space. "Did we hit bottom already?"

"The Fathometer is correct," Torsin replied, studying the dials. The observation screen showed nothing. Lt. Thomas J. Wagner quickly switched over to another viewfinder which broadened the angle of observation downward so that they were able to see what was below the boat.

They saw nothing but water that shimmered in a green hue and seemed to be bottomless. The boat kept sinking slowly.

"Maybe it was an animal," Wagner surmised in a hoarse voice. "Some kind of a whale."

"If there are no small fish it is not very likely that there are any big ones. It's quite impossible."

At a depth of 1,000 meters they were proven to be wrong although it was not a whale they encountered. The goggle-eyed monster that slowly floated into their view bore no resemblance to anything on the land or in the water of Terra. It was the embodiment of a nightmare suffered by a psychotic brain. As far as its size was concerned it was enormous—more than a match for the submarine. The only thing they could actually see clearly enough was the horrendous eye. It had a diameter of 2 meters and stared at the strange intruder.

"Horrible!" Rengall exclaimed stupefied, holding himself on the rungs of the deck's ladder. "There are animals down here after all..."

"It could be an animal," Commander Torsin admitted sceptically, letting the U-35 sink deeper. The nightmare went upward and was soon out of sight. "We don't know whether we collided with such a giant after diving 200 meters but it is very probable. They are apparently harmless or they would have attacked us. But that eye..."

"That eye looked terribly weird, sir," Lt. Wagner interjected.

Torsin studied him tensely. "What was so weird about it?"

"It was uncanny how that 2-meter big eye stared at us so inquisitively. All I could see of the beast was the eye. I had the feeling that it was holding me and was unwilling to let me go."

"Like a hypnotic orb," Torsin murmured. "Somehow it gave the impression of being intelligent and understanding, as if it pardoned our intrusion in its silent world. I wonder how it can stand the enormous water pressure."

Rengall had recovered from his shock. He looked at the depth gauge, which now registered 1,400 meters below the surface. Meanwhile Torsin had switched on the detector instrument, which emitted rays in all directions. But none of the search beams were reflected. They would be returned only if they struck some metal, which did not have to be larger than a saucer and could be as far as 50 kilometres away.

The engine was started up again and the submarine moved in the direction of the western continent while it continued its approach to the bottom of the sea.

When they collided with the monster they had been able to determine that their searchlights reached as far as 200 meters. This was enough to change their course in case an obstacle suddenly loomed in their path. The danger of a collision was minimal since the submarine also used its radar in the horizontal direction.

2,000 meters. Now they could see the bottom of the ocean. It was mostly flat with a few shallow dips. Its yellowish colour seemed to indicate that it consisted of clay and mud. The observers scrutinized the ocean floor but failed to observe any vegetation or animals. But once they discovered a skid track which could not have been formed by the elements alone. Could it have been made by the 'Eye Dragon' they had run into earlier?

The track ended abruptly as if the creature that had left it behind suddenly rose from the bottom and swam through the water.

The intercom buzzed and Torsin pushed the button. "What is it, Gibson?"

"Call from the *Ironduke*, sir. Radio test. Also requests short report."

"Say that our search has not produced any positive result so far." Torsin switched the intercom off.

The ghostly search beams failed to detect any metallic or man-made objects. After awhile the ocean floor began to slope gradually down and when they had travelled 200 miles they had descended 3,000 meters. This was the maximum depth they could dive. Fortunately the ground began to rise again at a distance of 300 miles from the coast. But its appearance never changed until they came within 50 miles of

the continent. At first Torsin, Wagner and Rengall noticed that the ground began to rise and fall irregularly. Then came the first cracks. They were too small to be entered by the submarine. It was even difficult to take soundings. The thought that they could meet another and more aggressive sea monster preyed heavily on their unspoken thoughts.

Behind the uneven terrain lay a rocky chain of mountains whose highest peak reached within 500 meters of the water's surface. Torsin had to use all his skill for his manoeuvres and all Rengall could do was stand by idly and watch the observation screen in the absurd hope of suddenly discovering the elusive quarry. Although he had no way of knowing what the hideout of the Antis looked like, he pictured it in the form of a huge metallic dome because such a shape would best withstand the pressure of the water.

The U-35 explored the undersea mountain without success. Then it continued on its course toward the continent and followed the coast at a distance of 10 miles, first north to the cape and then south to the open sea.

To judge from the reports they received from the central radio station none of the other boats had found anything either. Of course it could have been only the most incredible luck if they had found the undersea fortress so quickly without a clue whatsoever. Maybe they would have to keep up the search for weeks before it met with success. If it did so at all.

At the southernmost point of its area of operations the U-35 turned around and steered north again. Although it seemed unpromising, Torsin went close to the shore and hugged the rocky coast underwater within a few meters. Sometimes the coast was so steep that they had to dive down alongside a wall 500 meters deep in order to stay near the land.

Rengall watched the dangerous manoeuvre with sceptical eyes. "Is it necessary to get so close to these rocks?" he asked, keeping his eyes glued to the observation screen. The bizarre forms of the submerged precipice were on the left and the infinite expanse of the ocean on the right side. Jutting rocks and crevices passed in quick succession. "You've got your detectors and there is no need to endanger ship and crew."

Capt. Alf Torsin slowly turned around and eyed the security officer. "We have been good friends up to now, Major. Let's keep it that way and stay out of my business. Only I am responsible for this ship and I know exactly what to do. Although you are a major and I am only a captain, this makes no difference on our mission. Besides our search beams are useless if the Antis built their fortress under land with an undersea passage to the entrance. It would be easily accessible to them by submarines. I could imagine that the fortress is on the mainland—or more accurately, under the land."

"I didn't mean to be critical of your actions, I simply asked a question," Rengall replied, irritated. He should have known that he would stir up trouble. There was something like a friendly rivalry going on between the active officers of the Spacefleet and the agents of the Security Service. They liked to use every occasion to put each other down. This was not done in a malicious spirit, however.

Torsin wanted to make another remark but was interrupted by Tom Wagner, who shouted: "There...! A tunnel...!"

Torsin reacted at once. He stopped his propellers and manoeuvred his boat to a dark spot in the steep wall 200 meters below the surface of the water. In the twilight they soon recognized an almost circular opening which turned out to be a cave whose rear wall they were unable to light up with their searchlight.

"That hole is big enough to swallow us with our torpedoes and atomic rockets," Torsin mused, glancing



nervously at Rengall. "I don't know if we should risk it. The smallest mistake..."

Rengall remained silent. He offered no advice and did not encourage Torsin. Neither did he keep Torsin from acting on his impulse.

Lt. Wagner merely muttered: "Yes... h'm."

Torsin went closer to the tunnel. The opening was brightly lit by the searchlight and its rim looked natural without a sign of artificial work. However this could be a deliberate deception.

Rengall could read the firm intention in Torsin's face to inspect the inside of the tunnel and he asked quietly: "What about using the Reissman diving suits? Don't you have some on board?"

Torsin nodded in surprise. "Yes, that's right. I almost forgot about them. Before we imperil the whole ship I would rather send out 2 men. I really don't believe that it will be dangerous. Those diving suits are tough enough so that they won't be torn by hitting a rock."

Rengall drew himself up. "If you give me another good man, I'm willing to..."

"That's out of the question," Torsin declared firmly. "I'm responsible for you and if something happened to you..."

"Diving is my hobby," the major assured him. "A Reissmann suit permits descending to a depth of 350 meters. Here we are only 200 meters deep. I'll take a raygun with me."

"We have only 4 shockproof hand rayguns in our arsenal," Torsin said, half persuaded. All others would endanger your life because of the conductivity of the water. Well... all right! You've talked me into it. But it will be your own responsibility."

"Of course. Captain. I don't think anything can happen to us. Just wait for us here until we return. The tunnel may not be very long. Perhaps it bends around and that's the end of it."

Only one other man, engineering science and systems expert Robert A. Gibson, had some diving experience and thus was chosen to accompany Rengall. The task did not appeal very much to the redheaded computer fanatic but duty called. Ten minutes later the 2 men left the boat through the pressure chamber and swam away after testing their radio equipment.

The Reissman diving suits were almost ideal. The nuisance of oxygen tanks had been eliminated since a convenient chemical device produced enough air to breathe for 20 hours. This gadget was so small that it took up less space than the radio transceiver which was a miniature set. Each of them carried a raygun in his pocket where it could be easily reached.

The U-35 kept hovering at the same spot and illuminated the tunnel with its searchlight. Rengall flipped over, unencumbered by gravity, and waived gaily to Torsin although he was unable to see him. "I'm enjoying this," he said into the microphone which was built to his helmet. "I feel much safer out in the water than in the narrow confines of the boat."

"But," Torsin taunted him, "only as long as I keep shining my lights. You will be surprised how little fun you have when it gets dark around you. Well, don't waste my time. Haller is already at the entrance."

Rengall sputtered something about the unseemly haste of insensitive dullards and swam to catch up with

Haller without taking time to peer at the bottom of the ocean.

Gibson, straining his blue eyes, waited at the entrance to the cave and pointed to the dark gap. "I can't see a thing in there, Major. But it really seems to be some sort of a cave. Maybe we found the Antis, sir."

"Maybe," Rengall replied sceptically as he joined Gibson.

The light of the submarine's searchlight reached about 50 meters inside the cave, which indicated that its size was huge. The end could not yet be seen.

"I guess we'll go for a swim," Rengall suggested. Gibson nodded. He had already anticipated it. They pushed off and entered the tunnel, which was gradually getting narrower. The U-35 would not have gotten very far and Rengall was eager to let his friend Torsin know it. When it got too dark they turned on their own lamps, which were mounted on their helmets. The light reached only 10 meters but it was sufficient.

The cave became an almost round tunnel, measuring 10 meters in diameter and leading horizontally into the rocky continent, making them wonder if it had been excavated although they failed to notice any trace of labour.

The exit behind them looked like a large bright spot and it disappeared when they rounded a corner. Now Rengall knew that they were really alone.

They floated in a shadow zone which had no semblance to the world on the surface. The cone of their light flitted across the irregular walls with its small crevices and sharp edges. There were no fish and no plants.

They continued swimming for almost 20 minutes and had travelled several hundred meters when the passage widened. The ceiling, walls and floor receded to such an extent that the shine of their lamps failed to reach them. It was impossible to determine whether they were again in the open ocean or inside an enormous cave although the latter seemed more likely. Torsin's chart had not shown that a fjord or a lake stretched behind the coastal formation and they had to assume that it was a subterranean lake, a cave filled with water and connected with the ocean.

"How are we going to find the continuation of the tunnel if there is one?" Gibson said dejectedly.

"Let's keep looking," Rengall proposed although he was doubtful of the result. "We'll have to follow the wall."

"Any luck?" both men heard Torsin's voice. "Where are you now?"

"In a cave full of water. We don't know how big it is."

"You seem to be on the wrong track." The voice of the captain sounded disappointed. "I want you to come back."

But Rengall was caught by the fever of adventure. "Why, Captain? Perhaps we can find the continuation

"I told you to come back, Major. We can't waste so much of our limited time. Is that clear?"

Rengall glanced at Gibson, who was floating next to him. His red-topped face was clearly visible in the

helmet. He made a questioning gesture with his hand as if he didn't want his superior to know anything about his doubts.

"Alright, we are turning back," Rengall finally answered. It was senseless to argue with Torsin since he was in command.

Half an hour later they reported to Torsin and came just in time to hear the radio message which the *Ironduke* broadcast to all U-boats. It was short and urgent: "Calling all submarines on Okul. Surface immediately and signal your positions. Waft for further orders. Search to be suspended in the meantime. Rhodan."

Capt. Torsin looked at Maj. Rengall in astonishment. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked, completely baffled. "Did somebody discover the Antis?"

Rengall slowly shook his head. "I would hardly think so, Captain. Something unforeseen must have happened. We'll soon find out about it, I suppose."

They surfaced and marked time in the irregular swells near the coast, which rose like a wall of rock from the ocean. The sun stood low in the west and night was fast approaching.

### **3/ COUNTDOWN TO CONFLAGRATION**

It was 3 days after the spaceship Antilles had brought the mud borers to Earth. Dr. Koatu was in Prof. Wild's office.

"Read this, Dr. Koatu!" the professor said to him, handing him a report from the University Clinic of Heidelberg.

At Heidelberg they had developed a new analytical method and the laboratory was able to prove that the secretion of the gland was neither a poison nor habit-forming but an excellent medium of rejuvenation. The laboratory raised the question for the first time whether Liqutiv might contain also an additional drug which had so far escaped detection.

"What do you say?" Prof. Wild asked his colleague after he had carefully studied the report.

"It's possible," Koatu admitted reluctantly. "But where is the second drug to be found? In the liqueur or in the secretion?"

"That's what I am asking myself." Prof. Wild revealed how vexed he was by the diagnosis.

\* \* \* \*

The morning Phil Norris visited the golf clubhouse following the advice of his friend Rengall a terrible surprise awaited him.

Gary Bascall received him without the usual courtesy of the manager. He was nervous and disturbed and made no secret of his irritated mood.

"What do you want here so early in the day?" he inquired. "Nobody is playing at this hour..."

"I didn't come to play golf," the physician explained. "I just wanted to pay you and your fine bar a visit."

"Somebody has already done that last night," Bascall retorted, suddenly narrowing his eyes and scrutinizing Norris. "You sure had a beauty tied on the night before last."

"I missed my Liquitiv. That's why I came to see you. Sir John told me that you have it in stock and since it will take me a few weeks to get back to the city I would appreciate it if you could let me have a few bottles. You probably can buy it before I get a chance."

"You have come a few hours too late," Bascall replied in a strange tone. "Sir John was the last one to get any Liquitiv from me."

"But..."

"Come with me." the manager said and walked into the clubhouse. It was a splendrous wooden edifice with a wide porch and a fine staircase of wood. The large windows had iron bars but one of them was missing. It had been removed by force and the twisted metal was thrown on the manicured lawn. Norris had a dim suspicion.

"Look for yourself, Doctor. It was kept in the cabinet behind the bar. They used to steal money but now they steal Liquitiv. That's progress for you!"

Bascall apparently was still unaware of the reason for the sudden series of burglaries. Norris thought he saw his last chance. "The liqueur isn't exactly cheap. It's worth its weight in gold. Well, how about it? Let's have a drink after this shock!"

Bascall nodded, still distracted. He seemed to have dropped his suspicion of Norris. "Alright, Doc!" he replied, going to the bar and setting up glasses. "Whiskey?"

"Oh, I would prefer Liquitiv. I suppose you have a few drops left?"

Bascall shook his head in amazement. "That takes the cake! Didn't I tell you that I was robbed of the whole stuff? They even took the few bottles I kept under the bar. I'm completely out of it and I have to drive into town today or the club members will raise the roof."

Phil. Norris realized that the time had come to enlighten the manager. Perhaps they could get somewhere if they worked together. "I doubt that you can buy a single bottle of Liquitiv in Florida or in any other state, for that matter, not even if you want to pay twice or 10 times the price. The import has been blocked and it looks as if the government intends to carry out a radical cure. You can picture the consequences yourself. Within 4 weeks 200 million addicts will make a shambles out of our civilization unless they are all locked up."

Bascall glanced sideways at Norris. "Did you know all that when I gave the 100 bottles to Rengall? Did

Rengall know it?"

Norris nodded, feeling a little ashamed. But Bascall suddenly started to grin. "Looks like you got stuck just like I did. That's a joke. Now what? Can't you as a physician find a substitute?"

"They didn't find one in Terrania. How do you expect me to know it? We'll have to dig up the Liquitiv somewhere. It's the only way. I don't feel like spending the rest of my days in an insane asylum. I still can live 9 or 10 years and that's what I want to do."

"So do I," Bascall declared. "Where can we get hold of more Liquitiv?"

"In the city. Lock up your premises and let's go before the crowds storm the place. It has not yet been officially announced and there are only a few people wise to it. We must try to buy up any available supplies. Do you have a gun?"

Bascall looked surprised. "Yes, of course. But why do you need it?"

"We better take it with us."

Bascall looked at his broken liqueur cabinet and saw the light. He took a revolver from a drawer and put it in his pocket. "Let's take the delivery van."

"It will look better," Norris agreed. "That way we can order Liquitiv anywhere without drawing attention. First we'll drive to your wholesaler."

Before they reached the outskirts of the city it dawned on them that their attempt was doomed to failure. A noisy crowd blocked their way when the people recognized the Golf Club van. Before Bascall could inquire about the reason for the commotion he was pulled out of the driver's seat and forced to open the loading doors. The mob howled in disappointment when it discovered that they only carried empty bottles and boxes.

"Where did you hide the stuff?" one of them shouted, shaking Bascall. "Start talking or we'll kill you!"

"What stuff?" Bascall panted, trying to reach his gun unnoticed. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

If he didn't know, he suspected it and so did Norris whom they had left in peace.

"The Liquitiv, you donk!" the rowdy screamed furiously, striking the manager a blow that made him stagger and fall. "You know as well as I do that we can't get it anymore. Nowhere in this city. If you don't surrender the stuff we'll..."

He didn't get any further. Bascall managed to pull the revolver from his pocket. He jumped to his feet and pointed it at the leader of the mob. His men stepped back.

"Start the motor, Norris!" Bascall shouted, cocking his gun with a slight click and holding it up ready to shoot. "Get out of my way!" he warned the ruffian who had hit him so hard. "We don't have any Liquitiv. Lay off! They'll soon sell it again. I'm going through!"

Brandishing his gun, he plunged into the crowd that made room for him. Meanwhile Norris had moved into the driver's seat and started the motor. He shifted, and opened the right door. Bascall jumped on

and held himself at the door. The leader of the raving mob was beside himself in his rage and, neglecting all caution, grabbed the leg of the manager to prevent him from getting in. "Don't let him get away!" he bellowed. "They're hiding the stuff in the cab!"

Bascall took careful aim and fired. The maniac screamed and dropped. Norris stepped on the accelerator as the manager got on the seat. The pack howled but it was too late. The victims had escaped.

"Did you kill the man, Bascall?"

"No, I only shot him in the leg. He won't try to commit assault and robbery so soon again. This borders on anarchy. Now drive to the wholesaler and don't stop for anybody!"

They saw to their great chagrin that others had already conceived the same idea before them. The large building was under a regular siege. Holding up placards and banners the unruly mass of people made it clear what they were after. They demanded the immediate distribution of all the Liquitiv that was stored.

Norris stopped the car.

"We'll have to walk," Bascall decided. He put the revolver back into his pocket and opened the door. "I know the warehouse supervisor very well. If he has any Liquitiv left, I am certain that he will give us a few bottles. Follow me, Doctor!"

They left the van and approached the warehouse through the backyard. Nobody tried to stop them and they were able to enter the building unmolested through a side-door. Inside a policeman suddenly blocked their way. "Stop! Who are you?"

Bascall grinned confidently. "I am the manager of the Beach Golf Club."

"What do you want here?"

"What's the matter? Is this place in some sort of trouble? I came to shop for our bar."

"You can buy whatever you want. Except Liquitiv, if that's what you have in mind. You will be searched before you leave the building again."

"This is unheard of..."

"I am merely following orders," the policeman said, with a note of resignation. "Ask my superior officer if you want to know more about it. Didn't you hear that a state of emergency has been declared?"

"All because of that Liquitiv?" Norris asked.

The policeman looked at him suspiciously. "So you have noticed it already."

They met the warehouse supervisor in the office of his boss. There were also 2 officers in uniform present. They studied a list and exchanged remarks in a low tone. At first they paid no attention to the visitors.

"Hello, Rebok, what's going on? Are they planning to introduce prohibition again?"

Rebok, an elderly man in a blue suit, shook Bascall's hand and greeted Norris. "Looks like it, Gary."

Although the prohibition is strictly limited to Liquitiv. They've confiscated all our stock."

"Confiscated?" Bascall was horrified and turned pale. "What do you mean, confiscated? I came to buy some."

"Sorry, Gary. You may have everything but Liquitiv."

"But..."

One of the officers looked up and asked: "Who are you?"

Bascall introduced himself and Dr. Norris, who added: "I am a physician, Lieutenant. If you withhold the supply of Liquitiv you will cause a catastrophe. The addicts are already ganging up in the streets. You must know that a nervous breakdown is inevitable if an addicted person is deprived of the narcotic drug for 6 days. Are you willing to take this responsibility?"

"It won't take 6 days, Doctor. The supply is merely held in reserve and registered. Then it will be distributed so that each addict receives his minimal dose. The government plans only one week's delay."

"One week's delay...? What does that imply, Lieutenant?"

"We are expecting further shipments from... other sources. Together with the stock at hand it will suffice to take care of the needs of 90% of the population. The other 10% wouldn't have to suffer either if we could catch those culprits who have hoarded the drug for themselves. Have I made myself clear?"

"Clear enough," Norris acknowledged. "But what happens after the first week? Will new cargoes be coming in later on? I mean, can we count on a permanent supply?"

"I'm sorry that I'm not in a position to give you any information about it."

Rebok turned to Bascall and said in a regretful tone: "I wish I had known a little earlier that you need more Liquitiv. I could have sent you a few bottles. But now, it's too bad, Gary."

"It's not your fault. They stole 900 bottles from me last night. Perhaps this interests the police."

The 2 police officers were indeed interested and they took down Bascall's statement. When Bascall signed it, one of them commented: "900 bottles—this means that 900 people won't get their critical doses. You see what hoarding does?"

"It's only 899 people," Bascall corrected him. "You don't have to count the thief."

As they drove away from the city they heard on the radio that a state of emergency had been declared. There had already been riots in Europe by frenzied demonstrators who had to be calmed in violent clashes with the police. Many fatalities had occurred. The government urged the population to remain calm, claiming that all requests for Liquitiv could be fulfilled in one week at the latest.

Phil Norris stared at the passing landscape. "Do you believe it?" he asked glumly.

Bascall shook his head. "It's a tranquillizer pill, nothing more."

"A tranquillizer won't do any good. It can't cure the addiction. It will be bedlam if that narcotic doesn't

get here in a week."

The catastrophe had already begun to spread. The spaceports of the continent were jammed with desperate people. They tried to obtain passage with bribes or the threat of mayhem to the most unimaginable places in the vain hope that other worlds had an abundance of Liquitiv. The first reports of the impending disaster were relatively harmless. Then a group of unscrupulous men overwhelmed the crew of a small cargoship and forced it to take off. The ship was soon hopelessly lost in the cosmos. It was followed by a report from South America that the largest spaceport of the country was overrun by a belligerent mass of people and that the police was powerless to deal with their rioting. The terminals and control towers were smashed, 3 ships crashed and exploded.

It was the beginning of the end. The addicts of the whole world rose in defiance of law and order and insisted on getting their narcotic drug.

Terra faced the total collapse of its civilization.

\* \* \* \*

"I don't have another choice," Perry Rhodan said, looking at the questioning eyes of Jefe Claudrin and Reginald Bell. "Either I can pull off the ruse or all will be lost. Under no circumstances can I order the arrest of 200 million Terrans and there is no other way of controlling these hordes of maniacs."

"What's wrong with our scientists?" Bell asked tonelessly. "We furnished them more than 5,000 mud borers and they should, theoretically, be able to produce Liquitiv. If they get on the ball, these dopers can receive..."

Rhodan interrupted him. "You heard the latest news from Terrania. The experts are unanimous in their opinion that the chemical composition of the mud borers' glandular secretion is known and that it is not a toxin but a rejuvenation agent."

Bell looked at him dubiously. "No matter what you are trying to tell me, Perry, you will have to explain to me what causes this to turn into such a terrible habit that it makes lunatics out of those poor suckers and leads to their death after only 12 years."

"Our scientists are still working on this problem. They suspect that Liquitiv contains a second drug which they have been unable to isolate until now."

"Is this really possible?" Bell asked, perturbed.

"I have to accept the conclusions of the medical experts. But it makes it clearer than ever that our best hope lies in finding the Antis who are hiding somewhere on Okul. Although they fail to answer our radio calls I am convinced that they can hear us. Consequently we will have to send them a message which will compel them to respond at the peril of death."

"What about our resources on Lepso?" Claudrin inquired.

"All gone," Rhodan replied. "Everything we had there was shipped to Earth and parcelled out. The delay



of one week is approaching its end. The alarming reports from Terra are worsening by the hour. We have suffered already more than 2000 casualties. We must take action and force a decision one way or another. The Antis are not anxious to commit suicide."

Claudrin sighed and shifted his huge bulk on the other side of his chair. "Alright, sir. If you give me the text of your message I'll see to it that it will be broadcast over all transmitters. The U-boats will hear it too." He pulled a penzel and paper from his pocket and added: "I am listening."

Rhodan reflected for a moment and then dictated: "Calling Thomas Cardif and all Antis! Okul has been sealed off. Escape is impossible. I have removed 5,000 mud borers from the planet for the purpose of producing Liquitiv. I hereby give you an ultimatum of 3 hours. Unless you give me the formula for the antidote to Liquitiv within the stated time, I will destroy Okul with Arkon bombs. All our radio stations have been directed to monitor your answer. I repeat..."

"Do you believe that the Antis will bite?" Claudrin inquired, looking up.

"They should—if they can be swayed by logic. Our past experience has shown that they think and act rationally. Cardif will want to negotiate. This is the least I can expect from our ultimatum."

"Forgive me, sir, but I don't trust Cardif."

Rhodan smiled sadly. "There is nothing to forgive, Colonel. I don't trust him anymore than you do. First let's wait and see if he has an offer for us. Please direct all transmitters to broadcast the message at once, to repeat it 10 times and to listen for their answer. I'm betting that we hear from them. Alert our rangefinder officers so we can pinpoint their transmitter. Even if their decision is negative, we will gain the possibility of disabling them without demolishing the planet."

Jefe Claudrin got up and left the cabin with thumping steps. Bell stayed with Rhodan. Scratching his red hair bristles he asked in an unhappy mood: "What are you going to do, Perry, if they ignore your ultimatum?"

Rhodan stared straight into Bell's eyes. "I will turn Okul into a sun! We don't have any other choice if we want to root out the source of the evil. Without Cardif the Antis will abandon their 10-year-plan and we will get a breather which we so urgently need. Don't look at me like that, Reggie! Do you think it is an easy decision for me to execute the death sentence of an entire planet, even though it is uninhabited?"

Bell gazed at the ceiling without a word.

\* \* \* \*

180 minutes can seem an eternity.

After the first hour Rhodan took the necessary steps to prepare for the destruction of Okul. He sent uncoded instructions to the fleet stationed in the vicinity of the planet to prepare the launching of 5 Arkon bombs.

Rhodan reasoned that the Antis were in a position to monitor his broadcast and this was precisely the

purpose of his undisguised directions for the impending attack. He wanted to impress on his opponents that he meant business and had no intention of sparing his son.

The second hour elapsed without a sign from the Antis.

The U-boats were still at their stations in their operational sectors, waiting on the surface of the water. Their rangefinders kept scanning their surroundings without registering a target. The radio detectors were also alerted. The moment the transmitter of the Antis emitted its first signal they would determine its direction. They felt certain that at least 3 of the U-boats could pick up the signal so that the location of the transmitter could be traced at the intersection of the radio beams.

The cargo-spaceship stood by at the shore of the big bay. It was ready to start at a moment's notice to take the submarines aboard which would require 5 hours. It would take at least 6 more hours before they could commence the incineration of Okul.

The *Ironduke* circled the jungle planet in a narrow orbit. Rhodan had gone to the Command Centre and sat silently with tightened lips before the observation screen. He watched the monotonous landscape of Okul gliding by at a steady speed.

Claudrin talked in a low voice to Prof. Arno Kalup, the genius who had constructed the linear propulsion system. The engineer could not be dissuaded from joining this mission. "You never know what can happen and I would rather be there," he had firmly declared. He was a giant of a man. His bald head was polished like a billiard ball and his drooping cheeks made him look like a contented hamster. At the moment he seemed to have lost his biting humour with which he liked to tease his friends. He answered Claudrin's technical questions concisely and in a serious vein.

Rhodan did not listen to their conversation. His thoughts were occupied with other matters and he kept looking at his watch from time to time: 2 hours and 13 minutes! How the time dragged on! Why did the Antis refuse to answer? Did they gamble that he would shrink from annihilating a planet or trust he would refrain from killing his own son? Whatever it was, he thought grimly, they were making a reckless mistake.

Rhodan was resolute in his determination to issue the fatal command to his fleet in exactly 5 hours and he looked at his watch again—45 minutes.

The lives of millions of human beings and untold billions of other intelligent denizens of the Galaxy were at stake. This counted more than the fate of 250 Antis and one traitor.

#### **4/ CARDIF'S MAD PLAN**

The surface of the ocean was in constant motion. It gave no indication of the craggy mountain peaks buried 1,000 meters below in eternal darkness. The steep slopes of the mountain chain dropped 4,000 meters on both sides to the base of the ocean. The slopes as well as the peaks were bereft of any vegetation.

At one place the almost vertical wall of stone curved inward and created an overhang which would have

been impossible to detect by a rangefinder even though it passed directly overhead. The projection was much too thick to permit the transmission of any such rays.

However if a submarine had submerged to this place an alert observer would have noticed that the wall underneath the projection had a certain area which was much too smooth and, regular to be of natural origin. The area was round and measured 30 meters in diameter. A fine seam coincided with the vertical diameter. It was the line of separation for 2 large doors which could be made to recede in the adjacent walls and thus open an entrance, if necessary, to a water-filled tunnel leading to the interior of the mountain—the fortress of the Antis and the last refuge of Thomas Cardif.

Watergates separated the air-filled fortress from the tunnel. Ventilators deep inside the mountain were constantly at work to supply the immense excavations with fresh air. Light sources illuminated the farthest recess, permanently shutting out the night. Corridors, rooms and laboratories were all heated and nobody could have guessed the fact that they were more than 1,000 meters under water.

The Antis had built an elaborate hideout and considered various contingencies. Thus they were prepared for the present emergency. They knew that they could not be detected by rangefinders and trusted that the fortress could not be found. All technical instruments had been provided to follow every move of the adversary and to act accordingly.

A shaft ran down from the fortress to the bottom of the ocean where it continued in a horizontal direction 100 meters under the floor through solid primeval rock. It contained cables which connected them to a remote-controlled transceiver station 2,000 kilometres away. The radio station was housed in a shockproof dugout and the antennas could be raised and lowered for transmission and reception. In case the unmanned station were accidentally spotted it could be retracted to the safety of the bedrock. The installation enabled them to observe the outside world visually and evaluate the measures to be taken as well as their effect by electronic means. All radio communications could be handled from inside the fortress.

Thomas Cardif and an elderly Baalol priest sat in the radio centre of the fortress and watched the various optical panels lining the walls. An ingenious arrangement of their antennas made it possible to receive many different pictures on the same set. The method was perfect for the surveillance of all events taking place on and above the face of the planet.

When they heard Rhodan's warning they knew that the Terran was deadly serious. They were aware that the entire globe was blockaded by a huge armada and had no illusions that Rhodan would hesitate to proceed with the threatened destruction of the planet.

Cardif bore an uncanny resemblance to his father. Only a good observer could have missed a wrinkle here and there, if he had seen their faces together. Cardif's eyes were not pure grey, they seemed to be a little on the yellowish side. This was the only real difference in their appearance.

He sat in a comfortable chair staring fiercely at the screen and said: "I don't know what to do."

The priest appraised him with a sharp look. He had a heavy beard and evoked the image of a Springer captain. It was quite possible that one of his ancestors had been a Springer patriarch but now he was the High Priest of the Baalol cult. "There must be a way out," he replied tersely, "and we are going to find it."

The loudspeaker repeated Rhodan's ultimatum 10 times before the strange voice stopped. A click indicated that the Terrans had switched to reception.

Cardif looked at his watch. "We have only 2 hours left, Rhobal, hardly enough to work out a good plan. Rhodan wanted to make sure that the supply of Liquitiv is maintained. After the mud borers have been delivered to his laboratories he will know the secret. They will analyse the secretion of the glands and soon be in full production."

The priest smiled superciliously. "You are wrong, Cardif. Of course their scientists will diagnose the secretion but that won't help them very much. They can even produce Liquitiv but it won't be the same Liquitiv. It will be nothing but a temporary means for cell rejuvenation. You ought to know this better than anyone else. Rhodan's ultimatum has affected your cool judgment. Normally you would never have made a comment like that. Don't you agree that the double effect of Liquitiv gives us a good chance?"

Cardif considered the thought, then shook his head. "I can't see what good it would do us. Before Rhodan finds out his mistake, we will be dead. He won't wait to carry out his ultimatum. He will initiate the destruction in 2 hours. This will also deprive the other inhabitants of the Galaxy of their Liquitiv. It will create a pandemonium of incredible proportions, not only on Earth but every place where galactic trade is conducted. Too bad that I won't live to see it."

Cardif's voice sounded full of regret. He seemed to be saddened by the thought of being prevented from watching the nightmare spectacle he had dreamed up. The thought seemed to rankle him even more than the prospect of losing his own life.

Rhobal glanced at the pair of Antis who were seated at the radio sets. "We must try to gain time. Let's figure out the best way to get a postponement from Rhodan. We won't get anywhere if we keep silent."

"We don't have much of a choice. We can only accept or refuse."

The priest was plainly disappointed. "Don't give up, Cardif. There's always a way, if we can only think of it."

Thomas Cardif was a criminal motivated by hate. He hated his father as much as any human being was capable. He blamed him for the death of his mother Thora. The Arkonide woman had not been granted the cell shower on Wanderer, the artificial planet, and had aged while Rhodan remained young. Cardif considered this sufficient reason to suspect his father of committing the indirect act of murder. He believed that Rhodan wanted to get rid of his old wife and decided to send her on a mission that periled her very life. The conviction that Rhodan had sent his mother to her death was so strong in Cardif that it could not be shaken. He simply refused to admit that Thora had volunteered for the mission.

But he had found other reasons for hating his father. His father, who looked so much like him, had been successful whereas Cardif considered himself a failure without being willing to admit that the fiasco was his own fault. It was one of Rhodan's principles, not to give preferential treatment to his son. He promoted him with the same consideration he gave all his officers, without lavishing special favours on his offspring. When Cardif learned that he was the flesh and blood of Rhodan his quiet admiration turned into glowing hatred.

And there was a third reason. Rhodan had condoned the hypno-block which changed Cardif's personality and made a new man of him. The memory of his former life had been extinguished until the Antis restored his recall of the true facts and with it they revived the indelible detestation of his father who had robbed him of 50 of the best years of his life. Cardif had also remained relatively young due to the heredity of his mother Thora who, as an Arkonide, had a much longer life expectancy than Earthlings. At the present time he looked the same age as Rhodan.

"Yes, maybe we have a chance," Cardif said, embittered. "We must reason with Rhodan by pointing out to him that he won't be able to obtain sufficient quantities of Liquitiv before the critical time if he destroys Okul. If he buys the argument he will be ready to negotiate with us."

"Negotiate? Do you believe he will grant us a free retreat?"

"Maybe so, even if he is loath to do it. We must convince him that it is the only sensible possibility if he wants to avoid the imminent disaster. Consequently it will be necessary to lift the veil of the secret how we made Liquitiv."

"You are not going to..."

"No! I won't tell him anything. But I will guarantee him that he cannot begin the production of the narcotic drug in less than 3 months under any other circumstances."

Rhobal pointed to the radio operators. "You can talk to Rhodan yourself if you wish,"

"I will do that," Cardif replied and got up. "They can't detect us with their rangefinders. It would be fatal if Rhodan could find the fortress. He could wipe us out without having to seal the fate of the entire planet. But I doubt that he would do that either because he is in dire need of something else. And that, Rhobal, is the thing we will dangle before him."

However he put off sending his call because the transceiver was constantly intercepting the flow of radio messages exchanged between the *Ironduke* and the Spacefleet. The Antis learned thereby that their opponents were getting ready to drop 5 Arkon bombs on the planet. Cardif's last doubts vanished as he listened in. He wondered however when the attack would commence since the 20 U-boats were still out at sea. Rhodan would not be so callous as to sacrifice them and so he had still more than 2 hours left.

But he was not inclined to take a chance: 10 minutes before the end of the ultimatum he broadcast his message and asked to talk to Rhodan.

The moment the radio signal was received the electronic direction finders of the fleet went into play and the location of the transmitter was pinpointed while Rhodan answered the call. It was situated 4,000 meters under the surface of the ocean and thousands of miles from the coast of a continent. The 3 U-boats waiting nearest to the spot immediately headed for the transmitter with their heavy water bombs.

Thomas Cardif waited tensely. It took several minutes before the voice of his hated father emerged from the loudspeaker. "This is Rhodan speaking! The ultimatum will expire in 5 minutes."

"We know. What do you expect to accomplish by devastating Okul? Those 5,000 mud borers are not enough to make a sufficient quantity of Liquitiv. If you destroy Okul and take our lives there will be no hope for 5 billion intelligent beings."

"Whose fault is that? Yours or mine?"

"We are willing to help you."

Rhodan was so stunned as to be wordless at first. It took awhile before he answered: "You want to help us? I am curious to hear what you have to say."

Thomas Cardif contemplated the distant Rhodan as if he had already won the battle. Of course he was

still far from indulging in overeager optimism but a vague idea began to creep into a corner of his brain, a mad plan whose realization required time. To gain a few more hours would be enough. "It will take you 3 months to develop the formula for Liquitiv, if then. And what happens in the meantime?"

"It is a mistake to underestimate our scientists."

"And the mistake is even bigger if they are overestimated."

"Stop playing with words," Rhodan replied. His tone was growing impatient. "We have only a few minutes left before I give orders to proceed with your destruction. If you have any proposal you want to make, out with it! Hurry up!"

Cardif's face twitched. It was full of hate. But his voice sounded calm. He had learned to control himself like his father. "We will consent to put 3 of the Springers' collection points for the Liquitiv at your disposal. The supply they have stored will be enough to meet the demand of the Solar worlds for months."

"Not bad," Rhodan admitted. "And what do you ask in return?"

"That you will spare Okul," Cardif replied. "Secondly, you must give us a spaceship big enough to transport 250 persons and an adequate supply of food and water. That's all."

"That's all?" The voice sounded derisively and Cardif could picture Rhodan's sneering smile. His face became distorted by his fury. But he did not lose all of his composure. Under no circumstances would he betray his intentions and he would have the last laugh. "It's not much if you consider what I am offering you."

This was the same second when the 3-hour ultimatum ran out.

"Well, I accept. Give me the names of the planets where the Springers have their collection points."

After Cardif had named them Rhodan added: "I will adhere to our agreement with one exception. The spaceship I make available to you will not take 250 persons aboard but only 249."

"What do you mean?"

"It means that you will not leave with the Antis but with me. You will be my prisoner."

"No!"

"In that case we will go and get the Liquitiv from the Springers' planets without you because you will be dead."

Cardif gnashed his teeth to keep from screaming into the mike. He controlled himself so perfectly that the High Priest was deeply impressed. With all the calm he could muster, Cardif replied: "This is coercion and blackmail. May I have some time to consider my answer quietly?"

"You may consider your answer but not quietly. While you do I will order a ship to land somewhere near your fortress. Now that we have been able to determine its location it shouldn't be difficult to find a good place."

"So you know where our fortress is?" Cardif smiled enigmatically. "That's interesting. By the way, you made a little adding mistake: there are 250 Antis without me. Don't forget it!"

"And don't you forget that you have only one hour," Rhodan replied coldly. "I'll be back in exactly one hour to get your answer. Remember that your fate will depend on it."

There was a click in the loudspeaker, followed by a slight hum. The High Priest waited 'til the radio operator had switched off the transceiver, then he said to Cardif: "We Baalols are saved. Rhodan is only after your scalp."

"And you think he will get it?" Cardiff asked scornfully. "Don't believe that you can buy your freedom by throwing me to the wolves. I would rather betray to Rhodan where the fortress and the other bases are. No, it's not that simple. Besides, I have a plan."

Rhobal came closer. His voice sounded leery. "What is it?"

Thomas Cardiff snickered. "Instruct your people to prepare everything for a surgical operation. Tell the physicians to go to the Brain Department. I want all specialists to wait for me in the auditorium. I will be there in 10 minutes."

"What are you going to do?" the priest asked impatiently and Thomas Cardif took him into his confidence.

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When Rhodan cut off the connection, Bell could no longer restrain himself. He had stood the whole time with gritted teeth next to Rhodan, having trouble not to explode. "Are you willing to let him go scot-free if he insists on it?"

Rhodan turned around. His face looked expressionless. "We've got an hour to think about it," he said briefly, hinting that the final decision had not yet been made. "Besides, I'm not so sure that we have found the fortress. The transmitter was detected 4,000 meters below sea level, that's all. No boat can dive that deep, not even one of the Antis. If their fortress is down there at the bottom of the ocean, how did they get in?"

Bell looked at Rhodan. "Do you mean to say it could be a bluff? But how can they radio from such a depth without being..."

"By remote control, Reggie. You could have figured that out sooner."

The door opened and Gen. Deringhouse entered. "Any new instructions, sir?"

"Not yet, except postponement of the planned action by one hour. Please see to it that all communications to this effect are broadcast openly to the fleet. The Arkon bombs will be held in readiness. We can worry about a ship for the Antis later."

"Maybe we can induce one of the Springers to take the whole caboodle aboard," Bell suggested. "There

are enough of them snooping around in this neighbourhood."

"That's a slight exaggeration," Rhodan replied with a fleeting smile. "Nevertheless, we should be able to intercept a merchant ship of the Springers with enough cargo space. But let's wait that one hour first."

It was a long hour. But before it had elapsed, something totally unforeseen happened.

Rhodan and Bell were in the Command Centre of the *Ironduke* talking about their next measures with Gen. Deringhouse, when the door of the radio room was pushed open by the excited radio officer who exclaimed. "Sir... it's Thomas Cardif!"

Rhodan was outwardly unperturbed. "We have been expecting his call. I'm coming."

"It's not that, sir. Cardif appeared on our picture screen. He called from a new place on the surface of the planet."

Rhodan gave no answer. He rushed into the radio room where he saw the face of his son on a small video. The transmitter did not seem to operate at full strength since the picture was fuzzy although he recognized Cardif beyond a doubt. "Yes, this is Rhodan speaking. Did you make up your mind?"

Rhodan preferred not to switch on the camera, so that he could see Cardif without being seen himself.

"Yes, I have made my decision." There was something surreptitious in Cardif's voice that made Rhodan cautious. But his next words created a sensation in him that made him forget all caution. "I have given a great deal of thought to this matter and I would like to talk to you about it in person."

"Nobody is listening who is not concerned with your decision."

"You don't understand me. I suggested we meet so that we can talk alone."

"Meet you?" Rhodan was taken by surprise and hesitated to answer. A thousand thoughts and possibilities crossed his mind. Bell and Deringhouse, who had also entered the radio room, looked at each other. They stood out of sight of the camera so that Cardif could not have seen them even if Rhodan switched it on.

"What's wrong with it?" Cardif asked impatiently. "You think it's some kind of a trick, don't you? But what sense would it make? I came alone to the surface. My allies remained in the safety of the fortress, which is on the high mesa of a mountain. I am certain that you have already ascertained my position with your instruments. Do you believe I would expose myself to such a danger if I didn't trust you?"

"Why should you trust me?"

"But I do. That's why I am asking you to have faith in me too. The more I have thought about my attitude the less I could understand myself. I hated you because I believed you were the murderer of my mother and

"You believed?" Rhodan repeated in astonishment. "What are you trying to say?"

"That I'm beginning to have my doubts and that I would like you to explain it to me. Maybe you can finally make me see your side of the story. I would like to forget the past."



"To be honest, Thomas, your change of mind came rather suddenly. Moreover you have attained your new point of view precisely at the moment of greatest jeopardy. You must admit that such behaviour lacks credibility."

"This I must grant you but you have to consider certain other circumstances. I was freed by the priests against my will. I was forced by them to undergo a shock treatment which restored my memory and my former personality. Perhaps they even stoked the flames of my hatred for you and Terra, I don't know. It is precisely the hopelessness of my present situation which has caused me to reexamine my preconceived ideas, leading me to conclusions which you seem to find so surprising."

Rhodan remained suspicious. He could not imagine that such a radical change of mind had taken place in so little time, especially because it appealed so temptingly to his own feelings, buried deep in his heart. Was it really possible that the shock of the treatment which removed the hypno-block could also create such a change of character?

"I don't believe in your professed conversion," Rhodan finally said. But he had trouble speaking the words. How fervently he would have loved to believe his son! "You are trying to lure me into a trap," he said coldly. "Perhaps you are merely trying to gain time in the hope that help will arrive. But it's no use because this planet is effectively blockaded. Not even the might of the Antis can break the ring around you."

"I know that too and that's why a trap would be ill-advised," Cardif pointed out. There was a touch of regret in his voice. "Now that I have struggled with my conscience and at last expressed the desire to talk to you, you rebuff me with your mistrust. If there is anything left in me that is good you will bury it with your lack of faith. How can it ever gain the better of me?"

Rhodan knew that he faced the most difficult decision of his life, a decision which he was compelled to make. But it was at the same time a decision he had longed to make with all the fibres of his heart although he had long given up hope of seeing the day. "I am your father, Thomas," he said, softening a little. "But you are also my deadly enemy. You have caused untold suffering on Earth and many other worlds just to punish me, a single man. You have committed atrocious crimes to seek revenge for a deed which is a figment of your imagination. There are many people who have sentenced you to die and I am one of them. I would like to believe you but I don't know if I can take the responsibility."

"Nobody is above making mistakes and I realize my guilt. I will try to atone for it. I have developed the Lquitiv and I know how it is made. I could even help you to develop an antiserum which counteracts the effects of the drug and might even prevent the fatal end. If you give me the opportunity to work with your best scientists in a good laboratory, I would be certain of success. It would be the only way for me to reduce my guilt. But if you reject my outstretched hand... what am I to do?"

Rhodan turned with a look for help to Deringhouse and Bell. The men met his eyes with expressions full of doubt. Then they firmly shook their heads.

Not unexpectedly, Rhodan suddenly stood alone, forced to arrive at the fateful decision by himself. He feared that the decision would be influenced by his feelings. How could he justify it? Weren't emotional decisions too often contrary to sound reason? His brain told him that the irreconcilable hate of his son could not turn so quickly into remorse or even affection. He desperately sought a way to allay his doubts, finding none. He finally expressed them openly to his son. "I find it difficult to believe you, Thomas, despite the fact that you are my son. If I agree to meet you, it will be only for the purpose of learning your true intentions. I wish to know the reasons for your incredible change of heart. But beware of trying to set a trap for me. My men will be waiting not far away and..."

"I promise to come alone and I expect you to do the same. The plateau is not big enough for a ship to land. An airglider put me down here with a video transceiver. At the moment I am helpless. If you come, we will be completely alone and there is no reason to fear me. I have no weapons."

Rhodan did not take lightly the possibility that Cardif lied and intended to make him walk into a trap but he was already firmly resolved to risk the attempt. But should he do it without covering his back? If he made a wrong step he would endanger all he had accomplished so far. On the other hand he could not afford to miss a chance to win his son back for the sake of Terra. "Alright, I'll be there. I'll walk if it is possible."

"No problem. 100 meters below the plateau is a level plain where a ship can land. From there you can start walking. I have no objections if your ship waits for you there. It's obvious that it can appear over the plateau the moment you men suspect something to be wrong. Nobody can approach the plateau without being noticed by your men."

It sounded reasonable and Rhodan abandoned his misgivings. There was a short pause as the data of the rangefinders came in and Rhodan checked the position. Cardif's transmission originated from a small rocky island in a big ocean. The nearest continent was 500 kilometres away. What Rhodan did not know, however, was that a huge undersea mountain with peaks rising within 1,000 meters of sea-level was located no less than 100 kilometres from the island.

"I will land on the island in half an hour," Rhodan said. "But I'm warning you, Thomas, one false move and I will react without mercy. This is my last attempt at offering you my hand. Don't forget it!"

"I am waiting for you," was all Cardif replied. Then the picture faded away and the radio officer of the *Ironduke* switched off the set.

Rhodan slowly walked over to the Command Centre. Bell and Deringhouse followed him. Their faces looked anything but optimistic and they made no secret of their opinions.

"How can you be so gullible to trust Cardif even for a minute," Bell rebuffed Rhodan, venting his indignation. "You can't believe in this miracle of his conversion. If the shock of the treatment really reformed him, he noticed it much too late."

Deringhouse shared his opinion. "I can't imagine that it took Cardif so long to see the light if he ever did."

"I don't claim to trust him implicitly," Rhodan replied, studying the chart on the navigation table. The island was already marked on it. "But what kind of an ambush can he set up? It is a lonely island and the *Ironduke* will be close by. Nobody can get to the plateau without our knowledge. No, I've got to take the chance."

"I guess it is more curiosity than anything else which leads you to try your luck with this manoeuvre." Deringhouse made a stab at analysing Rhodan's behaviour. "I suppose I would have done the same if I were in your shoes, sir."

"Thank you, General!" Rhodan looked at him relieved. "Actually I don't have much of a choice and Thomas Cardif knows it as well as I do. Aside from the fact that he is my son, we have to make every attempt to capture the producer of Liquitiv by hook or crook. Well, what are we waiting for? Pass the necessary instructions to the fleet! Top alarm! If the *Ironduke* comes under attack, we will proceed with the destruction of the planet. I will immediately break off all negotiations with Cardif. Is that clear?"

Deringhouse nodded.

"Then set course for the island!"

As the *Ironduke* left its orbit, slowed down and entered the atmosphere while Rhodan made his preparations for meeting his son. After a long reflection he decided not to ignore the suspicion of his friends: he put a small needle-ray gun into the pocket of his pants. He was not inclined to expose himself to the tender mercy of his worst enemy in a state of utter defencelessness. Maybe he did him an injustice but again—maybe not.

The island came into view. The huge ship slowly crossed at a low altitude over its single peak which formed a plateau. It was very small, hardly more than 30 meters in diameter, and a large ship did not have enough room to land on it.

In the middle of the plateau stood a lonely figure that looked upward. The face was clearly visible. Thomas Cardif was alone. The bare stone faces of the top and sides allowed nobody to hide.

"If this is a trap," Deringhouse said sceptically, "I'll be curious to see how it works. Cardif alone shouldn't be much of a danger to you, sir."

Rhodan nodded. "That's what I think. Down there is the place to land which Cardif mentioned! It's big and flat enough."

The vessel slowly descended and gently touched ground. Bell accompanied Rhodan to the exit. "I can't get rid of the feeling that something is unkosh. We can't see the backside of the plateau from down here. How can we know what happens there?"

Rhodan stood on the threshold of the hatch. At his feet shimmered the antigrav field which was to let him glide down safely. He said: "I carry a transmitter in my pocket. It emits a constant signal which lets you determine where I am at any time. I also have a mini-radio transceiver so that I can call for help if necessary." He pointed to the tiny multi-purpose set he carried on his wrist. "I wouldn't mind if the *Ironduke* lifts off in 15 minutes and waits airborne for my orders. Is this good enough for you?"

Bell was reassured. "Yes, I think so. At least it's better than sitting here like a chicken on a roost." He shook Rhodan's hand. "In 15 minutes then. By that time you should have made it to the top. Good luck!"

\* \* \* \*

The medical scientists at Terrania were jubilant.

For 3 days and 8 hours they had overlooked that the proboscis of the mud borers contained a second gland which produced a secretion. Now they were conducting the first experiments on living but aging cells and nerves. They projected on a huge white screen what the Ara microscope revealed, magnified 3 million times.

To their great surprise they had found in the second gland a chemically identical secretion. It had not

taken them very long after the discovery of the additional gland to prove conclusively that the substance was the same. Nevertheless the scientists were not satisfied and began to test it on cells and nerves.

However the disappointing results were reflected on the screen. The secretion of the second gland was also a rejuvenation agent. It also failed to attack the nerves with a narcotic or toxin that caused incurable addiction and led to premature death.

Even before the demonstration was finished, Prof. Wild had rushed as fast as his legs would carry him to the laboratory where the second gland in the proboscis of the mud borer was dissected.

Dr. A. Hughens, the chief of the department, listened to the agitated professor, unable to refute his suspicion. "Come with me," he impulsively invited Prof. Wild and lead him to the microscopic apparatus.

Wild studied the 1.5 million magnification of the accidentally discovered gland. The longer he examined its structure the more excited he became. The organic structure of the mud borer-gland which had already been detected on Okul was firmly fixed in his memory. "Hughens," he whispered, trying to keep his composure, "this gland can never produce the same excretion. Look for yourself at the left upper third of the specimen!"

He stepped aside and Hughes looked at the incredibly sharp magnification. He had to agree with Professor Wild. But didn't the chemical analysis show that the 2 substances were identical?

Wild called the projection room. He was appalled by the information he received. They confirmed that the excretion of the second gland was nothing but a rejuvenation agent and chemically identical with the first one.

"I refuse to believe it," Wild roared. "If a million tests show the same result I can only say that our tests are utterly worthless! There must be other methods of investigation!"

## **5/ PERSONALITY TRANSPLANT**

The steaming primeval jungle covered only the lower plain of the island. Nothing grew farther up. Although it was warm enough, there was not enough humidity to support any vegetation. The rocks were swept clean of humus and bone dry.

The ascent to the upper plateau was hardly more than 50 meters. The sphere of the *Ironduke* with its diameter of 800 meters loomed like a mountain. It was higher than the peak but the cameras mounted on its upper pole were unable to observe what went on, on the other side of the plateau.

Rhodan took his time. He chided himself for being such an incorrigible optimist as to believe that Thomas had finally been won over by virtue. His responsibility for the welfare of Terra was graver than the one he could assume for his son. Yet would it be wise to miss an opportunity to talk things over with his son? Did he really do it only for his own sake? Didn't he have a good chance to free Terra and the Solar Imperium of a terrible predicament by diverting a powerful enemy or making a friend of him?

He walked around a boulder and saw the last stretch of his climb. Cardif's figure was clearly outlined up

against the brilliant sky. He was unable to recognize his face because the backlight was too strong. But it was Cardif, there could be no doubt about it.

He ascended the last few meters and faced his son who had walked back to the centre of the plateau. The 2 men looked at each other, studying their faces in silence.

Rhodan was startled. At first he thought he had stepped before a mirror. The man who stood before him was his spitting image. The same lean features, the same hair, although a shade lighter. The eyes looked the same except for the hardly noticeable yellow shimmer. The slim, tall, figure they had in common.

Cardif also scrutinized his vis-a-vis although he did so for completely different reasons. He was satisfied that his dangerous ploy had succeeded so well thus far. His doppelganger Rhodan had come alone to the plateau. The presence of the huge spaceship did not bother him. It would not prevent him from carrying out his plan. And Rhodan looked exactly like himself after the lapse of 50 years.

At this moment the engines of the *Ironduke* began to roar and the sphere was lifted slowly and majestically up in the air.

"My men believe they have a better view from up above," Rhodan said apologetically. "It does not violate our agreement. I came alone."

Cardif followed the *Ironduke* with his eyes till it assumed a stationary position at an altitude of 10 kilometres. The glistening sphere was motionlessly suspended in the sky and Rhodan knew that all its cameras were focused on the little plateau so that any danger would be instantly recognized when it occurred. It was a reassuring feeling.

"I have no objections to the presence of the ship," Cardif said, looking into the eyes of Rhodan. "All I asked was that you come alone. Why did you trust me?"

Rhodan was vexed. What did he mean by his question? He replied as calmly as he could. "Much of what you told me could be true. I wanted to convince myself if it really is. If what you said is on the level you can now come with me. You will have the cooperation of our best scientists and we will put our finest laboratories at your disposal. I am willing to forget the past."

"Can you really do that, Perry Rhodan?"

The tone of his voice did not express remorse, Rhodan thought, and became very vigilant. His instinct warned him but he still failed to see any danger. Where could such danger possibly lurk? Cardif stood unarmed, his hands hanging down, a few steps away. A scornful smile on his lips. He looked confident and much too carefree for a man in his position.

"We will have time to talk about this later, Thomas. I came to accept the hand you have offered me. Why don't you extend it to me?" He stretched out his hand without moving from his spot. "Well, how about it?"

He looked anxiously at his son's face, which had a very strange expression. The heat became unbearable and the air seemed to shimmer on the stony plateau. Cardif's face was suddenly less clear and his outlines became fuzzy behind the veil of hot air. The air became suffocating.

And then, much too late, Rhodan understood. His hand reached into his pocket and pulled the needle-raygun out. He took one leap toward Cardif, who remained motionless and awaited him.

Rhodan bounced against the shimmering air. A protective screen of energy, just as he thought! But the energy screen in the shape of a dome did not surround Cardif but himself. The dome shut him out from his surroundings.

He was lucky that he had realized it in time because a shot from the raygun could have been dangerous to him. The radio waves from his transmitter could no longer reach the *Ironduke*. But this made no difference because their absence would alert Deringhouse and Bell too.

It was a trap after all. The disappointment was more than Rhodan could bear. But he was still unable to figure out what Cardif wanted to accomplish since he could not remove him from the plateau without jeopardizing himself. But it was not this thought that caused Rhodan to hesitate. What else could he have done?

He had revealed to Cardif that he had a weapon in his possession. This was an unforgivable mistake. He put the raygun back in his pocket in resignation. The energy screen could not be maintained forever.

How was it generated and what powered it? The Antis. Only they could produce such energy fields mentally. So they had to be around somewhere. But where? There was no place to hide on the plateau.

Perhaps under it? Rhodan had hit upon the answer just before the ground began to vibrate. A section of the plateau on which he and Cardif were standing started to move downward. That was the reason why Cardif had retreated to the centre earlier. He had drawn him on the movable platform.

There was nothing Rhodan could do about it. He stood helplessly under the little airtight energy dome. It was hot and stifling.

The *Ironduke* dropped out of the sky, growing larger and larger. They were certain to follow the events on their picture screen. But would Deringhouse manage to arrive in time?

The platform sank at a faster rate. Cardif didn't move a finger. His face looked tense. He had trouble hiding his triumph. He said something but the sound couldn't reach Rhodan's ears. He had stumbled into a more perfect trap than anyone had ever plotted for him.

The opening in the surface closed up again, shutting off the sight of the *Ironduke* hurtling down from the sky. Deringhouse would not dare to bombard the peak for fear of harming Rhodan. Cardif must have counted on it for the execution of his plan.

A light flared up and Rhodan saw that they were no longer alone on their way down. Three Antis were now standing next to Cardif. He recognized them by their cloaks. One of them had a full beard which made him look more like a Springer. He was talking to Cardif and pointed repeatedly at Rhodan.

Rhodan knew that he had one last chance. The Antis were unable to maintain the energy dome indefinitely. Furthermore it would be impossible to transport him anywhere unless they overpowered him. And the moment they removed the screen Rhodan would have to act.

Finally, after endless minutes of descending deeper and deeper, the platform stopped with a jolt. At the same instant the energy dome disappeared. Rhodan was taken by surprise because it came much sooner than he had expected. But he lost no time in drawing his raygun. However before he was able to fire at Cardif he was hit by the concentrated shock-beam of the Anti who had also waited for the precise moment. Rhodan felt an icy cold engulf his limbs and paralyse him. His weapon fell from his numbed

hand; he slowly sank to the floor and lost consciousness.

\* \* \* \*

It couldn't have lasted more than a few minutes because the Antis were busy tying him up when he opened his eyes again. Rhodan put up a terrific fight but all he managed to do was to kick down one of the Antis. Cardif stood by and gave his instructions, holding in his hands Rhodan's needle-raybeamer, his wristset and the little beeper. When he saw that Rhodan was defenceless, he came a step closer. "You haven't trusted me from the beginning, Rhodan. We found the proof on you."

"My suspicion was justified, wasn't it?" Rhodan retorted. He had had enough time to control his disappointment but he was still ashamed of his weakness. He should have listened to reason instead of following his feelings. Bell would tell him off in no uncertain terms.

"Did you really think I would admit defeat? Never! In this respect I am your son—but only in this respect." His voice became hard and uncompromising. "You were kind enough to give me time to think. I have used the time, you didn't. This was your mistake, not mine."

"You will be hunted, Thomas, to the end of time and space. Sooner or later you will be caught and then you will have to deal with men who won't fall victim to their feelings but will act with clear minds and firm determination to avenge me mercilessly."

"Save your strength, you will need it," was all that Cardif had to say. He gave the Antis a few orders, then Rhodan was picked up and put on a flat car. Cardif and his companions sat down on it too and the ride into the mountain began.

The tunnel slanted down a little. It was just big enough to let the car pass through so that they barely missed scraping the ceiling with their heads. It was dimly lit by lamps which were mounted at regular intervals.

Rhodan figured out that the elevator had dropped to a depth of about 1,000 meters. But the mountain peak on the island was 700 meters high at the most. The tunnel would probably end 500 meters under the surface of the water unless it soon turned up again.

Before long the tunnel widened into a regular hall, most of which was filled with water. He saw the submarine which the surviving Antis had used to escape from their destroyed fortress. Rhodan began to believe that Cardif had not lied concerning one point: the second fortress of the Antis had not yet been discovered.

The car stopped. Two Antis picked up Rhodan and carried him to the submarine. The bearded one and Cardif followed. They talked to each other but Rhodan was unable to understand a word. He wondered whether his little beeper was still operating. They took him to a small cabin, checked his bonds and left him alone.

A little later the engines were started up and he heard the rushing of water. They probably passed through a waterlock to reach the open sea. Then the engines ran smoothly and the swaying stopped, leading Rhodan to assume that they were now under water and heading for the mysterious sub-aquatic

fortress.

If his beeper still functioned, the *Ironduke* would follow the course of the submarine. But this was not much help at the moment. Thomas Cardif held the best hostage that could guarantee his safety.

Nobody would attack the submarine or the fortress so long as Perry Rhodan was in Cardif's power and nobody knew this better than Rhodan himself.

\* \* \* \*

Bell stared the lonely island. "We should have known better," he exclaimed full of angry desperation. "Why did we let him go?"

"Nobody could have stopped him," Deringhouse replied.

The *Ironduke* descended till the observation screen showed the most minute detail of the plateau.

"A trap, pure and simple," Deringhouse continued. "Now that we know it, it is easy to see the outlines of the closed shaft."

"The sender is transmitting its signal again," the radio officer announced at the door of the Command Centre. "Do you wish to follow the signal on the big screen?"

Deringhouse nodded, surprised.

The screen depicted the landscape below the ship, giving them a sharp general view at a smaller scale. A tiny point of light crept across the scope at a snail's pace, wandering from the centre of the island toward the ocean.

"It's at least 500 meters below sea level." Bell observed the point of light with growing interest. "The shaft must be connected with the ocean. Perhaps Cardif is taking Perry by submarine to the fortress."

"Without switching off the signal transmitter?" Deringhouse shook his head dubiously. "Cardif isn't that stupid. If he lets the beeper go on operating he must have his reasons. He wants us to know what happens to Rhodan and where he is taking him. And they might take him anywhere except to their last refuge. They can never be sure what orders Rhodan gave us and they must reckon with the possibility that we will attack them regardless."

All further discussion of the subject was rendered superfluous when the point of light suddenly was extinguished. It had moved far enough out into the ocean to prove conclusively that Rhodan was abducted in a submarine. So that was what Rhodan's friends were supposed to know, that and nothing more.

"Trace the submarine with the rangefinder!" Deringhouse ordered. The vessel was much too big an object not to be registered. "Follow its course but don't attack!" The latter order went out to the fleet and their own U-boats. "We must determine at all costs where Rhodan is being transported."



The disappointment wasn't long in coming. Although the search started at the same point where the submarine of the Antis had been seen last, they could detect no trace of the ship. The scope of the rangefinder remained blank. None of the scanning beams was reflected to its origin to show the outlines of the vessel and its position,

The submarine of the Antis had disappeared and with it Perry Rhodan.

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan's signal transmitter kept working continuously but now he and the entire submarine were shielded by an energy field. It isolated the ship so effectively not even a thought could penetrate to the outside, making it impossible for his telepaths to contact or locate him.

The submarine was propelled through the water at a depth of 1,000 meters at top speed and it slowed down only when the peaks of the undersea mountain appeared before its prow. It cautiously sank lower till it floated before the overhang of the rock. The doors opened and the ship entered a water-filled canal. It ended at watergates through which it passed into the harbour of the fortress itself.

When the energy screen finally collapsed the signals from his beeper were useless because they were unable to penetrate the massive rock.

Four Antis came into Rhodan's cabin and picked him up. They carried him through a narrow corridor to the conning tower of the submarine and then on land. The harbour basin was brightly lit and nobody could have guessed that they were more than 1,000 meters below the level of the sea.

Rhodan saw Cardif and the bearded Anti walk ahead and turn into a corridor. He was put on a stretcher and carried behind them.

His situation was becoming more dangerous than he cared to admit. At first he had thought he would be used as a hostage so that Cardif could press his demands. In that case Cardif would not have wasted so much time. What then, he asked himself, were they really up to?

The corridor ended at a wide door which opened automatically as the bearers approached. Rhodan could move around only very little but one look at the ceiling confirmed his worst fears. Symmetric rows of lamps flooded the room with unbearably bright light. Where the ceiling joined the walls, bundles of cables ran into enclosures. Rhodan assumed they were leading to the power station. He turned his head as much as possible and recognized the complicated apparatus of a well-equipped research laboratory. The hypno-shock machine standing in the corner to which he was brought was unmistakable.

He was put on a table and fastened to it. Rhodan tried vainly to read the thoughts of the Antis but his telepathic capability was too inadequate. The priests of the sect had shielded their thoughts well.

In the background he noticed Cardif and the bearded Anti who seemed to be his constant companion. He now wore a white robe, which was girded by a golden belt, and he held a few papers in his hand.

Cardif approached him from the side. He almost had a friendly smile as he walked to the table where Rhodan was tied down helplessly. "You might as well enjoy for the last time being able to think your own

thoughts because from now on you won't be able to anymore. We are not going to kill you because you are much too valuable to us. Your brain and your memory are too useful to be lost forever. Many people would like to learn what you know. For instance the secret of Wanderer, the Planet of Eternal Life. Or the key to Arkon and its power. Oh, there are so many things we are dying to know—and the way to your knowledge is so simple. But this is far from all I want you to do for me. You once robbed me of my memory and grafted a new personality on my mind—one of a ridiculous weakling and dreamer." Cardif still smiled, however his smile was no longer mild and friendly but distorted by hate. "I, too, will give you a new personality, Perry Rhodan. You will be a man whom the Terrans and Arkonides will pursue to the end of the world and who will be drowned in the hate of the Solar Imperium's people. You will be the enemy of the universe whose name will be cursed until you are finally captured and killed. Do you know what your name will be?" Cardif bent over and looked into the grey eyes of his defeated arch enemy. "So you can't guess? Then I will tell you: in one hour *you will no longer be Perry Rhodan but Thomas Cardif!* "

Rhodan remained motionless. He hardly dared breathe. Of course he had already suspected what Cardif had in mind but Cardif now opened a Pandora's box. His son killed 2 birds with one stone with his diabolical plan.

Rhodan began to reproach himself bitterly. His sentimentality had put Terra and Arkon in terrible jeopardy. It would have been much better had they killed him. Now they would burden him with a new personality—remake him into Cardif—and condemn him to the relentless prosecution of his own friends. Even worse, Cardif would...

"I can see on your face that you have guessed the truth," Cardif continued triumphantly. "While you are going to play the onerous role of Thomas Cardif, I will be Perry Rhodan with all his knowledge and prowess. My eyes will appear to be pure grey by means of injections. My hair is easily dyed. That our brain and body frequencies are identical we have already found out. I, Perry Rhodan, will in a few hours be the Administrator of the Solar Imperium and will give orders to hunt down the fugitive Thomas Cardif until apprehended and killed! This time Rhodan will not have pity for his son." He stared sharply into Rhodan's eyes. "Now what do you say to my plan?"

Rhodan had no illusions. His situation was hopeless. Nobody knew where he was and if they knew they would be afraid to launch an attack although it would be much better for the Imperium if he died. Cardif's plan was foolproof and risk-proof. Even the telepaths would not be able to know the difference between the real and the false Rhodan.

Thomas Cardif would become Rhodan and perhaps not even be aware of it in the end. It was quite possible that he would become the nemesis of the Antis with the same ardour as Rhodan. It all depended on his intention of retaining a part of his own memory and the possibility of shielding it sufficiently against telepathic espionage.

But Rhodan speculated that he would not much longer be troubled by this question. He preferred not to answer.

"It leaves you speechless. I see," Cardif stated with obvious satisfaction. "I thought it would. Anyway I'll do a much better job than your men did 58 years ago. They left my memory intact and merely sealed it with a hypnoblock which could be lifted again. In your case there will be nothing left to restore. If they should try to remove your hypnoblock they will draw a complete blank because you will be I and I will be you. With one little difference, however, and I don't mind telling it to you since it will deprive you of your last slim hope. Even though I will be Rhodan, I will not completely give up being Thomas Cardif and I will remain conscious of it. Yet no telepath will ever realize it. My personality will live on, encapsulated

in your knowledge and ability, and it will continue to pursue its goals. But they won't be the same goals as yours, Rhodan!"

Rhodan steadfastly maintained his silence. What could he have said? He would have wasted his breath. Thomas Cardif was insane—he had to be insane! But he was also clever. Unfortunately...

Cardif beckoned to the bearded priest. "You may proceed, Rhobal, as soon as the contacts have been made. We are lucky some of the Aras have escaped their extermination. I don't know how we could do this without them. He bent once more over Rhodan and said: "Goodbye, Perry Rhodan! I don't think we will ever see each other again but if it were to happen again, two like-minded persons will meet—because I will not bestow the character of an angel on you. You may close your eyes. I am humane enough to spare you the sight of the machines. Have a good trip, Perry Rhodan!"

Rhodan did not close his eyes but neither did he care to give an answer. He vainly tried to loosen his straps but had no more success than before. A hood of glass descended over his head from above. Metal bands were clamped around his wrists and ankles. A second table was rolled next to him and Cardif stretched out on it. Several of the wires passed through the machine and connected him with Rhodan.

Rhobal stepped forward. "Everything is ready, Thomas Cardif!"

"Then proceed at once! We don't have too much time to lose. If it takes too long they might become impatient." He turned his head and looked at Rhodan. "Now you will pay for making Arkon a colony of Terra, Rhodan. I will restore the might of Arkon and put Terra in its place. If I succeed in accomplishing this, my mother will be avenged."

He turned on his back again and gazed at the ceiling.

Rhodan still remained silent. He knew that it would be senseless to waste his words. However he still struggled against giving up despite the utter helplessness of his situation. Was he allowed to hope? Who could help him now? Even the mutants were powerless had they been able to find the fortress.

No, it was all over. He had reached the pinnacle of his power and success in life. Now he would be overthrown and topple as low as he had climbed high. A dizzying height he had to admit. Nobody could fall that far without perishing.

And he fell by the hand of his own son.

The machines began to hum. At first Rhodan was lulled by a pleasant warmth and a prickling sensation all over his body but then he felt as if someone reached into his brain and ripped it out piece by piece. The pain became so intense that it grew dark before his eyes. With the greatest of efforts he could barely concentrate enough to observe the proceedings but it quickly became too much for him. The excruciating pain threatened to burst his head. Finally he sank into a black bottomless pit.

Just as Perry Rhodan had to go to a museum to obtain his U-boats, Prof. Wild had to contact another museum halfway across the globe to get a UV-Hormotroscope and ship it to Terrania from the Museum of Medicine at Florence. He was forced to consult with numerous colleagues before he finally managed to find one who was able to explain to him how the Ultraviolet Hormotroscope worked.

It had been discarded more than a hundred years earlier because it had proved to be of limited value to medical scientists. Professor Wild did not expect very much from the instrument which had been mentioned in one of the outdated medical publications he liked to read but he was desperate to try anything for fear of overlooking a chance and regretting it later—the more desperate because he was a Liquitiv drinker himself.

3 hours after the first experiment he came up with the same result 18 times. The effective extract of the second gland permitted only the passage of ultraviolet light at a magnitude of 0.57% compared to that of the other gland.

He alerted the enzyme specialists of Terrania. Enzymes were those minuscule organic bodies of biological origin whose presence affect the chemical process. Being present in the human body in a thousand varieties they could be found anywhere in the saliva, the gall, the pancreas and so on. These enzymes were all catalysts which produced chemical changes in other substances by their mere presence without altering their own chemical composition.

There were only a handful of such specialists in Terrania and they embarked immediately on a medical lottery game with the task of checking the effect of the extract from the mud borer's second gland on more than 1,000 enzymes in the human body in a few hours.

Prof. Wild was biting his nails as the analysis was conducted. The entire medical profession was in a state of extreme excitement. More than 1/3 of the physicians were dependent on Liquitiv.

At long last a result was announced. It concerned the extremely rare Lyl enzyme which had been discovered only 20 years earlier. If the substance from the second gland came in contact with one of the Lyl enzymes in the human stomach, the catalyst changed the extract into a narcotic drug whose efficacy was so potent that it caused an incurable addiction and eventually destroyed the nervous system.

If the extract from the second gland of the mud borer failed to come in contact with a Lyl enzyme—inside the human stomach it remained what it was in the first place, a harmless, quick-acting rejuvenation agent.

Prof. Wild held his head with both hands. "Good heavens!" he groaned. "What an infernal cover-up!"

He had every reason to feel distraught. The hope of finding an antitoxin in a few weeks was zero.

\* \* \* \*

After Perry Rhodan vanished without a trace Reginald Bell took over the command of the *Ironduke* and the entire warfleet. This burdened him with a double responsibility. The uncertainty of what happened to Rhodan prevented him from acting according to his own best judgment. Of course he was glad not to know for certain that Rhodan was dead. If he had been convinced that Rhodan was no longer alive, he

wouldn't have hesitated a second to turn Okul into a flaming sun.

The *Ironduke* followed the rotation of the planet and remained motionlessly at a high altitude above the island. The U-boats were given orders to converge on the island and to scan the sea continually with their rangefinders. The submarine of the Antis could not have simply vanished. The cargo-spaceship was standing by at the bay, ready to take the U-boats aboard at a moment's notice. This wouldn't take very long since the 20 vessels were concentrated in the vicinity of the island. This was all he could do at the moment.

The sun went down below the horizon and a long night began. Bell kept tossing around on his bed, unable to sleep. The fear for the fate of his friend was foremost in his mind. He had to admit that he had never been in such a hopeless predicament. Whatever the Antis or Cardif demanded he would have to comply with their conditions in order to save Rhodan's life.

If they would only get in touch with him! But the night passed in endless waiting until the dawn of the next day finally arrived.

Bell took a cold shower, dressed and rushed without breakfast into the Command Centre where Deringhouse waited for him. "Nothing?"

The general shook his head. "Nothing!"

Bell was assailed by a terrible anxiety. He glanced at the dials of the control panels as if he could find the answer there. The door to the radio room was kept open. All transceivers were attuned to reception. The rangefinders were operating without interruption. The routine reports of the waiting fleet and U-boats came in and were answered.

The tension became unbearable.

"If I only knew what we can do..."

Deringhouse tried to be optimistic. "They can't hide forever," he murmured lamely. "They've got to come out from their hiding place some time and then..."

"And then... what? If Rhodan is in their power we will have to consent to their unhindered retreat. I don't know..."

"Sir!" It was the voice of the radio officer. He sounded excited and urgent.

Bell dashed into the radio room. "What's up?"

"Radio signals, sir! From here!" He pointed to a map on his table. "We don't have the coördinates from the rangefinder yet. All I know as yet is the direction."

The finger of the radio officer was on a point 2,000 kilometres away from the island.

"What kind of a radio signal was it?" Bell asked impatiently. "Perhaps it came from one of our ships

"It was from Rhodan, sir."

Bell gasped for air. "What—?!"

"Morse, sir! Only a Terran knows Morse signals!"

This drove Bell almost into a frenzy. Deringhouse had come in and they both listened to the message: "... am in fortress. Located exactly 2,000 kilometres west of transmitter in a mountain 1000 meters below zero. Sender is remote-controlled, destruction useless. Am free but cannot leave fortress. Try to rescue me but..."

The signals broke off.

"Is this another trap?"

Deringhouse shook his head. "Who except Rhodan speaks English and knows Morse signals? Well, Cardif perhaps. But what sense would it make if he would betray the location of the well-concealed fortress? No, it must have been Rhodan!"

Bell turned to the radio officer. "Where is the transmitter located?"

"It is the same one the Antis used to make the first contact with us. Here, 4,000 meters below the surface of the ocean." He pointed to a mark on the map.

Bell took a ruler and put it on the map: 2,000 kilometres west of the mark was out in the open sea. He concluded an underwater mountain containing the fortress at a depth of 1,000 meters must be located at the spot. "Thank you," he said and went back to the Command Centre, followed by Deringhouse. "Order the withdrawal of 200 units from the blockade and deploy it around the undersea mountain. We want to seal it off. I will give the same instructions to the U-boats and advise them of the positions they must take up. Take care of it at once, Deringhouse; each second counts."

The orders were quickly carried out. Less than half an hour after receiving the radio instructions 200 spaceships had surrounded the fortress. Although the spaceships could not move as fast in the water as in a vacuum, they manoeuvred very safely in this medium as well. In case of an attack they would be unable to use their ray-cannons but could respond with atomic torpedoes. The location of the fortress was not precisely known but the mountain was not very long. It rose like a cone with several peaks to a height of 3,000 meters from the bottom of the ocean. Wherever the fortress was located, nobody could escape now without being noticed. And if somebody managed to slip away nevertheless, there were more than 4,000 other units of the Terran warfleet waiting to intercept the fugitives and destroy them.

The Antis were trapped but what was the matter with Rhodan?

\* \* \* \*

3 hours crept by with agonizing slowness. They failed to receive another call and the uncertainty whether Rhodan's escape had finally succeeded or if he had been captured again was still unrelieved. The former seemed highly unlikely because he would have been detected. No man could leave the fortress if it was in the mountain.

The waiting grew unbearable. The *Ironduke* hovered directly above the undersea mountain at an altitude

of only 2 kilometres. The contours of the massif were already charted on the map since the U-boats that were in close proximity had quickly performed the necessary measurements.

Furthermore, submarine U-35 made an interesting discovery. Sir John Rengall had noticed something unusual when Capt. Torsin steered close to the overhang. Both men thought that the wall was remarkably smooth.

"Look there, Captain... the entrance!"

Torsin remained sceptical. "It could be an accident of nature. Such smooth walls of stone sometimes occur in the ocean. The water washes the rock and smoothens it..."

"Down here at a depth of 1,000 meters? Did you notice any currents?"

Torsin gave no answer. He steered the submarine closer to inspect the area in question. It was clearly visible on the observation screen, including the fine seam extending from top to bottom at the centre of the smooth face. No, this was no accident. "I'll report it to the *Ironduke*," Torsin said, motioning the waiting radio operator. "Coded!"

Rengall gazed fascinated at the entrance to the fortress. The last doubts he might have had vanished. They had found the entrance to the fortress and he was eager to put on his diving suit to swim to the gate. He had to restrain himself since he was not allowed to do it without Reginald Bell's permission, which was not forthcoming.

Bell slumped into his chair just when something unforeseen happened. The *Ironduke* received a strong signal from a transmitter and a message to turn on the visual reception. The radio officer complied and switched through to the Command Centre.

Rhodan's face appeared on the screen lighting up before Bell's eyes. And what a face it was!

His hair was clotted with blood and wet from sweat. Blood from a fresh scar on the right side of his forehead ran down his cheek and disappeared in the collar of his uniform. Deep furrows on his face showed the effect of the torment he must have suffered. Yet his grey eyes flashed triumphantly as he exclaimed: "Reggie... is it you? Let me see you!" The radio operator turned on the camera and Rhodan seemed to breathe easier. "How good it is to see your face again, old buddy! They nearly fixed me up for good."

"Where are you, Perry? In the fortress? We have found the entrance gate!"

Rhodan smiled wryly. "So you have found the gate? Excellent! But at the moment it doesn't help me much. Yes, I am in the fortress but I'm not free." He stepped aside to make room for a bearded man who came into view. "This is Rhobal, the High Priest of the Baalol. I am his and Cardif's prisoner. During my last attempt to flee from here Cardif was severely injured and it is not yet certain that he will pull through I got away with a few minor scratches as you can see."

Bell scrutinized the face of Rhobal, who stood next to Rhodan and held a heavy impulse-beamer in his hand. "Why do they let you talk with me?"

"I have to submit a proposition to you in the name of the Baalol," Rhodan said in a strained voice. "You won't have any other choice than to accept it if you want to save my life. Cardif needs the care of the Aras for a chance to survive. They are willing to trade me for Cardif. If we let them leave unmolested,

they will set me free."

Bell remained suspicious. "You are under duress to make this deal. It's useless."

Rhodan smiled with unaccustomed coldness. "Do you believe they can force me to do something that would harm Terra? I would rather die. No, you can be sure, Reggie, that this is one time I agree with the opinion of the Antis. We have no alternative. Please put a spaceship at their disposal and have it land on Okul. Then exactly 250 Antis and the injured Cardif will leave the fortress. As long as you don't prevent them from taking off in the ship, my life will be safe. I am going to stay behind in the fortress and keep in touch with you by radio-vision.

Bell's eyes lit up but Rhodan shook his head. "Forget those hasty ideas, my pal! Naturally Cardif's men have taken precautionary measures to keep you from attacking the Antis and freeing me at the same time. I will be locked up inside the radio room—together with a bomb which can be ignited by remote control at anytime. Rhobal will have the impulse trigger. Only after the Antis and Cardif get away safely will you be allowed to enter here."

Bell was amazingly stubborn. "And who will guarantee me that the Antis won't blow you up as soon as they are ready to perform a transition?" He shook his head. "I don't like this deal. We must have some safeguard too."

Rhobal, the Baalol priest, pushed Rhodan away and said: "You don't have a choice, Terran! Nonetheless I will offer you a compromise. I will permit 2 of your ships to escort us. We intend to go into the transition at the perimeter of the solar system and you can keep us from leaving if we don't eject the impulse sender from our ship into space where you can pick it up. Moreover, by that time your men will have invaded the fortress and liberated Rhodan. You can trust me that I will keep my end of our agreement."

Rhodan nodded. "You may take his word for it this time, Reggie. Nothing is going to happen to me." He winked an eye at Bell so that the Anti could not see it. "I will be glad to get back aboard the *Ironduke*."

"What about the Liquitiv?"

"They will let us take over the stock from 3 warehouses."

Bell looked at Deringhouse. "Send out a couple of cruisers to intercept a spaceship of the Springers. Instruct them to land on the island so they can take the Antis aboard." He turned back to Rhodan. "Alright, Perry, we'll be there in a few hours. But heaven help the Antis if they are trying to pull a fast one!"

Rhodan laughed and wiped the blood from his face. "You may rest assured, Reggie, that this is not one of Cardif's tricks. I have cured him of doublecrossing me once and for all. He's through with all his deceitful schemes."

Rhobal stuck the barrel of his weapon into Rhodan's side and shoved him away from the camera, addressing Bell. "We are going to lock Rhodan up now and set the bomb. You may keep in constant touch with him. In the meantime I want you to withdraw your blockade so that we can use our submarine to proceed to the island. No rough stuff! I'll be keeping my finger on the impulse trigger. One false move from you and Perry Rhodan is no more! Is that clear?"

Bell nodded, gnashing his teeth. As Deringhouse gave instructions to round up a spaceship of the



Springers, Bell watched on the picture screen how a small bomb in the shape of a box was put into a cabinet. Rhobal locked it up and took the key. Then he waved to Rhodan and left the room.

Rhodan commented: "He locked the door but it won't be hard to open it from outside."

"Are you sure they can't hear us now?" Bell asked in a hopeful tone.

"Quite sure—unless they go to the trouble of watching the transceiver. But I think they've got more important things to do now. Why? What were you going to say?"

Bell was nervous. "Teleporters! As soon as the Antis are gone on the submarine, the teleporters will come to get you. Then we can sink the submarine before they can reach the island and..."

"Stop it!" Rhodan said in a sharp voice, startling Bell. "Are you crazy? To begin with, the fortress is shielded by an energy field which cannot be penetrated even by teleporters. Secondly, I have no intention of breaking our agreement with the Antis: I don't want them to consider me a traitor. Thirdly, the risk is too great. So then—no rash actions. I must insist! Have you got that?"

Bell pulled himself together. "Sure, Perry. I had the feeling they had treated you so roughly that you are overly cautious. I'll give orders to relinquish the blockade of the exit and to permit the safe passage of the Antis' submarine. But if you come to grief—!"

"I told you that nothing will happen to me. Believe me, in a few hours I will join you safely aboard the *Ironduke*!"

\* \* \* \*

As a gland and hormone specialist, Prof. Wild knew from experience that a drug to counteract the addiction of Liquitiv could not be developed from one day to the next.

This fact was emphasized again at the conference he had convoked. Discussing the excretion of the second gland in the proboscis of the mud borer, they had strayed from the subject and put the question: *Can we be criticized for having failed to recognize the seriousness of our duty to control our research of Liquitiv?*

The medical scientists did not spare themselves nor their colleagues from hard accusations which were voiced bluntly or implicitly, until Prof. Wild asked to speak. He got up with a red face and his voice suddenly became loud and strong. "Gentlemen! Must I remind you that the Liquitiv drug we have tested for 2 years in the most distinguished laboratories on Earth was merely the secretion of the first gland we detected in the proboscis of the mud borer. This drug is the best and fastest-acting rejuvenation agent we know today although it loses its efficiency after 12 years. Only after the Health and Drug Control Office of Terrania authorized the sale of Liquitiv did the Antis add the drug from the excretion of the second gland and simultaneously reduce the amount of the original substance. It was impossible to detect the difference because both secretions are chemically equivalent. Nor did we have reason to be suspicious because the alteration of the components produced at first the same rejuvenation and the addiction occurred, according to our investigations, only after consuming Liquitiv 5 or 6 times. However by that time everybody drank so much Liquitiv that the addiction remained hidden and undiagnosed. We have

not even noticed it on our own bodies although we should have been able to observe it firsthand. But the fact that Liquitiv made us younger prevented us from realizing that it was an insidious narcotic drug. The thought never occurred to us and we lived a lie that all we craved was eternal youth! And now I would like you to give it some thought what to report to Perry Rhodan. I suggest we hold back any report until we can announce that we have prepared the formula for an anti-toxin. I urge you to coordinate our efforts so we can achieve our goal as quickly as possible. I can only express my fervent hope that we will succeed before it is too late!"

The conference voted to adopt his proposal not to submit an interim report to Perry Rhodan and the desperate search for a cure of the addiction was continued and intensified.

\* \* \* \*

The observation screen of the *Ironduke* registered the outlines of the Antis' submarine and the rangefinders monitored its course. Bell was seated so that he could simultaneously watch the observation screen and Rhodan. In the meantime Deringhouse was informed by radio that a ship of the Springers had been approached and requested to change its course to Okul where it was expected to land without delay.

The ship of the Springers soon rematerialised in the outer reaches of the stellar system. It slowed down and finally landed, guided by directions over radio, at the bank of a river which flowed into the ocean not far from the bluff where Rhodan had met his unhappy fate. The submarine of the Antis navigated upstream until it reached a convenient place to anchor.

As the spaceship landed, Rhobal got once more on the videophone of the *Ironduke* . "You have kept your end of the bargain," he praised Bell sarcastically. "After we have boarded the spaceship you may go to the fortress."

Bell looked closely at the observation screen. In the background the submarine was clearly visible after emerging from the water. The Antis walked over the rocky bank to the waiting spaceship. They carried many objects which appeared to be personal property of the priests or valuable equipment. Two Antis carried a stretcher.

"What is that?" Bell inquired.

Rhobal turned around. When he looked at Bell again his face was irate. "That is Thomas Cardif, Rhodan's son! We would never have believed it possible that a father could mistreat his son so viciously. Look for yourself...!"

Bell was able to catch only a short glimpse of Cardif's face because he was too quickly carried away. But he clearly recognized the traitor's hated features, soft and devoid of character as he remembered them. The eyes of the invalid patient were firmly closed. They had probably administered a sleeping pill to protect him from the pain of the transport.

Once again Cardif escaped his well-deserved punishment. But Rhodan's life and health were more important. Cardif would not escape justice forever even if he cheated his fate this time.

Rhobal stepped in front of the camera again. "Make your arrangements to pick up the impulse trigger before we go into transition. The green button must be depressed to defuse the bomb." He eyed Bell coldly and with undisguised satisfaction. "Goodbye, Terran! If we see each other again I will remember your generosity."

Without waiting for a reply he turned his camera off but Bell was still able to see him since the long-range cameras of the *Ironduke* were already trained on the island. Rhobal left the portable transmitter behind and boarded the vessel of the Springers as the last of the Antis.

Minutes later it lifted off and soared with blazing speed into the stratosphere toward the waiting cruisers of Terra's warfleet.

\* \* \* \*

Capt. Torsin hesitated no longer when he received the order.

The entrance to the fortress had been left open by the Antis. Torsin cautiously steered the U-boat into the tunnel until it passed through the waterlock to the basin inside the rock.

Guided by the beam of their electronic instrument they quickly found the radio room. Rengall knocked at the locked door. When he failed to receive any answer he became worried. He instructed his teammate to call the U-boat which, in turn, contacted the *Ironduke*.

Bell, who had continued to watch Rhodan without interruption, informed them: "He must have passed out—he isn't moving. He's sitting with his head resting on the table. Break down the door if you have to!"

Capt. Torsin passed the information along. Rengall, who had meanwhile inspected the lock, motioned his mate not to use his explosive. "That won't be necessary. This is a magnetic lock. We'll have it open in a jiffy..."

While talking he manipulated the lock with skilled fingers. It was obviously not the first lock of this kind he had cracked. In his career as a Solar Security agent he had been trained to handle locks of every type extraterrestrial races employed.

The door suddenly gave way without a sound. Rengall would have tumbled into the room behind it if Lt. Wagner had not caught him.

Rhodan sat slumped on a stool. Only the fact that his folded arms which supported his head were on the table kept him from sliding to the floor.

They lost no time taking him back to the submarine.

The ship of the Springers was met halfway by several of the cruisers and then escorted with the same speed. Complying with their agreement, the impulse trigger was ejected through a hatch and then recovered without difficulty by one of the cruisers. An officer pushed the green button on the metal box and the bomb was defused.

Without being molested the ship of the Springers went into transition with 250 Baalol priests and the purported Thomas Cardif aboard. The body auras of the Antis were activated just before the manoeuvre, causing the exact starting point and intensity of the transition jump to be veiled. The ship traversed hyperspace, its destination unknown.

When Bell received the news he finally heaved a sigh of relief but only seconds later a powerful explosion shook the ocean from beneath. A mountain of water gushed to a great height; big boulders were hurtled through the air and a fountain of fire barely missed the *Ironduke*. The fortress of the Antis had been blown up.

Bell never knew for certain whether the detonation had been set off too late or it had been their intention to let Rhodan reach safety first. Of course he did not have the slightest inkling that the false Rhodan had rigged the time fuse to go off after he had been led away.

Fortunately neither a spaceship nor a U-boat had suffered any damage. Bell ordered the submerged units to return to the fleet ringing the planet and then instructed the commander of the cargoship to bring back the U-boats.

As far as he was concerned, Mission Okul was finished. Little did he know that it had just begun.

\* \* \* \*

Soon after the *Ironduke* landed, almost at the same spot where the Antis had embarked on the ship of the Springers, the first hyperradio call from a relay ship came in, reporting that the Springers had willingly surrendered the entire stock of Liquitiv stored in their depot upon verification. All requirements of Terra could be met for weeks to come. The threat of revolts was abated although they had gained only a postponement. Bell felt certain that the other depots would not raise any difficulties either.

10 minutes later the U-35 emerged in the river and tied up at the rocky bank next to the abandoned submarine of the Antis. It was a suitable spot because the primeval forest had not been able to take root on the stony surface.

\* \* \* \*

The preceding hours had been a strain on Thomas Cardif's nervous system such as no other man had ever experienced before. As he felt Rhodan's knowledge flowing into his brain and the personality of his father taking over, he began to realize the enormity of his task. It was not enough to evaluate Rhodan's memory, he would have to act consistent with it. He had to know how Rhodan would behave in certain situations and be ready to emulate him. Since he also took over Rhodan's conscious thoughts together with his memories and knowledge, he would be able to do it automatically as long as he managed to shut out the last vestige of his own mind at the moment of decision. But to keep this last reminder of Thomas Cardif was indispensable unless he were to be completely changed into Perry Rhodan and know nothing

about Cardif's plans.

The Antis had the expertise to leave only just enough of Cardif's own image to enable him to carry out his scheme. At the same time it was also too insignificant to be detected by telepathic or parapsychological probing because it was shrouded and isolated by the content of Perry Rhodan's brain.

The operation caused Thomas Cardif to go through a coma before he awakened again as Perry Rhodan. Surgeons had slightly altered his face and cut the scar of a wound into his forehead. He was given injections to change the colour of his eyes to the perfect shade of grey of Rhodan's. A few small wrinkles contributed to make him an indistinguishable impersonator of Rhodan and the same surgical methods were applied to turn his father into the son.

However there remained one risk that defied total elimination and Rhobal had expressed it when he accompanied the false Rhodan to the radio room. "We have never performed an experiment like this before, Cardif. Therefore we have no way of knowing how the coexistence of 2 divergent minds will be affected by an extended duration. Remember that we had to make Rhodan's personality predominant for reasons of security. Although your personal memory is smaller, it is also very vivid. We can only hope that it will remain the dominant factor."

"Do you mean that I could actually become Perry Rhodan?"

"It's possible his mind could conquer yours."

Cardif replied icily, "Then that is a risk I have to take. Did you send the Morse signals?"

"Yes. The Terrans believe you have escaped and this will make our ruse more creditable to them. Our performance must have been very convincing."

"You bet it was, Rhobal!"

The conversation with Bell took place a few minutes later. The conditions were negotiated and then implemented while Cardif played the role of the unconscious Rhodan, a job which was more difficult than he had presumed. It was not only necessary to restrain his own thoughts but he had to watch Rhodan as well. In order to avoid mistakes he delved into the memories of Rhodan. It was the simplest way to maintain the façade and to persuade eavesdropping telepaths that it was the real Perry Rhodan.

The critical point came when the team sent out by the U-boat came to get him and broke down the door to the radio room. He pretended to have fainted. He kept his eyes closed and let his body slump. Then they carried him to the submarine and put him on a bed where he was immediately examined by a physician. When he moaned he was given a sedative injection. He fell asleep but woke up in time to witness the landing of the U-boat at the island.

He recognized Reginald Bell by his voice but he was considerable more worried by the presence of John Marshall. The telepath was dangerous and Cardif decided to continue faking unconsciousness and leave the thoughts of Rhodan free rein.

His fate was hanging in the balance when he was wheeled into the medical department of the *Ironduke* and put on the examination table. He blotted out the residue of his own mind and encapsulated it in the alter ego of Perry Rhodan. Keeping his eyes closed, he tried to relax. He submitted to the check of his brainwaves, cardiogram, blood sample and the analysis of all his organs' functions. What puzzled the experts most, however, was the state of his mind. They consulted in low voices but Cardif understood

every word and became aware that his condition provoked serious doubts. He was shaken by a sudden fear that his plot would quickly be doomed to failure due to the pedantic habits of the physicians.

He remained quiet and listened to the whispered conversation. "...doubtlessly the effect of a tremendous mental shock," somebody he didn't know lectured. "He must have been so severely interrogated in a hypnotic trance that it damaged his brain."

"Are you trying to say that Rhodan is mentally disturbed?" another voice interjected.

"No, of course not. It was simply an excessive but temporary shock. We have neither the means nor the specialists on board to prescribe the proper cure. We must see to it that Rhodan will be put at once in the care of a special clinic."

"Shock? By questioning him under hypnosis?"

"Precisely!"

Somebody entered the room. Cardif cautiously peeked through his eyelashes and recognized Bell. However their eyes met and he realized that it was too late to play being unconscious now. He moaned and pretended to wake from a deep sleep.

"He's coming to!" one of the physicians exclaimed.

Bell stepped closer. "Perry, can you hear me? Do you recognize me? Nod your head if you can..."

Cardif nodded, making it look as if it required the last ounce of his strength.

"He recognized me!" Bell cried with a gasp. "If he recognized me he can't have lost his memory." He bent over Cardif's face and studied it. This was a decisive moment. If a discovery was possible at all, it had to come now. Nobody knew Rhodan better than Reginald Bell, his oldest friend. He knew every pore of the familiar face. "Are you in pain, Perry? Say something, please!"

Cardif made a weak effort to smile and looked as if he were about to depart from this vale of tears. He played his part to perfection although his deception might not have been quite so successful if both 'Rhodans' could have been seen together. There was no direct comparison.

"Thank you, Reggie!"

"That's better," Bell exclaimed happily. "Now you're talking! Who crowned you with that thing on your forehead? Was it that bum Cardif? Well, he was able to take it on the lam this time but mark my words, I'm going to catch up with him and make him pay for his treachery."

"Yes," Cardif-Rhodan agreed feebly.

The physicians shunted Bell aside. "The patient needs rest," one of them explained. "It isn't good for him to exert himself too much, sir."

"Alright, if you think it's best." He turned back to Cardif. "I'll be back later. The best thing you can do now is sleep."

Cardif tried to raise his head a little. They had undressed him and his uniform was hanging on a hook in

the white wall. This was rather convenient for his next act. "Reggie...! Over there!"

Bell stood still and followed the direction of Cardif's raised hand, pointing to the uniform.

"What is it? Your uniform? I'll have it cleaned right away, Perry. It doesn't look very neat anymore..."

Cardif shook his head and twisted his face as if suffering excruciating pain. It was obvious that it was difficult for him to speak but he also seemed to have trouble concentrating his thoughts. "In the tunic... at right..."

His voice was barely audible but Bell understood what he tried to say so painfully. He walked over to the tunic and began to search its pockets. In the right hand pocket he touched a flexible object which aroused his curiosity. He took it out and saw that it was a narrow plastic strip which was inscribed with letters and formulas in the language of Arkon. Bell did not grasp their meaning but surmised that it must be of special importance. He walked back to Cardif's bed and said: "Take it easy, Perry. Is this what you want?" He held the strip in front of Cardif's eyes. "What is it?"

This time Cardif spoke the truth. "It's the formula for the antitoxin to... Liquitiv! The Antis were careless enough to talk about it. Cardif had the formula... and I stole it from him." He groaned in pretended pain. "He didn't notice it."

Cardif had added a lie to the truth. Surrendering the formula to the Terrans was a calculated trick he had thought up and which was designed to gain the confidence of the Earthlings. He figured that he would allay all doubts about his identity—if anyone should harbour them—by presenting the life-saving formula. So far he was apparently not yet tainted by suspicion. He even managed to fool the telepaths. What he thought was buried under the formidable mask of Rhodan. Notwithstanding the fact that the remnant of Cardif's personal character was effectively shielded in his body, he figured it could do no harm to nip any calamitous conjectures in the bud.

"Antitoxin!" Bell exclaimed in astonishment. "Will it really cure the scourge of Liquitiv?"

Cardif nodded. Bell put the plastic strip in his own pocket, bent over Cardif and planted a resounding kiss on his bloody forehead. "You really outdid yourself, old boy! I'll say Hi for you to Deringhouse and tell him to get out of here. The sooner we get back to Earth the better it will be for you."

Bell straightened up and walked to the door. There he paused and admonished the physicians, "Take good care of him, gentlemen! Let him sleep. It's the best medicine for him!"

Cardif began to breathe easier after Bell had left. He knew that he had just passed the severest test under the eyes of Bell who had taken him for Rhodan without questioning his identity for a single moment. Now he was reasonably safe until the *Ironduke* returned to Terra. Not much could happen during the flight. They would put him to sleep and watch the normal functioning of his organs, including his brain. But he would not be subjected to a radical treatment before they reached Terrania. Until then Reginald Bell was in command.

The revolts on Earth ebbed away as Liquitiv became plentiful for the time being. In the meantime the laboratories would work full blast to produce the antidote. Cardif knew they could achieve it because he had handed them the formula. This furnished the most indisputable proof that he was Perry Rhodan and nobody would dare to challenge his credibility.

Sir John Rengall...? Well, he had been given the task of arresting Thomas Cardif but all he had

accomplished was saving Thomas Cardif and believing that he had rescued Perry Rhodan.

Cardif felt a slight vibration when Deringhouse started up the engines of the *Ironduke*. The island sank into the ocean of Okul and the planet soon faded away in the sea of stars. Thomas Cardif closed his eyes and smiled.

"He's getting better," one of the physicians whispered with a sigh of relief. "He'll pull through his ordeal."

Yes, Cardif mused, he's going to make it. He, Thomas Cardif, was a superb actor who could fool the most critical audience he had to face.

\* \* \* \*

Even more persuasive was the antidote Cardif-Rhodan had obtained for the suffering Earth.

In a novel and marvellous collaboration with the Aras, the galactic medical scientists, Terra succeeded in setting up the high capacity production of the antidote in the incredibly short time of 27 days. The Allitiv was fabricated in the form of capsules not only on Terra but also on Aralon and 6 of their other planets.

The output of the pharmaceutical plants increased from day to day and the fastest ships of the Great Imperium rushed the Allitiv capsules to the addicted victims of Earth. But for many people the cure came too late.

Those who had indulged in taking Liquitiv longer than 10 years were beyond help. It was impossible to regenerate their damaged nervous systems. They languished for a long time as pitiful creatures, serving to all others as a handwriting on the wall.

But the others—the lucky ones—had to pay a horrendous price for their health. The cure was often accompanied by a debilitating fever of the nerves. Although the fever, when it occurred, could usually be controlled in individual cases, whereas the vasomotoric paralysis connected with it often defied the treatment of the best experts of Terra and the Aras. The vasomotor nerves, controlling the opening of the blood vessels and the blood pressure suddenly failed to function without prior warning and nothing could be done to stimulate them again.

However all those who survived the abominable affliction—and their numbers were in the billions throughout the worlds of the Solar Imperium—did not forget to whom they owed their lives: Perry Rhodan, the most illustrious of all Terrans.

And the alter ego of Perry Rhodan smiled. An ominous smile.

## **ORDER OF THE ACTION**



[1/ DREADFUL DILEMMA](#)

[2/ INTO DEPTHS UNKNOWN](#)

[3/ COUNTDOWN TO CONFLAGRATION](#)

[4/ CARDIF'S MAD PLAN](#)

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[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

FALSE FRONT

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## THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

"BIG WORDS, Rhobal!" Cardif retorted.

Rhodan's son rose to his feet and shoved the Anti aside. Stepping over to the ball of energy he seized the sphere and raised it above his head.

"Go ahead—all of you! Feast your eyes on these cell activators which can give the gift of eternal life! 20 of them, waiting here for you... but you will never have them unless I give the mental order, of my own free will, for the sphere to open. They lie behind a barrier to our time, gentlemen. Do you understand that? They are enclosed by a time field and that field will remain closed unless I feel like having it open up. Well, Rhobal, do you still dare antagonize me with your threats?"

Negotiations might have begun but at that moment a loud announcement came over the speaker: "Rhobal, a ship from the Solar Fleet is approaching!"

More than 2 dozen Antis stiffened in sudden alarm and consternation.

And the man who had usurped Perry Rhodan's position in the Sol System cursed inwardly.

You'll read the rest in—

## THE MAN WITH TWO FACES

By

Kurt Brand