

TOP COMMAND CRISIS

FEVERISH HASTE

Research Project "Liquitiv" is being pushed forward in feverish haste.

For what was at first merely a mission for a few agents of Division 3, has developed into a desperate situation that has the leaders of the Solar Empire holding their frightened breaths.

Terra, the colonial planets and the Arkon worlds find they have been lulled into a false sense of security by the scientists of two Imperiums who have made a disastrous error in their analyses of the long-range effects on human and Arkonides of Liquitiv.

The hope of multiple worlds now rests on—

SPOOR OF THE ANTIS

1/ LAST LAUGH

SHEER DESPERATION.

Mulvaney's plan had been born of sheer desperation.

From a legal standpoint, of course, it was purely reprehensible because it involved the possibility of having to murder old man Lansing. In a normal state of mind it would never have occurred to Mulvaney to kill another person. However, his condition had entered a phase now which made rational thinking impossible: he was approaching the brink of insanity.

Lansing himself was not the cause of such a motivation—no one had any reason for hating old man Lansing. Mulvaney's real objective involved a few plastic flasks which he suspected his intended victim kept in his possession. And of course it could not be presumed that Lansing would hand the flasks over of his own free will. After the Government had clamped down on the sale and distribution of the liqueur, any remaining supplies of it had been hoarded tenaciously by the owners. It was only a matter of time until the last little bottles of Liquitiv would be consumed by their addicted users.

But Henry Mulvaney wasn't thinking of this. Nor was he thinking any more of the fact that more than 50 million Terrans were now addicted as he was and would do or commit anything to obtain the liqueur.

With trembling hands he grasped the top of Lansing's patio wall. The hour was after midnight. The street was lonely and deserted. Albert Lansing was an oddball recluse and a crank, an invalid who was paralysed from the waist down. Every day the old shut-in had a robot servant with him but it did not stay there at night. The robot was the only compromise Lansing had ever made with modern technological

advancements. His wheelchair was the old-fashioned kind with large wheels on either side for hand-power locomotion but similar automatic models could hardly match the skill and swiftness with which Lansing manipulated his familiar vehicle.

Mulvaney drew himself up on the outer wall of the patio. The inlaid stone capping felt cold and rough. The house stood silently before him. He turned a last time to check the avenue behind him and the gas-tube street lamps were like startled stars in his wide-staring eyes. His face was wildly distorted.

He paused there for another moment and then jumped into the patio itself. The soft earth absorbed the sound of his arrival. Rising up from his crouched position, he moved stealthily forward, heedless of the flowers and other plants he trampled under foot. When he stepped on the approach path his feet made a slight grinding sound on the coloured gravel.

He drew the magnetic key from his pocket. The shadow of the house finally enveloped him, making him practically invisible from the street. It gave him an increased sense of security which helped to calm him momentarily. A cat suddenly arched its back at him nearby, its great yellow eyes gleaming balefully for a moment as he stared at it. Then it was gone into the bushes of the little garden. Mulvaney grumbled menacingly, half-aloud, without being conscious of it. All he could think of was his mad desire for the Liquitiv. The closer he came to his goal the greater he felt his need.

Until now he had regularly consumed a flask every 3 days. The promised effect was youthful vigour and a suspension of the aging process, which never failed to be felt. Mulvaney had not been able to comprehend why the Government should have prohibited the enjoyment of this preparation. He knew nothing about the human wrecks who had been brought to Earth from Lepso, struggling in vain for their salvation. Nor did he realize that he himself would fade away and die if he continued to drink the liqueur for a total period of 12 years and 4 months.

By now he had arrived at the door of the house, where he paused to listen. He cautiously placed his ear to the door. Inside everything was quiet. It was a 2-story dwelling and Lansing had installed a lift-chair along the staircase to help him go up and down. Mulvaney knew the layout very well because he had often come here to play chess with the old man. It was the way he had found out that the cripple regularly imbibed Liquitiv. Lansing had confessed to him that he had hoped the liqueur might improve his condition or possibly cure him of the paralysis. A certain colour and heartiness had returned to his face and he had lost most of his wrinkles. To his few acquaintances he even appeared to be more energetic to some degree—but the paralysis had remained.

Mulvaney placed the magnetic key in the lock and the security bolt slid back immediately. A slight pressure of his hand pushed the door open. The room beyond appeared to be a dark hole but he stepped inside without hesitation, making sure that the door was locked again behind him. He held his breath for a moment and attempted to detect by sound or any other sign where Lansing might be at the moment. He took a step forward. His burning thirst had increased still more.

He had to get his hands on that Liquitiv!

What was that?—the turning of wheels?—the approaching wheelchair? Mulvaney dodged to one side. But nothing came toward him out of the darkness of the room. His fingers groped along the wall until they encountered an obstruction: the wardrobe cabinet. He felt of something soft and yielding—the house smock for the robot. It was another crazy idea of Lansing's, making his robot wear a smock. But he was in no mood to be amused. He kept groping his way until he found the wall again.

Here was the entrance to the kitchen. Inside the house there were no internal doors because they would

only have obstructed Lansing's wheelchair. The individual doorways were only covered by divided curtains. Mulvaney pushed the heavy material to one side and came into the kitchen. There was a strange odour in the air as though somebody had spilled too much cleaning fluid on the floor. He bumped into the table, which had a kidney-shaped indentation in it. This was to accommodate Lansing in his chair whenever he was eating here.

Now where would the old man hide his Liquitiv?

Mulvaney thought awhile. He couldn't just search around willy-nilly without some plan of action. That might take him hours. Also, this blind groping around was bound to make noise. The only alternative was to find Lansing.

He went around the table and stumbled over a chair. This was an unusual object to find in this place. Fortunately the chair legs had been coated with some yielding material so that it didn't make much noise. Mulvaney was sure by now that the kitchen was empty. Evidently Lansing wasn't in here. Suddenly the idea came to him that Lansing might have become aware of his intrusion already. He might be lying in wait for him somewhere with a weapon. The thought of Lansing's being armed brought him a sense of dread. For awhile he was incapable of doing anything. He merely stood there trembling with new fear. But then his body took over and demanded its needed quota of Liquitiv. The gnawing sensation was worse than any fear!

He left the kitchen. On the ground floor there were only two other rooms, the library and a so-called workroom. Of course Lansing never worked anymore, even though he occupied the place a great deal of the time. He received a monthly pension and also was given some voluntary support by relatives in Europe. Lansing's 'workroom' would have been a strange sight to any stranger. Two parallel metal bars stretched from the entrance to the opposite window. They formed a kind of aisle which was just wide enough to permit passage of the wheelchair. Only once had Mulvaney witnessed the purpose of this arrangement. It was the only place where the crippled man could leave his chair without assistance. He would get up onto the bars and pull himself along on them until he reached the window, where he often stood and stared for hours at the street outside. When Mulvaney discovered him here that single time, Lansing had remained angry about it the whole evening and had not been able to concentrate on his chess game.

Mulvaney remembered when he had hesitantly pulled the curtain back to look in on him.

"Go ahead and laugh, why don't you?" Lansing had shouted at him.

Mulvaney had been affected by the experience for several weeks after that and he had tried to avoid visiting or contacting the old man. But Lansing had called him up and invited him to play with him again.

Now as he groped his way toward the 'workroom' he remembered the invalid's words. A certain sense of timidity kept him from parting the curtains and going in but finally he overcame the feeling and entered. After finding that Lansing wasn't there either he went to the library, which was also empty. This meant that he had to be upstairs. With mixed feelings Mulvaney went stealthily over to the staircase

Here he unexpectedly tripped on a broken wheel of the wheelchair and fell on his face. His wildly flailing hands came in contact with other disconnected parts of the familiar vehicle. Lansing's wheelchair lay in a rubble of destruction at the foot of the stairs. Mulvaney groaned and crawled his way out of the tangled mess.

If Lansing were anywhere around here, the noise would have surely attracted his attention. But aside

from the sounds that Mulvaney made himself the house was completely still. He got up in a hurry and threw all caution to the winds. His craving for the supposed rejuvenation elixir dominated him completely. An icy terror clutched him when he thought that someone else might have been here before him. Maybe Lansing's supply had been stolen already.

With a loud curse he turned on the lights. Now he could see that the wheelchair had fallen down the stairs. It was completely destroyed. A few steps up from the bottom was Lansing himself. He was dead. He was sort of hanging there, partially leaning against the banister posts with his eyes staring and a waxy look to his face. Mulvaney began to sob, not for his dead friend but out of new desperation. He felt instinctively that he would find no Liquitiv here.

Slowly he approached Lansing and noticed that he was clutching a slip of paper in his right hand. He took it from the lifeless fingers and read the small, cramped words, written with a trembling hand.

Today my supply of Liquitiv ran out. I don't have strength anymore to live without it. May God forgive me...

Mulvaney let the paper fall to the floor.

Lansing had committed suicide. It meant that there wasn't a drop of the liqueur left in the house. The crippled old recluse had deliberately steered his wheelchair down the stairs and let it tumble him to his death.

One more he heard the old man's words "Go ahead and laugh, why don't you?"

Mulvaney began to giggle senselessly like a madman. He was laughing. His whole body shook. He needed Liquitiv—badly, very badly. But the Government had stopped the sale of it. No one could procure any more of it now.

The horrible plan of the Antis was beginning to show its first effects. Mulvaney staggered out of the house like a drunkard. He was only a single human. Addicted and lost.

One of more than 50 million.

2/ GLOBAL DEADLINE

More than 50 million humans were threatening to break out in revolt. Earth had become a madhouse. The addicted victims had to have the liqueur which was commonly known as Liquitiv. It was as necessary to their lives as air to a normal man.

Things were not much better on the colonial worlds. Also Atlan, Imperator of the Greater Imperium, was fighting the same problem on the Arkon planets. Gigantic shipments of the treacherous narcotic elixir had virtually flooded the planets of both of the allied Imperiums.

Perry Rhodan, Administrator of the Solar Imperium, stood stiffly at his desk in the large plain room that served as his office and conference chamber. He was not alone. In front of his desk was a group of men

and women who stared with burning eyes at this highest chief of the government. Rhodan did not see a single friendly eye among them. At first he had been angered by the request of these addicts for an audience with him but finally he had yielded to pressure from Reginald Bell.

The tall, lean man finally moved. With at least an exterior calmness he took a seat behind his desk.

Immediately the assembled people began to all talk at once. Rhodan raised his hands. He could understand their state of agitation but if he were going to help them he had to have order. "Choose a spokesman among you," he commanded. "It's senseless for all of you to talk at once."

Before anyone could suggest someone, a thickset man who was taller than Rhodan stepped forward. "I'm Godfrey Hunter," he said.

Undoubtedly the lack of respect in his voice was the result of his uncontrollable state of agitation. Rhodan realized that the man had lived a quiet and orderly life until now. But already the ban on selling Liquitiv was having its consequences.

"We speak for a larger group of people, sir," Hunter continued. The way he spoke through his teeth revealed that his self-control was on a thin edge. "Sir, we're asking you to lift the ban on the sale of Liquitiv immediately."

There was a murmur of agreement from the other addicts as they all pressed closer to the desk. Rhodan studied Hunter thoughtfully. He felt compassion for such people but he dared not show it. When he finally spoke, his face remained expressionless. "How long have you been drinking the liqueur?" he asked.

"About 3 years, sir. I still remember the day my wife brought a flask of it home with her. I can't find anything wrong with drinking it—there's nothing dangerous about it. On the contrary, after my wife and I began to use it there was an obvious general improvement in our whole physical condition. I could practically say, sir, that since then I've hardly aged at all."

You poor devil—thought Rhodan. *If you had seen the men we found on Lepso you'd be sure to understand.* "Oh, I believe you," he said aloud. "I believe every word you say. But now answer another question for me: how many days has it been that you haven't been taking the Liquitiv?"

"I haven't had a drop for 6 days!" growled Hunter venomously. It was obvious that he blamed the First Administrator for this fact.

Rhodan nodded: 6 days—that was the known limit, according to all observations. After that point the phenomena of breakdown and fatigue became apparent. The second phase would then set in with spells of dizziness. The end was agonizing and brutal: the body of the victim would begin to writhe under repeated nervous attacks until it virtually shook itself to death.

Rhodan was stone-faced as he looked at the man. He did not yet have the report of the medical experts who were searching feverishly for an antidote to the narcotic which would cure the addiction. Thus far all attempts to cure the victims had failed miserably. His mind was shadowed by a very dark vision. He saw millions of Terrans in a growing state of mental derangement, trying desperately to hold on to an existence of blind illusion, demanding the continuance of this horrible self-deception. The situation had reached the point where it was far more dangerous than during the time of Vincent Aplied's vast smuggling operation. At least Aplied and the Galactic Traders had been content to merely use the standard forms of narcotics produced on Terra, with the intention of undermining the economic position of the Earth.

But when it came to the Antis there was an end to any scruples a tall. For them, any means was justified if it could place power in their criminal hands. Their fanatic anti-mutant sect had spread through the galaxy like a spider's web. World after world fell into this web like so many flies. The Antis had no need for armed fleets. They worked insidiously from the background and others performed their dirty work out in front

Others, that is, like Rhodan's own son.

The thought of Thomas Cardif blurred Rhodan's vision momentarily. Was it possible that his own flesh and blood was capable of such deeds? His lips tightened when he remembered the photo that Allan D. Mercant had shown him of a certain Dr. Edmond Hugher on Lepso. It was the haunting picture of a man who had purportedly extolled the virtues of the new elixir and had tried to convince everyone who would listen to him. One of those who had believed him was Dr. Zuglert. But Zuglert was no longer among the living. He had carried this picture on him, however, because he had worked with Hugher on Lepso.

And Hugher was none other than Thomas Cardif, Rhodan's son.

Hunter's tense voice interrupted the thoughts of the tall, lean man behind the desk. "Have you decided, sir?"

"I can't make any official statement yet," Rhodan replied, still maintaining an outward calm. "Until the medical experts have been able to prove conclusively that the continued use of Liquitiv is harmless, the liqueur will not be released for public sale."

"Dammit!" yelled Hunter. The word seemed to hang suspended in the room. Everyone fell silent. It was another demonstration of what the Antis' product could bring a man to. Hunter's drawn expression revealed that he was suddenly aware of his loss of control.

Rhodan got up slowly. Even the most impartial observer would not have been able to read the Administrator's thoughts in his inflexible features. Hunter was leaning slightly forward and seemed to sway back and forth slightly. His movements were strange but Rhodan understood. Hunter was fighting an urge to simply turn and run wildly out of the room. It was only the last dregs of his pride that held him there. Rhodan's trained eye could detect this trace of stubbornness, the man's inner struggle with himself. Hunter had not broken yet but he did not have far to go.

Another man came forward and touched Hunter's arm. "Come on, Godfrey," he said. While he tried to draw Hunter away he shouted angrily at Rhodan, "Sir, don't you know that the constitution of the Solar Imperium gives us certain rights?"

Rhodan was silent. The man let go of Hunter to face him furiously, his face flushed as though from running. There were heavy pouches under his eyes. Rhodan's silence only seemed to pique him more.

"Our democratic freedoms guarantee us the right to the liqueur!" he persisted in a high-pitched voice.

"You are in no condition to discuss Democracy with me," retorted Rhodan. He pressed an intercom button on his desk. "Mr. Kenwood, would you please come in here and escort my visitors downstairs? Our conference is ended."

Somebody in the group shouted maliciously: "*He probably has his* share of Liquitiv reserved for him!"

They were all showing their resistance now. Their logical thinking processes were being distorted. They

were becoming unreasonable and their self-restraint was beginning to crumble. Rhodan could understand their reactions but even for him it was difficult to take their abuses as though he hadn't heard them. He kept telling himself that they were ill. Their condition had to be considered.

Kenwood came in, all neat, proper and disciplined, greeting the Chief in his usual stiff manner. Behind him came another man who was not quite as military in his attitude or appearance. It was Reginald Bell.

"If you please!" said Kenwood, inviting the visitors to follow him.

Hunter only nodded without a word but the other man with him still protested. "You can't just send us away!" he complained incredulously. "You have *todo* something for us!"

Rhodan and Bell exchanged meaningful glances. The man's attitude was typical. It was always *Rhodan* who must do something. So far he had always done something. His name was too closely tied to the progress of humanity that his failure to do something was unthinkable.

Rhodan felt a restriction in his throat. It was not due to any sense of fear but more to a feeling of deep depression. By no choice of his own had gotten himself into a very enviable position. Humanity identified itself with him. He had become an almost mystical figure in the thoughts of billions of humans Rhodan moved on a higher plane of existence where he could rule and command whatever he pleased.

There was practically only one possibility of descending from this imaginary Mount Olympus and that was to die! He, the immortal, suddenly had the feeling of being lost in an abyss of solitude. He was withdrawing farther all the time from the thought levels of ordinary mortals, for whom he wished to do everything in his power. Death was the price of returning to them.

"They've gone." It was Bells voice, speaking to him quietly.

Rhodan smiled. He was not quite alone on Olympus. There were still a few others up there with him.

I guess it was a mistake to invite them up here," said Bell. "Looks like all that came of it was a few insults."

Rhodan checked his watch. "The briefing starts in one hour. Anyway, it's well that I had a chance to witness the mood of these addicts personally."

It seemed as though Bell had lost his sense of humour somewhere in the dreary wastelands of Lepso. He had been among the few who had sought to convince Rhodan that Thomas Cardif was not an evil man, basically. The stocky man had reminded Perry often enough that Cardif had been raised without knowledge of his parents. Moreover, the half-Arkonide believed that Rhodan had killed his mother. He considered the rumour to be true after Rhodan had sent his wife on an ill-advised mission that had cost her her life.

"There's a better way to let you see the mood these poor victims are in," said Bell grimly. He switched on the intercom. "Kenny, switch that Paris telecast into our channel here. The Chief wants to see it."

"Yes sir," came Kenwood's quick response.

Bell joined Rhodan behind his desk so that he could face the viewscreen. It was a global monitor on which any TV program in the world could be seen, once the assistant in the anteroom had given appropriate instructions to the Communications Centre in Terrania.

"The Centre has been advised, sir," Kenwood announced. "The telecast is being channelled over to you."

"Fine—thanks!" Bell answered, then turned to Rhodan. "The telecast has been on for a few minutes already so I'd better explain that the people of Paris have been without Liquitiv two days longer than the average number of addicts in other cities. And that, by the way, is just a fluke—it wasn't intended. They ran out just two days before we placed a ban on all sales. It seems there was a holdup in normal distribution and before supplies could be replenished, the lid came down."

The viewscreen began to flicker. The tube brightened quickly and the picture came into clear focus.

The first thing Rhodan saw was a great mass of people. The commentator had his camera trained on the surging mob from an elevation which might have been a balcony. Somehow it was a ghostly spectacle. The sound was not coming through yet. The two top leaders of the Solar Imperium were looking at a silent multitude. Their pale white faces contrasted sharply with their darker clothing. Some groups were waving placards and banners which clearly demanded an immediate lifting of the ban on Liquitiv.

"Excuse me, sir," said Kenwood over the intercom. "We lost the sound there for a moment."

Then Rhodan was also hearing the multitude in Paris. A steady grumbling undertone emerged from their ranks. It wouldn't have been so bad if they had roared and raged and screamed but this was worse. Involuntarily Rhodan had an impression of the low warning growl of a great beast of prey which had just come of age.

The filtered voice of the commentator was also heard. "The police are closing in from all sides with heavy riot equipment." As the camera panned across the scene a number of special vehicles could be seen moving across an open space. Rhodan recognized fire trucks with hydraulic snorkel turrets.

Bell muttered dejectedly. "Let's hope they don't have to use guns on victims of the elixir."

"The crowd is getting more excited," said the commentator, his voice rising. "Protest groups are forming. Police officials have thrown a cordon around the front of the government building. These people can't understand why they have been denied the use of the liqueur, which always seems to be rejuvenating and invigorating. We know, however" —the commentator's voice took on a theatrical tone— "that even various members of the Government and of the Solar Fleet are not inclined to live longer than a normal life span. Our most fundamental axiom is: equal rights for all!"

"Is that guy donk?" yelled Bell, suddenly enraged. "It's blunkers like that who dump us from the frying pan into the fire!"

"It's also quite a normal human reaction," answered Rhodan. "It's even possible that the commentator is also addicted. But with the mood of present public opinion his attitude isn't very helpful at the moment."

Bell slammed his fist down on the desk. "So if somebody's dropping a guillotine on your neck you're still going to wonder whether or not he might have a reason for it? Human reaction! That guy just wants to come off like a big bird, that's all!"

"It's good to see that you're back to normal again," observed Rhodan unperturbed. "You know that sensationalism is a reporter's stock in trade and it's normal for him to take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself."

"But those people are practically condemned to end their lives in madness," objected Bell. "It's unnatural cruelty to spread that over a telecast!"

"There's often a thin dividing line between actual circumstances and the bitter taste of having to bring them in the open," said Rhodan. "Such circumstances can be many things, even the prospect of death."

"Very realistic," grumbled Bell.

"We still don't know how many addicts we have on the Earth alone. But in addition there are the colonial worlds. And Atlan is faced with the same difficulties so much so that we can hardly expect any help from him."

It was plain to see that Bell was confused by Rhodan's attitude. Always before, in every situation the Administrator had been able to clear up everything with a few swift commands. But now it seemed that Rhodan was holding back. Bell suspected the reason for it. His first counter-measures had to be taken against the human race itself—against innocent people who had been victimized by some very clever advertising.

"Unfortunately," said Rhodan, "we've lost Cardif's trail. We have succeeded in putting the production centres on Lepso out of business but we're all agreed that that isn't the main source of this narcotic poison, not by any means. We opened fire on the Springer ship that was carrying the surviving Antis but it got away from the temple. And Cardif was with them. We couldn't even determine where the Springer ship emerged from its hypertransition."

"I know," said Bell ruefully. "Those Antis could beef up the Springers' hyper-compensators with their mental zappers—made 'em so strong they absorbed the whole warp wave. Our sensors couldn't spot their jump at all."

Rhodan shut off the viewscreen. He seemed to have arrived at a decision. "We have to avoid an eventual rebellion. Desperate people like that are capable of anything. At the briefing I'm going to give orders for a more intensive campaign of public information. The world must know about the devastating effects of Liquitiv. I want to use every medium of public information available—TV, press, radio—all of them have to get rid of this fantasy, once and for all, that the liqueur is an elixir of life."

Bell was sceptical but his usual impulsiveness was held in check this time. He was weighing Rhodan's words very carefully. "The world won't understand and they won't believe," he said finally. "For them, you know, that 12-years and 4-months deadline hasn't arrived, so they could have been drinking the stuff for years already and all it's done is to make them feel terrific. They all only call attention to the tests that every consumer luxury item is subjected to before it's put on the market. Top scientists have endorsed that poison—they've qualified it as being completely harmless. That's the kind of professional opinion that's anchored in the head of every addict. The only thing they're going to want to believe is that they can prolong their lives with a nice-tasting snifter like Liquitiv."

Rhodan made a gesture toward the TV tube. "And that's just what we're going to have to counteract by means of the public media. Certainly we probably won't be able to get it through the heads of those who are still healthy that someday this potion is going to make them mentally deranged but we can at least avoid an all-out revolution. When the victims get the idea that we're concerned about them, that should be half the battle. We have to get them to hang in there and go along with us."

Bell brushed a hand through his thick red hair. Often enough in the past Rhodan had been alone in his

opinions and yet had turned out to be correct. But this time, Bell thought gloomily, only a miracle could help the situation.

The addicts' thirst for Liquitiv wasn't going to just turn off with words. Before they got to the dying stage there'd be hell to pay. The idea of trying to bring them to their senses was like standing guard over a spring of contaminated water and trying to hold off an army dying of thirst. Bell began to have a fuller perspective of the terrible consequences all this could lead to. When his eyes met Rhodan's he knew that the First Administrator was thinking the same thoughts.

Their former encounters with the Antis had put them through some pretty rugged experiences but all that was insignificant by comparison with what was hanging over them now. The anti-mutants' spider web was drawing in on them. A spider could be anywhere in that web and where it would attack from next could not be foreseen. Also, once the victim was trapped, the spider could take its time. All it had to do was wait until its victim entangled itself to a point of helplessness.

Rhodan and Bell both knew that every countermeasure they tried would only bring them closer to the ultimate disaster. The logical conclusion was that they must do something else.

They must hold off—they must wait and give no sign of defence preparedness.

Neither Rhodan nor his chief deputy expressed this thought but each man knew that they both had the same idea.

3/ THE BIG AMEN!

The police officer got out of his patrol car. His broad face revealed only the slow, rhythmic movement of his jaws as he calmly chewed the gum in his mouth. There was no sign of fear in his attitude—it was more like curiosity. He casually swung his electric shock-stick in his free hand. The other hand he had shoved in between two buttons of his uniform jacket.

On both sides of his car was a banner which displayed the latest public slogan: *You die soon enough. Why speed it up with Liquitiv?*

This and other similar catch phrases were now on all the buildings and public vehicles, such as: *Liquitiv yen? The Big Amen! ... If you want to live, stop Liquitiv! ...* and many others. In red fluorescent letters they attempted to advise the addicted populace of what they were facing if they continued the habit. Everywhere police and medical authorities had received informative fliers and bulletins which described the results of using the elixir.

John Clayton, patrolman, stared calmly at the raging mob ahead of him. Normally his partners Andy Smithers and Jonas DeWerth would have been with him on a call like this but they had been sent home. The two of them were also hooked on the liqueur. So Clayton was alone in the street, facing more than 50 angry men.

In the frenzied crowd was Henry Mulvaney, who knew nothing about John Clayton. For him a policeman was an enemy. Each dark uniform only stood between him and that which he wanted. And

behind Clayton was the objective: a small shop dealing in spirit beverages and liquors.

The owner of the shop cowered in the entrance. His trembling hands held a small pistol. Next to the door was a small showcase from which the normal displays had been removed. All that was there now was a bright poster: *Liquitiv*. But instead of a glowing and rejuvenated young woman, as in the banned TV commercials, there was a grinning skull and crossbones. A second caption read: *Why buy and die?*

The liquor dealer had gone over to the government's side and had adopted its slogans. The anger of the addicts was threatening to descend upon him. At the moment John Clayton was the only barrier that kept the mob from pushing into the shop and demolishing it.

Two days had gone by since Mulvaney had made his unsuccessful raid on Albert Lansing. He stared with burning eyes at the liquor shop. Since he was now suffering repeated attacks of dizziness, his disposition was anything but friendly. He had reached the borderline where he was on the brink of collapse.

His fuzzy thoughts and tangled fantasies dangled false visions before him. There in the shop he was sure that a Paradise of liqueur supplies was waiting for him. The poster in the window was just a scam to deceive former customers.

He had quickly found many supporters who were in the same condition as he. They were all only too ready to believe him. Such exhausted and desperate men were willing to grasp at straws.

The policeman suddenly stopped chewing his gum. In a calm, firm voice he told them: "Everybody clear out now—go on back home!"

At the shop entrance the owner waved his ridiculous little gun threateningly as though to give weight to his protector's words. John Clayton had formerly been assigned to such routine duty as handling traffic violators yet he slowly approached the crowd like a veteran.

In a moment of clarity Mulvaney perceived that the officer's hand inside his jacket could be holding a gun, which was a greater threat by far than the shock-stick. "Get out of our way!" he shouted. "That storekeeper's got some *Liquitiv* stashed away in there—and that's what we've come for!"

A howl of agreement followed these words. More than half the men present were already convinced that they would find the liqueur they were craving. If this were not so, why should the police show up?

"I have hidden absolutely nothing in here!" retorted the shopkeeper in a shrill voice. A sign on the store indicated his name: Gary P. Mocaaro.

"Alright, you heard him," said Clayton, trying to appease them. "He doesn't have anything for you."

Mulvaney was so sick he thought he was going to have to throw up. He began to see several images of the dark uniform before his eyes. His vision was blurring.

"We'd rather see for ourselves," sneered a man next to him.

Mulvaney moaned softly. He staggered forward a step or two toward the policeman. Never in his life had he felt so terrible.

"That's far enough!" Clayton ordered sharply.

The shock-stick wasn't swinging anymore. It was more like an extension of his arm now. The gum chewing had stopped. Mulvaney was thinking this might be a sign that the officer was afraid. He took another step forward.

"Look out, officer!" croaked Mocaaro. "They're planning something!"

Mocaaro's concern was neither for the policeman or his prowl car, however. It was of a much more personal nature: the merchant feared for his life and his establishment. He knew instinctively that Clayton was the only means of preserving both. It suddenly convinced him that he would have to help the officer. He raised his 'pop-gun' of a pistol and sought to aim it as he fired uncertainly.

The echo of the shot had scarcely died away before Mocaaro realized that he had made a mistake. Clayton blurted out a cussword and lifted his stick. As though in response to a secret signal the addicted gang moved in a body. Clayton waited for them determinedly.

With tears streaming down his face, Mulvaney also joined them. He was aware that they were threatening to outrun him and he was horrified at the thought that they would get the Liquitiv supplies ahead of him. He was already too weak to keep pace with the mob. A blind hate seized him. He wanted to have his share. It was *he* who had led them here in the first place. But that wouldn't stop them from grabbing up all the Liquitiv that they could get their hands on. Nobody would raise any question about Henry Mulvaney.

He saw that the policeman had succeeded in shocking three of his attackers. But Mulvaney wondered why the officer did not use his other hand.

Clayton defended himself stubbornly. At least 10 men had jumped him by now. They rushed to the police cars and tore off the banners and then heaved the vehicle over onto its side, causing a cloud of dust to rise. Clayton could hear Mocaaro's anguished outcry. He kept swinging his club almost automatically.

When somebody jumped on his back he finally fell and from the ground he could see the storefront. Mocaaro had disappeared. The panes of the display window were shattered and several men were moving about amidst the fragments. The noise of the raid was indescribable.

Although Clayton was on his back he still continued to defend himself. But then somebody tore the shock-stick from his hand and he received a blow to the head that knocked him unconscious. The attackers dashed away from him and stormed the little shop.

Mulvaney was the last to reach the prone policeman. The sight of the uniformed officer lying there on the ground unconscious gave him pause for a moment. The sounds coming from Mocaaro's store indicated that none of the precious liqueur had been found so far. He was sobbing softly. His mouth was parched. He sank to his knees. For awhile he just stared at the policeman's face. Then he looked at the overturned car.

The cracking and splintering of wood came to his ears from inside the shop. There was another shattering of glass and muffled pounding sounds—then a crash. Apparently the addicts were attempting to tear a cabinet or showcase apart. From the distance came the sound of police sirens.

Gently, Mulvaney took hold of Clayton's wrist and pulled his hand out of his jacket. He stared at it—or rather he looked at what had been hidden by the uniform coat. It was not a hand, just an artificial

stump-end of where it had once been.

They had jumped a one-handed man.

"The poor gutsy fool!" Mulvaney muttered.

He got up and staggered toward the shop. The sign was dangling in broken pieces. Only a few letters of the name were left. He stepped on some broken glass and slipped. A man came out of the store. His face was bloodied and his eyes seemed to burn like coals.

"We didn't find any Liquitiv," he said apathetically.

"We're all going to die!" groaned Mulvaney hopelessly.

The police sirens grew louder...

4/ DRAGON SEEDS

The Solar Imperium's chief rep for Sector Red/b 1245 11 was an important man. Since the numerical designation of his sector was only meant for card files and the positronic data banks of computers, the region he was responsible for was also called the Kapra System. Kapra was the name of the star around which orbited no less than 24 planets. The special feature of this system was that 6 of the 24 worlds were oxygen planets, which meant that they had been settled by colonists from Earth. By virtue of the system's magnitude and the number of planets it contained, Oliver Gibson was an extremely important man.

The fact that he was presently in Terrania meant that there was an extremely important reason for it. Perry Rhodan was aware of the heavy load of responsibility such men carried and he knew it was best for them always to be in their assigned sectors whenever possible. At the present moment, however, Oliver Gibson was almost 20,000 light-years removed from the place where normally he was accustomed to watch over the destiny of the Terran colonists. He was sitting in the large briefing chamber that was located in one of the mightiest structures in Terrania.

Other than himself there were more than 50 men and women present who were the most outstanding leaders the Solar Imperium had to offer. A pale, lean man sitting close to Rhodan appeared to be John Marshall, the chief of the legendary Mutant Corps. In addition Gibson recognized Reginald Bell, Solar Marshal Freyt and Solar Intelligence Chief Allan D. Mercant. He knew that there were a number of mutants in the room besides Marshall. General Deringhouse was engrossed in a discussion with the head rep from the Vega System. Behind Rhodan sat two men in white smocks, which gave the impression that they had been called here directly from their work.

For a moment Gibson's attention became riveted on a human tank of a man who required two chairs to accommodate him. He wondered if this could be that Jefe Claudrin who had shot through the heart of a star together with Rhodan on board the *Fantasy*, the first Terran ship with linear space drive.

But then Gibson saw *thecreature!*

Measuring about 3 feet in height, the animal looked like an overgrown mouse whose mother must have had something to do with a beaver. Gibson's eyes actually opened wide as he stared at this strange entity. It was wearing the uniform of a lieutenant of the Solar Fleet—obviously tailored to fit because there was even a special hole to accommodate its wide beaver tail.

The creature seemed to sense Gibson's interest because it straightened up slightly. More astonishing was the fact that it was occupying the only upholstered chair available in the room. Gibson swallowed hard. He had already heard a lot about Pucky but hearing and seeing were two different things entirely.

The mousebeaver gazed across at him out of two button-black eyes. Then he revealed a very unpleasant-looking incisor tooth and grinned at him. Gibson felt his face flush in embarrassment. He didn't know how he should act in a case like this. After all, this creature was an officer and the deeds he had performed were a legend that had reached even the Kapra System.

Not knowing what else to do, Gibson responded with a slight nod of his head. Pucky nodded back graciously and blinked at him drowsily.

Perry Rhodan got up from his chair, thus turning Gibson's attention in his direction. A silence pervaded the conference chamber. Here were assembled the top leaders of the Solar Imperium, all of whom were characterized by a high sense of responsibility.

Rhodan began. "A few weeks ago I issued an order to stop all imports of Liquitiv, both here on Earth and on all colonial planets. Also a ban was placed on all sales and distribution. Of course we knew that we couldn't cut off all supplies of the liqueur in one stroke. There was a hurried wave of panic buying and the black market was booming just as much as ever. Nevertheless, it now happens that approximately 50 million humans can no longer get their hands on this narcotic. And that number is constantly increasing, not considering the colonial planets or what's happening on the worlds of Arkon. The anti-mutants of the Baalol cult have followed a very insidious and fiendish plan. Before they arrived at the point of flooding Earth and the Arkon planets with Liquitiv they had already infested the remoter worlds with the drug."

Rhodan paused while scanning his audience gravely. He reached for some bulletins that lay before him on the conference table. "It now looks as though we're facing a general revolt" he announced. "I have a number of reports in front of me which fill me with deep concern. In Des Moines: the mayor's house—ransacked. In Paris: an hourly increase in demonstrations. The first attempts to raid public buildings there were squelched by police and fire brigades. In Gettysburg there was a street fight between addicts and a police officer. A mob of 50 men and women beat him unconscious and destroyed his patrol car, after which they plundered a liquor store. In the same city the first suicide connected with this problem is on record now. A paralysed recluse killed himself because he couldn't live without Liquitiv."

He shook his head sorrowfully and his lips seemed to tighten as he continued. "Those are just a few reports among many. Meanwhile, Mr. Bell and I have decided to launch a major education campaign, which is already underway. We have to warn humanity of the dangers of this poisonous narcotic. There were great quantities of the liqueur that we were not able to confiscate and these will probably be sold more or less openly at some piratical price. It's therefore axiomatic that we have to make it clear to people, once and for all, the danger that's involved in taking the elixir."

Gen. Deringhouse stood up. "Do you believe, sir, that your campaign will reduce the brutality of these people in their attempts to obtain the narcotic in the future?"

"I am hoping so. Yes."

Oliver Gibson felt that the time had come when he could clarify his own situation. He asked to be recognized by lifting his hand. Rhodan nodded to him, inviting him to speak.

"Most of you know me," he said. "All the same I'd like to repeat who I am and where I come from. I'm the Commissioner for the Kapra System where six of the Earth's colonial planets are under development. The situation there can't be compared to that of the Earth's population. Those colonists lead a hard life. They're always happy to find some kind of relaxation and diversion, so it's understandable that the liqueur is sold in greater quantities on the Kapra worlds than it is on Earth. This is more or less true of most colonies of that kind." He smiled. "Ladies and gentlemen—you see, I am also a user."

The persons present were accustomed to surprises. There wasn't a muscle twitch among them when they heard Gibson's confession. Some of them watched him a bit more gravely and others turned to look at him for the first time but nobody tried to interrupt him.

Gibson looked over at Perry Rhodan. He had reported his miserable situation in fullest confidence. Rhodan was not the type to condemn a man immediately and unconditionally. Gibson saw no reproach in the grey eyes of the Administrator—only a silent urging to continue.

So Gibson made his next confession. "I've been 3 days without Liquitiv." Unconsciously his gaze had turned to Pucky. The mousebeaver had closed his eyes. Nevertheless he sensed there a warm current of relationship and knew he was among friends. He straightened his shoulders. "I am here to speak for 6 colonial planets. I'd like to condense my contribution to this meeting into a single sentence: it is urgently necessary to find a solution which will be equally fair to the addicted people and the rest of humanity." He nodded and sat down. There was no one in the room who was inclined to be scornful or derisive. All seemed to have a desire to help him.

When Rhodan turned toward the two men in white smocks, one of them got up to speak. He was visibly very nervous. One hand was hidden in the pocket of his smock. "My colleague, Dr. Topezzi, and I have had the task of coordinating all inputs from the research teams who were making a crash effort to trace down the dangerous characteristics of the narcotic in question." He cleared his throat tensely and cast an imploring look at Dr. Topezzi, who was obviously thankful that he was not himself in the speaker's shoes.

The doctor continued. "So far it hasn't been possible to determine how the Antis produce the Liquitiv. There's no question, however, that it has a rejuvenating effect. It's interesting to note that the symptoms of addiction only appear after the 4th or 5th dosage. Certain influences may be drawn from that but of course they are purely theoretical and not important to us at the moment. One thing is certain, however: *exterior* to the human body this liqueur *is not* a nerve poison. Its final composition appears to be completed after some catalytic action has taken place within the stomach, having to do with human metabolic processes. Inside the digestive system some kind of enzyme combines with the liqueur, and enzymes of course are well-known catalysts. So before being imbibed, the liqueur is not poisonous. It only becomes so when it encounters the unknown enzyme. I need not stress the fact that Liquitiv has a hormone basis to it—otherwise the actual rejuvenation characteristics would not be explainable..."

"Alright Doc!" said Reginald Bell. He was not the only man who had become impatient.

"Now give us your report on the research for a countering agent," ordered Rhodan, "and give us the status of it."

"To put it briefly," the doctor admitted, "the status is negative. The top specialists in the field of drug addiction and control have not come up with anything. We all know that users of opiates, barbiturates and other types of habit-forming drugs can be cured and even their post-withdrawal distress can be

relieved in the process—which is true of alcoholics as well. But with Liquitiv this isn't the case. Within 4 weeks at the latest after a person has stopped using it, the abstinence syndrome state degenerates into complete mental derangement." He lowered his eyes and added his conclusion in a low voice. "At present our only recommendation is that the restriction on the importation and sale of Liquitiv be lifted again, if you don't want to face the risk of having millions of people go insane."

With this bombshell the doctor accomplished what Gibson had not been able to do with his own confession. His listeners were obviously disturbed. Jefe Claudrin straightened up rigidly on his double chair and it seemed that his massive Epsalian frame was going to burst the seams of his uniform. John Marshall quickly exchanged glances with another member of his corps, a small Japanese mutant who had the trace of a smile on his face.

But Rhodan wasn't smiling. "Do you mean you want the blockade lifted, Dr. Whitman? Do you know what that means? The Galactic Traders—in particular our old friends the Springers—would be able to penetrate the Solar System again without hindrance."

"That is correct, sir," said Dr. Whitman.

Deringhouse was a cool thinker. He was nevertheless a soldier above all and his logical thought processes operated on military levels. As a general he considered it his responsibility to use the Solar Fleet as a means of shielding Terra from all incursions of disaster. He had little patience for nefarious chess moves, political intrigues or tricky diversionary measures. "That's no different than a straight capitulation," he growled bitterly.

Pucky blinked his eyes, considering the proposition with new interest. Capitulation. It was a term that even this fun-loving former inhabitant of Vagabond did not take lightly.

Rhodan was the only one who seemed to maintain his calm.

Dr. Topezzi finally spoke up. "Capitulation seems a bit rough, sir," he said. "A better term would be compromise."

"This isn't a word game, Doctor," retorted Deringhouse, who was clearly irritated. "Defeat is defeat, no matter what labels you try to hide it with. I am against lifting the blockade."

Jefe Claudrin grunted heavily, which everyone present knew was a sign of agreement. As commander of the first Terran linear-drive spaceship, his opinion carried a certain amount of weight.

Rhodan realized that if he didn't step into the argument the men would start to split up into several camps. He was well aware of his responsibility at the moment. Whatever decision was made here would apparently affect the whole existence of humanity, whether on Terra itself or on the colonial worlds. It was as though the baleful eye of destiny were on this man whose name had become inseparably bound to the development of the human race—this man who had even won a certain measure of respect from Auris of Las-Toor, the female representative of the Ruling Council of Akon.

It was a historic crossroad but he hardly hesitated to formulate his decision: "The blockade will be lifted. Effective immediately the sale of Liquitiv will be permitted on Earth and in all of its extraterrestrial colonies. We shall make a similar recommendation to Gonozal VIII, better known to us as Atlan, so that hopefully he may coordinate his policies with ours."

Perry Rhodan's grey eyes searched every face in the room, probing each man for his reaction. He saw

the sudden pallor in Deringhouse's features and noted Claudrin's dark frown as well. Some of the men swallowed visibly and their faces hardened. But trust and confidence in their First Administrator was stronger than their personal feelings.

Rhodan's voice finally penetrated the deathly stillness. "First of all, we thus avoid having millions of people degenerate into madness. Our educational campaign will be strengthened so that those not yet addicted will not be victimized. Everywhere in the Imperium it must become axiomatic that using Liquitiv is equivalent to a death sentence." He laughed but it was without a trace of humour. "Naturally this does not mean that we are defeated. We are going to launch a research program such as this world has never seen. We are going to mobilize the best scientists from every planet; we are going to provide them with every possible facility; and they are going to try to find a cure."

His eyes narrowed. "*They shall* find a cure—just as I will find Thomas Cardif."

Pucky's eyes widened in startled surprise but he said nothing. He knew that silence was the better part of valour when his Chief was in this kind of mood. Every man present could sense Rhodan's grim determination.

His personal energy and positive attitude generated a spirit of optimism but in relation to later events it was not to be justified. Once one has slipped and fallen back against an offensive onslaught, recovery is never immediate. Not even when one apparently remains inactive in order not to provoke the attacker.

Two days after the conference, Liquitiv was again available everywhere on Earth. For a few hundred unfortunates, this action had come too late. In Gettysburg a man was committed to a psychiatric institute, completely out of his mind. His name was Henry Mulvaney.

The dragon seeds sown by the Antis were bearing evil fruit. In the laboratories of Earth and on the Arkon worlds, the desperate search for an antidote was underway. Rhodan refused to spare himself. He monitored every result and Ending personally.

Then something happened which precipitated a new turn of events.

5/ LAST CLUE

From a purely aesthetic point of view the city was just a cluster of grey buildings with narrow streets, deserted intersections and untidy-looking establishments which had been abandoned. Nowadays the town was of no importance and its ugliness was all the more apparent. Not long ago when Lepso had still functioned as a sort of intercosmic Tower of Babel, this city like many another on the planet had witnessed the nefarious traffic of countless interstellar races.

After the troops of the Solar Imperium had occupied Lepso, this town and all others like it had simply died. No longer could the furtive figures of smugglers be seen in the doors and archways during the night. The familiar flash of rayguns here and there between 'businessmen' was a thing of the past. Gone were the endless haggling over prices of their tainted merchandise.

The town was dead because Lepso was dead. The corruption in the government was also a thing of the

past because it had been backed by the Antis and now the so-called god priests were no longer present on the planet Rhodan had launched an attack on the Baalol temple itself. At the last moment, some of the Antis and Thomas Cardif had been able to escape.

With their tracing and sensing devices the soldiers of Earth had quickly located the subterranean installations where the narcotic elixir had been produced. Robot commandos and elite troop detachments had penetrated such areas and occupied all locations which appeared to be at all important. Nevertheless when the facts were in it was soon apparent that Lepso alone could not have produced the tremendous quantity of the toxic elixir which had made itself evident throughout the galaxy.

Surveillance patrols were flown on regular schedules as a precaution against the possibility of some strongholds on Lepso not having been discovered. Stephen Elliot circled over the sombre grey town, beyond which the barren Lepso landscape extended. He manoeuvred his glider to a lower altitude. For him the daily routine flight was over with.

"Hi there, Stephen," said a cheerful voice suddenly.

It jolted Stephen although he knew who had spoken. Desoga had a very unconventional way of handling his voice traffic on a military waveband. As Elliot switched on his transmitter he had a vision of the lean Spaniard as he sat there below in the control post.

"This is glider FTP 34," announced Elliot. "I read you."

Desoga could be heard coughing. In the matter of rank he was Elliot's superior officer but Elliot asked himself as he often had in the past how it was that such an unmilitary type could direct operations which required a high degree of responsibility.

"When I look out the window I can see you up there," Desoga remarked.

Elliot stared below disconcertedly. From his position he could not determine which of the grey buildings down there contained the patrol post. From the air they all looked alike. Moreover it made no difference to him whether Desoga could see him or not.

"Don't come in yet, Stephen," ordered Desoga.

Elliot sat there in the wide-view cockpit and waited. Desoga made a few snuffling sounds as if he were waiting in turn for Elliot to say something.

Finally he forced himself to answer: "Do you have further orders, sir?"

Secretly he cursed Desoga—in fact this whole city and the entire planet which seemed to consist of nothing but rocky wastelands and barren cliffs. But Desoga finally spoke again before he could include other items within range of his maledictions.

"Yes I do, Stephen." He cleared his throat in a way that made Elliot think he was in for something. "Get over to sector X45-B3," ordered Desoga. "A report's come in from the sentry detail over there. Apparently they've uncovered a small enemy base that we hadn't braced before." Desoga had not traced down a single enemy stronghold as yet but he spoke as if he had discovered them all. "The guard troops have a mutant with them, Stephen. He's a telepath. Presumably there's supposed to be just one man holed up out there somewhere. Go see what you can do."

It was typical of the Spaniard's orders. He had given no specific instructions as to *what* Elliot was supposed to do. Nevertheless he banked away toward the coordinate he had been given.

"It might be a good idea," said Desoga pleasantly, "if we could take this fellow *alive*."

At any rate the Spaniard seemed to know more than he was telling Elliot. Desoga always seemed to know more than people around him. The pilot suddenly realized that this might explain a few facts—such as why this skinny Spaniard was his superior, sitting there in the patrol post.

"Very well, sir," Elliot replied.

But apparently Desoga had cut off already. The city fell away behind Elliot. All he could see of it as he looked back was its dark silhouette on the horizon. Fering, the small brownish yellow sun of this system, still dispensed enough light to illuminate the landscape below. But Elliot wasn't concerned with keeping a constant surveillance on nothing but rocks and gravel.

"What are we doing here, anyway?" he asked himself.

It was a question that nobody seemed inclined to answer. He glanced at his flight panel. In exactly 10 minutes he would be in the grid sector that Desoga had indicated. The troops there would probably be looking for him by now.

As he had expected, when he circled over the area he could see the men waving at him. He made a smooth landing. The sentries' uniforms revealed that they were a unit of the Solar Fleet. They were heavily armed. Two combat robots were present but they remained lightly withdrawn from the men.

Elliot clambered out of the small flier and felt the unyielding stony ground of Lepso under his boots. This being an oxygen planet, the Terrans were able to operate without their spacesuits. It was hard for Elliot to figure out why this world, of all places, should have blossomed into a centre for intercosmic smuggling. Lepso had been the central transacting and liquidation point for all such shady dealings until Perry Rhodan had shown up with the Solar Fleet. Even the counteraction of the Springers' cylindrical long-ships had not kept Rhodan from moving in full force against the Antis.

A stocky soldier came up to him. "You must be Elliot," he said by way of greeting. "Desoga told us you were on your way here. We were told to hang loose until you arrived. I'm Corporal Higgins, in charge of this detail."

Elliot looked around him at the 16 men of the sentry squad. Where was the mutant the Spaniard had mentioned? He was sure he could pick out any member of the legendary Mutant Corps immediately.

Higgins seemed to guess his question. "The telepath's gone over to a second detail with Lt. Lechner. Lechner has captured some suspicious-looking Arkonides. They're from some colony of the Greater Imperium and at the time of our attack they were here on Lepso for some shady reason or another."

It was obvious that Higgins was expecting him to take over the command here. Uncertainly, Elliot looked out at the desolate terrain.

"So what's the story here?" he asked.

Higgins was anxious to give his report. "The mutant has detected a hidden enemy post up there," he said, and he pointed toward a low flat hill that seemed a very unlikely place, in Elliot's opinion.

Higgins only shrugged. It was obvious that he wasn't familiar with how mutants operated. Nor did he seem to think it was any of his business. He was satisfied with the matter as far as he had been able to bring it. Any decisions beyond this stage he was glad to leave to somebody else.

But he added: "The mutant told us that there's only one Terran holding out there. He's supposed to be armed but the telepath thinks he's not dangerous."

"That we'll have to find out," Elliot decided.

Corp. Higgins struck an attitude of being the battle-scarred veteran. "Yessir, that's right!"

Elliot didn't have any clear idea of how he was supposed to take this so-called 'stronghold' but since the men were expecting him to make something happen he started moving toward the hill.

Higgins chattered on beside him. "We already tried to contact that Terran by radio," he said, "but no luck there either."

They had traversed about half the distance toward their goal when Elliot's problem was solved in a very surprising manner. A swaying and staggering figure appeared on the hill.

"Forward!" Higgins called out to his men. As he ran past Elliot on his rather short, bowed legs he was suddenly almost comical. Elliot merely increased his walking speed. "That must be the one, sir!" Higgins yelled as though they were preparing to storm a Springer battlecruiser.

Elliot was wondering about the stranger up ahead. Why should anybody who had been hiding out for a long time suddenly pick this moment to show himself to the very forces he had presumably tried to escape from in the first place? The man was either sick or completely exhausted, judging by the way he reeled almost drunkenly down the hill toward them.

"Take it easy with him," Elliot ordered. "He seems to be wounded."

He and Higgins and two other men were the first to reach the stranger. There was no doubt about his being a Terran. He was of medium stature and very thin—almost as skinny as Desoga. His features were sunken and more than half-covered with a growth of beard. His clothing was badly torn and he had a makeshift bandage on his right thigh.

The man looked into Elliot's face without knowing apparently where he was or whose hands he was falling into. Elliot had a hunch that the fugitive's leg wound was not alone responsible for his condition. There was something familiar about that vacant stare. He suddenly remembered seeing such a look on the faces of other prisoners here on Lepso a few weeks back. This one was heavily addicted! He was far gone on Liquitiv. Elliot shuddered inwardly. Desoga had ordered him to bring the prisoner in alive but he knew he'd have to move fast if he was to comply with the command.

"Give him some support, Higgins!" he ordered.

They surrounded the half-dead captive and dragged him to the glider.

So far no one suspected that this man was the beginning of a new trail—a path that would lead directly into the heart of the galaxy. Except that this might have had something to do with Desoga, the lean Spaniard who was waiting with more than usual interest for Elliot to return to the patrol post.

* * * *

What Elliot could not know—for the simple reason that no one had told him—was that Miguel Desoga was a special agent of Solar Intelligence. After a private conference between the two of them, Rhodan and Mercant had decided to station a mutant and a special agent in each town of Lepso. This strategy was to prevail for a duration of two months until they could be certain that this second planet of the Fering System did not harbour anybody who might have important information.

Miguel Desoga had sent his pilot out of the room two hours ago. Now there was only the doctor who had been trying with hypos and other medical treatments to bring the semi-conscious prisoner into some kind of shape for interrogation.

"He's lost a lot of blood," explained Dr. Silverman. "That raygun wound in his hip is a bad one—and then of course he's been pretty well gutted out by the narcotic poison. It appears to me that he's been on Liquitiv for more than 12 years. At least he has all the symptoms."

The Spaniard's dark eyes narrowed. His lean, intelligent features were taut. "So you mean he's going to die?" he asked.

Dr. Silverman eyed him disapprovingly. "Yes, in fact quite soon."

"Hm-m-m..." Desoga studied the emaciated figure of the patient who sat a few yards away in a chair, completely slumped down and helpless. In spite of his moribund condition he gave an impression of high intelligence. "Alright, Doc," Desoga said somewhat peevishly, "bring him around so I can talk to him."

Dr. Silverman knew that it was completely useless to argue with an agent. He had worked with such men for 20 years. When they made a decision they always had a good reason for it. He prepared another injection. Desoga waited calmly until the doctor was ready.

"If were lucky," Silverman announced finally, "he'll be fully conscious in about 10 minutes. Then you can question him."

"For how long?"

Silverman shrugged his angular shoulders. "All depends on his resistance. If this is your bad day he may only talk for a few minutes before he goes out completely. But at the most you'll have just under an hour or so."

Desoga decided that in any case he'd have to run a tape on the interview. He got his equipment ready. Since he would have to hurry the interrogation he had little time to prepare his questions but the recorder was an incorruptible witness. It would pick up every detail of the conversation and the replay later would be much more effective than Desoga's memory alone, however well trained. He had hardly finished his setup before Silverman gave him the signal.

"He's coming to."

Desoga drew up a chair and turned it around backwards so that he could lean on its backrest and face the patient. The subject groaned softly. His eyelids fluttered.

"You can go now, Doc," said Desoga curtly. "I might need you again before I'm through—so stand by!"

"You might need me," muttered the doctor, "but he won't—not any more!" And with that he went out of the room.

Desoga nudged his chair a bit closer to the awakening prisoner. "Can you hear me?" he asked in a deliberately urgent tone. "Do you understand me?"

The man nodded. He opened his eyes, which were bloodshot and red-rimmed. He was looking at him in obvious bewilderment. Desoga decided to give him a minute or so to collect himself.

"Where am I?" stammered the prisoner.

"Back on Earth," Desoga lied. He knew that his subject was aware of approaching death and every Terran in his condition always had an instinctive longing to be back on his home planet before the end came. "You are in a hospital."

"Hospital?" The addict repeated the word in dull wonderment.

Desoga took one of the other's hands and shook it gently. "We want to know who you are."

"I am Dr. Nearman." The sudden statement came with a note of pride. "I am Nearman, the well-known biologist and astro-medical authority."

Desoga had never heard of any Dr. Nearman but before he could ask any more questions Nearman continued with his story. "I left the Earth about 38 years ago," he said.

Desoga was alarmed to see the pupils of the man's eyes changing from small to large and back again continuously although the light in the room remained constant. Was it because of the stimulus of the injection—or a sign that the end was near? "What were you doing on Lepso?" he asked him.

During the following half-hour, Nearman gave a somewhat incoherent report which Desoga had to keep clearing up with questions in between. It developed that Dr. Nearman had become friends with a man named Dr. Edmond Hugher—no less than Thomas Cardif himself. They had worked together on the further development of Liquitiv. Desoga presumed that they had hooked Nearman on Liquitiv in order to bind him closer to the criminal organization. Dr. Silverman's guess that the victim was in his last stages turned out to be valid. After the appearance of the Solar Fleet on Lepso, Nearman had experienced his first qualms of conscience concerning his activities. He had tried to get away and had been wounded by a shot from a robot. Yet in the overall confusion he had been able to reach a hiding place and there the mutant had detected his presence. Being completely exhausted and unable to resist any longer, he had finally given himself up.

Desoga found out that Dr. Nearman had an excellent knowledge of galactic navigation and he knew his position calculations. He kept talking about a mysterious planet named Okul. Somehow Desoga made a connection between this planet and Thomas Cardif and the Antis because Nearman mentioned that the 'organization' was convinced that it would find a safe sanctuary there. As far as he could, the Spaniard extracted all the data that the dying man seemed to know about this very secret world.

Desoga sighed with relief when he checked the recorder and found that everything was still operating perfectly. He was sure that they would be in a much better position to use Dr. Nearman's information on Terra than he was here on Lepso. He was already deciding to send it to Earth by the fastest means possible.

"Okul must be a jungle world," Nearman continued. His voice was becoming weaker with each passing moment. "I remember Dr. Hugher saying that there was no intelligent life there. That's why the Baalol priests figured it was reasonable to establish a settlement there."

"Just keep talking, Dr. Nearman," Desoga urged quietly.

Suddenly the biologist was seized by the strange apprehensions which all dying people seem to experience. "Are you a doctor?" he asked. "What do you want from me?"

"Everything is alright," the agent assured him. "You are safe. Nothing is going to happen to you."

But Nearman's gaze had stiffened and gone blank. Desoga knew that the man was dead.

He stood up and went to the door. Dr. Wilverman was sitting outside in the hallway with his legs crossed and a notepad on his knee.

"Better come in here, Doc," said Desoga.

6/ TARGET: OKUL

The histories of galactic empires all have one paradox in common: the more they extend themselves and the larger they become the more their existence is endangered. There are two reasons for this. A smaller realm, which is under the protection of the Imperium, never has much to fear. If the greater empire is conquered, the smaller community of worlds automatically transfers to the possessions of the enemy and under the new rulership its peaceful life continues. For a major Imperium, however, such a policy isn't possible. It has to battle for its existence against opponents who are either of equal strength or stronger or weaker. It is very seldom that one race of people ever arrives at the point of ruling one galaxy alone.

The basic reason behind the paradox lies simply in the immeasurable distances between the various solar systems. Through the natural course of development a cosmic Imperium is governed from the mother worlds of the ruling race. From that centre invisible threads reach out to the various colonial planets, to many commercial bases and to the conquered and friendly worlds of other races. With the passage of time the task of coördinating all events and operations becomes gigantic. Even through application of all technological facilities it becomes impossible in the long run to monitor and control a mighty stellar empire from a single planet. The inevitable consequence is the political sovereignty of a number of colonial planets which then pursue their own ways. It simply goes beyond the capacity of any intelligence to extend and maintain its rule from a single planet across the fantastic dimensions of a galaxy. And no concentration of military might can help. No matter how vast the battlefleets they become lost among the stars.

Further, the histories of mentally advanced races prove repeatedly that the Imperium is only a transitional

stage. But during this phase the destiny of any given race is decided. One portion of it succeeds in contracting itself and, thanks to its technological development, it is able to shut itself off from every attack—whereas the remaining portion is systematically destroyed.

An old cosmic law states: the more advanced the race is, the less frequent is its appearance in the power struggles of the worlds.

But in order to reach such a state of socio-technological evolution, the long and difficult road of the Imperium must be traversed. The Solar Imperium found itself at the beginning of such a road, and already there were signs of increasing difficulties. Opposing forces were becoming more numerous and more powerful. An Arkonide philosopher had once said: "All we are doing is to continuously extend the battlefield—otherwise nothing changes." Even the Solar Imperium was about to extend the 'battlefield' once more. A certain zone of the galaxy which had heretofore been regarded as unexplored was now suddenly very interesting.

41,386 light-years from Earth was a small yellow sun which was located near the core of the galaxy. Around it circled a planet that had so far remained unknown to anyone on Earth—a world called Okul. The two other worlds of the system were nameless and of no importance.

* * * *

The government research centres on Earth had become beehives of activity. The composition and toxicological factors pertaining to Liquitiv had to be discovered, as well as a cure for its effects.

It was a very overworked Perry Rhodan who met with Solar Marshal Freyt in the middle of the night to discuss certain findings which the robot Brain had worked out. The recorder tape that Desoga had sent in by special courier had been subjected to a full evaluation. At this same time, Reginald Bell and Allan D. Mercant were supervising the interrogation of the Aras who had been captured there. The Galactic Medicos were being processed by the members of the Mutant Corps. Rhodan was hoping to obtain very vital information from them concerning the narcotic liqueur.

"Good evening, sir," Freyt greeted him in his usual unperturbed manner. He had much in common with the First Administrator.

Rhodan glanced at his watch and smiled faintly. "You could just as well have said good morning," he answered. "It's past midnight already."

Freyt kept a straight face. "I didn't want to deprive you of the illusion that you still had a well-deserved night's sleep ahead of you."

He took a seat and Rhodan offered him some hot coffee which he had ordered brought in to the office. Rhodan knew that the marshal was a hard-working man who did not waste any words concerning his own deeds and accomplishments.

After Freyt had sipped his coffee, he cautiously opened the subject: "I hope you have good news, sir."

Rhodan nodded gravely and began immediately. "The probability factors show that Okul must be the

source of raw material for making Liquitiv. So it really looks as if this Dr. Nearman was a good catch. Too bad he had to die on our hands but we're lucky we had a good agent on Lepso. Otherwise we wouldn't have gotten hold of this information at all. This man Miguel Desoga moved fast, thank God!"

"So what you're saying is, there's probably some kind of plant growing on Okul from which the narcotic ingredient is extracted?"

"Perhaps."

Rhodan pondered over the question for a moment. In the past few days his scientific advisers had been coming up with an increasing amount of information from their own investigations. There were indications that the drug was not necessarily a plant extract. In any case, however, Okul was important in the plans of the anti-mutants.

"At any rate," he continued, "we can be fairly certain that this Lepso information isn't the mere ravings of a madman. Desoga sent along his own evaluation of the interrogation and he's pretty definite about the validity of the data. He says Dr. Nearman was normally conscious at the last because he'd had a doctor give him a booster shot."

Freyt set down his empty cup. He knew now that there was only one course of action: Okul was the next step. The Solar Marshal was sure his friend was thinking the same thing. In fact he had a good hunch that was why Rhodan had called him here at this hour.

"Frankly speaking," said Rhodan, "at present we're pretty helpless. The Antis have gone under cover. They were able to distribute so much Liquitiv beforehand that by the time we perceived the danger it was already too late to take any really effective action." He studied Freyt for a moment. "I know that not all of the Fleet officers approve of lifting the blockade."

Freyt had known Rhodan long enough to realize that the Administrator was referring to his concern over loyalties within his own camp. "There's been some criticism," he confessed, "but mostly its because the danger of the liqueur was discovered so late in the game. They take a dim view of our standard control procedures for products imported from the outside. They don't have much faith in the effectiveness of tests made by food and drug control authorities."

Rhodan smiled ruefully. "And yet I'd stake my life on any of the scientists responsible for that control."

Before Freyt could give an answer there was a knock on the door. He turned in time to see Reginald Bell enter the office. The latter appeared to be as worn out as they were. He came forward without a word and sighed heavily as he sat down in a chair.

"Good evening, sir," said Freyt with mock politeness.

When Rhodan started to smile, Bell cut him off angrily. "I'm half dead!" he grumbled. "These Aras are a tough bunch of thugs. It took John Marshall and five of his best mutants to drag everything out of them." He fanned his face with his hand as if to come up for fresh air.

Rhodan's features hardened since he knew what was involved here. Thomas Cardif had worked with the Aras.

"So what did the mutants find out?" he persisted.

Bell avoided his penetrating gaze. Freyt was a sharp enough observer to realize that their stock friend had unpleasant news.

When Bell answered, his voice was flat and toneless. "The Aras have confessed. They told us who the real inventor of the Liquitiv is."

Freyt knew instantly whom he was referring to. He and Bell would have preferred at the moment to change the subject but Rhodan's pride forced out the next question.

"Who?" he asked coldly.

Bell and Freyt exchanged quick glances. Their friend's personal tragedy weighed almost as heavily upon themselves. There was a pained silence for a moment.

Then Bell said the inevitable: "It was Thomas Cardif."

A stranger, knowing that the name of Rhodan's son had been mentioned, would have thought the father to be an unresponsive block of ice. But Bell and Freyt could see through his armourplate of self-control. They saw nothing but sorrow and bitterness behind his expressionless facade.

Bell raised his hands imploringly. "Don't forget that Cardif was under a hypno block. When he collaborated in the development of Liquitiv he was not himself. Just remember he was living under the name of Dr. Edmond Hugher. He felt he'd been deceived by you. Maybe the Antis have succeeded in lifting the hypnosis with their mental powers but all Cardif's actions have only been directed at you in order to destroy you—thanks to a bunch of false rumours he believes."

"That was a very pretty dance around the Maypole," retorted Rhodan sarcastically. "When you boil it all down, what does it say? Thomas Cardif, the son of Rhodan, is a criminal."

Bell flared up on the defensive. "He's the product of an unfortunate chain of events, Perry!"

Rhodan's voice became louder also. "Have you forgotten the time he wanted to betray the Earth to the Springers? Don't you remember the clan chief, Cokaze? Cardif and that old patriarch were working hand in hand and they almost succeeded in destroying the Solar Imperium."

"One thing he got from his father, alright," countered Bell: "He could always make it hot for the opposition."

Reginald Bell was perhaps the only man who could dare to criticize Rhodan concerning private matters. He rarely used the prerogative but when he did it was, as usual, on impulse. And Rhodan seldom commented on Bell's reproaches, preferring to swallow them in silence. At the moment he knew that even he had made a mistake in having his son brought up by strangers. The boy had been raised without parental love. From a carefree young man he had come to be an embittered enemy of his father. Once Rhodan had sought to bring about a reconciliation and over Thora's grave he had offered him his hand. But before an audience of millions of TV viewers Cardif had abruptly rejected him. This painful scene remained indelibly in the memory of the First Administrator—the chief of a small empire which had come to be called 'Solar' and which was on its way to becoming a decisive factor of power within the galaxy.

"There's a theoretical possibility that Cardif is on Okul. Since our information points to that place as the hub of the narcotics production, it leaves us no other choice: we must switch to the attack mode."

With that Rhodan had spoken the decisive word. The time of inaction had ended. The spider's prey was beginning to wriggle in the web—turning boldly toward its centre.

Freyt was glad that the Thomas Cardif subject had now been left behind for the moment. "You've no doubt had some ideas concerning our next move, sir," he said. "Have you worked out any specific commands for the Fleet?"

Rhodan nodded in confirmation. New life had come back into his powerful features. The three of them were conferring here in the middle of the night and everything would depend upon their decisions.

"My operation against Okul involves a completely altered set of conditions," said Rhodan. "We have to make a lightning strike. When the enemy discovers us it must be too late—for him."

Bell massaged his neck. His fatigue had suddenly vanished and now he sat forward in his chair. "The *Ironduke*," he said with emphasis.

The *Ironduke* was a battleship of the Stardust class, measuring about one-half mile in diameter, and it was equipped with the new linear space drive. Whereas on the original prototype, *Fantasy*, they had been forced to dispense with a full complement of armament, in this regard the *Ironduke* was a high-powered arsenal. Once inside the zone of semispace the *Ironduke* was immune to detection by any hypersensor. There was no tracking device that could trace its position. It moved in a kind of buffer zone between dimensions, which the converter invented by Dr. Kalup served to generate. A compensator field screened off any 5th dimensional or hyperspace effects so that no dematerialisations could occur.

A linear-drive ship flew a phantom-like course in a libration zone where both 4th and 5th dimensional influences were equally ineffective. More than 50 years before, Terrans had succeeded in wresting the secret of linear flight from the Druufs, who were invaders from another space-time continuum, but it had taken a long while to convert theoretical plans into practical application.

"You're absolutely right," Rhodan agreed. "The 6th-dimensional absorption fields will keep the Antis from detecting us ahead of time. When we come out of the libration zone, they won't have time to set up any systematic defence."

Inwardly Rhodan knew that any attack against Okul would be of little use if a cure for the Liquitiv addiction were not discovered soon. What would be the point of reducing one Anti temple after another to rubbish and ashes—since the seeds of this illness had taken root and proliferated throughout the Earth and its colonial planets? At most, Okul was merely a faint glimmer of hope.

But Freyt and Bell did not appear to be concerned with such apprehensions. At this late hour they were busy working out a battle plan.

Rhodan realized that there was still something that had to be done before the *Ironduke* could take off. The most important item was the matter of weapons. Fortunately no one in the Solar Fleet knew of Rhodan's plan to equip the *Ironduke's* crew with perfect facsimiles of old-fashioned machine-rifles. A storm of indignation would have been the result.

Against the most dangerous enemy of all, was the Administrator going to operate with weapons which had been considered hopelessly obsolete for many generations?

7/ WRONG COURSE

In the course of his life a great many things had been said about John Emery's character. He had been called everything from lazy, ill natured and a loudmouth to 'pushy' and egotistical. Although such accusations may have been based on honest convictions they were nevertheless indicative of a poor understanding of human nature.

John Emery was nothing less than an organizer of the first water. In fact he had developed his talents in this area far more than he had in his career with the Solar Fleet. In the latter respect he was only a sergeant. Of course he could be proud of the fact that he was part of an elite troop that was only assigned to special missions but that was the extent of his military reputation.

Whenever Emery found out that somebody in the circle of his acquaintances possessed something that seemed desirable to him, it was only a matter of time before he would gain possession of the object of his wishes. Often there had been others in the Fleet who had sought to emulate Emery's 'hobby'. At times there were even some men who talked about having acquired as much loot under their bunks as he had. But in comparison to Emery they were amateurs.

John Emery worked with an irresistible swiftness which didn't seem to be compatible with his physical make-up because he weighed over 225 pounds and every bone was well padded. Also he didn't give anybody the impression of being either charming or even courteous. He was simply 'that certain something' which had made him what he was.

According to the legend that Emery had become, it was said that in his bailiwick there was everything imaginable: from a snipped-off Chinese pigtail to the electromagnetic tooth filling of a native of Ferbador. Whatever he did not have stashed away in his locker or cabin he could always get anyway. Whatever occurred to him to have he could always lay his hands on in a hurry. His fee for procuring things for others was also as unusual as the talent itself: he always asked for some rare item that belonged to his 'client'.

So it was that in the course of years, John Emery, sergeant of an elite unit of the Solar Fleet, had become a commercial power within his own domain. His friends maintained that there was nothing that could ever phase him.

It was the 9th of April of 2103 and Emery was in for a very bad shock.

He was lying on his bunk and plotting as usual. He was thinking of Eduard Gooding, the man from Nigeria, and how he could separate him from the carved death mask that he had brought from his homeland. Emery had no personal yen for death masks but that youngster Bergotta was crazy for this one. Since Gooding had proved to be as stubborn as a water buffalo, Bergotta had come to Emery to report his lack of success.

Emery was so deep in his broodings over how he could deal with the Afro-terran that he only heard his buzzer call on the third summons. The sergeant rolled out of bed. He had very definite plans for his furlough starting next day but this call at such an early hour was not what he had in mind. He turned on the video screen, which was of his own special design, and waited resignedly for the thing to warm up.

Finally the rather fierce countenance of a man appeared who did not seem to appreciate Emery's

custom-made screen. "Does that thing always take that long to come on?" he asked irritably.

The sergeant regarded him with a mixture of concealed indignation and ironic humour. "More or less," he answered.

"You're going to have to cancel your leave," the man announced.

Emery could see now that the other was in uniform. He made a feeble attempt to make his pyjamas look more presentable by hitching the pants up higher on his midsection. Then he stuck a finger in his ear and sought to relieve an itch.

"Something biting you?" inquired the man glacially.

Emery wanted to tell him that he had a right to itch wherever he pleased, without it being anybody's business. But he settled for a very obvious yawn.

"You will report to your commander immediately," the stranger ordered. "Your unit has to be lined up at the spaceport within 3 hours."

Emery's first thought was his private hoard of loot. His second thought was dedicated to the unfortunate Bergotta who would have to do without his death mask for awhile longer. And finally his third thought was of his furlough. "Very well, sir," he grumbled.

He made a new connection with one of his friends and assigned him the task of watching over his billet in his absence. He urged him to keep an eye on it every minute. Then he tried to reach Bergotta but wasn't able to find him.

One hour later, he proceeded to the giant spaceport of Terrania. He did not know that he was not part of a 5,000-man mission that was going to take off in the *Ironduke* but that was a piece of news he could adjust himself to without much trouble.

There was one other development, however, that would come as a great surprise: he didn't yet know that he was going to be issued a weapon that was practically a fossil—and yet he had sought in vain for years to add such an automatic rifle to his 'collection'.

* * * *

Still in a disgruntled mood, Emery took a look at the overcast April sky. Before him stretched the vast installations of the Terrania spaceport. From his long experience in the military he knew that the cancellation of his furlough on such short notice was a sign that some pretty important signals must be flying. Although a big operation was taking shape, nobody had passed out any information as yet. They were all standing out in front of a large hangar that was at some distance from the main field. The commander had shown up with a serious look on his face, which probably meant that he didn't know anything either.

Then came another man and at first glance it was apparent that this one knew the elite task force's destination. He was one of those types with a razor-sharp look in his eyes, the kind who had a way of

taking hold of a problem and straightening it out. Walking with him were officers of the ship's crew, which served to emphasize his powerful figure.

No one could mistake Jefe Claudrin.

When the Epsalian spoke his voice was something like thunder. His physical proportions and tremendous strength were especially impressive on planets like Earth where the gravity was much less than that of Epsal.

Emery felt an elbow nudge from Hans Berker, the man standing next to him. "Claudrin!" muttered Berker. "That means we're taking off in a linear-drive ship!"

Claudrin only glanced briefly at the ground troops. He kept stomping along without stopping or wasting a word. One of the officers was conversing with Lt. Henderson, the commander of their special unit, but his end of the conversation only seemed to consist of nodding his head and muttering respectful "yessirs".

Henderson only commanded a part of the 5,000-man contingent that was to board the *Ironduke*. His commando task force was specially trained for combat operations on alien planets under life-support conditions which were hostile to humans. This meant that Henderson and his men were a space infantry organization and space travel was only a means of transport to other theatres of operations.

While Henderson was still talking to the officer a cargo truck approached the area. The driver squatted behind the wheel with a poker-faced expression. When he pulled to a stop the officer signalled him with a wave of the hand and pointed to the waiting troops.

Henderson turned to look at his own outfit and his subordinate officers. Emery felt the stir of unrest about him.

"Attention!" shouted Henderson. Berker cleared his throat meaningfully and Emery gave him a warning look. "Sergeant!"

Emery stepped forward while maintaining the outward calm of the professional soldier whom nothing could phase. "Sir?"

"Take some men and distribute the weapons!"

"Very good, sir!" snapped Emery in his most efficient tone. Henderson turned on his heel and walked away. The sergeant beckoned to three of the men standing nearby.

"We have to roll back the tarp," grumbled the driver. "Got big orders to keep *these* weapons out of sight as long as possible." With Emery's help he unfastened the straps and pulled back the synthetic covering. Which gave Emery his first glimpse of the weapons.

"What's the matter?" asked the driver. "You got a gut ache or something?"

The sergeant was standing there in a trance with his mouth open as he stared into the freight bed of the truck. "But—that's not possible!" he blurted out finally.

The driver looked at him curiously while the other men shrugged their shoulders in bewilderment.

"Maybe you're seeing something I'm not?" asked the driver warily.

Emery had to blink his eyes several times and he rubbed his forehead. Finally he pointed to the weapons. "Are you sure they mean these weapons?" he asked testily. "Isn't there some mistake?"

The driver practically gave him a lecture in which he assured him emphatically that there was no mistake. He told the nonplussed sergeant that *each* of the 5,000 men was to receive such a weapon as these.

"You haven't seen anything yet," the man concluded. "Get a load of the ammunition!"

And this was the final shock. in addition to the old-fashioned automatic rifles he received a load of plastic cartridge clips whose explosive charges were supposed to be non-magnetic.

If Emery had not known that Jefe Claudrin was their spaceship commander he would have sworn somebody was sending them out on a cosmic rabbit hunt. So these venerable old weapons had to have some kind of special purpose after all.

About an hour later Henderson's outfit boarded the *Ironduke*. And John Emery, who had spent years trying to locate an old automatic rifle, had to swallow the fact that more than 5,000 men on board were similarly equipped! It was a moral defeat. He decided that as soon as he got back he'd get rid of all of his loot.

* * * *

Pucky tested the seat he was going to use and looked at Bell with an expression of dissatisfaction. "As I've said before," he squeaked, "the *Ironduke* is the most uncomfortable ship in the Solar Fleet. Any respectable mousebeaver has the right to expect comfortable seating arrangements. In this respect this ship is a plan catastrophe. It's almost like self-mutilation to squat on a thing like that!"

"These seats weren't designed for *sleeping*," Bell retorted. "If they don't suit your fancy you can always stand—or float around next to the ceiling."

The mousebeaver pretended to be startled by this and he bared his incisor tooth to reveal his indignation. "Now your true colours are showing at last," he chided. "While you treacherously play on my affections for you, here you are thinking up new atrocities."

"The tragic fate of a mousebeaver without his pillow!" sighed Bell sarcastically.

John Marshall joined the conversation. "The trip won't be too long," he said. "Rhodan and Claudrin figure it'll take about 18 hours."

Pucky waddled over to his seat and sat down peevishly, remarking that comfort wasn't a matter of duration. They were all in the Control Central of the *Ironduke*. Rhodan and Claudrin had not appeared yet although it was known that the Epsalian was already on board.

John Marshall and the other mutants who were present had already had some bad experiences with the Antis. In spite of their paranormal powers they were powerless in comparison to the priests of Baalol. The Antis' form of mutation had given them complete protection against any kind of mental attack. Thus

the Solar Imperium's ultimate weapon, the Mutant Corps, was in this case practically condemned to a state of helplessness.

Nevertheless, even on this mission Rhodan did not wish to dispense with the most capable of his mutants. In other respects they were able to be of invaluable service. Pucky, who possessed a number of paranormal faculties, was undoubtedly the strongest trump card in the pack. He was capable of telepathy, telekinesis and teleportation. Aside from Ras Tschubai, who was a close second, Pucky was by far the best teleporter among the mutants.

"18 hours," the mousebeaver complained. "I get sick when I think of what I'll have to put up with on this ship in the meantime!" He opened his mouth in his most heckling manner and his incisor gleamed like a white needle.

"I've heard tell that there's not a single carrot on board the *Ironduke*," said Bell cheerfully. "Perry said that there's only room for important items."

Pucky's button-bright eyes opened wide. "Not a single carrot?" he groaned in disbelief.

Bell's affirmative nod was obvious enough but his grin was one of outright triumph.

"Then it's a good thing that I took some precautions," remarked Pucky with mocking undertones.

There was a mysterious look in his eye and Bell had an unmistakable feeling that something had just turned the tables on him. Nevertheless he couldn't resist smiling back and asking a question: "Precautions?"

Pucky leaned back comfortably in his seat, which he had only just condemned as being unsuitable for him. "Of course," he chirped. "I took the liberty of stashing a few personal things in your rufflebag."

Now it was Bell's turn to be nonplussed. "Personal things?" he repeated.

"Carrots, old buddy," the mousebeaver told him.

"But my bag was stuffed to the brim!" objected Bell.

Pucky nodded. "That's why I had to get rid of a few items that seemed to me were un—"

He did not get to finish the sentence. Jefe Claudrin stepped into the Control Central and spoke in a voice that rattled the glass in every panel instrument.

"Gentlemen, let's get this show on the road!"

The staff officers made their appearance behind him. Claudrin set up communications with the various crew sections of his ship.

John Emery also heard the thundering voice of the Epsalian. He stared pensively at the automatic rifle that was leaning against the bulkhead nearby. Henderson, who was seated farther up ahead, was nervously tapping his fingers on the seat rest.

The *Ironduke* took off exactly 14 minutes later.

Rhodan and Claudrin turned out to be correct when they had estimated 18 hours for the flight time, using linear drive. But something else had gone wrong: the small yellow sun, around which Okul should have been circling, was not where it had been expected to be. The coördinates furnished by Dr. Nearman apparently contained a factor of error.

Because there, where Okul was supposed to be—*wasnothing* ...

8/ HIDDEN GAME

The water was shallow and swampy-looking. In the oppressive heat it steamed and bubbled. Along the shoreline stretched the jungle, a colourful world of trees, flowers, lianas, ferns and other vegetation. The roots of fallen trees towered above the moist morass.

But there was other life on this world—intelligent life. Of course the intelligences were from other planets but they were here. The sky was a flaming yellow. It could only be seen from this vantage point because within the jungle itself the heavens were obscured by the foliage.

The man in the open boat was pushing it along with rhythmic thrusts of a pole against the bottom of the swamp. He did not seem to be the type who would have come to this place on a mere whim or a lark. With powerful strokes he shoved the craft onward. He was simply but neatly clothed. The way he looked over the landscape ahead was an indication that he was familiar with the terrain. He was tall and lean to the point of thinness. Above his aquiline nose were two grey eyes that were almost too close together. His face reflected a suggestion of aristocracy.

In fact his was the face of the Earth's First Administrator: it was that of Perry Rhodan! His physique and carriage and movements all appeared to have been borrowed from Rhodan. But the man was not Rhodan. He called himself Thomas Cardif and he was the son of the famous Terran. In a very special way his life had been, equally as adventurous and eventful as that of his father.

But there was one difference: Perry Rhodan fought *for* Earth. Thomas Cardif fought *against* it.

Cardif's Arkonide blood prevented him from aging as swiftly as normal Terrans. At present he was the image of his father in every respect. It was simply an impossibility to detect any outward difference between the two.

Cardif skilfully worked his way between outcroppings of stumps and roots and steered the boat toward the bank. A cacophony of birdsong came from the jungle. Millions of insects hummed above the surface of the water, hovering in thick clouds that rose and fell to some mysterious cadence. Cardif headed for a sandy spot on the beach.

A small aircraft similar to a helicopter was already waiting for him there. A scornful smile touched Cardif's lips. Even at this distance he gave the impression of being sinister and mysterious. In his hand was a strangely designed weapon.

Outwardly the man seemed to be a genuine Arkonide but he was not. He was a priest of Baalol—an Anti. It was presumed that the Antis were descendants of several early waves of the Arkonide emigration

era who had mutated on a paranormal level.

Cardif reached the small natural harbour and jumped out of the boat. He anchored it and walked slowly over to the aircraft. The Anti lowered his weapon. In his dark eyes there was no sign of emotion.

"Do you think these excursions are wise?" he asked Cardif. "If you fall out of the boat you are lost. Even these weapons won't be able to help you then."

"In my life I've undertaken more dangerous things," said Cardif.

"We could have crossed the bog in the aircar also," retorted the priest.

Cardif regarded the aircar disdainfully. He pointed toward the water. "There's only one way to track down those animals," he declared. "You ought to know that, Hekta-Paalat."

Paalat seemed to be more sullen than before. If there were any friendship between him and the Terran they both concealed it very well. Nevertheless Cardif was not perturbed by the other's remarks.

"We are in the process of constructing another boat," the Anti reminded him. "If you had waited a few more days this amateurish and primitive craft would have been unnecessary and you would not have to take any risks."

There was a strange gleam in Cardif's eyes. "Wait," he murmured bitterly. "I've waited long enough. Now I'm on my way again. Besides, I've always suggested that the animals should be bred in breeder tanks. That would save all the trouble of having to hunt them down all the time."

The Anti listened in annoyance. "So far every attempt to keep them alive in captivity has turned out to be hopeless. They only wasted away for several months until they died on our hands. Before we can determine the reason for it, the tank-breeding process is useless."

Rhodan's son climbed into the aircraft and the priest followed him. The almost unbearable heat was making them sweat.

"The Earth cannot be conquered with slowness and waiting," grumbled Cardif. "We have to attack in a number of places simultaneously, with the same methods as before."

For the first time the trace of a smile was visible in the features of Hekta-Paalat. "There are various methods of overcoming an enemy," he said. "The fastest means are not necessarily the best ones. Your impatience stems from hate of your father. Impatience and hate are feelings and emotions which make a man become irrational."

Cardif's tone was contemptuous. "The unknown hidden power, way in the background—your race has played this role so long that you'll never get out of it. It is important to know how to strike at the decisive moment. You've done pretty well on my advice so far in your fight against Arkon and Terra. Do you call that irrationality? In fact, the contrary is true. I am presently your highest trump card in your hidden game. You have on your side the son of the mightiest man in the Solar Imperium."

"Of course only in a strategic sense," retorted Hekta-Paalat sarcastically.

Without comment, Cardif started the engine. With hardly a sound the aircar rose from the ground. Cardif was accustomed to being met with the scorn and sarcasm of others. He had seldom been on the side of

righteousness but even the unrighteous he had worked with failed to understand that he was out to destroy his own father. They capitalized on his feelings and brainwork for their own purposes but they took no heed of his own basic motivation. They respected him only as an intelligent and capable collaborator.

9/ LOST: ONE PLANET

If one were to suspend a sack of dried peas over an open area and then rip open the bottom of it so that all of the peas spilled out, they would create a fairly chaotic pattern on the ground below. There would be only a few in many places and haphazard concentrations of them in as many other locations. But at the centre point of impact there would inevitably be a heavy conglomeration of them, to such an extent that it would be difficult to distinguish one pea from another.

A stellar galaxy presents a similar pattern. The closer one comes to the core of it the greater the concentration of stars. Distances between the suns become shorter. The tremendous voids separating solar systems out on the edges of the Milky Way are here contracted considerably. Our own galaxy is comprised of approximately 100 billion individual stars—an incomprehensible number. And yet it is only one of many. Its form is that of a disc which has a major axis diameter of some 80,000 light-years and a thickness of 'only' 16,000 light-years.

The maze of stars that could be seen by observers in the Control Central of the *Ironduke* was far more concentrated than what they had been accustomed to seeing on the panob screens while traversing more familiar regions along the outer arms of the Milky Way. Here at the core were billions of stars—in fact, the massive majority that made up the mass of the galaxy.

Many millions of them were small yellow stars.

According to Dr. Nearman's information, Okul was supposed to be circling one of them. But when the *Ironduke* emerged from the zone of semispace it was soon determined that the coördinates given by the biologist had not been very exact.

Perry Rhodan's lips were tightly compressed as he stared at the observation screens. Reginald Bell and Jefe Claudrin were standing next to him. The crew in the Control Central watched the three men in silence. Following their disappointment a mood of depression had set in. Each of them knew enough about galactic navigation to realize that the chances of finding Okul now were extremely unlikely.

"It looks as though we've made a flight for nothing," remarked Claudrin finally. He was realist enough to face the facts and state them flatly. His great head turned toward Rhodan. "What do you think about it, sir?"

Each of the light points and discs on the viewscreen was a sun. The whole panorama had the appearance of a carpet of pearls. In the face of such a hopeless spectacle, apparently there was nothing Rhodan could do but agree with the *Ironduke's* commander.

But Rhodan was also a realist. His brand of realism told him that they *had* to find Okul if they were ever going to have any starting point at all for counteracting the criminal activities of the Antis. Billions of

people placed their faith in their leading representatives. There was a world government, ministers and other officials, but the men of Terra identified Rhodan with this government—in both success and failure.

Rhodan looked at his questioner. He nodded toward the panob screens. "We shall make the search!"

The silence in the room became more profound. But it was only for a moment. Then the men began to stir with new motivation. Rhodan's words had lifted them from their mood of hopelessness. If the Administrator was ordering a continuation of the search, then he must have a reason for believing that it could succeed.

Pucky, who had remained silent longer than was his custom, now raised his voice in a tone of complaint: "Does that mean we're still going to be stuck for awhile in this crate?"

"I think," said Bell insidiously, "that this search won't take very long at all, come to think of it."

"Is that so?" squeaked the mousebeaver sceptically. "What brings you to such a naive conclusion?"

"We have somebody with a long nose on board," replied Bell.

The mousebeaver felt of his remarkable proboscis wonderingly. More quickly than he cared to, he had to realize that Bell actually meant him. "You know it's a psychological fact that people with knobby noses are always torn with jealousy when they see one like this."

A wave of laughter rang out through the Control Central. Their recent disappointment had been forgotten.

"Let's get to work," ordered Rhodan. "Since it's senseless to move around out here without any plan of action, well set up a definite system to go by. We don't know what margin of error is involved in Dr. Nearman's coördinates. Logically we'll start the search with the nearest stars—but we'll use our present position as a centre point in a spherical search zone."

Rhodan knew that from the centre point of the sphere there would be a countless number of courses to fly to reach the various suns involved but since many of them possessed planets in every such case an investigation would be necessary.

Claudrin was already busy giving out orders. Within a few minutes the first target star had been selected. Further calculations were made while the *Ironduke* raced toward its goal at many times the speed of light. In the various crew quarters the general mood was still at low ebb. There was still nothing definite known about their mission. All the grapevine had told them was that they were making a move against the Antis. Even before the *Ironduke* had reached the first star the elite commando troops had already found out that the planet they were looking for had not been found.

"One thing I'd like to find out," said Hans Berker, "is why Rhodan doesn't call for help from the Fleet. If we had a couple hundred ships beating the bushes around here we'd make a lot more headway."

Sgt. Emery was leaning back in his seat, holding his automatic rifle in his hands. "Then the Antis would have a couple hundred more bogeys they could detect," he replied. "I think the Chief is planning a surprise attack. The *Ironduke* can't be traced by any hypersensor as long as it's moving in the libration zone."

"We have to trust the operations of the ship's command," interjected Henderson.

"Yessir," said Berker.

Emery could see at a glance that Henderson's confidence wasn't much to go on. His superior officer appeared to be nervous and unsure of himself. But Emery had known Henderson long enough to realize that this seeming insecurity always vanished in battle. Then he would strangely change into the leading figure of his unit. His orders and decisions were then calm and well calculated.

Emery fondled his rifle thoughtfully. He was thinking that the men in the *Ironduke's* control centre must be feeling a bit superfluous because their modern high-powered weapons probably wouldn't be put to use in the engagement. Or was it that the combination of old and new weapons was supposed to be the key to victory? In addition to the automatic rifles the men had also been issued energy weapons. Emery remembered one soldier's sarcastic question. He had wondered if a commanding officer was always going to be present in the fight to decide which kind of weapon they were supposed to use at any given time.

Berker's sudden chuckle brought Emery out of his reverie. The German was looking at him askance with a grin of amusement. Emery refrained from asking any questions, however. It was any man's right to have something to chuckle about before going into battle—whether Emery himself was the cause of the merriment or not.

Put any chance bit of merriment in either the crew quarters or in the Control Central was very short-lived.

The first sun the *Ironduke* reached had only two planets. They circled the central star at such great distances that its heat could barely reach them. These worlds were covered with a frozen mantle of methane and ammonia.

The next sun only had a single planet circling around it. Although it was not Okul it appeared to be very unusual to the space travellers. A luminous veil surrounded it as though the atmosphere were enriched with phosphor. However, there was no time to make an investigation.

6 more systems followed, after which there was a recess taken up by a further council of war. The search continued. Invisibly, the *Ironduke* plied its course from star to star. But it was all to no avail. At the end of another 7 hours, Okul had still not been found.

* * * *

From the beginning of his career, Reginald Bell had certain ideas of his own about discipline. Above all he took a dim view of spit-and-polish martinets in uniform. He believed that a man could fight just as well with an unbuttoned collar as any rulebook jockey.

At present he narrowed his eyes and unbuttoned the top of his shirt. He scratched the upper tufts of the hair on his chest as he remarked: "We're getting nowhere."

It was undoubtedly the most categorical statement that had been made so far concerning the course of their operation. It also happened to be the most valid.

Nothing had changed on the screens of the panoramic gallery or the tracking consoles. The 800-meter linear-drive ship was still somewhere in the middle of the galaxy. Although the stars kept changing on the panoramic screens the overall effect was the same. The flight of the *Ironduke* lent a tragic significance to the proverbial search for the needle in the haystack. Bell had been completely correct in his evaluation.

"We're getting nowhere."

Not everyone on board could comprehend the full significance of his statement. The chance that had been offered to the Earth to smoke out the main base of the Antis had suddenly slimmed down to practically nothing. It was true that the scientists back on Earth were working day and night to find a cure for the fiendish narcotic poison but it was still uncertain whether or not their efforts would meet with success in time.

When Bell gave his pronouncement, the bony radio tech, Jens Averman, had stiffened in consternation. He looked across the great room at Rhodan, who carried the burden of responsibility here. Even Jefe Claudrin was waiting for him to say something. As long as the Administrator was on board, he was the chief in command.

"The report that Miguel Desoga sent us from Lepso either contained a decisive error or Dr. Nearman's mind may have started to wander shortly before he died. I'm beginning to have doubts about the validity of his position data. Don't forget that Okul isn't even registered in the old Arkonide catalogues." Rhodan faced the men gravely. "I think this has been a false alarm."

No man on board had to be told what this meant. His statement put an end to the operation. A handful of Terrans had dared to stir in the spider's web and had only made their situation more hopeless. The plan of the Antis appeared to loom up more certainly than ever before. It was only a matter of minutes before Rhodan would give the order to return. Back to Earth, which was turning into a madhouse of narcotics addicts because of the criminal subversions of the Baalol cult.

When Claudrin spoke, his voice was unusually subdued: "So we're giving up the search?"

"All of us are urgently needed back on Earth," Rhodan answered. "There is no purpose in continuing the search for Okul."

Pucky waddled up to him. His great friend's deep despair could not be hidden from his paranormal senses. Even though no battle had been fought the *Ironduke's* mission had failed, which was a defeat for all humanity.

"We've done everything we could, Perry," said the mousebeaver in his high-pitched voice.

"Sir, Pucky is right," John Marshall agreed. Even now his well-known calm was not to be disturbed. "Keep in mind that there are still other ways to get at the Antis."

"Yes, of course," Rhodan agreed bitterly, "but we've got to find them."

Claudrin's mighty bulk pushed past Bell. "What are your orders, sir?"

Rhodan got up and walked over to the panoramic screens. The glitter of the stars seemed cold and indifferent. There was a hush in the Control Central waited for Rhodan's decision.

The Administrator straightened his shoulders, and his voice was toneless: "We're giving up," he said.

10/ BATTLE STATIONS!

Valmonze lifted his glass and nodded to Thomas Cardif. Hekta-Paalat and Rhabol looked on in silence. Their friendship for the Springers was not too great and they tolerated them only as business partners.

"I've had considerable experience with narcotics," said Valmonze. He stroked his beard and winked at Rhodan's son. "We've already put some dents in the Earth's extraterrestrial influence and went so far as to make a profit selling Terran narcotics on other planets. And Earth got the blame for it indirectly. Only thing that made things go wrong was a piece of bad luck that happened."

The Springer patriarch neglected to mention that the 'bad luck' involved was partially due to his own failure.

"Nevertheless we should consider my suggestion," said Cardif. "Now that they've apparently recognized the danger of the Liquitiv on Earth, we can cut off their supplies. As a rough estimate the number of addicts on Terra must have reached 200 million by now. If I know Rhodan, that's enough to put him under pressure.

Valmonze noisily finished his drink and looked questioningly at the priests. He had already found out that the Terran wished to proceed ruthlessly against his own race. The defeat of Lepso had not changed his mind. Cardif hated his father—and that included the Earth, as well.

"In any case I'm taking off in the *Val I*," Valmonze continued, since none of the Antis had deigned to answer. "With or without the Liquitiv. I can't wait around here all day until you wrangle out a decision. I'm suggesting that we keep on supplying the liqueur to all planets."

Cardif gave him a thin smile. "With all due respect to your business instincts, my friend, you are still forgetting that *we* have other plans."

Like any other Springer, Valmonze was ready to fight ruthlessly for any commercial advantage. But without any attractive goal in front of his eyes he considered it a waste of time to get into an argument. As long as it was possible to renew the distribution of the Liquitiv he didn't see any reason for cutting back the supplies on any strategic reason alone.

He was diplomatic enough not to express his opinion openly. But by insisting on an immediate departure of the *Val I* he knew he was forcing the Antis to a quick decision. He based his strategy on the mentality of the priests, who were always squeamish about changing their plans without careful deliberation.

Baaran was the oldest of the Antis who were present at the moment and it was he who finally nodded to Valmonze. "You will take off," he said calmly but in a cold tone of voice. "*With* Liquitiv," he added. "For the time being we will not interrupt the supply lines."

Valmonze made no effort to conceal his triumph. He had made a good business deal and everything else was immaterial. Cardif only watched him in silence as he drained the last dregs from his glass and wiped

his lips with the back of his hand.

"Your time will come, too, my young friend," he told Cardif patronizingly.

"That it will," remarked Hekta-Paalat grimly. "We'll soon decide on a cessation of the shipments."

Without saying a word, Rhodan's son got up and left the room. He took a passage that led him to the circular balcony that was built around the periphery of the giant steel dome. Here on Okul the Antis had dispensed with their pyramidal form of architecture. The steel domes were more practical. From where he stood he could see the ocean beyond the edge of the jungle. The priests had chosen an elevated area for their buildings and all vegetation had been obliterated that stood in their way.

The *Val I* lay on the ultramodern spaceport. Normally the Springers did not make the practice of landing in their giant long-ships, preferring to use commuter craft instead. But the *Val I* was to be loaded with a narcotic shipment that would be transferred to other ships.

The air-conditioning system beneath the balcony railing blew cool air up to Cardif but he still sensed the sultriness of the tropical jungle. The Arkonide half-breed was not aware that this scene of peaceful calm was soon to be disturbed. The indirect cause of it was to be the *Val I* itself but that much he never found out.

* * * *

Fate seems inclined to bring about vast political changes on the basis of apparently insignificant events. At present it was Valmonze with his precipitous takeoff who was destined to unleash a countless number of events which in their further development were to rattle the very foundations of the Solar Imperium.

When the *Val I* left Okul and entered hyperspace, it caused an extra-dimensional discharge of energy. Nobody on board the Springer ship suspected that a Terran vessel was in the vicinity or that it was just on the verge of returning to Earth. The *Val I* disappeared into hyperspace on an unknown course but it left behind it an unmistakable sign of its jump position.

It was a warp-shock trace that the *Ironduke*'s hypersensors were able to detect with perfect clarity.

* * * *

It was a sheer coincidence that Maj. Hunts Krefenbac, First Officer of the *Ironduke*, happened to be looking directly over Jens Averman's shoulder at the moment when the hypersensors responded. Both he and Averman shouted as though from one mouth. "Stop, sir!"

Averman quickly noted the strength of the impact as well as its direction and duration. Rhodan, who had just issued orders to turn back, came quickly over to the console. Although Jefe Claudrin was not much more than 5 feet tall, he appeared beside him like a rolling barrel. Next to him, even Bell seemed slender

by comparison.

The *Ironduke's* chief mathematician Carl Riebsam took up a position near the positronicon. He seemed to realize that he was about to be put to work. Only Pucky lolled sleepily in his seat as though he were indifferent to it all.

"Sir, it's a transition trace!" Averman called out. "It has to be a ship because the shock patterns are typical."

"Do you have the range?" asked Rhodan swiftly.

"Yessir. The calculator can work out the exact fix now." Like all other radio and instrument men, Averman had an instinctive aversion to advanced cybernetic equipment. He had a subconscious fear that one day his job would be eliminated by a positronic brain. So it was only natural that he should refer to the ship's positronicon as a 'calculator' when it was a multi-laminar microcircuit brain capable of handling millions of variables.

Bell spoke up. "If there's a spaceship operating here, it means there are planets around close by that they can land on."

"Such as Okul!" thundered Claudrin. "I'll bet you that ship is from Okul." He looked around as if to see if anyone doubted him.

But there was no one who would have taken the bet. Everyone was waiting tensely for the further processing of the calculations. Within a few minutes, Carl Riebsam was able to start programming the positronicon. Hunts Krefenbac handed over Averman's readings to him.

Rhodan watched the mathematician silently as he went to work. If the Epsalian commander's presentiment was true, then it would only be a matter of time before Okul was found. Perry was well aware of the fact that any attack against the mysterious planet could probably lose him his son. He was assailed by conflicting emotions. It was no secret to him that Thomas Cardif was seeking to destroy him at any price—even if that price were the Solar Imperium itself. For Rhodan such a monstrous intention was inconceivable. Although his son had continuously made trouble for him and the action now might endanger him, he was still thinking of how he might destroy the Antis without endangering Cardif.

The Administrator had not deceived himself. He knew that he would give the order to attack as soon as Okul was located. Even the unpredictable fate of his son would not deter him. Often enough in the past, Rhodan had been faced with the decision of whether or not to sacrifice a small number of people as an alternative to sacrificing the total race. He had always decided in favour of humanity.

In quieter moments he had often asked himself if his plan to lead humanity through all its perils to the status of a great galactic power had not developed into a mania already, which he might be succumbing to like one possessed. It was a great relief to have sober pragmatists around him who considered his goals to be correct and who supported him unconditionally. Men like Freyt, Mercant, Bell and Deringhouse were not the dreamer types who would follow a political experimenter. Such were the deliberations that gave Rhodan the certainty that he was on the right path. From time to time he was plagued by doubts but was that not a proof of the fact that he had a full awareness of his responsibility and therefore weighed every action carefully beforehand?

The Baalol cult was on the verge of throwing the human race back to the status of slavery. His own son stood in their ranks but that was only a personal twist of fate. Rhodan prepared himself to issue his

commands as though Thomas Cardif did not exist.

The sober voice of Dr. Riebsam startled him out of his broodings.

"There we have it," said the mathematician. "Without any doubt, Dr. Nearman's information contained a small factor of error."

"Don't keep us on the torture rack," growled Bell impatiently.

Riebsam waved the symbol-filled strip of foil that he had taken from the computer's output slot. "We were just about 4 light-years off course," Riebsam informed them. "That is, if the transition point of the alien ship represents any proximity to Okul."

Claudrin stomped over to him and cornered him completely with his wide bulk. The mathematician surrendered the plastic strip to him.

"Let's just fly to that location, sir," Claudrin suggested.

But Rhodan's thinking was still cool and collected. He shook his head. "No, Colonel," he retorted. "We'll be silent observers for at least a couple of hours. Its quite possible that other ships may show up."

A penetrating sigh made him turn around swiftly. Pucky looked at him reproachfully and indicated his uncomfortable seat. "Still more waiting," he groaned. "I have calluses already."

"Calluses, Lieutenant?" inquired Maj. Krefenbac.

The mousebeaver grimaced. He couldn't bear to have anyone address him by his military rank. He lifted himself from his seat, gasped for air and complained piteously. "It's awful!" he muttered.

Krefenbac maintained a poker face as he gave him an order. "Lt. Puck, report at once to sick bay. A serious case like this must be looked into."

In speechless dismay the mousebeaver uncovered his incisor tooth. Of all times, just now when things were getting exciting, was he supposed to leave the Control Central? "I—I think I'll be able to stand it," he said with more self-control.

Rhodan was smiling as Krefenbac turned to him gravely. "Sir, what do you think of the Lieutenant's condition?"

"I don't believe that my limited medical knowledge permits me to assume such a responsibility," said Rhodan sadly. "That's why in my opinion Lt. Puck should be under the care of Dr. Gorsizia."

"Alright, Puck," said Maj. Krefenbac in a firm tone of voice, "report to Dr. Gorsizia."

Pucky gingerly checked out his nether portions, then managed to conjure up a joyful grin of surprise. "They've gone!" he chirped.

"Gone?" queried Rhodan in amazement. "Who's gone?"

"The calluses," replied Pucky.

Rhodan himself was trapped. He could not contradict him because after all he had admitted to an insufficient knowledge of medicine to make a judgment on Pucky's ailment". But now the fun was over.

He turned back to his men. "So well wait a little longer," he repeated. "In the meantime I want to talk to the various units. They should know who it is that we're up against and what depends on the outcome."

Claudrin and Bell moved aside to give him room at the intercom. Rhodan's speech to all hands lasted exactly 12 minutes. He did not hesitate to describe the seriousness of the situation to them. He also explained to them why only the *Ironduke* could be used in this dangerous undertaking. His voice was carried to all parts of the heavy cruiser but one instruction he omitted. Although everything in his nature impelled him to shout out the words, he suppressed his emotions.

"Do not shoot any Terrans," he wanted to say, "because my son could be one of them."

Again and again he had thought out this problem. From an objective point of view, Thomas Cardif deserved death.

But the feelings of a father are not always objective.

* * * *

John Emery checked out the Arkonide battlesuit which had been improved by Terran technicians with many new features. The antigrav propulsion system enabled the wearer to glide weightlessly through the atmosphere of a planet and change his course as he pleased. When desired the deflector could be used to make one invisible. In spite of all this, Emery had an uneasy feeling. He asked himself how 5,000 men could manage to conquer a planet that the Antis had occupied.

What were 5,000 men to a fairly large world, in comparison?

They could only hope that the priests weren't widely distributed over the entire planet. The only chance for a victory would be if they were all concentrated in one place.

Emery had been asleep for more than 3 hours when Berker woke him up to alert him to Rhodan's address. The fact that the Administrator himself was on board served to emphasize the importance of the mission. Rhodan's speech was short but Emery thought he could detect in his words a serious note of alarm.

All the men around him were awake now. Alvarez and Dreyer were playing a game of conventional chess. Henderson was studying a book and Bowling was either writing a letter or making notes in a diary of some kind. But most of the men were lying on their backs and staring at the ceiling.

Emery didn't find it difficult to guess what was on their minds. Through time immemorial before a battle the soldier had always faced the question of survival. But John Emery was a veteran trooper, the professional type of soldier who didn't go in very much for philosophical trends of thought. It was only once in awhile that a strange mood would touch him like a passing shadow and he would be momentarily aware of a strong aversion to any kind of combat.

"I'm glad the Chief is with us," remarked Berker, who was next to him.

The 'Chief'—that was Perry Rhodan, thought Emery. This shrewd and experienced leader of countless cosmic battles would also lead them to certain victory in this conflict with the Antis.

"Yeah," he answered. "And we've got mutants with us too. That will be a surprise for the Antis."

The *Ironduke* raced onward toward its goal...

11/ DAY OF THE IRONDUKE

The nameless star was being orbited by 3 planets. Under cover of its sixth-dimensional absorption field the *Ironduke* plunged onward into the system. No sensing or tracking equipment could detect its presence here.

The second world was Okul.

"We've made it," said Krefenbac. "Dr. Nearman's information hits this place right on the nose. He only had a few minor errors in his coördinates."

"Activate matter and energy sensors," ordered Rhodan.

By now the spherical ship was in a stable orbit around Okul.

"Equipment in operation, sir!" called Jens Averman.

"Then run a race-down," Rhodan told him.

Averman got busy with his consoles. Since Okul had its own rotational movement and the *Ironduke's* sensing and tracing equipment was very wide range, Rhodan was asking for a quick determination of any activity on the planet's surface. On their second orbital passage the sensors responded.

"We've picked up something, sir!" called Averman. "Something is going on down there. The reading shows above-average energy discharges."

"Bring us in closer," Rhodan said to Claudrin.

Claudrin did not need any further instructions. The Epsalian knew what he was about. Ten minutes later, everybody on board knew what they had discovered. There in the jungle on the edge of an ocean were 67 steel domes of tremendous size.

"A city!" whispered Bell almost breathlessly. "A city of steel. So the Antis can build something practical, after all, when they're not trying to make an impression."

"Which gives them a nice base for carrying on their criminal activities without being disturbed," said Rhodan. "Down there must be the place where they mass-produce the Liquitiv. This must have been

going on for a long time."

Claudrin's deep voice intruded. "Do we attack, sir?"

"Get the troops to the locks," he answered. "All of them in battlesuits. They are to turn on their antigrav systems. Explain to them how the different weapons are to be used. The Antis' special defence screens can't be penetrated except by using the automatic rifles with their nonmagnetic ammunition."

Bell brushed back his stubborn stubble of red hair. He waved his hands for the benefit of the men in the Control Central.

"Here we go!" he cried.

* * * *

Casnan noted a dark speck in the sky. He rubbed his eyes and looked up again. Now there were 3 specks. Casnan stood petrified. Suddenly he heard an excited outcry from another section of the balcony. Somebody was running and clattering across the metal grill that covered the balcony deck. Still more specks had appeared. Hundreds of them. Casnan stared incredulously into the cloudless sky.

Instinctively he clutched at his wide robe and drew it together about him.

In the same moment a giant spherical vessel appeared over the domed city. It was spewing out virtual clouds of specks which kept sailing downward toward the ground. And then Casnan knew what was happening. Above the city was a Terran spaceship which had arrived undetected. Thousands of men were raining down toward the Anti base.

"Alarm!" yelled Casnan in desperation. His cry was drowned out by the confusion of alarm bells and sirens. Which meant that the guards at their observation posts had finally become aware of the invasion. Casnan spared himself a second look at the descending calamity. He stormed into the interior of the dome and ascended a long passage. Other priests were pouring out of different rooms in a mass of confusion. Most of them still didn't seem to know the reason for the alert.

Then a voice blasted forth from the P.A. system. "We are being attacked by a Terran ship. Everyone to their stations at once! We have to try to destroy the attackers before they land."

The confusion increased. Casnan collided with another priest who was darting along the passage.

"Terrans?" he panted. "How many?"

Casnan did not stop to give any explanations. He kept on running.

The voice crackled again over the loudspeakers. "Their energy weapons cannot penetrate your individual screens.

This announcement served to return them to a state of self-composure. Casnan slowed his pace. The Terrans had lost before even touching the ground, he reflected. The heavier ship's ordnance couldn't be

used against the thousands of them individually. And certainly no hand weapons were going to penetrate an Anti screen. By means of their mental capacities the priests were able to change the energy structure of their individual defence screens.

Casnan smiled triumphantly. He was on the right track. He would get himself a weapon and then go out on the balcony to take potshots at the enemy. The Terrans made good targets whereas he himself was practically invulnerable.

A hissing sound caused him to whirl around. Above him in the arching ceiling of the dome appeared a white glowing spot. It grew larger very swiftly. Glowing metal began to flow and trickle downward. Casnan let out a cry. There was a smell of burned metal plastic. From behind him another priest began to fire at the opening.

"They're already on the roof!" shouted someone.

They were burning holes through the dome, thought Casnan, alarmed. In spite of himself he could not suppress a certain admiration for this foolhardy raid of the Terrans but regardless of their initial thrust it was suicide for them.

The burned openings increased in number. Casnan kept running. Before the first of the raiders got into the dome itself he intended to have a weapon in his hands.

* * * *

Near John Emery floated about 20 other men who were not a part of his own unit. Beneath them flashed the first shots of the attack forces. The dome structures spread out below like so many inverted saucers. And over them hovered a mighty, menacing shadow which marked the presence of the *Ironduke*.

So far the enemy had not answered with a single shot. The surprise attack had succeeded. Emery steered himself toward the closest rooftop he could find. He gripped his energy weapon, pressed the trigger. The distance was still too great. The air shimmered as a trace of the unbearable heat of the raybeam. Everywhere clouds of smoke were rising.

"Now!" Emery said aloud without realizing it.

He had to take care not to shoot any of the men around or below him. The advance wave had already reached the roofs of the domes, where they were ruthlessly burning their way in with their impulse-blasters. Around the dome beneath him was a kind of balcony and Emery could see men appearing who wore wide cloaks or robes. They were all armed and began to shoot at the descending Terrans.

So here were the Antis. They were lost to Emery's view as he fell to the roof of the building. Not far away he saw 4 troopers burning holes in the roof with their energy guns.

"Remember, you guys!" he yelled at them, "only use the automatic rifles on the priests!"

A small, thin man grimly waved his weapon at him. His face was flushed from the heat and excitement.

Emery ran across the steel roof to join the group.

The little man pointed to the hole nearby. "I think we're ready to go inside."

Without hesitation he swung himself into the aperture. Emery bent down to watch him go. He was a brave little runt. In the passage below him the place was swarming with priests. He fired 3 times and then he was hit. Emery saw him jerk to one side and then topple. He fell like a stone toward the Antis who were drawing back.

Emery and the remaining commandos stared at each other for a brief moment. Then they silently sprang into the opening—one after another.

* * * *

The 12 figures on the grey surface below moved like ants. Perry Rhodan watched the viewscreen intently. The insect-like figures were members of the elite unit who were fighting their way across the roof. Rhodan's thoughts were with each one of them.

"These 3 domes are putting up a stiff resistance," muttered Bell dejectedly. "It looks like they'll be able to hold them."

Rhodan had to admit to himself that not everything was going as smoothly as he had imagined. The Anti had quickly adjusted themselves to the situation. When they realized that they could not defend all domes at once they had concentrated their strength into 3 of the buildings. From these points they were putting up a surprising counteroffensive.

While the Terrans were being held at bay in the other domes by a skirmishing action, the Antis were figuring on slowly beating back the attack from their central position. From a strategic point of view it was a very smart move.

Maj. Krefenbac was in radio contact with the various attack group leaders and he was frowning. "Henderson reports that he has 4 of the domes well under control, sir," he told Rhodan. "There's supposed to be only a few Antis left there, putting up a fight as they retreat."

"That's the way they pin down our men in various other locations," said Rhodan. "We definitely have to get reinforcements to the 3 main domes."

"No further word from Pastenaci," the major reported, sounding depressed. "My contact with him has been cut off. Sokura Tajamos' reports are about like Henderon's."

Rhodan turned to Col. Claudrin. "You take over the *Ironduke*, Jefe," he ordered. "It's time we gave those men down there some backup support."

He beckoned to Bell, who had been waiting with hands on his hips. Krefenbac jumped up but Rhodan shook his head. "No, Major, you're needed here on board. Bell and I will hunt up some more men that Claudrin may be able to spare."

"Do you really think that you should take part in the attack, sir?"

"Yes," said Rhodan quite simply.

Bell produced 2 battle suits. Pucky waddled excitedly between them. It could be seen by his actions that he was keen on joining his friends.

"No, little one," smiled Rhodan. "You still have to wait."

Disappointedly the mousebeaver went back to his seat.

"Good luck, sir!" said Claudrin gloomily, after the two had gotten ready.

Some minutes later when Bell and Rhodan drifted downward from the ship they beheld a picture of chaos below. The roofs of most of the dome structures had been partially destroyed. Clouds of smoke emerged from the openings in them.

Rhodan signalled to the 7 men who were with them to stick close together. From where they were now they could clearly make out the stiffly defended domes in question. In that area there was still a heavy exchange of fire going on whereas in the other places there was only an occasional flash of an energy beam or the brittle chatter of the automatic rifles.

Meanwhile the Antis had definitely determined that their mentally supercharged defence screens were no protection against nonmagnetic bullets.

Rhodan saw men on the roofs who were waving their arms. He could not make out what they were shouting but when he came closer he could understand them. Even though under heavy fire they were celebrating his appearance among them. Within a minute or so, every soldier knew that Rhodan had personally come into the battle.

"The Chief!" they yelled. "Perry Rhodan is coming!"

Within an hour the picture had changed. The Terrans in their Arkonide battlesuits were making headway now. At their head battled a tall, lean figure. The priests who saw him stared in disbelief. They thought they were looking at Thomas Cardif.

* * * *

"That is treason!" Cardif exclaimed heatedly. "Somebody must have betrayed us to Rhodan—otherwise how could he have found this world? Where are the traitors among the Antis?"

He was pounding on the table with his fists. His reddish Arkonide eyes gleamed their hatred for his father. Another defeat seemed to be looming before him. He had just learned that the Terran combat units had gained the upper hand in the 3 domes where the Antis had apparently been putting up a successful resistance.

Here were the all-important filtering and processing systems for converting the raw material used in the

Liquitiv preparation. The priests were determined to save the installation at any cost. Although even this plan was questionable now, no one took the defeat more tragically than Cardif.

Hekta-Paalat still maintained his composure even though part of his cloak had been singed by a stray energy beam. Like most of his kind he had given up maintaining his individual defence screen when he saw that the nonmagnetic ammunition of the automatics could get through

"There are no traitors among us," he replied, and as a side-thrust at Cardif he added: Although such could be true of *other* races..."

"Will we be able to hold these buildings?" he demanded to know, raising his voice to a shout.

"No," said Rhobal from the opposite side of the table.

The Terran's eyes flamed with anger. He came around the table and grasped the priest by his vestments. "We have to hold them off!" he yelled. "There's only one fighting ship over Okul. It couldn't have brought more than 5,000 men. I demand that you put me in charge of the battle. Together with our surviving forces I will save the installations."

The Antis who were present exchanged dark looks of negation. The shock of discovering that the Terrans' weapons could get through their personal defence screens had demoralized the priests. In any other circumstances they would have been able to turn the battle in their favour.

"We are going to make our escape," said Baaran calmly.

Cardif laughed scornfully. He folded his arms across his chest and nodded to the viewscreens where the demolished domes could be seen. "Escape?" he repeated derisively. "Where to, old man? To the jungle? Rhodan's troops will shoot at anything that moves out there."

"We go by sea," answered Baaran complacently. He did not seem disturbed by the fact that only a few hundred meters away the Antis were falling back before the invading enemy troops.

"What are we going to do—swim out of here?" asked Cardif. But there was a note of hopefulness in his voice.

He received no answer. Baaran and Rhobal had turned back to the viewscreens to watch the outcome of the battle.

* * * *

During the entire time of the fighting, Sgt. John Emery hadn't had a moment to even think. He had merely pushed forward like an automaton, blindly firing his automatic weapon at any priests who stood in his way. He knew he had been moving along with many men on either side of him but now he was aware that their numbers were dwindling for some reason.

His eyes were blurred by sweat. He struggled to breathe in the heated and smoke-filled air. He was lying on the floor at the end of a long, wide corridor while keeping three Antis at bay with his fire. They had

taken cover above him on a transverse gallery of some kind. Everywhere in the dome the sounds of battle were raging. A stray energy beam zipped past him from behind, singeing the back of his shoulder. He supported himself on his elbows and let loose again with the automatic rifle. When he saw the bullets rip a hole in the low partition of the gallery he grunted with satisfaction.

His opposition seemed to have ceased all action. For the first time he had a chance to take a look behind him. He was the only Terran in the entire corridor but he still didn't have time to think about it. He was still concentrating on the Antis because their silence was ominous.

He gave them 3 rapid blasts with the rifle, one after another, but they still did not return the fire.

Emery ran his tongue across his parched lips. The silence now pervaded the entire dome as though an order had been given for an immediate cease-fire. He got to his feet cautiously. It was risky to offer an open target to the Antis but he couldn't stay here in one spot forever. He sensed that something had changed. The battle had evidently been decided though which way he didn't know. It was hard to suppress the negative thought that their surprise attack might have failed. Could he be one of the few remaining survivors from the *Ironduke* ?

He stood there in the passage and looked down at himself. What he saw wasn't exactly reassuring. His uniform was singed and burned in many places. It was even doubtful that his battlesuit was still in operation. But that he could find out. When he switched on the antigrav he knew he was still in business so he grimly steered himself up to the transverse gallery. The Antis had deserted it. He landed safely and took a look around. From this vantage point he could see the entire extent of the large corridor. When he saw his former position down below him, an icy chill ran down his back. He had been facing the priests from there with no cover at all.

With his weapon in front of him, Emery pressed on into the dome's interior again. He was in a descending passage and had not gone far before he encountered a dark shape on the floor. It was an Anti—badly wounded but still alive. When he heard Emery's approach he rolled over. The sergeant aimed his automatic but the wounded priest watched him calmly. Emery was standing only 3 yards away from him.

"What are you waiting for?" the Anti asked in cultured Intercosmo. "Do you think that Casnan is afraid of death?"

"No," said Emery, but his throat was so dry that he practically croaked the word.

"What are you going to do?" asked Casnan.

"I'm going to keep on going," growled Emery hoarsely.

The priest smiled with a painful effort. He managed to rise up far enough to draw out a beam weapon from under him, which he regarded thoughtfully.

"No tricks," warned Emery. He was thinking that the man was trying to delay him for some reason.

Then he charged Casnan. The wounded man rolled to one side and aimed the weapon at him. With a loud curse Emery practically made a broad jump toward his opponent just as the glowing death-ray hissed past him. He reached the Anti and gave him a kick that made him cry out in pain but still with a great effort he swung his weapon upward.

But another kick knocked Casnan's arm to one side and Emery finally took possession of the energy gun.

"Alright," he grunted angrily. "Now well see what you're trying to hide back here."

Casnan's slight expression of alarm indicated to the veteran sergeant that he had picked up a hot trail.

"If you go farther you will die," threatened the priest. It was his last pronouncement, however, as he finally collapsed.

Paying no further heed to the fallen Anti, Emery started down the passage at a run. His pounding footsteps set up a resounding echo. The corridor took a sharp turn and suddenly he found himself facing a shaft that sank away into complete darkness. He dropped to the floor and listened.

Could he be mistaken or was that actually the sound of splashing water? What was down there at the bottom of the shaft? He unclipped a flashlight from his belt and turned it on. The walls of the shaft were completely smooth. The beam of light was unable to reach the bottom but Emery's thoughts were racing. He was thinking of the dying priest's warning. Was there really an unknown danger lurking here?

He clamped his jaws together and got up. Revving up his antigrav, he launched himself into the shaft.

* * * *

Perry raised his arm.

The 3 heavily defended domes had been taken. The combat robots were everywhere with their heavy weapons and were cleaning out the last nests of resistance. The dome city with its 67 buildings was practically destroyed.

One of the battle-weary men around him spoke up. "Sir, I'd like to know where they've all disappeared to."

It did seem strange since this was apparently their most important stronghold and yet from one minute to the next the priests had all left their battle positions. They had vanished as though into thin air. Rhodan estimated that at least 200 priests had fled to some unknown location. And Thomas Cardif was no doubt among the fugitives.

The dome was completely blockaded on the outside. Where could the Antis have gone? Was there perhaps a secret subterranean passage?

Rhodan called over one of the soldiers who was equipped with a field transceiver. "Get in touch with the *Ironduke* ," he told him.

Immediately the thundering voice of Col. Claudrin rattled the small speaker. "Congratulations, sir. You made it!"

From the triumphant sound of his voice it was evident that Claudrin had an unobstructed view of the

entire installation, and from his position in the Control Central the signs of the Anti defeat must have been unmistakable.

"A fairly large group has escaped us, Colonel," said Rhodan wearily. "There's probably a secret passage here someplace. Keep an eye out for them because we don't know where they're liable to reappear."

"The *Ironduke* will make a nice reception for them," confirmed Claudrin grimly. There was an obvious note of anger in his voice, mostly because he'd been forced to be a spectator so far.

Rhodan looked at the soldiers gathered around him. There were several hundred of them. The others were in the remaining dome structures and were undoubtedly being led by experienced officers to make a thorough search of everything.

This was the same task that faced him here.

"We're going to have a look around here now," Rhodan called out to his troops. "Make a systematic search through every room. You will immediately secure any area that can give us any clue concerning the manufacture of the Liquitiv."

Before he could continue there was a movement among the soldiers. There were some shouts and then an aisle was made to make way for 2 men who came toward Rhodan with an Anti between them. The Administrator noted at once that the priest was wounded. The 2 guards saluted.

"We have captured 8 Antis, sir," said one of them. "7 of them are about as talkative as a wooden Indian. Only our young friend here seems to have a story for us."

The wounded Anti was comparatively young. "They've left us sitting here," said this one angrily. "They just went off without us as soon as it was getting too dangerous for them."

Undoubtedly his irritation was aimed at the priests who had fled and taken Thomas Cardif with them.

"Don't feel too bad about it," said Rhodan calmly. "It doesn't alter the fact that we'll still capture them."

The Anti laughed derisively. He did not appear to share Rhodan's confidence. "I presume that you may be interested in our major product, Liquitiv?"

Rhodan thought of the human lives this conquest of Okul had cost him. He had to exert every effort of will to keep from striking the Anti in the face with his fist. "Speak!" he said in a hoarse tone.

The priest looked at him curiously. "You really resemble the traitor Cardif," he murmured wonderingly. "In fact, to a hair."

Rhodan's jaw muscles hardened visibly. Bell, who was standing beside him, gave the priest a warning look.

"That is highly possible," Rhodan answered him, still controlling himself outwardly. "After all, he's my son."

The Anti took a step back in amazement. The icy grey eyes seemed ready to bore a hole through him. Finally he began hastily to speak. "The main equipment installed in the domes," he said, "is principally for the refining processes that convert the raw material for the narcotic."

"From what plant do they extract the poison?" asked Bell.

"Plant?" The member of the Baalol cult shook his head in some surprise. "The poison is not a vegetable product. We extract it from the glandular secretions of a very weird animal."

"Animal?" queried Rhodan suddenly. "Explain that."

"They are armoured slugs with many feet, like a caterpillar, but they are over 6 feet long and almost 1½ feet thick. They are mostly to be found in the swampy regions of the jungle. On their horny heads they have a set of boring spines about 6 inches in diameter overall and they use them for rooting around in the ground. We call them slime diggers. The bore-head has some kind of pressure chamber in it that activates the spines for digging. These slugs have a special gland system and "That's what supplied us the basic material for the Liquitiv."

The Anti's voice was obviously becoming weaker. His injury seemed to be draining his strength rapidly. Rhodan gave the guards a signal and they took the man away with them.

"Well, now," said Bell, "that ought to do it. All we have to do now is catch one of those critters and analyse it."

I think your optimism is a bit premature," retorted Rhodan. "There may still be some unpleasant surprises ahead of us."

He issued further instructions. The men broke up into groups that were to search through every part of the demolished dome.

* * * *

The sound of lapping water became more audible. Emery practically held his breath as he floated down through the darkness. He had turned off his hand lamp. He allowed himself to drift downward slowly while holding himself in readiness to turn at the slightest sign of danger.

Once he thought he heard the throb of machinery but it could have been an illusion. Cool air was rising upward out of the depths. He realized that he might be in a deactivated antigrav shaft. Suddenly he felt the impact of solid ground under his feet. Directly in front of him was a bright slot of light in the wall. He placed his fingers into the opening and was surprised to see it widen. It was a double sliding door.

Peering through the vertical aperture he felt a shock of discovery when he recognized a subterranean harbour. A strange-looking craft lay alongside the loading pier and he could see a number of Antis climbing around on it. The great chamber was artificially lighted and there was an atmosphere of great haste and urgency. One after another of them was disappearing into the small ship.

Then Perry Rhodan appeared!

Emery came near to betraying himself with a startled yell. But the man was not Perry Rhodan—he was his son. Emery stood there frozen to the spot as he watched Cardif also board the craft. He knew it

would be senseless to risk a solo attack here. At any rate he had to get the news of this discovery to Rhodan at once.

Once everybody had gotten into the vessel it moved slowly into the middle of the harbour and then began to submerge. Obviously the submarine was being used to take them out to sea from beneath the dome. Apparently they had constructed an undersea escape tunnel for just this purpose.

Emery didn't wait any longer. As fast as the narrow lift shaft would allow, he shot upward to get back to Rhodan.

* * * *

Thomas Cardif used the periscope to take a last look at the battered Anti base on shore. Although he had once more eluded the grasp of his father and the Solar Fleet he had to face the fact of a definite military defeat and it negated any possible sense of triumph.

"Down periscope!" ordered Hekta-Paalat.

Cardif clapped the cross-handles into place.

"Prepare to dive," said Baaran.

"We're sneaking out of here like whipped dogs!" exclaimed Cardif bitterly. "But as long as I live I'll never give up trying to carry out my plan!"

"Sooner or later Rhodan and his men are going to discover the underground harbour," said Rhobal. "Then he'll know where we've gone. I'm sure he has ways and means of pursuing us, so our situation isn't any too hopeful. But for that very reason we have to keep our heads about us. Baaran, I believe that for the time being well be safest in the ocean depths."

Even Cardif had to admit that in their present condition they had no way of striking back effectively. They could only hope that with time there would be a turn of events. The tremendous setback represented by the loss of the Okul station was certainly not going to enable the Baalol cult to expand any operations now.

Rhobal noted that a scornful smile had touched Cardif's lips. "Do you have another of your great ideas?" he asked.

Cardif nodded. If the Terran researchers did not succeed in finding a remedy for the effects of the narcotic, Rhodan's Okul victory would only turn out to be an added cost to him in terms of lives and precious time. "I was just thinking of Valmonze," he explained. As the Antis looked at him in puzzlement he continued. "The patriarch has taken our last reserves of Liquitiv. We're not able to produce the raw material for any more because our installations have been taken or destroyed."

A light of response came into Hekta-Paalat's crafty eyes. He grasped Cardif's trend of thought. "That means that the Solar Imperium will be faced with millions of addicted persons who will rise in revolt when their nerve poison is unexpectedly shut off from them."

"Unless the Earth finds an effective cure," Baaran reminded them.

"Their scientists are fighting against only a very limited time," retorted Cardif. "They'll have to hurry if they're going to save many of the addicts they have on their hands now."

Regarded from this point of view, the Okul defeat did not appear to be quite so tragic to Cardif. The vague outlines of a fantastic plan began to form in his mind. The longer he thought about his daring inspiration the more certain he became that it could be carried out.

12/ NOT QUITE THE END

The conquered Anti base was a scene of devastation. More than 50 of the 67 domes had been destroyed. The condition of the other structures was such that they could no longer be utilized. The old-fashioned rocket batteries of the *Ironduke* had fairly riddled the buildings with an atomic barrage as soon as the troops had moved out of range. The nonmagnetic warheads were the only major ordnance that could get through the Anti defence screens.

Maj. Krefenbac manoeuvred his space-jet in a wide circle over the gutted city of steel. Columns of smoke were rising from many areas. Down among the ruins the search details could still be seen moving about. He could see the metallic reflection of combat robots as they provided each team with heavily armed security cover on the flanks. Any sudden outburst from an Anti ambush would be crushed with annihilating force. But it was highly unlikely that any nests of resistance were left. Rhodan had issued instructions to the ground units to make a thorough search for any signs of Ligitiv producing equipment.

"In a few years, sir," said Krefenbac, "the jungle will bury this place again. This elevation must have been a part of the forest originally."

"For some reason or other," pondered Rhodan, "the priests had a need for choosing a site this close to the sea. Otherwise, why wouldn't they have built their base more inland?"

"I have a simpler question," interjected Bell. "Those Antis were giving us a real bad time in 3 of the domes for awhile and then they disappeared without a trace. Thomas Cardif probably went with them. Where have they hidden themselves?"

Krefenbac frowned. "Perhaps they have matter transmitters," he said. "We haven't been through all the buildings yet."

"That's out," retorted Rhodan. "The *Ironduke* has plenty of sensitive instruments on board. Any 5th-dimensional discharge of energy would have been detected immediately. But Col. Claudrin has not reported any such event. No, Major, the Antis must have used another means of escape."

Krefenbac manoeuvred the space-jet into a curve, seeking a lower altitude. "Then only the jungle is left, sir," he replied.

Before Rhodan could answer him the regular telecom buzzed and the broad face of Claudrin appeared on the videoscreen. "Excuse me, sir," he rumbled thunderously, "but I have to interrupt your inspection flight."

"Has something new turned up, Colonel?"

Claudrin nodded. "One of the men brought back on board says he's discovered a subterranean harbour. He claims that the *Antis* and *Thomas Cardif* got away from there in a submarine."

Bell snapped his fingers and pointed toward the sea. "The ocean!" he cried out. "So that's where they've taken cover!"

"Back to the *Ironduke*, Major," ordered Rhodan. He turned again to Claudrin on the screen. "We're coming back to the hangar, Colonel. I'll speak to this man personally. In the meantime organize a well-armed troop detail so that we can raid that harbour."

Claudrin confirmed and the screen faded.

Bell brushed back his ever-stubborn red hair. "Now all we need is the right bait to catch our fish with," he said.

"Maybe I'm wrong," answered Rhodan, "but I don't think we even have the hook at this stage. In the Solar Fleet we don't have any amphibian ships."

Bell seemed to be indignant. He wasn't too fond of having his optimism crushed. "So we shoot across light-years," he grumbled, "and then run aground because of a little puddle!"

* * * *

Sgt. John Emery stood like a ramrod in the Control Central of the *Ironduke*. It could be seen that he had not held back at all in the recent fighting. With his more than 220 pounds he made a powerful impression. After several fruitless attempts he had given up trying to repair the tattered strips hanging down from his battlesuit. Each time Claudrin had raised his voice he had been startled by its volume. This was the closest he had ever come in person to these famous men.

"The space-jet has landed in the hangar," announced Averman. "Rhodan will be here right away."

Rhodan, Bell and the *Ironduke's* First Officer Krefenbac entered the Control Central and Emery snapped his heels together.

"That's the man, sir," boomed Claudrin's voice.

The sergeant swallowed bravely. "Sgt. John Emery, sir," he said. "Lt. Henderson's command."

Rhodan observed him in silence for a moment. "I can see your battlesuit has taken a beating," he smiled. "But now tell me about your discovery."

Emery described his experiences and expressed his belief that a subterranean escape channel must lead directly to the ocean.

"Do you feel up to finding that place again?" Rhodan asked him.

"Any time, sir!"

"Good. You are up for a promotion, Sergeant. Meantime, however, you will lead a group of men to that underground harbour. I want everything thoroughly checked out. See if you can find out where the submarine went. In case you find any other ships there, you are to secure them at once."

"Yessir!" snapped Emery.

Maj. Krefenbac took Emery to the troop detail that he was supposed to lead.

"Now we have to figure out a new problem," said Bell. "We have to find a way to catch those Anti fugitives."

John Marshall put in a word. "It's possible that the priests have a spaceship stationed somewhere. Perhaps they are heading for it by now?"

Rhodan nodded in agreement. He had no suitable means of searching the depths of the sea.

Pucky's high-pitched complaint was heard next. "It's time somebody came up with an idea," he chirped. He was visibly peeved that nobody had given him a chance to go into action. "We can't just sit around here in this iron coffin forever."

Aside from the fact that the mousebeaver always stood by his word, in this case nobody took his reproach seriously.

"But under no circumstances must the Antis be allowed to leave Okul," Rhodan continued. "We know where their undersea craft is at the moment, roughly. The longer we wait, the harder it will be to determine their location. They can't remain forever at the bottom of the ocean. Sometime or other they'll come up. That's when we'll have to have enough ships to make a complete surveillance of Okul. Don't forget the possibility that the priests could get reinforcements from outer space. Even the *Ironduke* couldn't handle a massive attack by larger fighting ships."

"You're right about that, sir," rumbled Claudrin.

Rhodan laid out his plan to the officers.

* * * *

Gen. Deringhouse swung his long legs out of bed and scowled at the opposite bulkhead of his cabin. This is how he had spent the greater part of the last few hours. His orderly, Cadet Oscar Hardin, looked at him uncertainly. He could well understand the general's impatience.

"If the *Ironduke* isn't heard from in the next half hour, I'm going to take action directly," Deringhouse revealed to the startled orderly. "The deadline we agreed on has long since passed."

"But sir!" Hardin dared to interject. "If the Administrator ever thought the linear ship was in danger he would have certainly gotten in touch with the Fleet!"

Deringhouse struck his palm against the edge of the bed. It seemed to be a superfluous piece of furniture because he had hardly used it—only as a place to sit. However, in his anxiousness to be of service, Hardin was worse than a mother hen. He seemed to be trained to read his superior's slightest wish from his expression. Deringhouse no longer dared to give any sign of weariness because at once the cadet would be at the bed and smoothing out the sheets or asking him if he wanted a cup of coffee or something.

Of course Deringhouse realized that the young man was only doing his duty but with all due respect to discipline and regulations he didn't have to overdo the thing. So all the general could do was look at the bulkhead wall and conduct himself as inconspicuously as possible.

"Don't forget the *Fantasy* ," he muttered. "Even the *Ironduke* isn't immune to shipwreck."

Hardin shook his head perplexed. Deringhouse suspected that the cadet was thinking desperately of how officers might be handled in a situation like this.

"That's true, sir," he replied diplomatically.

Deringhouse got up and stretched out his arms but at the last moment remembered to suppress his yawn. Hardin was watching him worriedly. It was the loudspeaker that rescued him.

"Control Central to Gen. Deringhouse! Central calling Gen. Deringhouse!"

Deringhouse switched on his intercom and identified himself, whereupon an impersonal-sounding voice gave him his message.

"We have contact with the *Ironduke* , sir. The Administrator wishes to speak to you."

Deringhouse spared himself the words for an answer. In a few quick strides he was out of his cabin, to Hardin's unhappy amazement. He stormed through the passage toward the lift shaft. When he entered the Control Central of the *Drusus* he immediately recognized Rhodan's face on the hypercom screen and breathed a sigh of relief.

"I hope you have good news, sir," Deringhouse told him while nodding to the 2 operators at the consoles. They silently moved out of his way.

Rhodan's expression was grave. "Okul is firmly in our hands," he reported. "We were able to destroy the main base of the Antis but some of them managed to escape in a submarine and they've gone into the depths of one of the many oceans here." The face on the viewscreen hardened. "Cardif is among the fugitives."

"Did you find out anything about the *Liquitiv*?" asked the general.

"Yes, but at the moment that's less important. I want to cut off the Antis and Cardif from any

escape—that is, from Okul—and I don't want them to get any help from the outside."

Deringhouse tensed and leaned closer to the screen. Veteran that he was, he knew what was coming next. "What do you propose, sir?"

"The Solar Fleet is on top alert," said Rhodan. I want these Antis pinned down, with no chance to get out of here. 5,000 units will fly at once to Okul and seal it off completely against any outside help."

"The ships are ready for takeoff, sir." The general's eyes were bright. At last all this waiting was over with. He knew that all crews in the Fleet were expecting his orders. They were ready for action.

Rhodan nodded to him. "Good, General. I want all superbattleships on their way to transition, along with the heavy cruiser formations and the lighter attack squadrons. At least we have Okul, so that pares not going to change."

Deringhouse gave him a promise: "You can count on that, sir!"

* * * *

The 4-dimensional space-time-continuum seemed to burst asunder as the great fleet formation virtually exploded out of hyperspace. The discharges created by the heavy spherical ships sent out a tidal wave of transitional warp shocks. This mighty cosmic disturbance even affected the minor system of 3 planets to which Okul belonged. Earthquakes and floods were the result.

But these side-effects of space flight could be overcome by linear-drive ships, *The Ironduke* could make a close approach to a planet within the semispace zone and be free of any such consequences. Hyperspace jumps always required a certain amount of caution. It was theoretically possible for the entire Fleet to go into transition right after takeoff from the Earth but in that case the home planet's orbit could be distorted, with calamitous results.

In the Control Central of *the Ironduke*, Perry Rhodan was watching the arrival of the other ships.

"Quite an impressive show," Bell confessed. He had witnessed this phenomenon often enough but had never failed to be fascinated by it.

This strong taskforce of ships would be enough to close off Okul so completely that, practically speaking, not even an insect would be able to take off or land without detection. Thousands of supersensitive tracking and sensing instruments would be watching the surface as well as outer space.

"Those sky-hoppers are the good comfortable kind I'm used to," chirped Pucky. "It would sure be a pleasure to teleport over to the Drusus and pick up some real peaceful snore time." He looked about him disdainfully. "Capt. Graybound knew what he was talking about. You can't impress me with these semispace 'sneakers'."

Although Rhodan was fully occupied with communications from the oncoming ships' commanders, he took time to give the mousebeaver an order. "You stay here on board *the Ironduke* Lt. Puck."

The Administrator instructed the individual commanders concerning the present situation. The veteran space officers responded at once. Within the hour, Okul was completely blockaded.

"So," said Rhodan, satisfied. "In any case we now have our friends pinned down. They'll really have to come up with something special to get away from us this time."

Jefe Claudrin manoeuvred the *Ironduke* into a stable orbit around Okul. With its high-speed capacity it was the best suited for this type of mission. The old-fashioned rocket batteries were aimed threateningly at the surface of the planet. Okul was surrounded by an impenetrable curtain of steel.

The staff officers of the Fleet gathered in the Control Central of the *Ironduke* for a strategy meeting. Rhodan was well aware that their actions: would not be able to produce results at the moment. Their ships were practically sentenced to a state of passivity. They could do nothing more than wait for the reappearance of the mysterious submarine.

For the second time the Administrator set up a contact with Terrania. He spoke with doctors Topezzi and Whitman and advised them of the discovery of the slime diggers. Since both doctors headed up the research operation they suggested that a couple of laboratory research ships be sent to Okul.

"That we will do," agreed Rhodan. "In the meantime we'll start collecting as many specimens of these creatures as we can. When the lab ships arrive, your specialists can get right to work so that no time will be lost."

Dr. Whitman revealed a new spirit of confidence. "I firmly believe now that we'll find a remedy," he said. "After all, the technical postulates are behind us. Now we know what this glandular poison consists of and how it is generated."

"I hope that your optimism is justified, Doctor," said Rhodan by way of conclusion.

He cut off the connection. When he turned around he encountered Bell's smiling face. The coldness vanished from the tall man's grey eyes. He turned to the assembled officers and began to speak in a firm and certain tone of voice.

13/ AFTERMATH: CHAMBER OF

THE LIVING DEAD

The nurse walks slowly along the row of white beds. Her gaze passes over the patients who lie motionlessly on their pillows. Sunshine floods through the large windows. The room has a clean and cheerful atmosphere. She smiles at one of the men but the staring face of the patient reveals no sign of response.

"Come on now," the woman says gently.

The man does not move, his gaze unfocused. His eyes are dull. There is no sorrow in this face, no pain, no suffering—it is completely apathetic.

The nurse leans over him and slowly lifts his arm. Stiffly, he finally follows the tug of her hands.

"Careful now," smiles the woman.

She knows that her words are not understood. All the patients here can no longer understand. Sometimes she feels that she is working in a chamber of the dead.

Now the man is standing by his bed. He does not seem to be aware of his surroundings. The nurse leads him down the long aisle but not a head turns to watch them nor is there a single shout or word from the patients.

"It's going to be a nice day," says the nurse.

When they come to the hall she guides her mute companion into the elevator. A little while later they come out into the park that surrounds the sanitarium. Birds are singing up in the trees. Men and women are seated on the benches with nurses beside them. All of the patients have the same horribly blank stare. They sit there stiffly, like so many puppets.

"Over there," says the nurse.

The man follows her obediently. He knows nothing more of this world. Perhaps she does not even exist for him. He and his fellow sufferers are vegetating away to shadows.

They are victims of the Liquitiv. They are mentally deranged and perhaps beyond recovery.

The nurse walks with her patient a half-hour through the park. Then she takes him back. All patients have to be taken out and exercised. The doctors insist on it although the nurses don't believe there's any sense to it. They know that this condition continues until the sick people die. And they die fast. They depart from life without a struggle.

"Wasn't that a nice walk?" says the nurse. But there is no answer nor will she ever receive one.

But now and again she has to say something if she is not to lose her own mind. It is her profession to help the mentally ill but often he asks herself if there's any purpose to it where these patients are concerned.

The morning walk is ended.

Now she is bringing the man back into the chamber of the living dead. Both of them walk along the long row of beds.

It is very still here. Only from a far distance can the song of the birds he heard. Meanwhile, assistant nurses have changed the bed, at the head of which is a small nameplate. The name of the man is printed there in black letters—a name he can no longer read. It is now only a record for files in the sanitarium but once it was a part of this man who has forgotten his former identity: Henry Mulvaney.

ORDER OF THE ACTION

[1/ LAST LAUGH](#)

[2/ GLOBAL DEADLINE](#)

[3/ THE BIG AMEN!](#)

[4/ DRAGON SEEDS](#)

[5/ LAST CLUE](#)

[6/ TARGET: OKUL](#)

[7/ WRONG COURSE](#)

[8/ HIDDEN GAME](#)

[9/ LOST: ONE PLANET](#)

[10/ BATTLE STATIONS!](#)

[11/ DAY OF THE IRONDUKE](#)

[12/ NOT QUITE THE END](#)

13/ AFTERMATH: CHAMBER OF THE LIVING DEAD

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

SPOOR OF THE ANTIS

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

"OVER 200 MILLION disciples throughout the Galaxy, this Baalol cult!"

"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..."

In the next instalment you will read of the pursuit "Into Unknown Depths", of the "Countdown to Conflagration", of "The Evil Alter Ego". All in—

FALSE FRONT

By

Clark Darlton