

ALMOST IMMORTAL

THE FANTASTIC FACES of the Antis are momentarily transfixed by a rapture of awe and wonderment—but the wonderment swiftly transforms itself into greed. There before them, floating in a shell of energy, are 20 keys to Eternal Life!

Thomas Cardif speaks: "Feast your eyes on these cell activators... waiting here for you... but you will never get them unless I give the mental order... AND OF MY OWN FREE WILL!"

THE MAN WITH TWO FACES

1/ GALACTIC ENEMY #1

TERRIBLY WRONG.

Something was terribly wrong and Reginald Bell couldn't quite put his finger on it. He shook his head in troubled thought as he laid the report aside. The document bore Perry Rhodan's signature. It was one of many that Bell had read this very day. All these documents had come to his desk directly from Rhodan's office. Some of them included Perry's handwritten comment: *approved*.

The same comment was on the report he was shaking his head about now: *Examination of the proposal of the Galactic Traders to establish an additional 300 trading posts within sovereign territory of the Solar Imperium*. The experts who had prepared the report had arrived at the unanimous opinion that the Springers' proposal should be rejected. But Rhodan had written his comment at the bottom of it: These trading settlements are to be sanctioned. Signed: Rhodan.

Bell sighed heavily. "Perry, Perry, what the devil's come over you since we've come back from Okul?"

Suddenly his temper got the best of him. He had to blow off steam by cursing aloud. Then he reached out to his button board and depressed the intercom switch.

Allan D. Mercant's face appeared on the videoscreen. When the Chief of Solar Intelligence saw Bell's fierce expression it told him all he needed to know for the moment. Mercant waited for Bell to speak his mind. It didn't look like very good news. Within 2 months after Rhodan had been brought back from Okul, wounded and in a deep state of mental shock, even laughter had become a thing of the past in his vicinity.

In his exasperation Bell blasted out: "Mercant, I've just gotten the input from the experts—you know, about the proposal for letting the star gypsies spread out farther into our own backyard. You know what Rhodan's written here? He says those rip-off artists can go ahead and set up their tents! Now how does

that grab you?"

To which Mercant calmly replied: "Well, if it keeps on going at this rate, unfortunately I'm going to be forced to increase Intelligence personnel by about 10 times their present strength."

"Then tell him that, Mercant!" shouted Bell.

Mercant begged off with a slight shaking of the head. "The Chief has become a man of solitary decisions, Bell."

"So what's it all going to come to, Mercant? The more time goes by, the stranger Perry becomes to me—like he'd been hooked on Liquitiv! He acts spaced out or something. I don't know. He never smiles anymore—not a trace of humour left in him. Everybody keeps out of his way, even Pucky."

"Maybe that's the crux of the matter. Maybe we're making it too obvious to him that he's become strange to us. Could be that our reaction to him is the very thing that drives him further into his isolation."

"Oh, butterfly pie", Mercant! If he's head sick so let him take a vacation, but let's not have these stellar pirates take over our whole back lot!"

"Face it, Mr. Bell—you're his closest friend," Mercant reminded him. "It's your duty to indicate this to the Chief."

"No way!" Bell exclaimed hotly. "Look, I've had to swallow some rough head-knockings already from the medicos. They leaned on me because I was giving Perry a bad time. Those drug-pluggers are after me all the time to lay off. They keep telling me to remember he's under shock therapy and that I shouldn't rock the boat when they're trying to bring him through his convalescence. But somebody's going to have to get to him when he makes wrong decisions. From all appearances I'm the worst candidate in the bullpen for that. But Mercant, you're much more of a diplomat than I am. Now why don't you drop by my office and pick up this proposal decision. Take it back in to Rhodan. I hope he'll listen to you and stop this Springer invasion before it becomes a fact."

He noted Mercant's hesitation but didn't press him further. Allan D. Mercant was not a man who could be pushed. The decision had to come from himself.

"Alright," Mercant said finally. "I'll give it a try. You may expect me in 10 minutes, Mr. Bell."

"Great!" As Bell cut off the connection he uttered a heartfelt sigh of relief. But his concern for Rhodan remained.

Things had started to go wrong from the time Rhodan had decided on Okul to face his son Thomas Cardif alone. When they finally picked him up again he was wounded and almost out of his head. They had made a high-speed emergency flight with him back to Earth in order to get him into the hands of the doctors.

The greatest medical authorities had rushed to Rhodan's bedside and all their diagnoses were amazingly in common accord. The panel of experts also agreed very quickly on the best method of treatment for him. This was the Thmasson shock method, a therapy jointly developed by Terran and Ara doctors which minimized the intensity of deep mental disturbances so that when the course of treatment was over with the patient would recall it only as a vague dream.

After that the recovery process had moved forward with amazing swiftness in Rhodan's case. Only 3 days after application of the Thmasson therapy the authorities were able to announce: *Perry Rhodan, Administrator of the Solar Imperium, is on his way to recovery. He has passed all critical danger. No further bulletins will be issued.*

Within the stellar empire of Terra, Rhodan's illness had only generated sporadic concern here and there. Everything was overshadowed by the Liquitiv crisis and the millions of raving addicts. While the administrative staff in Terrania was still worrying about Rhodan's mental health, new large shipments of Liquitiv were brought into the Solar Imperium for the first time since the depletion caused by the blockade. This supply was sufficient to return the raging addicts to an apparent state of normalcy. In conjunction with this, however, the most gigantic preparations were being made both in Earth-controlled regions and in the Akron Imperium to complete an effort in only a few weeks which would provide massive production plants for generating sufficient quantities of the addition-healing Allitiv.

Rhodan had been released from the clinic in Terrania for some time already when it became known that all addicts would have him to thank if Allitiv succeeded in curing them of their narcotic addiction. At no time in the history of the Solar Imperium had Rhodan's star gleamed so brightly in the firmament of popularity as during those weeks of new rising hope.

And never before had any man been so accursed as Thomas Cardif. The Arkon worlds as well as the inhabitants of the Sol System knew the role that this man had played. A Universal search was being made for him; of course he was seen everywhere but whenever the clues were followed up they always led nowhere. Thomas Cardif appeared to be hiding out somewhere in the star jungle—in unexplored regions of the galaxy.

No one had guessed the actual truth!

No one could imagine that this man who was being sought by millions was in Terrania. Thomas Cardif had taken over the role of Perry Rhodan! Nobody knew that Perry Rhodan had been kidnapped and was now in the clutches of the Antis.

But the man who represented himself as Rhodan realized more and more each day what a risky game of roulette he was playing. The danger wasn't so much with the mutants whom he had feared so much at first. With them he used a double brain faculty which enabled him to simulate Rhodan's brainwave patterns whenever he knew that a telepathic or tracer mutant was around. This fact eliminated even the slightest suspicion that he could be taken for Thomas Cardif.

No. The danger of discovery lay in an entirely different area. Although he had absorbed most of his father's knowledge, he did not possess the full magnitude of that intuition which had made Rhodan stand out from the masses of men.

Prof. Kalup was the first to get suspicious when he went into discussions with Cardif-Rhodan over development work concerning the linear space-drive. The scientist had stopped him in the middle of a statement to look at him incredulously. "Sir," he asked him, "where did you get such an idea as that?"

So Cardif-Rhodan had no alternative than to fall back on the Thmasson shock therapy as an excuse for extricating himself at the moment.

The Thmasson shock spectre seemed to cast its shadow over Terrania from then on. The man presumed to be Rhodan was seen far less frequently in the company of scientists, engineers or technicians. Ever since his return from Okul he had not manifested a single electrifying idea that might serve to rescue some

stagnating project and drive it forward.

All the time it was something like: "The Chief doesn't have the old flash touch for technical problems—but it's because of the Thmasson shock therapy." Cardif had quickly learned to capitalize on that one perfect excuse.

With cool premeditation he had gone to his physicians and pointed out what had happened in his discussion with Prof. Kalup, even emphasizing his lapse of competence. "Is it possible," he asked them in mock concern, "that the Thmasson shock treatments have robbed me of some of my former thinking capacity?"

The doctors could not give yea or nay to the question. With a great inner sense of satisfaction he had left them with that to contemplate. So all dangers of this nature were always avoidable henceforth by his pretense of still being under the effects of the therapy.

In the public eye, however, he had not changed. Cardif was too much like his father, not only in outward appearance but also in many intellectual respects. In addition the knowledge he had taken over from him came in handy and with his own talents combined he had been able to make such a clever use of these assets that often he would appear to be Perry Rhodan to his father's closest friends.

But when he was alone—and from week to week he shut himself off more and more—then a real spectre would arise to haunt him. He was overcome by the increasing awareness of being a puppet in the hands of the Antis. They held the real Rhodan as their trump card and if he, Cardif, failed to dance to their tune they might put the thumbscrews to him.

Even at night he hardly slept any more.

In desperation he sought for a way to become independent of the Baalol cult. The longer he played Rhodan's role the more he was gripped by a sense of power and this new intoxication was serving to push his former hatred of his father more and more into the background. But he had also seen even this danger. Like one addicted he fought against the narcotic of power. He must not let it control him because one thing he'd been certain of from the very first minute: he could only operate as Cardif but never as Perry Rhodan.

The transference on Okul had only been a partial success. He attributed it to the limited time at his disposal, never suspecting that the cause of it lay within himself. The egoic 'I' in Thomas Cardif was simply not capable of being subordinated in this pressing situation.

He heard someone knocking. "Yes?" he called out, startled. He was brought back to reality from the depths of brooding. By the time he looked toward the door he had collected himself. "Oh it's you, Mercant," he said as he saw his visitor enter. "I don't seem to recall putting you on the calendar for any discussion just now."

Formerly Perry Rhodan had spoken sharply like this once in awhile but only when justified. Since his return from Okul this tone was almost habitual with him.

The Solar Marshal did not allow himself to be intimidated or frightened away. He simply walked right in and took his customary seat to the left of Rhodan's desk. He spread out the experts' report and began. "Sir, I found this proposal study in Mr. Bell's office. May I bring to your attention the fact that the manpower strength of Solar Intelligence will have to be increased many times if 300 additional trade settlements are to be opened in the colonial territory of the Solar Imperium, on top of the many

commercial bases the Galactic Traders already have there?"

Cardif-Rhodan's grey eyes held unwaveringly on Mercant's face. His sharply chiselled features revealed nothing of his train of thought. Thomas Cardif was thinking at this moment of the Antis and was cursing them mentally. It was due to pressure from them that he had approved the proposal of the Galactic Traders. He was a victim of their first attempt at extortion! Four days ago they had given him unmistakable signals by way of a Trader delegation that they would be able to judge his comportment accordingly if a negative decision was reached with regard to the trading post proposal.

The Springer patriarch who had brought him this message had not suspected exactly *what* he was transmitting to the First Administrator. But Cardif-Rhodan had perceived what was behind the hearty greetings. The name Fut-Gii told him enough. Fut-Gii had sent him greetings! But Fut-Gii had been done away with 4 years ago while working for the Antis because as a Galactic Trader he had not been willing to wear the yoke of service to the Baalol priests.

And now here was Mercant who was trying to convince him to revoke his authorization of the proposal.

"Anything else, Mercant?" he asked coldly.

The Solar Marshal was clearly amazed. He stared at the man who to him was his Chief. "Sir," he stammered—and for him confusion was rare—"this can be a matter of life and death to use, expanding the already large number of alien settlements by another 300. We are simply not in a position to keep an eye on all these Springer counting houses in the Solar Imperium—not to the extent that our security demands. We're opening our gates for a Trojan Horse!"

"You let me worry about that, Mercant! I have approved the proposal. Isn't that enough?"

Inwardly, Thomas Cardif was highly agitated. He could well understand the Chief of Solar Intelligence. He also recognized what lay hidden behind the Springer proposal: a surreptitious takeover of the Solar Imperium by the Galactic Traders, with the priests of Baalol looming right behind them.

Mercant's face became a mask. His lips pressed together. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he gathered the report together and placed it in his portfolio. He nodded wordlessly to the Chief and got up and left.

Cardif's eyes followed him to the door. When it closed behind Mercant, he took a long deep breath. He clenched his fists in a helpless rage. "You Antis!" he muttered between his teeth. Then he was slightly startled when the videophone screen flickered to life.

Reginald Bell was calling him. He couldn't know yet that Mercant's visit had been unsuccessful. "Perry," he said, "Reception just informed me that you're ready to receive an Arkonide by the name of Banavol. Would you mind telling me what this man wants from us?"

Cardif was repeatedly irritated that Bell's curiosity kept mixing into his private affairs. He had often attempted to cut him out of such matters but every barb of innuendo had shattered against Bell's thick insensitivity. He wouldn't let go of the reins, it seemed, and against Cardif-Rhodan's most strenuous objections he managed to put up his own brand of argument: "Perry, as long as you're not 100% fit yet, I'll keep an eye on you. I owe you that and someday you'll thank me for it. I'll be damned if this Thmasson shock business hasn't turned you into a stranger to all of us! But do you get my point?"

Thomas Cardif had gotten the point, which he remembered now while Bell was questioning him. However, he was not at a loss for a plausible answer. "My thick friend, it happens that Banavol's visit

has to do with Thomas Cardif. Does that satisfy you?"

No. Reggie Bell was not at all satisfied. He was too well acquainted with the Arkonide mentality. In his opinion they were the biggest donks in the galaxy. Nor was he loathe to express that opinion now. "So when Solar Intelligence is beating its head against a blank wall, you think an Arkonide, of all people, can help us? OK, that's fine if you're not hurting for time. So you're really going to see him, Perry?"

Although Cardif was inwardly resentful of Bell's stubbornness he attempted a touch of levity. "Yes, Fatso, I'd like to. It's nice that you've given your blessing. Anything else?"

Bell seemed to swell visibly with sudden impatience. "Yes, Perry, one thing more. Will you kick that habit of saying 'anything else?' You know it was bad enough before when you used that brush-off about 10 times a month but now it's a broken record—about 10 times a day! So try to knock it off, will you, *oldsock*?"

"Yes, nurse," replied Cardif, attempting a sarcastic smile. "Thanks for the tip!"

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Bell chuckled slightly as he cut off the connection. Maybe Perry's recovery was making some progress after all, he thought. Once in awhile he cracked a smile at least.

When Mercant came in, Bell didn't need to ask any questions. The answer was written clearly on the Solar Marshal's rigid face as he tossed his portfolio onto Bell's desk. "The invasion is on!" he reported.

"You're kidding!"

"Am I?" retorted Mercant wearily.

"What reason did he come up with this time, Mercant?"

"Nowadays who gets any reasons from him?" Mercant replied. "So what happens now, Bell?"

"Allan, how much preparation time do you need for beefing up the personnel in your outfit?"

Mercant waved his arms in a gesture of futility. "What do you mean, beef it up?" he protested. "I don't know of a hundred extra good men I could scare up, let alone 2,000 of them! Mr. Bell, you know even the Intelligence service is something that has to be learned. I'll tell you this now so that there'll be no misunderstanding between the two of us: if another 300 Springer trading posts are set up in addition to what we're faced with already, that will overtax the capacity of Solar Intelligence to handle its job. And before that happens I'll apply for my pension!"

For once Bell controlled himself. "Mercant, I'm going to take a long chance. What I have in mind I'm telling you strictly in confidence. I'm going to make a slight amendment to that proposal—to the effect that only 100 new Springer camps will be allowed inside the Solar Imperium in any one year. That way you won't be faced with an invasion. It'll take those con artists 3 years to make full use of the agreement. So on that basis are you still going to apply for your pension?"

"Mr. Bell, if you can do that. . ." Mercant's eyes had lighted up for a moment but then the hope faded. "If the Chief gets wind of it he'll quash the whole thing."

"I'll worry about that if it happens, Mercant. By the way, do you know who's with the Chief at the moment? He's an Arkonide and he's here on Thomas Cardif business!"

"Do you know his name?" asked Mercant, not overly surprised.

"Banavol."

"He's known. Arkonide mother, Arkonide father; very alert, extremely intelligent; quite efficient and enterprising. For some years now we've worked with his office"

"Who? You mean Intelligence?"

"Yes, he built up a financial consulting firm; his was one of the few espionage channels in the Arkonide Imperium that we could do anything with. So now here's Banavol with the Chief and the subject is Cardif. And there's another point, incidentally, where the Chief has changed: he's more persistent than ever before in his efforts to locate his son. The only thing is, I don't know if it's a desirable change or not. Anyway, right now we have other things to worry about."

Neither of them knew, however, the things this man had to worry about that they took to be Perry Rhodan.

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The man sitting opposite Cardif-Rhodan appeared to be a typical Arkonide. Banavol was about 30 years old by Arkonide reckoning and openly flaunted his arrogance. To him the First Administrator of the Solar Imperium was a member of a lower and more primitive species. He had hardly seated himself before he opened the conversation.

"We both know that between us there is no need to discuss the subject of Thomas Cardif, Terran. Can I speak freely here? What I mean is: not overheard!"

This threw Cardif into a crisis of alarm. Banavol's impudent words were an indication that he had a message of the greatest importance. There was a flash of response in Cardif's eyes but it was the only visible sign of his excitement.

"Can I speak freely here?" Banavol repeated insistently. When his question still went unanswered, the Arkonide appeared to relax unconcernedly. "Very well. It's no concern of mine. I have come here directly from the Crystal World. Fut-Gii is waiting for a reply to his greetings, Terran!"

The threatening innuendo failed to elicit a contradiction. Cardif smiled thinly.

The Arkonide continued. "Well, I am doing what I'm getting paid for. But they're not paying me for making long speeches. Rhobal wants 20 cell activators! And with that I've earned my money, Terran. I

wouldn't know what else to say."

Something of menace lingered in Banavol's voice and attitude; its threat seemed to lurk within his red Arkonide eyes. Yet he sat there in apparent unconcern.

Cardif-Rhodan's reaction had deceived him, however.

Rhodan's image, seated opposite him, had not twinged or uttered a whimper when the name of the high priest Rhobal was mentioned. He had shown even less reaction when Banavol voiced the Anti's demand: 20 cell activators! 20 anti-mutants were desirous of acquiring an eternal life like that of the Emperor Gonozal VIII. The only person who could provide them with these egg-sized activators was Rhodan's double, Thomas Cardif.

In their minds it would be easy for him to obtain the galactic coordinates of the synthetic world Wanderer. The Antis knew through Cardif that *It* was Rhodan's friend. In the opinion of the Baalol priests it would be a minor task for Cardif to locate Wanderer, request 20 cell activators from *It* and return with the miracle devices.

"Banavol, inform Rhobal that his request is unfeasible," said Cardif.

The Arkonide shrugged. "I'm not authorized to negotiate with you, Terran. If Rhobal's request doesn't suit you, you can complain about it at the Springer base on Pluto. They are waiting there for you before you fly to Wanderer. It's a good thing you reminded me of that or I'd have forgotten to mention it."

Since the beginning of the Solar Imperium no one had ever spoken in this tone before to the First Administrator. But apparently Banavol knew that the man across from him was not Perry Rhodan. The Antis must have entrusted their greatest secret to him.

Thomas Cardif had lived among the anti-mutants for almost 50 years. There was no Terran who knew the insidious priests better than himself. But for that very reason he knew that Banavol was not a threat, because whenever the Antis assigned tasks of this nature to anyone, such messengers were no longer free to act of their own volition. So Banavol must be in the same inextricable position as himself—trapped by some extortion of the Baalol priests.

"I'll stay a little longer," said Banavol, "so that my visit will take up an appropriate amount of time. And now, Terran, I'd like to discuss the subject of Thomas Cardif. With your permission, at first I couldn't believe it when Rhobal paid me a visit and related a certain secret to me. But some time later I saw the famous Perry Rhodan. Cardif, you look better than he does. There is nothing much left of your father's former greatness. But isn't it strange that the Antis are a thousand times more in awe of a powerless Perry Rhodan than they are of his son? Do you understand me, Terran?"

Thomas Cardif understood exactly what Banavol was saying and why he was saying it. He wanted to make it clear to him again that he was only a marionette for the Antis and that as soon as he ceased to be useful to them they would cast him aside like an empty shell. The permit for an additional 300 commercial bases inside the Sol System was the first step in a bloodless takeover of the Solar Imperium. And he was being used as a catspaw for their plans of conquest!

Some moments passed while each man stared at the other. Thomas Cardif's face still showed no reaction.

"With all due respect, Terran," said Banavol finally, "you have very good self-control. On this point

Rhobal did not inform me very well. But now I suppose I can go—or would it be better to stay awhile longer?" The arrogant smile never left his face.

"Why not stay awhile, Arkonide?" answered Cardif. It wasn't said in a tone of friendliness but he returned the smile.

The 2 men facing each other were equal partners because they were both in the same kind of trap. But while Banavol continued to converse and Rhodan's son sought to meet him in repartee a plan was taking form in his mind. Suddenly he was intrigued by the idea of conforming to Rhobal's demands and also he began to be intrigued by this game of matching his strength with that of the Antis. But he still expressed his refusal to Banavol. He told this agent of the Antis to advise Rhobal that Cardif was not plaything in their hands.

"It that your last word, Terran?" inquired Banavol as he prepared to leave the office. "You refuse to fly to Wanderer?"

Cardif's answer was almost imperious in its one. "I'm quite certain I've made myself clear to you, Arkonide!"

"As you wish, Terran. It is not my task to transmit your refusal to the priests. The only place you can do that is at the Springer post on Pluto. I have no further responsibility in the matter."

Cardif could believe him. He knew how the Antis worked. Well, he had nothing against a flight to Pluto, at least, and he had no qualms about meeting an Anti in the disguise of a Springer. For the first time since taking over Rhodan's role he felt in good spirits. He smiled ironically as Banavol left the room. The smile was still there when he made a videophone call to Bell.

"Yes?" he heard him respond. Bell was only thinking of the Thomas Cardif situation. "Was that Arkonide able to say anything important about Cardif, Perry?"

Cardif-Rhodan made a lightning shift of his thoughts. When he replied he was calm and collected. "Banavol didn't have much significant to say, Fatso—aside from maybe 3 clues that could possibly lead somewhere. But that's not why I've called you. I don't want to lose sight of what Mercant had on his mind. Do you follow me? I'm talking about the proposal of the Galactic Traders. I'd like to go along with him and see that approval changed—to the extent that the Springers will only be allowed to set up 100 new commercial bases a year in the Imperium..."

"Perry!" Bell interrupted with enthusiasm. "Are you putting out some of those telepathic tendrils again? You just read my thoughts! That was exactly what I was intending to do but I wanted to have it all laid out first before I showed you the changes."

Cardif maintained his friendly expression although inwardly boiling over Bell's arbitrary action. Very smoothly he replied: "I can't quite rely on my telepathic ability yet—not that it was ever very much in the first place—but I'm glad we are both agreed on this."

This only served to remind Bell that he was not in agreement at all with allowing Springers into the Sol System in the first place. But he thought he had found a favourable moment for changing Rhodan's mind entirely. "Hey, Perry," he suggested, "don't you think we ought to tell these star gypsies to shove their whole ballawax? All those greedy sky-peddlers can give us is grief in the long run, so I say later with them!"

Now Cardif-Rhodan's tone was noticeably cooler. "I have my own special plans for the Springers." He hoped that this would be enough to dampen Bell's curiosity but it wasn't.

"What plans are you talking about, Perry?"

"I'll tell you more about them later. But don't issue the revised approval of the Springer proposal yet. Before that I want to take another look at their trading post on Pluto." He watched Bell's face carefully on the videoscreen.

But his heavysset listener only laughed. "Now you've really got me curious about your plan, Perry! Galloping galaxies—what's Pluto got to do with those trouble merchants?"

"That you will know soon enough, my friend."

"That 'soon enough' bit is another one of your broken records, Perry," Bell commented pointedly. "But I'm cutting off so I can advise Mercant about the proposal. When are you taking off for Pluto?"

"Probably tomorrow, That's all, Bell."

The videophone shut off. Cardif-Rhodan got up and walked to the window. How often his father had stood here and looked out over the rooftops of Terrania at the landscape beyond, which had all been a desert not too long ago. How often Rhodan had been here alone with his problems, big and small, struggling through the years for decisions!

It was now much the same for his son, except that his problems were in another category. Everything that he considered or planned was basically on the other side of legality—nothing more than one crime after another. And how had it all come about?

"Rhodan..." he heard himself say bitterly, and the hate for his father flamed up anew within him.

In taking over the role of Rhodan he had played the wrong number in this cosmic shell game. His neck was out. For better or worse he was totally dependent upon the Antis. Through Banavol they had put in an order for 20 cell activators. When Thomas Cardif thought of this he smiled grimly. It wasn't difficult to imagine what the motivations were for such a request: 20 of the most influential Baalol priests were toying with the idea of reaching for relative immortality by means of the activators.

Cardif nodded in secret satisfaction.

His plan was shaping up more and more. It was to become a test of power between his and the Antis and he was convinced now that he would win that contest.

"Alright," he muttered aloud to himself. "So be it!"

In the mist of distance a gigantic shadow swept across the Earth. One of the Solar Fleet's superbattleships was coming in for a landing. The *Wellington* was returning from a mission.

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Pucky the mousebeaver had a visitor in his own house, which was a comfortable bungalow on the edge of the Goshun salt lake. Rhodan's oldest and most intimate colleagues and friends lived here in this residential colony. Life was grand and peaceful here, far removed from the rush and bustle of Terrania. But in spite of this, Pucky's visitor seemed to be unusually troubled. Even the mousebeaver's mood was not the best at the moment because his incisor tooth remained hidden and the rascally twinkle was absent from his shining mouse eyes.

Five minutes of silence had gone by before Pucky finally chirped a remark. "An icicle is nothing, John, compared to *him* !"

John Marshall, Chief of the Mutant Corps, was the best telepath other than Pucky within his group. He nodded in agreement since the bitter comment was all too appropriate. All he could do in his mind was underline the statement for emphasis. Ever since the Chief had returned from Okul he had continued to build up an invisible wall around himself. It was increasingly noticeable to his old friends that he was no longer the Perry Rhodan they had known but rather the *Administrator* alone—a lonely celebrity, unapproachable and frighteningly impersonal.

Pucky lay on his daybed and John Marshall had stretched himself out in a suspended hammock couch. Beside the mousebeaver was an assortment of fresh carrots which Pucky had personally grown in his garden. Aware of his obligations as a host, he reached into the mountainous heap and picked out one of the finest specimens. "One for you, John?"

To his surprise the telepath didn't turn down the offer as he usually did. "Yes, hand it over! Vitamins can't hurt at a time like this. Carrots are good for the brain and mine's beat! Pucky—just between the two of us, I have a question: can you still pick up the Chief's thoughts?"

There was an old standing regulation that prohibited the telepaths from using their paranormal faculties in relation to Perry Rhodan or any of his top staff of coworkers. Their thought patterns were forbidden territory and John Marshall had always been among those mutants who had taken care to see that the order was obeyed. On the other hand, Pucky had always been one of the worst offenders in this regard and had not even drawn the line where it came to Rhodan's thoughts. Today, however, even Marshall was ready to violate the rules.

"Yes, John, I can reach his thoughts. But whenever I tune in on his wavelength I get the shudders. What have those medicos done to him? John, have you noticed how little the Chief seems to care about whether or not this lousy Liquitiv curse is wiped out? Even the Swoons, the little cucumber people, feel they've been betrayed and sold out, because the Boss never sees them anymore. I'm telling you, if I knew that the medicos were to blame for Perry's change I'd take that whole cloud-nosed crowd of hippocratic oafs and give them a douse of salts in the lake!"

"Take it easy, little buddy..."

But Pucky wasn't to be deterred now in expressing himself. "So how come you're here to see me if I can't say what I think about our Chief? No matter how often I sneak into his thoughts I can't tap the patterns that used to be there—the ones that were always concerned with Thomas Cardif! Doesn't he ever think of his misguided son anymore?"

"You mean you've changed your opinion about Cardif, Pucky?"

"I had to, John. Now I'm even sorry for all the times I stood up for him.. But tell me now—in these past

weeks haven't you also done some snooping around in the Chief's head? Go-ahead John, you can level with me. I wouldn't snitch on you even if we have a few spats now and then. Haven't you noticed something peculiar about him?"

In some surprise, John Marshall straightened up. "What do you mean, Pucky?"

"If I only knew! Since that crazy shock treatment the Chief has turned into somebody else. He can't read thoughts anymore and as far as technical things go, I know more than he does now. He doesn't know how to laugh anymore. But all that's beside the point. There's something in his brain pan that wasn't there before—something strange and kind of blurry. Sometimes when I try to read his mind it's like standing in front of a frosted glass screen and behind that screen I see shadows. . . phantom thought shapes in the background, as though they were hiding. Then it all clears away—the shadows and the screen along with them. Have you ever noticed that, John?"

The Mutant Corps chief stared long and thoughtfully at the mousebeaver. It was an effort to face the truth. "Little one, you've just put your finger on something that's been bothering me. Yes, I've seen those shadows! Ye cosmic gods!—do you think those phantoms are the key to what's changed him?"

Even the best telegraphs in the Solar Imperium did not suspect that the *shadows* were actually the thought impulses of Thomas Cardif which had been buried under the hypnotically-implanted knowledge of Rhodan.

After awhile Marshall spoke again. "Pucky, from now on well have to keep a sharp watch over the Chief to prevent him from making any disastrous mistakes. It's enough to drive one to despair when you think of all the damage Rhodan's only son has caused."

"Galactic Enemy Number One! I'd have never dreamed I'd say such a thing about Thomas. But in spite of his genius he must be psychopathic."

"Insane with hate for his father; and on top of it a man of 2 different worlds—half Terran, half Arkonide."

Pucky nodded his agreement but added: "In spite of everything I can't understand how a man could walk over dead bodies in order to destroy his own father."

"Don't forget the Antis, little one. Cardif is in their power and once they have somebody in their clutches they never let him go. Cardif has to dance to their tune. He is no longer the master of his own will."

2/ THE EXTORTIONIST

"Now things are getting *real* cute!" exclaimed Bell in complete exasperation.

He glanced sharply at the intercom which had just brought him a message from Rhodan. Then he got up from his desk and went out. While going through the outer reception room he snapped: "I'll be in Mercant's office."

When the outer door had closed behind him, someone was heard to say: "Old Chubby's mood gets

worse as the Chief gets weirder!"

By this time Bell was already headed below in the antigrav shaft, en route to Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant. Halfway down the shaft he met Prof. Manoli on his way up.

"Just the man I wanted to see!" shouted the red-haired Solar First Deputy. "Wait a sec, I'm changing floors!"

He moved into the upward force flow, sailed a few meters higher and came out at the next level with the Professor in tow.

"You going to see the Chief?"

Manoli looked at him in astonishment. "Yes, but how did you know that? Rhodan gave me strict orders to keep my visit a secret."

Bell concealed his own surprise. "Do you know why he wants to see you, Prof?"

"He wants a post-treatment checkup."

Bell nodded. "Maybe with enough time I'll get used to Perry's cloak and dagger antics. Did Marshall and Pucky see you, Manoli?"

"A few hours ago, sir. I take it you've been informed, right?"

"And how! What do you make of these *shadows* in Rhodan's brainwaves?"

The Professor shrugged somewhat helplessly. "Unfortunately we are not telepaths. Our equipment can't come near to matching the abilities of a mind reader. So all we have to go on is their own data, which is anything but reliable from a medical standpoint. We need curves, values, charts. We would have to have precise measurements of the intensities..."

"So you and your buddies don't have any of that," Bell interrupted. "I'd like to get your private opinion of the Chief, Manoli. Is Perry healthy or sick? Yes or no—no fooling around!"

This was typical of his nature: no fooling around. He always preferred to strike to the bottom line, straight out. He had often taken some awful nosedives this way but just as often he had beat everyone else to the punch.

Being accustomed to think only in medical terms, Manoli tried to squirm out but Bell's merciless glare finally forced him to express a personal view. "The Chief is well, Mr. Bell. It's only that he suffers from a certain depressiveness..."

Bell thought he hadn't heard him correctly. "What's he suffering from? You mean he's in the dumps or something? And that you call healthy? Come on now, don't you know by now that Rhodan's mentality isn't geared for depressive thinking? How come you don't buy this bit about the *shadows* that Marshall and Pucky noticed?"

"Because medical science has no knowledge of *shadows* appearing in brainwave patterns! What the 2 telepaths say they've seen is layman nonsense! Mr. Bell, what do you think would happen if the Chief caught onto the fact that the mutants are poking around in his thoughts...?"

This was the wrong way to go with Bell, who interrupted him abruptly. "What do you think that *I* will do to you, my dear Manoli, if you tell Rhodan anything about it? Do we understand each other?"

"You just made yourself quite clear!" replied Manoli, obviously shocked.

In a friendlier tone, Bell added: "Let me know the results of your examination, please."

"No—! Bell, there's no way I can do that. I'm a doctor. The code of ethics..."

"Jam the code of ethics!" Whereat Bell left the bewildered Professor standing there. His former comrade from the long-ago moon-landing project in the 20th century had never spoken to him in this tone before. Until now they had always been the best of friends. When Bell disappeared into the lift shaft, Manoli continued to stare at the spot where he had last seen him.

Could there really be anything to the observations the 2 telepaths had made, he asked himself—but why couldn't they give him a better explanation of these ominous shadows? When he continued on his way to the Chief's office he decided to give him more than the usual checkup.

* * * *

Meanwhile Bell was already in a surface car and had driven to the headquarters of Solar Intelligence. "Is Mercant in?" he asked as he entered the reception lobby of the big building.

"Yessir. Solar Marshal Mercant is in his office."

Shortly thereafter, Bell was seated across from him.

"Well?" asked Mercant unsuspectingly.

"I see you're sitting down, Mercant. These days it's a good idea to be in our seats when either one of us comes in to say anything. The *Ironduke* is being cleared for takeoff."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Bell."

"OK, so nothing special about that, right?" retorted Bell with a slight note of sarcasm. "But why the Chief has cleared the *Ironduke* for just a little toad-hop to Pluto... well, is that something else again, Mercant?"

Mercant's eyes narrowed cautiously. "You mean—the *Ironduke* is only going to Pluto?"

"So you don't have any idea about the second step, do you, Solar Marshal? I learned about it by pure accident. It often happens in Terrania that even the top-drawer secrets can't be buried. Perry called the positronic brain on Venus and asked for the galactic coordinates of Wanderer!"

Mercant's words were like an explosion. "The Chief wants to *gothere* —?!"

"Yes, Mercant. A little more of this and I'm going up in smoke, with Perry's help. He's never lied to me

before. But a short while ago he handed me a whopper! What do you say to that, my friend?"

"Nothing, before I know what the Chief is planning. I suspect he has something big on his mind. Perhaps I can guess his purpose: he may be hoping to regain our shaken confidence in him by pulling off some very surprising action."

"You still believe in Santa Claus!" cried Bell. "But I wonder if it could be possible..."

"What?" asked Mercant.

"Nothing!" Bell waved it off. He had hoped to meet with understanding here in the office of the Solar Marshal, to find a reasoning partner who might also be convinced as he was that something was very wrong with Perry Rhodan. And what was the result? Mercant believed the Chief wanted to pull a big surprise on everybody so that he could regain their confidence in him. "Glord!" he groaned aloud.

Mr. Bell, I almost have to assume that you're biased toward an idea that isn't at all related to the facts," said Mercant in a tone of slightly irritated reproach.

Bell shook his head moodily. "Assume what you want, Mercant, I'll not yield on one point, and that's Perry's condition—he's really sick, mentally or psychologically. On the way to see you I ran into Prof. Manoli. He'd been called by the Chief to give him another checkup. But that's a secondary matter. I know the Chief like nobody else and when I say he's changed you'd better believe it!

"Sometimes he seems to be his old self when he starts to make a lightning decision. Then he seems closer to me and I know what's going on. But as soon as he pulls back into his shell and starts making decisions under a lid, all by himself—then I'm looking at a stranger.

"Now Rhodan has lied to me! He gave me the old 84 when he put on that he simply had to go to Pluto—telling me it was of critical importance for him to inspect the Springer layout there. Mercant, since when has he bothered about such minor details? What's Solar Intelligence for? And if he only wants to hop to Pluto, why take the *Ironduke*? Why the request to the Venus Brain for the galactic coordinates of Wanderer? What's our business on Wanderer at this time?"

"But Mr. Bell, are you saying that I should put the Chief under surveillance or something?" At least Mercant's protest revealed that Bell's words had made an impression on him.

"Who's talking about surveillance? He's supposed to be healthy! But I'm more convinced than ever that if he's sick it isn't from any so-called depressive condition, which Manoli was trying to sell me. No—the Chief is hiding another kind of sickness.

"Thomas Cardif?"

"That's my bet. When that kid got the upper hand on his father there on Okul, something in Perry must have snapped. Forget low spirits and depression! Since Okul, something's been missing from him completely: the human touch, maybe, a spirit of animation, *zombop*! Mercant, what I'm trying to say can't quite be described!"

"Are you saying that he never speaks of his experiences with his son on Okul?" Mercant appeared to be more convinced now that Bell's concern for Rhodan might be well founded.

The video intercom rattled out an announcement: "Attention, urgent message: takeoff schedule for the

Ironduke has been advanced to hours 18:35, standard time. I repeat: takeoff schedule for the *Ironduke* ..."

Bell cut the connection swiftly. The speaker's metallic clamour had suddenly grated on his nerves. "Are you flying with him, Mercant?"

"I've received no orders to do so."

"Nor I. But I'll be on board. In fact John Marshall is there already with some of his veteran mutants."

Mercant let out a low whistle. "Mr. Bell, you're sure sticking your neck out! I don't know what the Chief's reaction will be when he finds out you and the mutants are on board."

Bell laughed bitterly. "And think what a surprise it'll be when he also finds *you* there, Mercant!"

The latter stared at him through a moment of frozen silence but finally took a long deep breath. "You know, Mr. Bell, ever since you began to suspect that Rhodan isn't himself, you've developed some faculties I would never have expected of you. Alright, I'll join you on board."

Bell left his office without having mentioned how very exposed he considered his own neck to be.

* * * *

The vast steel sphere of the *Ironduke* dropped down toward Pluto. At 20,000 meters the ship's searchlights flared to life and illuminated the desolate, hostile surface of the Sol System's next-to-outermost planet.

Out of quadrant Green, 30 degrees, came the instrument approach beam of stellar defence fortress Pluto-6. The guide beam touched the ship, ready to bring it in on computer course. The nearer the *Ironduke* came to the surface, the mightier loomed the gun installations of the base in the glare of the lights.

Here were the heaviest-calibre thermo-cannons and on either side of them the disintegrator and impulse batteries became visible. A few km farther south were the powerful tracking and sensor stations which were capable of detecting any transitional spacewarp in the outer void and tracking approaching vessels over tremendous distances. The main base's towering antennas were under a super-powerful defence screen that could hold up against salvos from half a dozen superbattleships.

Even during the landing manoeuvres of the *Ironduke* the great screen was not shut off. This was by strict orders from Cardif-Rhodan himself. He had also requested alternate beam course to the small spaceport which the Galactic Traders had established by use of their own equipment and materials. On the eastern edge of the port under the sheltering cliffs of an ice-covered mountain chain was the trading settlement of the united Springer clans. This was Cardif-Rhodan's goal.

What his objective was in this visit to the Springers was a mystery to everyone on the ship but this wasn't the first action the Chief had started in which only he knew the purpose. Nevertheless there was such a high level of tension in the Control Central that it fairly crackled.

Was it because of the big surprise only a few minutes before when Reginald Bell walked in unannounced with Allan D. Mercant and John Marshall? Even Jefe Claudrin the Epsalian-born Terran—a stocky colossus with dark leathery skin—was heard to gasp harshly when he saw the 3 men enter and simultaneously he swore he was going to haul a certain airlock officer over the coals for not having reported these people on board.

Other than a momentary gleam in his eyes, Cardif-Rhodan had not revealed any sign of surprise. "Oh—!" was all that came from his lips and then he merely nodded to Bell.

While Mercant and Marshall remained in the background, Bell came forward without hesitation. "I had enough of this during those last hours on Okul, Perry," he said to the man he still thought to be his friend. "This visit you're making—I mean, I don't trust these sky gypsies any more than I do the Antis!"

"So?" Cardif-Rhodan answered. "The next time, Fatso, I expect to be informed about your security measures—do you understand?"

Bell only shrugged and the incident was ended. But no one suspected the inner turmoil he had caused in Cardif, not even John Marshall, who now tuned into the Chiefs thoughts for the third time. Rhodan's double deliberately maintained a fragmentary train of thought. He guessed that Marshall was giving him a mental surveillance, which he compensated for as calmly as possible. Cardif-Rhodan only thought on his father's wavelengths and completely concealed his own impulses.

In his cogitation the proposal of the Galactic Traders played the heaviest role, with here and there tatters and fragments of memories out of the past. The pseudo Rhodan thought of former treacherous manoeuvres of the Springers and he began to calculate how great the danger might be if the Traders established another 100 commercial bases inside the Sol System. He allowed his thoughts to circulate to this extent but he was careful not to think of what lay beyond that. Only a few times he permitted a surge of anticipation and hopeful triumph, picturing an end result where the Galactic Traders would turn out to be the swindlers who were betrayed.

Meanwhile under Jefe Claudrin's guidance the *Ironduke* had made a safe landing at the Springers' spaceport. The mighty telescopic struts, of the gigantic sphere had made a few feathery contacts before the ship settled firmly on the frozen soil of Pluto, at a distance of more than 20 km from Pluto-6 and its bristling defences.

The tense atmosphere caused by the appearance of Bell, Mercant and Marshall now reached a new high. The man whom everybody took to be Rhodan laughed at Bell in a strangely crafty tone.

"Just so you won't try to play nursemaid next time I'm taking the liberty of playing this one solo. And when I say alone, I mean just that! I'm visiting the Springer post*without* an escort. Let me have a spacesuit, please..."

The Epsalian commander's mighty hands clenched the arms of his special Right seat. He simply could not comprehend what he had just heard. But he was not the only one who couldn't understand Rhodan's actions.

"Sir—" Allan D. Mercant started to protest but was forced to silence by a swift signal from Cardif-Rhodan.

Against all expectations, Bell said nothing.

By now Rhodan was inside the heavy spacesuit. With an exemplary calmness he inspected his weapons. Since the first encounter with the Antis, everyone's armament included an old-fashioned .44 revolver with non-metallic bullets. The special plastic bullet heads had an astonishing penetrating power. At present these bullets were the only means of breaking through the priests' bodily defence screens, which they rendered super powerful by mental forces.

Cardif-Rhodan merely gave the old-fashioned weapon a passing glance. He was more interested in his energy weapons and he checked out their charge readings.

"All set," he announced. "Bell, I think I'll be back in about an hour. Emergency communications by minicom. Thank you," he said when he noted that Bell was about to accompany him, "I'd also like to go alone to the airlock. Somehow I'll have to show you my appreciation for all your precautions, my friend."

It could have been a jest—but also sarcasm.

The bulkhead hatch slammed shut behind Cardif-Rhodan. Bell looked questioningly at Mercant. He winked at him secretly and then left the control room. Shortly afterwards he was followed by Mercant and Marshall. Purposefully they sought out Bell's cabin.

"Well?" he asked them as they came in. His question was really directed at Marshall.

The telepath shrugged helplessly. "The Chief has some wild plan in his mind—about the Springers and the 300 additional stations—but unfortunately he didn't do me the favour of thinking it out. I only know that at this particular Springer post he's looking for something specific..."

"What's that?" Bell interrupted.

"That's just what I don't know. He kept it out of his mind somehow. As for our unexpected arrival, he wasn't a bit disturbed about it..."

"What?" Bell jumped up and stared at Marshall. "John, don't give me any fairytales! Look—we came here completely unauthorized, strictly AWOL! You mean to say he didn't show a trace of steam? What the devil! Any other time he'd be ready to chew me out for going against his orders like that. Has he been mentally turned inside out or something?"

"There's nothing more I can say," replied Marshall.

"Then I'm stumped for *what* I should think!" grumbled Bell, and he sat down again. He put the subject aside but asked Marshall another question. "Do you have contact with the other telepaths on board?"

"They are waiting for your instructions, Mr. Bell."

"OK, so let's wait for another half hour. At the moment, all the *Ironduke's* polar gun turret is doing is keeping close tabs on the Springer movements out there. I have to presume that those sky-hoppers won't try anything with the Chief—not here. Anyway, Perry did a beautiful job of pulling the rug out from under us with this solo caper of his. And I'm glad of it! It's more typical of him. There's some hope yet that he may come around to his old self again. Well, Mercant, what do you say?"

"Nothing," was the reply. "I'll wait and see..."

* * * *

Catepan, Springer chief of the Pluto trading base, had sent his biggest ground car out to the *Ironduke*. The vehicle was waiting for the First Administrator at the foot of C-ramp, which had extended outward from the spherical ship.

Fearless, cold-blooded, calm, Cardif-Rhodan came down the ramp. He was quite familiar with the hostile environment of Pluto. As a lieutenant in the Solar Fleet, Cardif had been transferred here for disciplinary reasons and had put in some service time, until all of a sudden the mighty alien fleet of the Druufs challenged the Sol System's defences. At that time the fate of the Earth appeared to be sealed but then Arkon's robot fleets came to the rescue along with the Galactic Traders and their fighting long-ships.

At that time he thought only fleetingly of it but not about his desertion. He switched his thoughts quickly. As he returned to Rhodan's wavelengths a grin came to his face that would have been alien to Rhodan himself. It was an expression of cynical satisfaction. The mutants, whom he had first considered to be his greatest danger, foundered against the hypno-induced knowledge of the genuine Rhodan, a surface screen which served to conceal Thomas Cardif. And since they continued to sense Rhodan's mental patterns they did not suspect that this very corroboration was their obstacle.

The young Springer's face was illuminated by the spotlight of the car as he greeted the First Administrator of the Solar Imperium. In good Intercosmo he invited him to take a seat inside the vehicle. Cardif-Rhodan curtly acknowledged the greeting and then sank back into the car's upholstered seat.

The machine sped like a shot across the smooth pavement of the landing field. Under indirect lighting the vast outlines of the Springer installations began to become more discernible. A hall-sized airlock received the car. The driver opened the door for him and greeted him again as he got out. The young chauffeur advised him that he could open his plastic space helmet.

The man in the uniform of the highest official on Earth thanked him for his courtesy and then turned toward the Galactic Trader who was hurrying toward him: Catepan, chief patriarch of the Springer post on Pluto.

Later in Catepan's office the patriarch offered a seat to the Administrator. Only here in the private suite of the Springer did Cardif-Rhodan decide to remove his helmet, which he did with a special purpose. Thereby he broke off his radio connection with the *Ironduke*.

"Catepan," he said immediately, "you are probably familiar with the proposal of the Galactic Traders who want to establish new commercial centres within the sphere of interest of the Solar Imperium. I shall approve that proposal if I don't find any reasons here for rejecting it.

The old Trader regarded him in amazement. "But—Administrator, are you saying that *this* is why you have come here personally?"

"That's right." Although Cardif-Rhodan spoke casually he concealed his real satisfaction. Catepan had plainly indicated that he took him for Administrator Rhodan. Cardif needed to know no more. When he got up again and Catepan rose up also as if to accompany him, he waved him off. "Thank you, Catepan, I'll go alone. Don't worry, I won't go astray in your rooms and offices. You may expect me back here in

half an hour."

When he went out he left an old-time veteran Springer standing there in utter confusion. Catepan couldn't get it into his head that the mightiest man in the Solar Imperium was concerning himself with such an inconsequential item as a mere trading post; and even less could he understand why Perry Rhodan himself had come personally and alone. But the most inexplicable part of it all was what the Pluto trading post itself had to do with the major proposal of the combined Springer clans.

Meanwhile Cardif-Rhodan had left the section designated for offices and living quarters and had traversed a bright passage which brought him into the first of the storage areas. His glances to right and left were only cursory because he was hardly concerned with the trade goods that were stacked here. The chief point of interest now was the Springer who stood in front of a door at the end of the warehouse. He appeared to be waiting for him—yet as Cardif approached the man, the latter turned his back to him and disappeared into the passage behind him.

Cardif recalled what the Arkonide Banavol had told him. It was only here in this Springer base that he would be able to make his protest against the Antis' demand for 20 cell activators from Wanderer. Was this man he had just seen the agent of the priests of Baalol? Cardif had to know. Before going through the doorway he turned to look back. The storage hall he had traversed was more than 50 meters wide and 100 meters long. He wanted to make sure no one had followed him.

Having confirmed this he nodded with satisfaction and still paused there to savour a growing realization. Even here, he thought, in this extra-territorial location, the wish of the First Administrator was law! A sense of power swept over Cardif like an overwhelming euphoria. The indescribable awareness of only having to give an order to fulfil all of his wishes was becoming an obsession that was hard to control. He did not know in this moment that his eyes gleamed with the light of megalomania. He only knew what pleasure it gave him to yield to this delicious state of power consciousness.

Then like a destroying bolt of lightning came the memory of an ultimatum—the demand of Rhobal, high priest of Baalol: 20 cell activators, automatically adjustable to individual wave patterns! The ecstasy of a moment before imploded suddenly into naked reality: disguised as his father, he was inescapably Thomas Cardif—a puppet!

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Thus the one moment was gone in which fate offered Thomas Cardif another chance to turn his life into brighter paths. He put it out of his mind. He was ready now for the test of power between him and the anti-mutants. Here in this trading settlement of the Galactic Traders on Pluto he would launch his plan which would eventually destroy the servants of Baalol.

Thomas Cardif turned and went into the connecting passageway. It led away from the storeroom at a right angle. The first part of the next section had been constructed as a heavy-walled blast shelter in case of catastrophe and was equipped with double airlocks. After the last lock door closed behind him he found himself in a new office section. As he soon discovered, this part was built along the left side of the building compound and faced the Traders' spaceport.

He walked calmly along the hallway which was provided with soundproofed floor covering. Finally he came to a door which was standing open, permitting a view of the room inside. A man turned from the window in the office and stared straight at him. With a nod of his head he signalled Cardif to enter.

Cardif-Rhodan walked in and gave the door a slight shove so that it closed behind him. The other man

looked like a Springer with the typical beard and 'star gypsy' clothing.

The stranger bowed and spoke to him in good Intercosmo "In the name of Fut-Gii I am authorized to give greetings to the First Administrator of the Syrola Daquarta—the Solar Imperium."

"Thank you," Cardif replied in a clipped tone. He sounded self-controlled and his gaze was highly indifferent. "May I sit down?" Without waiting for permission he took a seat.

Looking beyond the man, he could see the inhospitable surface of Pluto outside. Part of the Traders' spaceport was visible from here and a most unmistakable object across the field was the mighty sphere of the *Ironduke*, clearly discernible in the glare of its own lights. Cardif looked bored as he turned his gaze back to the Baalol agent—for such the stranger was. Mention of the name of Fut-Gii had been identification enough.

"Well?" Cardif demanded caustically.

The Baalol agent remained silent. With arms folded across his chest and leaning back against the window sill, he stared back at the man whom others claimed was Perry Rhodan. Cardif felt a surge of anger. The arrogant attitude of this representative of the priest cult was beginning to get to him.

"I cannot and I will not famish you your 20 little miracles!" he said abruptly.

"But that you *will* do," replied the other. His face remained inscrutable. "You're going to have to, Cardif, or the days of your power are numbered, not to mention your life!" Then he turned his back on him and looked out toward the looming spaceship from Terra. "What a magnificent dungeon cell for you! The *Ironduke* will surely take you back to Terrania for your final judgment."

"Your mouth is bigger than your brain," sneered Cardif. "You talk far too much. What do you expect to accomplish with threats? What's it going to buy you?"

"Nothing" answered the other as he tamed back to face him again, "other than 20 cell activators."

"Extortion?"

"The servants of Baalol are above such a filthy accusation!" retorted the agent.

"You know, for about 60 years now the Springers have also tried to get me to dance on a string but they have never succeeded. Who in the devil are you?"

"I am A-Thol, personal representative of the high priest, Rhobal. Any other questions, Cardif?"

"Rhobal's request is not feasible," Cardif answered sharply.

"You have no choice in the matter. On Lepso you swore eternal allegiance and gratitude to the cult of Baalol. Today, Baalol takes you at your word; otherwise in a few days the whole galaxy will have the head of its Public Enemy #1 on a silver platter. One word from us, skilfully planted in the right places, would be enough to rip the mask from your face. Make your choice here, Cardif. Before you leave this room you will have to make your decision."

Cardif was still master of the situation as he asked in frigid tones: "What does the high priest offer in case I deliver?"

For the first time the Anti's features revealed his thoughts. He grinned derisively. "Great Baalol will then shield you with his mighty hand forever!"

"Oh, he will, will he?" Cardif chanced to look past the anti-mutant. He looked outside into the twilight zone and discovered something that instantly upset a part of his plan.

Without visible reaction, he adjusted himself to a new situation. He managed not to draw attention to what he had observed.

* * * *

It had become quiet in Bells cabin. Except for a casual glance, Allan D. Mercant had not been involved in the conversation between Bell and Marshall. Now the 3 men were waiting for a call from Rhodan over the minicom. They had noted with agitation that he had cut off his helmet radio shortly after being greeted by the Springer patriarch Catepan.

After that had come the silence and waiting.

But instead of hearing from Rhodan they received a sudden call from the mutant tele-tracer, Fellmer Lloyd. His face appeared on the screen of the intercom.

"Sir, I've picked up the brainwave patterns of an Anti!"

That last word was all that was needed.

"Robot detail 1, emergency standby for action" roared Bell. His stocky frame moved quickly to the other mike but now he quickly re-channelled Lloyd's line so that what the mutant was saying could be heard by everyone on board.

"Anti wave patterns!" Lloyd continued, his voice now coming over all speakers. "At the Springer base! Pattern indications are hate, derision, thoughts of assassination. I'm sorry I didn't get it all. The Anti must have put a mental block into his screen. Attention! Anti brainwave pattern..."

"OK, thanks!" Bell interrupted. "Put all telepaths to work Lloyd... Jefe Claudrin, did you hear all that?"

There was something like a confirmation but it was such a thunderous roar that it overdrove the speakers. Yes, the Epsalian commander of the *Ironduke* had heard.

"Alright, Claudrin, but if these planet swindlers manage to get so much as a lifeboat into space..."

Now it was Bell's turn to be interrupted.

"So it'll be my neck—yessir!"

Bell was halfway out the cabin when he caught Mercant's grin. In spite of the seriousness of the situation he couldn't help chuckling, himself, over Claudrin's dry repartee.

The 3 men ran for the nearest antigrav shaft while Bell gave instructions over his minicom transceiver. "Robot detail 1! Wait until we get to the airlock! This is a combat alert!"

This time the normally swift shaft seemed to carry them all too slowly toward their goal. En route, Ben contacted Fellmer Lloyd again. There were no further developments. The anti-mutant in the Springer station was apparently still under his mentally-fortified personal screen. There was no further trace of his thought impulses.

There was one more stop before reaching the outer airlock. Bell, Mercant and Marshall had to put on their spacesuits. Although time was of the essence they refused to overlook anything now.

"Weapon check!" Bell ordered, having been the first into his suit.

Mercant and Marshall reported all clear in the weapons department so they all hastened to the outer lock. Shoulder to shoulder they ran down the ramp. At the bottom was the hovercraft with a crew of 20 combat robots and one robot pilot. The robots were the equivalent of 100 well-trained men of the Solar Fleet when it came to battle action.

The personnel carrier rose from the ground on its antigravs. Its sudden acceleration was almost uncanny. Bell sat beside the big mechanical pilot. He had pulled the panel mike to him but did not make use of it for the moment. He could see their rushing approach toward the Trader base as they glided swiftly along at a 10-meter altitude. He glanced at an instrument on the flight console which measured the distance from the Springer's energy defence screen.

Still 2 kilometres...

Bell held his silence.

One kilometres!

Now came his challenge: "Springer Catepan, this is Reginald Bell, Rhodan's second-in-command! Open your screen immediately! At once or the *Ironduke* will open fire!"

3 seconds later the instrument needle fell to zero. The energy screen surrounding the Springer base had ceased to exist for the moment.

The hovercraft with its robot and human cargo came down close to the entrance lock of the station. The combat robots swarmed out, perfectly programmed to deploy themselves strategically. Three of them rose on their antigravs to a height of 50 meters where they could cover almost the entire complex of storage warehouses and buildings. The others raced with the men toward the airlock. It opened without any challenge from Bell. When they entered it closed automatically behind them and the inner door also opened. In the hall ahead they could see the Springer patriarch hurrying toward them, showing obvious signs of alarm. He was not wearing a spacesuit. It meant that Bell and his 2 companions could open their helmets, which they did.

"Where is the administrator!" roared Bell as the Springer chief came up to him.

Catepan's alarm changed to astonishment. "Perry Rhodan? He's back in one of the offices but..."

"Which offices," Bell interrupted. "Where?"

Completely bewildered, Catepan pointed toward the end of the long warehouse.

"Then behind that to the left?" asked Bell cautiously.

The patriarch simply nodded.

Bell sprinted away. His heavy suit did not seem to retard him. But he had hardly advised the robots of his destination before 17 of them raced past him, arriving at the farther door before he had covered half the distance.

In spite of his concern for Rhodan, the rugged First Deputy did not forget to inform the men on the *Ironduke*. He called through to them, using the spacesuit's transceiver. "Claudrin, we're inside the base on our way to the Chief. Robots already gone on ahead. Over and out!"

John Marshall kept pace beside him with Mercant about 10 meters in the rear. They reached the door beyond which the 17 robots had already disappeared. They had hardly entered the passageway when Bell suddenly grasped Marshall's arm impulsively and stopped him. "Marshall, what was that?" he yelled. "Was it a shot?"

John Marshall could only nod his confirmation.

* * * *

The Anti had no idea of what was racing toward the base from the *Ironduke* at very low altitude but Cardif-Rhodan had been able to observe its approach.

For a long moment Cardif was gripped by a fear that bordered on panic. He remembered that Bell, Mercant and Marshall had come along on the flight without being authorized or asked to do so. And now he realized that with these men there was probably a group of mutants also on board the *Ironduke*.

Bell and his precautions!

His main cause for alarm was his apprehension that the telepaths might have been able to identify the basic brainwave patterns of the true Thomas Cardif. But then the absolute certainty that his own patterns were blocked from emerging to the surface served to calm him down somewhat. Nevertheless he had to make the most strenuous effort to hold his thoughts in the channels of his father.

That which he planned he dared not even touch with a conscious thought.

This was for him a moment of gravest danger. He had never been so close to being unmasked before. In order to eliminate any possible suspicion on the part of the telepaths he forced himself to build up a mental web of lies in complete detail while weaving it into his father's transferred thought-patterns. In his thoughts he gave form to the realization that he had just discovered the man across from him to be an Anti!

Thomas Cardif did not realize that in so doing he accomplished something unique enough to be worthy

of a better deed.

He proceeded to speak to the Anti; he pointed out the risk that he, the Anti, was taking to show up here in the heart of the Solar Imperium. Nothing more was said about the cell activators nor was Rhodan's name mentioned. The Anti overlooked the fact that Thomas Cardif was suddenly leading the discussion and he also failed to notice that he was keeping it in neutral channels.

But what he knew least of all was that a combat group from the linear-drive ship *Ironduke* had already come into the station. Nevertheless he began to note something sinister in Cardif's attitude. As the latter began to approach him slowly, he was instinctively alerted. "Don't get too close to me, Cardif!" he warned. "I turned on my screen shortly after you came in. Stay where you are—not another step!"

It was then that the first ponderous, metallic steps of the fighter robots rang out in the corridor.

"What's that?" it was the Anti's last question because he made the mistake of going past Cardif to have a look out the door.

A-Thol did not see what his visitor quickly whipped out of a pocket of his spacesuit. But as the indirect lighting was reflected from the barrel of an ancient-looking Terran weapon it was already too late to do anything. The nonmagnetic plastic bullet crashed through his super-powerful defence screen and struck home where Thomas Cardif intended it to.

The man in the mask of Perry Rhodan overlooked nothing now. He changed his grip on the .44 revolver, grasping it by the barrel, and struck the butt-end against the right side of his chin. It tore the skin and drew blood.

Cardif's next move was a swift dash to the desk. Among the papers was a heavy paperweight. Picking it up, he passed it over his bloodied chin, then let it fall to the floor. But in the midst of all this to think unwaveringly of the Antis yet not imagine the cavern location on Okul was an incredible effort of highest mental concentration.

Behind him the door flew open.

2 robots rushed into the room. Through their ocular systems they registered the presence of the body lying directly in front of the Administrator. Then Cardif was surrounded by a swarm of ponderous combat machines that were followed shortly by Bell and Marshall and finally by Allan D. Mercant.

Perry! Bell blurted out as he saw the dead man. "You shot him?" There was a note of puzzled alarm in his voice.

"Any objections, Bell?" Cardif-Rhodan's voice was harsh and imperious. "Was I supposed to let an Anti get the best of me?" As though not intended, he let Bell see the wounded side of his chin.

Bell still stood there over the dead Anti. Noticing the paperweight on the floor, he stooped down and picked it up. When he was about to place it on the desk he saw the blood on it. Strange—he thought to himself. But why he thought so he wasn't sure. Was it because in this particular situation Perry Rhodan had never appeared to be so alien?

Perry had defended himself. Clearly *inself*-defence, of course—but even then, would Perry Rhodan necessarily kill? Couldn't he have shot to wound him instead? Wasn't it Perry Rhodan who had always demanded that human lives were to be spared where possible, under any circumstances?

"You seem to be unhappy about something, Bell," commented Cardif-Rhodan warily. "I demand to know what's on your mind."

To Bell the question was like a whiplash. He stepped over the body and stood by the desk. Glancing swiftly at Mercant and Marshall he noted that they were also unsettled over what had happened here. Then he looked sharply into his friend's grey eyes which had suddenly become so cold. "Perry, how did you know that this man was an Anti?" he asked.

Cardif-Rhodan smiled thinly. "You have forgotten the visit I had with a certain Arkonide named Banavol. You've given too little thought to why I wanted to visit the Springer station specifically on Pluto. Why? To inspect their base?" He laughed sharply, which brought a look of new surprise from Allan D. Mercant. "I have a few more important things to do, my friend, than to make personal inspections. However, in this case I had to find out for myself if Banavol's suspicion was correct. This dead man verifies his report that an Anti had infiltrated here. Or do you suppose that nowadays the Galactic Traders are also able to mentally strengthen their individual defence screens?"

Bell impatiently waved his argument aside. "But when I came in, Perry, you talked as if you killed him deliberately!"

The other shrugged without the blink of an eyelash.

"Oh, did I? Then either I didn't phrase my words correctly or you misunderstood me."

3/ WHEN "IT" LAUGHED

When, they came back to the *Ironduke* an important message from Earth was waiting for them. In Pagnysur-Moselle, where the European plant for Allitiv production had been set up, the workers and technicians had gone on strike. They were demanding a 20% pay increase. If the strike weren't settled by afternoon of the following day, doctors in Europe would be threatened with a depletion of their Allitiv supplies. What effect this would have on millions of addicted people could not yet be estimated.

Cardif-Rhodan read the emergency dispatch in the Control Central and then handed it over to Bell. "Take care of this," he said curtly.

Bell stared at him perplexed. It was hardly believable, he thought. Could it be that Perry Rhodan no longer cared whether the narcotic victims in Europe got well or not?

Although boiling with resentment, he controlled himself. "Alright, Perry—I'll take care of it," he said. And with that he headed for the Communications Room.

On his way there he met Brazo Alkher, the officer of the fire control centre. "Well, Alkher, where are you headed?" Bell asked.

"To see the Chief. He called me on his minicom. I don't know yet what he wants, sir."

"Oh? The Chief called you? Well—alright, thank you, Alkher." Bell seemed to speak absentmindedly, was the impression the weapons officer got from Rhodan's First Deputy.

When Bell entered the *Ironduke's* Communications Centre he neither greeted nor saluted anyone as was his usual custom. He looked at no one but merely came over next to the hypercom operator and stared at the console panels.

The shavetail lieutenant at that position took one look at him and knew that trouble was brewing. He didn't dare open his mouth,

Bell was trying to solve the mystery of *when* Perry had signalled the fire control officer to come to the Control Central. Because from the moment they had left the dead Anti in the Springer base, he and Rhodan had been together. Was it that Perry had given the weapons officer a call while he was on his way to the Springer station? Those physicians, he thought grimly—what had they done to Perry? Could it be, however, that the Chief's new and incomprehensible characteristics were not due to the Thmasson shock therapy?

Finally he snapped out of his broodings and seemed to realize where he was. "Oh—ah—yes! Send the following dispatch to the hypercom station in Europe: Concerning strike in Allitiv plant, Pagny-sur-Moselle. The Administration takes recourse to Section 43, paragraph 2 and declares a state of emergency for the Allitiv plant at your location. Emergency status to take effect at zero hours. All striking personnel to be advised that any further refusal to work will be punishable by imprisonment. Signed: Reginald Bell."

"Is this to be coded, sir?" asked the young operator.

"Clear text!" growled Bell. "I'll teach those people in Pagny-sur-Moselle not to capitalize on a desperate situation like this. Wait, friend! Let's change that last sentence. Finish it up like this: All striking personnel to be advised that any further refusal to work will be punishable by *deportation*. The Administration refers to Section 1, paragraph 1 of the emergency provisions. Signed: Reginald Bell... I think that's more to the point. Damnation! I'll go along with any legitimate strike but this one is piracy!"

Without another word he stamped out of the Com Room. Unsuspectingly, he returned to the Control Central.

Jefe Claudrin was standing in the middle of the room like a brass statue. His eyes fairly burned a hole in the Chief as he stared at him. Perry Rhodan turned his back on Bell as he came in.

"That is the way it will be, Claudrin! You are to remain with the *Ironduke* on Pluto. Ready a space-jet for takeoff! Nolinov, Alkher! You know what you have to do!"

The 2 young lieutenants stood before Rhodan and saluted sharply. "Yessir!" they snapped in unison, and turned to leave.

But Bell blocked their way. "Where to?" he asked.

The other officers present in the Control Central had been looking back and forth from the Chief to the commander but now they stared only at Perry Rhodan, who was standing about 20 feet from Bell and facing him.

"Bell, may I ask that you do not delay the lieutenants?" he ordered more than asked.

The redheaded First Deputy glared at Rhodan with a hard gleam in his eyes. He took another look at the 2 lieutenants and then answered with equal sharpness in his voice. "I'd like to know why a space-jet's taking off! To my knowledge, all jets are in standby readiness—standard procedure."

Jefe Claudrin stepped in front of the Chief and saved him the trouble of answering—but he had a special purpose: to tell Bell what had happened in his absence. "The Chief wants to fly alone to Wanderer—with these 2 men. He can't use the *Ironduke*."

It made no sense to Bell. There was no ship in this section of the galaxy that was faster and safer than the *Ironduke*. Couldn't Perry see that right now everything was going haywire with him—that he was more vulnerable to mishaps than ever before? What did he want to do—*force* a catastrophe on himself? For weeks now he'd been practically insulting to one and all. It was enough to drive a man up the bulkheads, he thought dejectedly.

Then he astonished everyone by just saying "OK" and stepping aside so that the 2 officers could pass. He had seen a well-known flash in Rhodan's eyes which was typical of the Chief. It meant that no power in the world could deter him now from flying in the space-jet to Wanderer.

Besides, Bell was in no mood for fighting windmills. He didn't know when he had ever felt as dispirited as he had in the past few hours.

* * * *

Space-jet I-109 had disappeared into the depths of the outer void. The *Ironduke's* hypersensor system had tracked the small craft's transition entry.

"Flight on course!" was Jefe Claudrin's brief announcement.

And why shouldn't it be, he thought, with the two-man team the Chief had selected?

Stana Nolinov, commander of the *Ironduke's* robot forces, was just like weapons officer Brazo Alkher—unpretentious but a hard-bitten young veteran and ready for anything. However, the daring gallantry of these two was not their chief characteristic. In emergency situations when there was no time to think, they were both capable of acting instinctively and doing the right thing at the right time.

They hadn't exactly learned these things during their training period in the Solar Space Academy but shrewd psychologists had recognized the invaluable talents that were slumbering in the two of them and understanding instructors had been able to bring out these hidden capabilities, developing their reactive faculties to the point of automation.

Brazo Alkher was at the flight controls of the I-109. The position coordinates of Wanderer had been dumped into the smaller ship's nav-computer from the *Ironduke's* main positronicon banks. Some time before, the vast brain on Venus had spent a number of hours working them out.

Alkher and Nolinov were alone in the control room. The Chief had withdrawn to his cabin. Although the disc-shaped flier was only 35 meters in diameter and was a mere seed pod in comparison to any of the

heavier class spherical ships, it offered everything that might be expected of a proper space vehicle. Equipped with the most modern hyperspace propulsion and the finest automatic pilot system, it was even superior to many larger ships of other galactic races, and where its armaments were concerned, no space-jet was to be underestimated. Nevertheless it had been a rather unreasonable choice to use it for a flight to Wanderer. The fact remained that the *Ironduke* was a thousand times safer against all eventualities.

This was what Alkher and Nolinov were discussing in low tones at the moment. That the Chief had gone to his cabin shortly after their departure from Pluto did not seem to be unusual. But how could they have known that just now the man they took to be Perry Rhodan preferred not to have anyone around him?

Thomas Cardif was mentally weighing the probability of actually discovering on Wanderer what his father's knowledge told him he was supposed to find on the artificial planet—a relatively immortal being who in some indescribable form represented a combined race of intelligences, discarnate yet possessed of the incalculable knowledge of a people who in eons past had once ruled the galaxy.

With sober logic he evaluated his situation and his plan.

He thought of the hypnotic operation on Okul during which Perry Rhodan was forced to surrender his knowledge and faculties to him, Thomas Cardif. But this transference had not been 100% complete. Cardif's inner ego had retained the upper hand and this represented his greatest danger in the game he was playing in the Sol System. In this respect he was his own worst enemy.

This much he knew but he did not know what would happen when he faced the being on Wanderer and asked for the cell activators.

He tried to analyse his inner state of readiness for the ordeal, searching for any areas of uncertainty, but the longer he searched the more reassured he became. So far the paranormal tracers and telepaths hadn't been able to recognize his camouflage. They still took him for Rhodan and it was this certainty alone that would give him the full self-assurance he'd need to face the creature on Wanderer.

Thomas Cardif lay on his bunk like a daydreamer. His attitude was relaxed. Nothing in his outward appearance revealed the ingenious psychopath who was forging a plan that would cost his father his life and free him, Cardif, of his dependence upon the Antis.

He hated his father just as much as he had more than 60 years ago. To him the First Administrator was not his father, merely his procreator, and he was the man who had intentionally sent his mother to her death. It was true! Of this he was convinced and any claim to the contrary was a lie invented to protect Rhodan. How often he had searched through the mental patterns absorbed from Rhodan for thought impulses connected with his mother! None had been found! But for Thomas Cardif there was an explanation for it: Perry Rhodan had given himself hypnotic treatments, no doubt, in order to erase from memory the fact that he had murdered the Arkonide princess Thora!

Of course Cardif failed to realize that such a thought pattern would have had to be transferred to him as well. If his theory were true he would have been aware of Rhodan's intent to submit to such a treatment.

An announcement from the control room startled him. It was Nolinov: "Sir, transition in 3 minutes 30 seconds. This is the last jump."

The real Rhodan would have acknowledged the information with a word of thanks but Perry Rhodan was a naturally born leader of men who knew how to handle his co-workers in order to inspire them to

their greatest efforts. Rhodan's double had no such faculty.

In the control room Nolinov glanced at Brazo significantly. "Well, old buddy," he asked casually, "what do you make of the Old Man's mood? I've flown some more cheerful types in my time!"

Brazo wasn't ready to quite conform to Nolinov's opinion. "Don't forget what the Chief went through on Okul. He only has one son, you know, and when something like that happens to a father, even the strongest man is liable to come away with a few psychological scars."

Nolinov nodded his agreement but he had certain reservations. "That could happen if Perry Rhodan were any ordinary man, like you are me. But he's not. He happens to be the man who built up the Solar Imperium! No, Brazo, a few scars maybe—but not a crack in the old armament like this. I don't trust this... this whatchmacallit? No matter. Call it shock treatment. I think it went haywire somewhere and if you asked me to lay my money on it I'd bet that his reason for going to Wanderer is to get some real inside advice concerning his condition."

Brazo Alkher looked at his stocky companion in some surprise but he did not have time to make any further comments. The hypertransition jump was due in 5 seconds. The countdown was racing toward the zero mark.

They both strapped themselves in. Zero arrived. The transition followed, accompanied by its process of dematerialisation. Then came rematerialisation and the men in the I-109 felt the pulling pains that were typical of this type of travel—especially in the area of the neck. The 2 young officers groaned aloud and shook off the last of the shock effects, finally turning their full attention to the gallery of viewscreens before them. They noticed a section of space that seemed to be empty of stars for a distance of at least 5 light-years.

"Did we take a wrong turn, Brazo?" asked Nolinov with a worried frown.

Alkher was already calling for a readout from the ship's positronics in regard to their galactic position. In the same minute the computer chucked out a strip of punched tape. Both men could read the coded symbols as though they were in normal print.

"We made it, alright," muttered Nolinov, dumbfounded.

"That's the way it always is when you come out *in front* of Wanderer. Normally that synthetic planet can neither be seen nor traced. Hang on, Stant, I'm advising the Chief."

"I'm coming," was Cardif-Rhodan's curt reply.

In his cabin, Cardif got up and stretched himself, after which he took a long, deep breath. He now prepared himself to take the most dangerous step of his life. It was a thing he must do if he didn't want to be under threat from the Antis all his life because of this Perry Rhodan role they had superimposed upon him. If he wanted to cut the strings of the puppet he had to make the gamble.

When he finally left his cabin all sense of anxiety had left him. He was convinced that he could even fool *It!*

* * * *

They had held their breaths when the space-jet flew through the gap in the energy screen surrounding the synthetic world. Even Cardif was strained to control himself when it suddenly appeared beneath them: Wanderer, planet of immortality!

It was not a planet in the normal sense. It was actually a vast disc, 600 kilometres wide, above which the bell-shaped defence screen arched invisibly. The extensive disc below them contained every aspect of beauty that was to be found in the cosmos. Brazo Alkher and Stant Nolinov would have preferred to look at this miracle for hours on end but they were under the Chiefs orders to fly toward a circular clearing, 2 km wide, on the edge of which stood a slender, fragile-looking spire that towered more than 2,300 meters into the artificial blue sky.

This was the domain of *It* or *Him* —who had lived here for unknown eons of time!

Just before the gap had appeared in the energy screen, Thomas Cardif had heard from *It*. He heard a voice inside him saying: *Perry Rhodan, do you wish to come to me?*

And before Cardif could free himself from the impact of the strange contact, the inner voice sounded forth again: *I am pleased to see you once more. You seem very desirous of visiting me. But were you not here but a few moments ago?*

Rhodan's transferred knowledge enabled Cardif to realize what the collective entity meant by *a few moments*. *He* or *It* had a different time concept. What represented decades to humans was for *Him* but a matter of moments.

And now the voice remained silent even as the I-109 made a light landing in the circular area before the slender tower. Cardif stood behind the other 2 men and looked over their heads at the viewscreen gallery. Rhodan's knowledge enabled him to understand what he saw. Nothing here was strange to him. He even knew where he was supposed to go. The last rumble of the engines died out. Alkher and Nolinov had shut the ship down.

"Wait here for me, gentlemen," they heard the Chief say behind them. "I am going alone."

They watched him in silence as he traversed the radial corridor and came to a stop at the airlock. The batches swung open and he left the ship dressed as he was, without any form of protection whatever.

Wanderer's gravitational pull measured 0.9 gravs. The conditions here were almost the same as on Earth.

Cardif crossed the clearing and was approaching the tower when he suddenly heard or perceived the equivalent of roaring laughter in his subconscious mind.

Rhodan, I've almost been devoured by boredom! Friend, how happy I am to see you! It is regrettable that I am not in material form so that I might embrace you and slap you on the shoulder!

Once more the peals of laughter resounded in Cardif's subconsciousness but it no longer disconcerted him. *It* had greeted him as Perry Rhodan. *It* had even expressed the desire to clap him on the shoulder!

Abruptly, however, the laughter ceased.

Come closer friend! continued the soundless voice. *What is on your mind? Ah, you know precisely what it is you wish from me: 21 cell activators with self-selective individual pattern adjustment. I shall stand by my word. You shall have them. You know, of course, how fond I am of being a spectator when the cosmic game of power extends itself into many spheres. Really, Terran, I believe that the time of boredom is past for me.*

The voice fell silent; the laughter became fainter and fainter as though receding into a great distance and finally it died out altogether. While the voice had resounded from his subconsciousness, Cardif had not been standing still. He continued exactly as Rhodan would have done if he had been on Wanderer. His borrowed knowledge continued to guide him as he went.

Also he was more confident than ever now that *It* had also been taken in by this ingenious camouflage manoeuvre. However Cardif did not suspect that in this visit of his to the synthetic planet he had sentenced himself to death.

He was in the great hall of the tower. Here he waited patiently. It took little concentration to keep his thought stream in the same level as father's. He looked about him with an indescribable sense of exultation, yet suppressing curiosity in place of normal interest, like someone who beheld familiar things he had not seen for a long time.

There stood the Physiotron, the unique device which had thus far sustained the life of Rhodan and his closest confidants. Every 62 years they had to come to Wanderer to receive their biological regeneration.

For a long time Cardif had known that Atlan's life expectancy had been made practically unlimited by means of an egg-sized cell activator. Now he had just requested 21 of them from *It* and *It* had given him to understand that they would be furnished.

When he thought of this outrageous deception a mild shudder ran through him. He had to marshal all his forces of concentration to still the far cry of conscience somewhere in his depths. He coerced his mind, keeping his thoughts in Rhodan's channels, and concentrated on the 21 activators. He even began to feel like Rhodan. He thought on the basis of his father's knowledge and yet his ideation related to *It* were still not correct.

He resolved not to be merely one of those who had to come here every 62 years for a biological cell rejuvenation. He was determined to acquire the kind of youth enjoyed by the Emperor himself, Gonozal VIII. His thoughts revolved around this single point.

He was aware of the fact that *It* possessed an essential sense of humour and that *It* was fond of weaving certain subtle threads into the fabric of things but—

Cardif stared visibly when without warning the voice called again out of the well of his subconsciousness: *Old friend, you know you are giving competition to your own ancient hero Odysseus. A rather fascinating contest which makes me inclined to oblige. Shall I now place the 21st cell activator in the Physiotron and synchronize it to your personal frequency—Perry Rhodan...?*

Cardif felt the sweat break out on his forehead. *Yes*—he replied mentally. *Adjust the activators!*

He could have sworn he heard some kind of cosmic tittering, which was the only answer. The pause which followed was short because soon the voice echoed again from somewhere within.

You have raised my spirits today. Terran! And I shall pay you in your own coin. Wait outside the hall. Perry Rhodan, when I have tuned the cell activator to you, you will have the other 20.

With a heady and rapturous sense of euphoria such as he had never before experienced, Thomas Cardif turned to leave. It would be less taxing for him to wait outside than in the great closed room. He forced himself not to run. He walked out, sedately and with measured tread, as Rhodan would have done.

Once outside he sensed the mild and pleasant climate of this artificial world. The space-jet was out there only 1 km distant. Lts. Alkher and Nolinov had followed his orders and had not even left the small control room of the I-109.

Thomas Cardif's gaze took in the slender lines of the soaring tower. *Done!*—he thought triumphantly. Yet immediately he brought his mind under close control again. This cautious habit was a true hereditary trait from his father, who never took his victories for granted or endangered them by relaxing prematurely.

Still he permitted himself the pleasure of breathing deeply of the tangy air.

But something stirred in the depths of his mind; he thought he heard a haunting echo of whispered words—something about competing with Odysseus... Had *It* seen through him after all? Had his masquerade on Wanderer failed?

But now suddenly his own ego whispered insistently to him, telling him that *It* had not perceived his mask. *It* had merely been amused by the fact that he sought by means of the activator to eliminate the need for coming here every 62 years to obtain the biological cell shower. Because of this little subtlety *It* had compared his cunning with that of the ancient hero of mythology.

Cardif passed a hand over his brow. The tensions fell away from him once more. Again he drew in a deep breath of the scented air.

He waited for *It* to bring him the 21 cell activators.

* * * *

Homunk 'heard' the sound of mental laughter. During Rhodan's first visit to Wanderer, this highly advanced humanoid robot had been created for him. Now Homunk heard *Him*, his master, chuckling in vast amusement.

He had entered the great hall after Thomas Cardif had gone out. *It* did not wish any contact to be made between the two of them. The multiplex entity of Wanderer chose to speak with the humanoid robot in *Its* own fashion. The creature's appearance here probably wasn't necessary but the situation was so grotesque that *It* felt it had to be shared, if only with Homunk.

Thus it was that a mental dialogue ensued:

"Homunk, did you recognize him?"

"At once, Master."

"Anyone with even the name of Rhodan amuses me royally, Homunk. These cultural barbarians from the third planet of a ridiculously tiny sun are capable of ingenious ideas which have to be rewarded."

"Master, will you give assistance to the son of Rhodan?"

"If the little swindler is shrewd enough, why shouldn't I? But he still has to prove how clever he is. Perhaps a clever fraud will use an alias effectively for outward appearances but if he's wise he will never attempt to so identify himself in his thoughts."

"Master, will he understand the question you asked him?—about adjusting the 21st activator to the personal frequencies of Rhodan?"

"Homunk, today you disappoint me. Am I Destiny itself? Only fools attempt to sway the Ultimate Omnipotence. This is why I don't even intend to help Rhodan. Whoever dares to risk so much, as he did on Okul, must also pay the price."

"But Master, now both of them are in danger of extinction!"

"I do not deny it, Homunk."

"Master, you are placing Thomas Cardif in the greatest of dangers!"

Not yet. Before it comes to that I shall warn him, Homunk. I shall give him a very cogent warning. He has absorbed all the knowledge that Rhodan possessed concerning me. When a man dares to operate as Thomas Cardif is doing, then he must be smart enough to work with alien knowledge. But now it is time to remove the cell activator from the Physiotron. Homunk, will you check to see if it is exactly attuned to Perry Rhodan's frequencies—as Thomas Cardif wished it to be?"

"But Master, Cardif is not Rhodan. He was not able to deceive you and me as he did all the others—but the cell activator will be contra-attuned to him!"

"I shall warn him concerning this contra-attunement very clearly when it is time to do so."

"And what will happen with the other 20 activators, Master—the ones which have been requested from Cardif by the priests of Baalol?"

"A little entertainment, Homunk, and a constructive lesson—so that the Antis may clearly understand that no one may trifle with me, especially for evil purposes. But Thomas Cardif intrigues me—however, he must know the proverb of the cheated cheat. In any case, he is not as shrewd as his father."

The strange dialogue in the great hall came to an end, followed by more of *Its* delighted laughter. Homunk's brain was electro-organic in composition and functioned on a 6th-dimensional basis. At this point he dared not make any further appeals to *It*. But he was not too worried. Knowing *It* as well as he did, he knew that Thomas Cardif was still in charge of his own fate and thus he could still determine the future course of his life.

Homunk was still standing at the rear of the great ball as the cell activator came out of the Physiotron. He watched the egg-shaped device as it floated toward the exit door. Attuned to Perry Rhodan's personal frequencies, it was supposed to give the Terran a relative immortality if he wore it next to his body as did Atlan. But Thomas Cardif was *not* Perry Rhodan! Therefore, would the activator fail to work with him? Or would it produce an effect that was only nebulously hinted at by the term contra-attunement?

Homunk continued to watch the hovering activator as it moved slowly along. The amused laughter of *It* was not loud and yet it was vast enough to fill the great ball. *It* was intrigued by this Terran. In all of *Its* long existence, no other intelligence or being of any description had ever attempted to trick *It* but today this had been tried—hence the entity's merriment.

* * * *

Thomas Cardif was walking toward the space-jet.

He had accomplished it! He was already wearing the activator on his body. Eternal life lay before him. Now it would take a very violent event to kill him. Henceforth he was immune to cell decay. Through the incomprehensible workings of the egg-shaped device on his chest his worn-out cells would be continuously replenished.

He had actually pulled it off! Nevertheless he managed to keep his triumphant feelings under control. He was still on Wanderer. There was still danger that *It* might see through his ruse. Although the entity was silent now, *It* had said goodbye to him when he had put on the activator and concealed it under his uniform.

Perry Rhodan, I have adjusted it exactly to your vibrations; and I was happy to do it, old friend. I am sending the other 20 devices along to you. You will find them in front of your spaceship's airlock. Don't worry about the container they're in. When you will it to open, it will do so. If you will it to remain closed, then no power in the galaxy can reach its contents. Goodbye, Rhodan, your visit has given me more pleasure than I've known for a long time!

After that the multiple entity could still be heard laughing in the incomprehensible sphere of *Its* existence. The laughter followed Cardif until he was halfway to the ship, then it ceased abruptly.

Cardif was only 100 meters from the space-jet when he felt a quickening current flow through his body. It was something he had never experienced before in his life. The activator was working, he thought, and he had to use all the energy he had to keep from falling into a state of blind euphoria. He paused to analyse his sensations and then it became unmistakable. He suddenly felt that he was young; he was charged with a maximum of energy, which freed him from an oppression he had sensed since his arrival on Wanderer.

When he reached the small ramp of the ship there was another surprise. Out of nothing emerged a sphere, perhaps 1½ feet in diameter, which was surrounded by a pale red glow. It floated in the air at the level of his head. Within the sphere he could make out the dark shadows of 20 duplicate cell activators. He stretched out his hand and touched the container's surface. It felt cool but not cold; it seemed heavy

but Cardif knew it was not Rhodan's borrowed knowledge gave him the explanation. It was a time-field attuned to his own impulses and it could only be opened by his own will.

He suddenly understood what the community being had meant when *It* said: *If you will it to remain closed, then no power in the galaxy can reach its contents.*

When he entered the space-jet's control room there was a lingering smile on his face. Stant Nolinov and Brazo Alkher had decided to relax and have a game of chess. They started to spring to their feet when they saw the Chief but he signalled them an "as you were!" and nodded pleasantly to them.

Somehow he had to keep his triumph under control. At this moment he impressed the 2 young officers as being the Perry Rhodan they had once known, if it were really possible—the Rhodan who was frank and open to all.

"But unfortunately you'll have to break up your game, gentlemen. We're taking off."

Cardif-Rhodan ignored the curious stares of the 2 lieutenants, who couldn't take their eyes from the dimly glowing sphere at his shoulder. He gave them no explanation for it.

Nolinov and Alkher got up in a hurry and got into their flight seats. Using their panel controls they pulled in the outer ramp and closed the airlock door. The engines started warming up. The peaceful quiet inside the spaceship came to an end. There was a roaring and rumbling and howling. Automatic circuits integrated and synchronized the operation of many pieces of equipment. The main transformer set up a deep bass thrumming. A tremor ran through the I-109.

The 2 officers had no time to look when they heard the Chief's footsteps leaving the control room. However, while they were making the last preparations for takeoff, Cardif-Rhodan rejoined them, but this time he was not accompanied by the floating sphere of pale-red light.

"Liftoff!" said Brazo Alkher from habit. Although he was weapons officer on board the *Ironduke*, like all of his peers he had gone through a heavy training period at the Solar Space Academy to learn how to pilot space-jets, State-class ships and even cruisers.

The I-109 lifted up easily and described 2 long curves around the lofty tower. Brazo caused the space-jet to sway in its course by way of saying goodbye. It was a custom that had quickly become traditional in the Fleet but which could not be indulged in when one was flying the bigger spherical ships.

The I-109 shot upward toward the zenith of the energy screen that arched like a bell above the 600-km disc-world of Wanderer.

"There's the gap!" exclaimed Nolinov.

Alkher shoved the engines to maximum power and the I-109 hurtled through the slot into normal space. The small starship had hardly cleared the barrier before its viewscreens showed emptiness where the opening had been. Nor was there anything to be seen of the hemispherical energy screen itself. In their immediate vicinity the almost starless void appeared as if the mysterious synthetic world called Wanderer had ceased to exist.

Without saying a word Cardif-Rhodan again left the control room. He had to be alone so that at last he could enjoy his triumph to its fullest. He, the immortal, had achieved his purpose. As for escaping the clutches of the Antis, he was through playing games. He had 20 pieces of bait now and they were

foolproof.

He closed his cabin door and sat down in a chair. The pale-red glowing sphere of the time-field hovered in a corner of the room. He finally concentrated on it and thought: *open!*

The sphere floated over to him and came to a stop just a few inches above his lap. An opening appeared in its surface and inside he could see one of the egg-shaped shadowy forms move upward. A cell activator came out of the container and fell into his lap.

He picked it up and examined it from every angle. This device differed only in one respect from the activator he himself was wearing. Here on top of the 2-centimetre slot in its surface was the contact for the automatic frequency adjustment. *It* had especially emphasized that cell activators could not be transferred to another without causing them to cease functioning. Cardif laughed aloud when he thought of this.

"20 chances at eternal life, you priests!" he sneered, and he wished at this moment that he could see their faces.

For much less than 20 activators they would have to pay the price he would demand of them! He wondered why he couldn't force them to do his bidding with only one activator. Eternal life was beyond *any* price, wasn't it?

He shoved the device back through the slot in the time-field. The glowing sphere closed automatically and, as if it were endowed with an intelligence of its own, it floated back to the corner of the room.

"Done!" exclaimed Thomas Cardif triumphantly.

4/ LONG ARM OF BAALOL

After patriarch Catepan and the other Traders had been put through several hours of cross-examination there was nothing much left to be done on board the *Ironduke* .

Initially the Terrans had been pretty rough with the Springers but that was understandable because no one had forgotten the calamity that had been brought to the galaxy through Thomas Cardif and the Antis. The death of millions of narcotics addicts was attributed to these anti-mutants who called themselves 'priests'.

Allan D. Mercant had conducted the hearing. This was his proper place and forte and with the help of three Solar Intelligence agents who had been based on Pluto it had been possible to get through the interrogations with a maximum of efficiency.

Patriarch Catepan swore by the gods of Arkon that he hadn't the slightest suspicion that the man Rhodan had shot was a servant of Baalol. No one believed him at first but when 3 hours had gone by and every single Trader from the Pluto base had been mentally scanned by telepaths it became apparent that Catepan had not been lying.

However the surprise was yet to come.

The hearings had ended, the Springers had long since been sent back to their own settlement and the members of top command were asleep in their cabins when the latter were suddenly awakened by an emergency alert from the *Ironduke's* medical department.

Bell rolled from his bunk with a few typical expletives, hastily threw his clothes on and dashed to the main ship's clinic station. In one of the lateral antigrav shafts he overtook Mercant, who also knew nothing more than the fact that he'd been startled out of some much-needed sleep.

Dr. Pinter was in the clinic to receive them. Standing beside him was the *Ironduke's* commander, Jefe Claudrin. This was not so unusual but it was another matter to see Jac Hannibal here, who was a specialist in hypercom equipment. Bell and Mercant glanced at each other significantly.

"Something's making me think of our good old Tiff about now," muttered Bell.

"I had the same idea," Mercant confessed.

The man they referred to was Gen. Julian Tiffloor, who was known to his friends as Tiff, and Rhodan himself usually called him that. As a cadet in his earlier days he had been known also as the Cosmic Decoy and as such he had performed seemingly miraculous services. But all this had been due to a micro-hypercom tracer transmitter that had been planted in him surgically and which he still carried in his body to this day.

This locator-beacon transmitter had a range of several light-years and in its time it had often served as a trail-marker for Rhodan which brought him unerringly to the centre of action. By this means he had been able to make split-second decisions at the last moment, enabling him to strike at the right place with all the forces at his command.

But the other men present were not able to interpret the brief exchange between Bell and Mercant because in the days of the Cosmic Decoy operation they had not been alive.

"May I ask you gentlemen to follow me into the laboratory?" said Dr. Pinter.

They let him lead the way. It was Bell's first visit here. He didn't like anything that smelled like hospitals, clinics or sick bays, having always felt an aversion for all such institutions.

"Please have a seat," invited Dr. Pinter.

"Thanks, we'll stand," replied Bell. "I'd just as soon not be here any longer than necessary. What's up?"

Hypercom specialist Hannibal went over to an instrument table and picked up a pair of tweezers. On a glass plate lay a pea-sized object. Hannibal picked this up with the tweezers and held it for everyone to see. "This, gentlemen, is a type of hyper-transmitter you don't see every day. It isn't just because it has a range of more than 50 light-years: this little technological miracle uses the human eardrum as its microphone. And there's one little problem with that: the dead anti-mutant's tympanic membrane continued to be responsive about 2 hours after he died. This main capsule was embedded in the muscles of his upper left arm and it was able to pick up every word spoken in the vicinity of the body during that space of time. Unfortunately the device was only discovered about 3 hours ago. Meanwhile I needed the 3 hours to figure out how it worked. Do you wish to see this, Mr. Bell?"

Bell didn't need to see it. He had something new to worry about. He was thinking of Rhodan's flight to the synthetic world Wanderer. He tried in vain to remember what might have been mentioned in the presence of the dead man. Certainly somebody must have mentioned that the First Administrator was on his way there in a space-jet.

Mercant must have had the same idea because he tugged at Bell's sleeve. "Let's go!" he said in low tones.

Jefe Claudrin had noticed the swift interchange and looked at the two of them questioningly. When Mercant nodded to him he got the message and followed them. Hannibal watched them go, in some disappointment, but Bell stopped at the door and turned around.

"Thanks very much, Hannibal," he called to him. "I think we may all be indebted to you." Then to Dr. Pinter: "Who located that infernal gadget in the Anti's arm?"

"I did," replied the doctor modestly.

Bell gave him a significant nod of appreciation.

While en route to Mercant's quarters, Bell was already into the problem. "I don't see how it's possible that our own Com Central and the main Pluto base didn't pick up that transmission. Ordinarily that kind of equipment can hear a butterfly burp!"

"Have you forgotten the Swoons, Bell?" Mercant reminded him.

"Don't tell me those pickle people on Earth and Mars are working with the Antis!"

"I'm not talking about *those* Swoons—I'm referring to the cucumber people on their home planet, and if they're the ones who constructed that super-powerful hyper-transmitter, I wouldn't be surprised if it worked on a pulse-burst principle. You know that any coded pulse-bursts of less than a nanosecond's duration can bypass our signal-trace screens."

"Now *that's* a cheerful outlook! And what's going to happen to the Chief if it hasn't happened already? Are you deliberately avoiding that question-playing ostrich or something?"

Mercant gave him a thin smile. "You seem to forget about Lts. Nolinov and Alkher. The Chief couldn't have selected a better flight team. If anything had happened by now on that space-jet, or if they had run into any danger, we would have at least gotten a distress signal. We're all well aware of what a lightning bolt that Alkher can be."

"Let's hope he still has the old zap *on this* trip!"

Meanwhile they had arrived in front of Mercant's door and Mercant stopped suddenly to look at Bell closely. When Reginald Bell the optimist became pessimistic, something of an unexpected and unpleasant nature was likely to happen. Both of them checked their watches.

"Well anyway, maybe we can catch another 4 hours of shuteye," commented Bell. He yawned and said goodnight.

"Good night, what's left of it," said the Solar Marshal, and he went into his cabin.

Although he went to bed, sleep did not come to him. His thoughts continued to revolve around the Chief. And the longer he concerned himself with Perry Rhodan the more uneasy he became.

He stared into the surrounding darkness, which did not prevent him from forming a mental picture of Rhodan's face. He was familiar with every feature of that face and yet now as he looked at its image in memory he thought he detected something strange. But in what respect it was strange he could not say. He only sensed it and then his thoughts wandered off on the wrong course. Without being aware of it he had missed seeing a logical conclusion: he had failed to consider the validity of its instincts.

Solar Marshal Mercant had lost all sense of time and he did not know how long he had lain there brooding alone in the dark when the *Ironduke's* sirens startled him. Their shrieking clamour announced an emergency, Condition 1.

* * * *

Space-jet I-109 was travelling at more than half speed but no attempt was being made yet to go into transition. Cardiff-Rhodan had called through on the intercom and given an order to make the jump when they had reached 0.99 light-speed.

An order from the Chief was law to these young officers yet it could be seen in their worried expressions that they were not personally in agreement with this instruction.

Nolinov turned to Alkher. "Buddy, do you have any idea how far we are from our nearest patrol cruiser?"

"Not the foggiest notion. If you want to know, ask the positronicon."

"Too much trouble," Nolinov grinned. He was kidding, of course: he had only to swing his chair around to face the computer console. He knew that in a matter of seconds the positronic brain could shoot out a coded tape that would tell him where the nearest cruiser of the Solar Fleet was located.

The space-jet's velocity continued to increase. Brazo Alkher took a look at the tracking board. Everything zero. Before and behind them, to the right and left of them, nothing but empty space, if one were to discount some very distant stars. Next, Alkher inspected the weapons board.

"What are you doing there?" asked Nolinov, mildly curious.

To Alkher, all types of weapons controls were familiar enough to operate in his sleep. He didn't have to even look at the switch panel to see what he was doing. "One never knows, Stant—and it won't hurt at all while we're still not at top speed to dump one of the power bank outputs into the weapons system. Man, every time I'm sitting in one of these nut shells I'm always happy to remember the kind of armament these space-jets carry!"

"I guess it takes a weapons type like you to work up enthusiasm. I'm in terrible awe of every kind of energy gun. I can still remember my fast sharp shooting run at the Academy. Man, did my trainer ever make cannibal stew out of me!"

"What kind of boner did you pull?" Alkher deftly depressed the last contact for his weapons setup.

"What do you think, when a cadet's in the middle of training? We were flying around in the asteroid belt and my target was a big chunk of rock that measured 300 meters in diameter. It might have gone alright if there hadn't been an asteroid in back of it, 10 or 12 kilometres or so, and I think it was maybe 40 km's wide. Well, being all anxious and trigger-happy, guess what I hit?"

Alkher shouted suddenly and Nolinov's reveries were ended. The hypersensor had flashed to life. Simultaneously a gigantic, cylindrical spaceship emerged from the void. The space-jet's automatic magnification system brought the ship in close on the screens so that the ponderous cylinder with its rounded ends seemed to loom directly before them and yet they were separated by a million kilometres. It was a distance, however, which meant little at 0.60 light-speed.

In the I-109 three sirens sounded the alarm.

And instantly Brazo Alkher became another person. All he could see was the unknown ship racing toward the space-jet. His hand had reached out for the synchro-switch that would flick them into transition but in a split-second decision went past it. He had caught the flash of a heavy energy beam from the long-ship, which moved his hand at once to the weapons board. With the other hand he hit the over-ride on the engines. The propulsion system thundered in response and the alien beam missed the space-jet by several thousand km.

"I'll take over!" came Nolinov's voice, hard and flat. In a lightning cross-switch of the dual controls he was in charge of the flight.

Alkher had both hands free for his weapons board. It had all happened in fractions of seconds and now Alkher leaned into the battle in earnest. A long-ship was out to get them! That shot had been meant for the Chief!

In this same instant the red-call button sank into the panel. Being tied to the ship's computer, the positronic circuits immediately determined the I-109's galactic position and the powerful hypercom transmitter blasted a distress call into the void.

Even as this happened, Brazo Alkher fired a burst from his 3 impulse cannons. The chance course manoeuvre the long-ship was making resulted in more damage than was anticipated. Instead of hitting the blunt bow of the vessel as intended, Alkher's shots burned into the enemy hull in the propulsion area.

Then both ships had passed each other.

"Merk!" barked Alkher in a tone that could not be contradicted.

Nolinov, however, could not have contradicted if he had wanted to. The instruments revealed the reason, they also indicated the identity of the attacker.

Antis!

The power banks of the I-109 were putting out energy as before but with no effect. The servants of Baalol had placed a mental force field around the small but supercharged power installations of the I-109!

Alkher and Nolinov were thus cut off from their engines and power sources. The energy being delivered

could only build itself up inside the mental forcefield. If they didn't shut down quickly they could reach a critical point and turn into a bomb.

Nolinov acted. The main switch slammed to zero. Then the man they took for their Chief came running into the control room.

"Antis, sir!" announced Alkher and he pointed wearily to the viewscreens. The great long-ship was curving back toward them.

"Antis—?" Cardif-Rhodan blurted out. His eyes were fixed on the screens.

"Sir," added Alkher unsuspectingly, "I think I was able to get out a distress call!"

Thomas Cardif went rigid, momentarily jarred out of control by the thought of a distress call now. "What—?!" he shouted at Alkher "You mean—over hypercom, to the Fleet?" Even as he spoke this last word he was aware of his slip.

"Sir?" Brazo Alkher could say no more, merely staring at him dumbfounded.

"Oh, yes—fine, Alkher Cardif answered, attempting to get himself back on course. "But how do you know we are dealing with the Antis?"

"Sir..." The young lieutenant's amazement was in his voice as well now. "Can't you hear? We had to cut off the engines to keep from blowing up. The Antis have thrown a mental shield around the power and propulsion sections. Not even a radiation particle can get out—"

"Thomas Cardif cut in harshly. "I don't believe I need a lecture on it!" he said coldly, whereupon he turned and went out of the control room.

"Broth—er...!" Nolinov exclaimed. "What's happened to *him*?!"

Disheartened by the Chief's unjustifiable retort, Alkher waved off the question. "How would I know?" But his eyes were on happenings outside. "There! They've put a tractor beam on us—we're being pulled in! Why in the devil didn't I just blast straight into their engine section in the first place? There are no holds barred with pirates!"

At present there was nothing that could change their situation. The only hope they had was the Solar Fleet, provided that the hypercom distress call was beamed from their antenna. As Alkher switched the positronicon to emergency power and prepared to ask it something, a shadow beside him made him look up.

It was the Chief, whose tone was as cutting as before. "What are you trying to find out, Alkher?"

"I've just keyed in a question, sir, to see if our hypercall went out..."

"And?"

The Chief's tone was peremptory, which Alkher also swallowed, but it was costing him an effort now to remain calm and civil. "Its signal is positive, sir. Our call was sent..."

"We're going in!" exclaimed Nolinov, pointing to the screens.

The viewscreens revealed that the I-109 was entering a large hangar lock on board the Anti ship. Cardif-Rhodan had leaned closer to the screen in front of him, taking note of the evident hull damage on the other vessel.

"Is that one of your hits, Alkher? You mean you opened fire on them?"

The weapons officer was at a loss to understand such a question. "Of course, sir! Unfortunately I could only make one pass at them because all I had was just a few seconds."

A sharp jolt ran through the I-109 as it came to rest inside the alien long-ship. There was a following slight tremor which must have been the closing of the great hangar lock behind them. The panob screens only revealed the interior darkness of the hangar hold for a minute or two. The Antis must have been pumping air back into the vast chamber because when the big room was suddenly flooded with brilliant light they saw a man enter the area and he was not wearing a spacesuit.

Thomas Cardif instantly recognized him: the man who was approaching the space-jet was the high priest Rhobal. Then the I-109's screens went dark.

At last Cardif realized that he had underestimated the Antis. They were not so easily fooled after all. They had evidently anticipated the possibility that he would attempt a reverse extortion by holding back the activators for bargaining purposes.

He cursed aloud, incautiously.

Simultaneously he berated himself for this further slip. Once more Thomas Cardif had surfaced instead of Rhodan. For even in this situation Rhodan would have remained calm and self-controlled.

Nolinov and Alkher were exchanging glances significantly.

Cardif snapped out an order. "Nolinov, open the airlock!"

"Yessir!"

"And one thing more, gentlemen: in case the Antis aren't aware of our distress call, don't mention it under any circumstances. It may be our only chance." With that he turned and went out alone. For his meeting with Rhobal he didn't want any witnesses.

Nolinov turned to stare at his companion, who sat in his flight seat as though in a frozen trance. "Brazo, get hold of yourself! Isn't it bad enough for the Chief to be rocko?"

Alkher shook his head despairingly. "Can you tell me what's flipped him around so completely?"

"There's only one answer for it—his sickness! I'm ready to lay odds on it. Rhodan is much worse off than any of us thought!"

At this moment the man they still believed to be their Chief was facing Rhobal, who made a bow to him.

"The servants of Baalol are pleased to welcome the First Administrator," said the priest. "May I ask you to follow me?"

Cardif didn't move.

"If you please, Administrator!" repeated the Anti. His gaze moved warily to his right and his left, which forced Cardif to look in the same directions.

Beyond the main light-banks in the far shadows of the large hangar were fighter robots standing shoulder to shoulder. Their ocular systems were focused on the one item they were programmed for—the simple uniform of the First Administrator of the Solar Imperium. Also aligned with his midsection was the dimly glowing muzzle of every weapon in the room.

As Cardif finally complied, Rhobal almost whispered to him: "I was sure you'd see it my way."

* * * *

While Bell was clashing for the Control Central and the sirens were still in an uproar, the *Ironduke* took off.

The impulse engines thundered in the supercharged ringbulge as the double circle of telescopic struts pulled back into the spherical hull and hundreds of crewmen hurried to their stations. Many of them shouted questions as they passed each other but no one knew the cause for the alarm. None except 2 men: Reginald Bell, Perry's First Deputy in command, and Solar Marshal Mercant, Chief of Solar Intelligence. They, at least, were closest to the truth in their suspicions.

When Bell rushed into the Control Central he had to wait like everybody else. The takeoff of the *Ironduke* required maximum concentration by the deck-watch crew who were present. Jefe Claudrin's great bulk was bent over his flight panels as he brought his mighty bird into free space. The powerful Epsalian was among the greatest of commanders, having practically been born with a talent for handling the larger fighter ships. His voice of thunder was issuing commands as he worked.

Bell turned as someone stepped to his side and he saw that it was Mercant. An officer hurried out of the Com Room and after a moment of hesitation ran to Claudrin's custom flight seat with a message.

"Thank you!" rumbled the Epsalian.

The communications man came back but stopped to explain to Bell and Mercant: "Distress call from I-109!" Automatic signal but unfortunately the coordinate data wasn't complete!"

If anyone understood what this meant it was Bell. Incomplete coordinates could mean that the ship might never be found! The ship's positronicon was put to work and the retrieval programming had hardly been finished before the punched-tape readout was there.

"Well, let's have it!" bellowed Claudrin to the head operator. He was a fast mover and demanded the same speed and precision from his men.

"The area of the probable target zone is approximately 180 cubic light-years," announced the technician. "That's a probability value of 73.6%"

When Bell came up to Claudrin, the Epsalian glanced briefly at him, anticipating his wishes. He shoved the microphone toward him and then went back to his controls.

Bell spoke into the mike: "This is a dispatch to Fleet HQ... Following units alerted for action: third heavy cruiser task force; 18th, 19th, and 23rd light cruiser flotilla also release 3 superbattleships for emergency search mission and possible combat. The target areas is..."

The incomplete coordinates which had come in over the I-109's signal beam followed Bell added another sentence: "The Administrator is missing in the indicated space sector. Signed: Reginald Bell."

A re-run of the text was channelled through from the Com Room. Bell wasn't listening. He was staring at the deck. "For somebody out there, something's gone haywire..."

"For whom, Mr. Bell?" asked Claudrin.

Bell looked at him in surprise. He was only aware then that he had spoken aloud. "I don't know, Claudrin. I don't even know what made me say that. So when do we slide into semispace?"

Other than the rebuilt *Ralf Torsten*, the *Ironduke* was the only spaceship equipped with linear drive. With this propulsion system the discomforts of dematerialisation and rematerialisation were no longer necessary. A compensating converter known as 'the Kalup' served to generate a 6th dimensional forcefield which compensated for the hard and soft radiations of the 4th and 5th dimensions. Only thus was it possible to move in the semispace zone between the 4th and 5th dimensional universes, where velocities of millions of times the speed of light could be attained and a special 3D optical sensor never lost sight of the target star while en route.

In a broad sense it was a flight toward visibility. In comparison to the old system of hypertransition the new method was simply beyond evaluation.

But because of the linear drive the *Ironduke* was capable of reaching the targeted space sector much sooner than the other spherical ships of the Fleet, which had to traverse the vast abyss of thousands of light-years in a series of hyperjumps.

Jefe Claudrin did not allow Bell's question to disconcert him. "No sooner than usual, Mr. Bell," he answered. "Even when the Chief is involved it doesn't pay to take risks."

Claudrin's slightly caustic reply was justified. It was not too long ago that the *Fantasy* had exploded on its flight back from the Blue System. For any responsible commander, that catastrophe was enough of a warning not to experiment with the new propulsion system.

"OK, Claudrin." Bell wasn't in the least offended by the admonishment. "If anything comes up, I'll be in the chart room."

He took Allan D. Mercant with him. En route neither one had anything to say. They avoided having to criticize Perry Rhodan's actions. In the chart room, Mal. Lyon was already sitting before the charts. He made a move to jump to attention as the 2 men came in.

"As you were, Lyon," Bell told him with a wave of his hand. "I see you're looking over the charts already. Good, we can all see them together..."

After that there were only a few short remarks made now and then as they worked on the stellar data.

Finally Bell picked up a magnetic marking stylus and made a circle in a northern part of one of the charts. "That's where we have to look for Rhodan," he said, then glanced at Mercant. "Does that give you any ideas, my friend?"

"Actually, I've noted 2 things, Mr. Bell. So far, our hypersensors haven't picked up any signs of a transition jump. We've had some cases in the past where that has happened, when 2 ships in separate locations have made a hytrans at the same time. There's a blanking or heterodyning effect where the weaker transition is damped out by the other one.

"That's one thing; the other has to do with the space-jet's hypercom distress call. Hypercom transmission isn't subject to the type of interference that often gives us trouble in normal communication, so there's only one explanation for those garbled coördinates: anti-mutants!"

"Unfortunately we're both in complete agreement!" said Bell grimly. "And my circle on the chart shows where we have to look for Rhodan. But one thing I don't get, Mercant: why didn't the Chief go into transition immediately after leaving Wanderer?"

Mercant's answer was a cautious one. "He may have been attacked just after he left Wanderer but from our position we can only conjecture, Mr. Bell. We still don't know anything. This enormous area of 180 cubic light-years opens up many possibilities."

Maj. Lyon didn't dare to interrupt the conversation so he could only listen attentively.

Bell grunted perplexed. "If Perry were only his old self we would be sure of what he might have done after leaving Wanderer. But in a case like this...?"

It was an unmistakable confession that Bell was stumped. He threw the marker onto the chart. "Alright," he said, somewhat irritated, "180 cubic light-years is one big chunk of space and even if that sector is fortunately thinned out as far as stars are concerned we'd still be dealing with an unknown quantity of suns. If I keep following the logic of it I'll start counting confetti."

"I'm almost ahead of you in that department, Mr. Bell," commented Mercant dryly.

Bell couldn't control his temper. He banged the chart table with his fist. "What the devil was Perry trying to do? I'd like to take all those doctors that recommended that shock therapy and... and send them to Siberia!"

Mercant smiled ironically. "Siberia has become a summer playground. If I ever retire I'd like to spend my doddering old days somewhere in the tundra. Are you trying to give the doctors a bonus, Mr. Bell?"

"So then you're convinced that this whole bag of snakes is due to a fluke in those shock treatments?"

"Mr. Bell, is there any other explanation for Rhodan's strange behaviour? And then there's the death of that Anti at the Trader base... I can't get that out of my mind. I had a very good look at that priest and

Bell stared at him, curious that he had stopped but forgetting that Maj. Lyon was seated beside them. "Murder?" he asked with a note of anxiety.

"You might put an exclamation mark after that word, Mr. B..." Mercant caught himself, realizing that Lyon was present. He placed a hand on the major's shoulder and looked at him penetratingly without saying a word.

Lyon met his gaze steadily. "I think I'm going to have to get into this discussion, sir," he said, "but there's really only one statement to make: I'll swear on a stack a bibles that the Chief is incapable of murder. There has to be some mistake."

Mercant sighed deeply. "Lyon, I can only hope that you're right." Then he turned to the star map, recalling the galactic coördinates of Wanderer, and pointed out the area. "If you mark Wanderer's position as here, then that makes it the centre point of the search area, Mr. Bell. If my hypothesis is correct, then all we'd have to do is draw a line between Wanderer and the Solar System and search along that, with maybe a leeway of 3 light-years on either side of it."

Bell wasn't listening. "Mercant—what were you saying about the Anti?"

The Solar Marshal had been expecting the question. "He was unarmed. His position on the floor was practically an exhibit A—I mean a classical example of a person who has been shot without having been able to even defend himself, much less do any attacking. Rhodan's story about the paperweight is strictly 'no sale'. The blood on it alone is proof of that. Rhodan's chin scratch was too minor for that much blood to have been transferred to the weight. Blood traces are only left on a weapon where a very severe wound is involved."

"Why have you waited until now to tell me all this, Mercant?" asked Bell coldly. Without knowing it he was taking over Rhodan's role more and more. He was in the process of stepping into his friend's shoes as the latter appeared to be more incapable of wearing them.

"Because I've only been able to put it together in the past few hours," Mercant explained. "After coming back from the clinic I couldn't sleep. By the time I heard the sirens... Well, it was only then that I had the picture—and now you know."

Maj. Lyon spoke up. "And I don't believe it! The Chief is not capable of it!" Bell and Mercant were startled to hear the absolute conviction in his voice.

Finally, Bell answered him. "Major, if it turns out that you're right, then the Solar Marshal and I won't deserve to call Perry Rhodan our friend."

* * * *

Nolinov and Alkher heard the heavy footsteps of robots and they knew what was next.

Nolinov unbuckled his seat belt and quipped sarcastically, "Here comes our furlough, sailor—maybe a permanent one!"

Alkher also unbuckled himself. They were standing unarmed by their flight seats when the first towering robot entered, to be followed by 4 more of the powerful fighting machines.

"Come with me!" ordered the one who had entered first. The thing's weapons held steadily on both the Terrans.

With their positronic escort, the 2 men left the space-jet. The disc-shaped vessel was surrounded by robots but they opened a narrow aisle for them to pass through the cordon. The Terrans followed the Colossus who had come for them.

When Nolinov tried to speak to Alkher, the metallic voice rattled back at him: "No conversations!"

Nolinov shut up. He knew that robots operated according to their programs and programs had no feelings. He had no intention of committing suicide.

They had no chance to escape and hide somewhere in the big cylindrical spaceship. When they came inside onto the main deck, toward the machine room section they saw groups of men talking excitedly. An uneasiness buzzed through the ship and shouts were heard. Something about a fire that had not yet been brought under control.

Brazo Alkher smiled faintly, happy to realize that his triple beam shot had caused such damage where it counted. This fact improved their whole situation. By now the Solar Fleet must be on its way to this area, he thought, and it shouldn't be any problem to capture the Antis' crippled long-ship.

Suddenly a heavy blast was heard throughout the vessel, which was almost 1,000 feet long. The shuddering had not yet subsided in the floor-plates before sirens began to howl. The various excited groups they had seen scattered now in every direction. The Antis running past them paid no attention to the Terrans. Panic was on the faces of the priests of Baalol.

Nolinov grinned unabashedly and his eyes gleamed when he saw the consternation the sirens were causing. But they were suddenly gripped hard by the robot. A cabin door opened and the two of them were unceremoniously tossed inside. By the time they got up again, the door was shut behind them. In some perplexity they looked about them.

"Those robots are real friendly!" muttered Nolinov. He made another check to make sure they were alone in the cabin.

Another grinding jolt struck the vessel's entire frame but this blast was not as strong as the first one. The howl of the sirens continued.

"Congratulations, old buddy!" said Nolinov in grim satisfaction. "You hit these pirates where it hurts."

Alkher modestly shrugged off the compliment. "It was an accident."

Just as I fired, they started a course change, so instead of giving their faces a tan, I tanned their bottoms for them."

"One of these days you're going to die of modesty," grunted Stant. He was still looking about in the well-furnished cabin. "We need something to break that door open with. You see anything that might be handy, sailor?"

"You mean you want to make a try to escape without the Chief?" asked Alkher testily.

"If that's the only way, yes!" came the unhesitating reply.

"I don't go for it, Stant. We'd do the Chief and ourselves more good if we could pull off a little more demolition in their power and engine sections. Every minute we can delay them here betters our chances.

Don't forget our distress call!"

Meanwhile, Alkher happened to place his hand on the door handle. Without thinking about it he turned it and was shocked to find that it opened! Through a crack in the door he could see two Antis standing in the passage with their backs to him. He glanced swiftly at Stant, who gave him an answering wink. He was with him.

Soundlessly he swung the door wide open. He took the priest on his right and Nolinov jumped on the other one. The anti-mutants' outcry was drowned in the howl of the sirens. In the next moment the two Terrans dragged their unconscious victims into the cabin. The door closed by itself and Stant knelt down beside one of them. Alkher inspected the other priest.

Five minutes later the servants of Baalol lay bound and gagged in the adjoining bathroom. Nolinov and Alkher had appropriated their clothing, which didn't amount to much. Their disguise wasn't very good but they were counting on the turmoil and panic to cover their masquerade on their way to the machine rooms. There was some feeling of security in the heavy energy weapons they had obtained.

"All set?" asked Alkher.

"Let 'er rip, old buddy!"

The 2 captives left the cabin and as they moved along the main deck toward the engine rooms no one became suspicious of them. The sirens were still in an uproar and crewmembers were running everywhere. Far aft in the power and engine sections there were still repeated sounds of explosions. It appeared that the Antis had not yet brought the fire under control.

This was almost too easy, Nolinov was thinking—just as disaster emerged from a cabin in the form of a robot.

5/ DAY OF THE ANTI-RHODAN

Thomas Cardif thought that his luck had run out as he looked around the circle of fanatic priests. Even Rhobal the high priest was no longer friendly to him. They were standing around him since he was the only one in the large cabin who had been told to take a seat.

Rhobal spoke to him in cold, threatening tones. "As Edmond Hugher, you were permitted by Baalol to complete your studies on Aralon. As Edmond Hugher you swore your allegiance to Baalol forever. It is Baalol you have to thank for releasing you from the hypno-block that Arkon forced upon you for 58 years by order of your father. And as Thomas Cardif you again swore that you would be eternally grateful to Baalol. With our help it was possible to put Rhodan out of the way; with our help *you* have become Perry Rhodan! And for all this you still attempt to betray us?"

"Cardif, one word from us and the Terrans win rip that mask from your face and your game will be at an end! If you don't hand over what you have brought with you from the invisible planet, we shall announce your identity. We would have also revealed your identity if you had managed to get to the Earth with the cell activators. Have you seriously been toying with the idea of trying extortion on us?"

These questions and accusations had been delivered to Cardif like so many hammer blows.

"Where are the cell activators?" asked Rhobal threateningly as he aimed a hypno-beamer at Cardif.

In his helpless rage, Cardif realized that all resistance was useless, yet in the depths of his despair he remembered that the 20 cell activators were sealed in a spherical time-field which could only be opened if he so willed it!

"Rhobal, your 20 activators are in my cabin in the space-jet." Now his voice was calm again. He straightened up like the genuine Rhodan and ignored the hypno-weapon that was aimed at him.

The more than 2 dozen Antis in the room were startled in spite of themselves by the change that had come over him. Suddenly Rhodan's son was radiating that certain essence which had always made his father stand out from the masses.

"Go get them, Rhobal!" he challenged. "I know that you're interested in them only as a matter of course but what's so important, really, about having eternal life? It should mean little to you—or am I wrong? Well? Which of you will receive an activator? Have you already drawn straws among you, to decide?"

He knew these servants of Baalol better than any other Terran. His psychology was deftly applied to play one against the other. Here he was facing the most influential of the Antis. He knew them all and there was not one of them who was free of a greed for power. He knew how each of them had gotten to his present position. Not one of them was prepared to give up an activator willingly.

"Cardif," Rhobal warned him, "you will not succeed in sowing dissension among us, no more than you will succeed in getting away. Do not forget that Perry Rhodan still lives! And he will continue to live as long as you so that we may always remind you that you are only his soul"

For the first time there was a defiant gleam in Cardif's eyes. Antis! He spoke derisively as he glared at each of them. "You are not stronger than I! You are planning to take over the Solar Imperium, are you? Well, go ahead and try it—without me! Those 300 extra Springer bases haven't been approved yet. So how are you going to set them up—without me? Neither your agent Banavol nor the Baalol priest you sent to Pluto could force me to the wall!"

Rhobal was quick to accuse him. "Cardif, you murdered Juglun, alias A-Thol!"

Cardif-Rhodan answered with a cynical laugh. "Coming from you, Rhobal, that's a strange accusation. All right, so how shall we proceed in the future? On the basis of equal rights?—or do you still believe you've got the upper hand?" He waited calmly for them to make their decision.

The high priest turned to two of the Antis. "Bring the cell activators from the space-jet!" he ordered.

At that moment the vast spaceship was shaken by another powerful explosion. It brought a faint smile to Cardif's lips.

"Go!" said Rhobal urgently to the 2 priests, who had stopped in sudden fright. His eyes flamed anger as he turned back to Cardif. "If we all blow up because of your space-jet's treacherous attack, you will die with us!" he shouted.

"That I can't change," was Cardif's cold reply.

Then they all waited for the two Baalol servants to return. When the door finally opened, they all expected to see the 2 priests and their coveted booty. Instead of this, a robot pushed Brazo Alkher and Stant Nolinov into the room.

"These two Terrans were on their way to the engine rooms!" blared the metallic voice of the robot. He held his deadly beam weapons aimed directly at Alkher and Nolinov.

The 2 lieutenants waited in vain for a look or a signal from their chief. The man they had taken for Rhodan looked past them indifferently.

Brazo also saw the Anti who stood in front of the Chief raise his hypno-gun and fire. Then the two lieutenants of the Solar Fleet went into deep hypnosis. They no longer were aware of what was happening to them. They felt nothing at all when, on an order from Rhobal, the robot picked them up and carried them out.

The door hardly closed behind them when an important announcement came over the ship's P.A. system. The fire in the machine rooms had been brought under control. The three main power plants could not be repaired with the equipment available on board. The head engineer did not attempt to gloss over the salient facts:

"Transitions are still possible but I wouldn't like to try more than one at the present time. Any overloads now could cause a complete breakdown of our system. Over and out!"

The priests fell into an excited discussion of their situation. For some minutes they ignored Thomas Cardif until Rhobal composed himself and reminded them that they need not fear for their lives. "We can get away in Cardif's space-jet at any time," he said.

All of them nodded, satisfied, and quickly turned their interest back to their prisoner.

Again the door opened and this time the 2 priests appeared having returned from their errand. The pale red time-field hovered in the air between them. In its interior could be seen the dark egg-shaped shadows of the cell activators.

The fanatic faces of the Antis were momentarily transfixed by a rapture of awe and wonderment—but the wonderment swiftly transformed itself into greed! There before them, floating in an alien shell of energy, were 20 keys to eternal life!

Even Rhobal's voice trembled as he spoke. "Open that sphere, Cardif!" he demanded.

Thomas Cardif leaned back comfortably in his chair. "Why me? Open it yourself, Rhobal!" He looked the priest straight in the eye.

But during this sudden change of advantage he had failed to see Rhobal adjust the intensity setting of the hypno-gun. The tiny thumbwheel in the butt of the weapon was turned to a minimum charge. Without warning, Rhobal lifted it and fired directly at Cardif. The latter suddenly appeared to be in a trance.

"Cardif!" the priest commanded. "Open the sphere!"

The startled Antis heard Cardif comply: I will you to open!"

But the faintly glowing sphere refused to open.

What could the Antis know of the multiplex entity on Wanderer? All they knew was restricted to what Cardif had told them.

"Cut it open!" suggested one of the priests. He was so worked up by now that he could hardly speak, so great was his anticipation.

Someone aimed a disintegrator at the energy shell. The beam struck the upper pole of the sphere. Unharmed, the pale red ball hovered in the room as before, only gently swaying from the impact.

"Try a shot from a thermo!" suggested another of the servants of Baalol.

"No!" Rhobal contradicted him because he realized that the sphere would resist any attempt to open it by force. "Only the Terran can open it!"

"But he just tried that!" argued another.

"No he didn't!" the high priest explained impatiently. "He is not himself as long as he's in hypno-shock."

Rhobal, was standing close to the hovering ball. His gaze was still fixed upon the still unobtainable cell activators. It cost him an almost superhuman effort of will to conceal his excitement from the others. Close before him dangled the promise of eternal life! The future was open to him! For him and 19 other servants of Baalol! They would become immortals like Gonozal VIII!

The other priests began to complain and they criticized Rhobal for having used his hypno-gun on Cardif. Their desire for the cell activators was dissolving all consideration of rank; none cared at the moment whether Rhobal was their leader or not. They simply were not going to wait any longer for life eternal! They demanded to have the activators and they even began to shout threats at Rhobal.

But the latter must have anticipated such a possibility. He took a swift look around him and then called out: "Robots!"

The door of an adjoining room flew open to admit 4 combat robots. They took up positions on either side of the doorway and aimed their heavy weapons to the servants of Baalol.

"They are programmed to my commands!" snarled Rhobal. "You will forfeit your life if you attempt anything against me!"

Thomas Cardif had come out of his brief spell of hypnosis by now, and when he saw Rhobal's trouble he laughed, obviously amused.

Like a shot, Rhobal whirled and shouted at him: Open that sphere, Terran, or I'll force you to do it!"

"Those are big words, Rhobal with nothing behind them," Cardif retorted. He rose to his feet and shoved the Anti aside. Stepping over to the sphere he took hold of it and raised it above his head. "Go ahead, all of you! Feast your eyes on these cell activators which can give you the gift of eternal life! 20 of them are waiting here for you but you will never have them unless I give the mental order, *of my own free will*, for the sphere to open! They lie behind a barrier to our own time, gentlemen. Do you understand that? They are enclosed by a time field and that field will remain closed unless *I feel* like having it open up! Well, Rhobal, do you still dare to antagonize me with your threats?"

He let go of the ball of energy and it remained suspended in the air. There was something peaceful and restful about the pale rose glow of the sphere but it had no effect on the highly excited Antis.

With an exasperating casualness, Cardif went back and sat down in his chair. "Rhobal, are you ready to negotiate with me now or do you still think you can order me around?"

"Negotiate!" exclaimed the other Antis. "Deal with him!"

They were interrupted, however, by a loud announcement over the speaker: "Rhobal, a ship from the Solar Fleet is approaching our position!"

More than 2 dozen Antis stiffened in sudden alarm and consternation. But the man who had usurped Perry Rhodan's position in the Sol System did not rejoice—he cursed inwardly. He could guess the identity of the approaching ship: the *Ironduke*! And he knew that the appearance of the linear-drive spaceship had worsened his situation. Now the Antis would swing back to their old threat of handing him over to the Solar Fleet if he did not immediately surrender the activators to them.

He looked up. Rhobal was standing directly in front of him. The Anti was grinning at him in triumph.

"Well?" said the priest. He repeated the question with insistent emphasis. "Well, Cardif?"

* * * *

While the *Ironduke* continued to hurtle through semispace toward its goal, its 3-D sensor optics had not only picked up a spaceship ahead but had also brought out its form and contours on the special viewer. Bell had been waiting for just such a revelation for the past half-hour. The 3-dimensional sensor device had been his main hope.

This superimposed tracking system worked on the basis of a para-stable, blanketing field compensator which screened the return echo from the effects of 5th-dimensional distortions. Since the 3-D beam expanded with distance and produced a spreading effect that was enhanced by the ship's isolation field, it was possible to make observations from semispace and look into the 4-D continuum that lay directly ahead in the straight line of flight.

"Antis!" grunted Bell decisively.

Jefe Claudrin overheard him. "Sir, in 6 or 7 minutes we'll be alongside."

Simultaneously the weird rumbling of the Kalup converter cut off. Claudrin had come out of linear drive because he didn't want the *Ironduke* to race past the alien ship while in semispace. After a few seconds of transitional switchover the impulse engines roared to life. Thus dropped into the normal continuum the *Ironduke* was reduced to a mere 9-tenths the speed of light. Yet in present quarters this was still far too fast and had to be braked. On the big flight panel the normal velocity readings began to drop rapidly.

Claudrin must have also touched a few alarm buttons. The space-jet hangars were reporting their readiness for action. Then came: "Gun positions on standby!" This was from the Fire Control Central,

normally headed by Brazo Alkher.

The Com Room signalled that it was ready.

Claudrin grabbed the microphone. "Transmit data to Fleet units, coördinates and so forth."

"Yessir!" the loudspeaker rattled. "We'll have a confirmation in a few moments!"

Meanwhile Bell had not taken his eyes from the 3-D sensor screen. The big cylindrical ship with its stubby bow and stern configuration was becoming more and more discernible. Being coupled in to the ship's positronic computer, the tracking system had long since furnished the first range-coordinate data for calculation. From the moment of the *Ironduke's* re-entry into normal space, the main computer had been bombarded with 180 changing variables per second but it was processing them all as though it were child's play.

In spite of a velocity that was still in the range of half the speed of light, their approach to the alien long-ship seemed to be imperceptible. Bell was just about to ask for an explanation of this when the C.O. at the positronic board made an announcement. "Enemy vessel is picking up speed!"

Jefe Claudrin responded at once. Once more the impulse engines thundered to maximum power. The *Ironduke's* spherical hull began to resonate. For some seconds no spoken word could be heard but then as quickly as the thundering had come it suddenly died away.

"That ought to clip off a good minute of approach time!" muttered Claudrin.

Bell shot him a question from his position by the hypersensor screen. "Jefe, when do we come into firing range?"

"Alright, my good sir! bellowed Claudrin, aiming his ire at the computer section's C.O. "Will you kindly give Mr. Bell the time factors? Lieutenant—you and I will have a talk when we get back to Terrania!"

Normally an easy-going person, Jefe Claudrin was a stickler when it came to service performance. His threat concerning the talk with the positronics C.O. was not to be taken lightly.

"Sir!" the lieutenant called to Bell. "Firing range in 330 to 340 seconds if the long-ship doesn't go into transition first. In past 20 second enemy ship has gone into high acceleration!"

Bell hadn't required such precise data but he was already apprehensive that the other ship might get away from them. He could clearly see on the sensor screen that the vessel was leaping ahead at an amazing speed.

Claudrin's voice boomed out again: "Com Central: challenge to alien ship... heave to for inspection! Threaten them with firing action!"

Mercant was standing beside Bell. The Solar Marshal only glanced occasionally at the viewscreen but more frequently at his watch. A hundred second had passed since the time-fix had been given.

"100 seconds on your countdown, Mr. Bell..." He got no farther.

The Com Room made a startling announcement: "Alien vessel *Baa-Lo* threatens to execute Perry Rhodan if our stop order is not retracted at once! This is an ultimatum and we're 17 seconds into their

countdown!"

Bell was staring directly at the loudspeaker. "These Antis don't give you a chance to think!... Com Room, this is Bell! Answer at once: stop order cancelled. We agree to stay out of firing range. Ask for a parley!"

Claudrin knew what he had to do. His fighter ship went into a course change as the retro-engines strongly braked the velocity. Under this sudden load the inertial absorbers set up a complaining howl in the depths of the ship. No man in the Control Central paid any heed to it. Not one superfluous word was spoken. Everyone was waiting for another announcement from the speaker, which was due in a matter of second.

But those seconds became an eternity of waiting!

Mercant's eyes were still fixed on his chronometer. "100 second *ontheir* count... 105... now it's..."

The expected announcement came through: "Offer accepted. Ready for parley but Perry Rhodan's life is forfeited if there is the slightest incident. Signed: Rhobal."

"Rhobal!" exclaimed Bell. His brow gleamed with sweat. He would not forget that name till his dying day!

* * * *

High priest Rhobal proved that the title he carried was not unjustified. When the Solar Fleet battleship's presence was announced, he had taken amazingly swift and logical action. He had insisted on having Thomas Cardif next to him so that he could hear every decision he made.

Rhobal realized that he must act within seconds if he and the other priests were not to be lost along with their damaged ship. For many decades it had been known in this part of the galaxy how effectively the Solar Fleet could strike when the situation called for it.

But before the high priest turned his attention back to Cardif he alerted all priests on board, ordering each of them to put his personal forcefield behind the *Baa-Lo*'s defence screen so as to reinforce it. During their flight from Lepso it had been shown that not even the silo-thick battle beams of the superbattleships could get through a screen that had been strengthened by their mental forces. Their only and greatest handicap at the moment was the heavy damage to their engines, which at the most could only deliver a single hypertransition.

Wordlessly the high priest looked at the man who had been such a major key to their operations for so many years. As Edmond Hugher he had worked for them under a hypno-block and had dedicated his superior medical knowledge to their purposes over a period of almost 5 decades. Not least among his accomplishments had been the discovery of a certain hormone in the glandular systems of the so-called slime diggers of Lepso. This had turned out to be a time-limited but highly effective means of rejuvenation. However it also developed in the human body an addictive poison of very little toxicity.

Thus offered as a rejuvenating liqueur, this cleverly camouflaged poison had come out under the name of

Liquitiv on an intergalactic basis and millions of Terrans and Arkonides had become its victims.

Now the two, Anti and Cardif, who had been partners for decades, faced each other as enemies: the extortioner and the extorted.

Rhobal expressed it quite flatly to him: "Cardif, you have your life in your hands!"

"What about the cell activators?" he blurted out. "Do they count for nothing?"

"What value do they have in the present situation?" asked Rhobal. He pointed to the viewscreen. In the abysmal depths of the void was a sharp small point of light: the *Ironduke* ... waiting. The linear-drive ship had turned on all its searchlights, which was a signal to the *Antis* on the *Baa-Lo* that the Terran top command wished to parley.

Cardif stood breathing heavily in helpless rage before the priest. It was costing him an almost superhuman effort not to lose control of himself.

"Decide, Thomas Cardif! You have your life in your hands as well as all of our lives but I'll give you the right to make a choice, once you have handed over the 20 cell activators!"

The pale rose spherical time-field hovered in the air nearby.

The ship's Communication Centre channelled an outside message directly to the local speaker. Bell's voice was heard, stating his demand for a parley. Only the sound circuits were activated in the receiver system, the picture portion remaining blank. The fact that the viewscreen remained grey was another means of placing Cardif under pressure. He knew that Rhobal's operator could cut in the video portion at any moment unexpectedly, if the situation warranted it, and a scene could be transmitted from the *Baa-Lo* to the men on the *Ironduke* which might make their Chief appear to be suspect.

"Cardif, you heard what your First Deputy and possible successor, Reginald Bell, has just demanded. We wish to bring the negotiations to a conclusion quickly. Well, what is your position regarding my demand for the activators? If you refuse, then you and the servants of Baalol are doomed together. If you hand them over, then there'll be nothing in your way as far as leaving this ship is concerned. But once you have gone, don't forget that within 3 days the proposal for an additional 300 Trader bases must be approved. If you fail there, then unfortunately we'll have some other unpleasanties for you!"

Again the speaker blared with a relayed message from outside. Again it was Bell who spoke: "Ahoy spaceship *Baa-Lo* ! This is Reginald Bell, First Deputy Administrator! I must advise you that a strong Fleet formation is approaching our present position. Considering the large number of ships, mishaps are possible. In order to avoid such dangers, I suggest our negotiations begin immediately! Standing by for confirmation. Over and out!"

There were 3 combat robots in the back of the room. Their sole object of surveillance was Thomas Cardif. The five other priests who were still present had calmed down in the meantime and had once more submitted to Rhobal's autocratic authority.

"I'll open it!" cried Cardif, forcing himself to yield.

"But don't forget you have to show us how to adjust the activators to our individual frequencies!" Rhobal warned.

Cardif clamped his jaws together and took a seat. The sphere drifted down to his lap and then he concentrated intensively on one thought: *open!*

Instead of merely opening, the pale red time-field ceased to exist. It disappeared into nothingness, permitting the 20 egg-shaped devices to fall into his lap. The priest took 19 of them and shoved them into the copious pocket of his cloak. He handed the 20th one to Cardif. "Now show us how to set it for physical frequency!" Rhobal's voice was adamant and self-assured.

The eyes of Rhodan's son were aflame with hatred yet he finally showed the high priest how simple it was to adjust any of the activators to the frequency of its wearer. Rhobal took the 20th activator from him and also placed it in his pocket.

"You may hail the *Ironduke* and tell them you're on your way, Cardif. However, don't forget to order them to give us a clear transition run with no interference. And would you believe that it's been a distinct pleasure to have you with us on board the *Baa-Lo*?"

Cardif turned his back to him and went over to the local communications terminal. He switched on the viewscreen and waited for it to light up. He finally saw Bell's face, which looked tense and worried.

"I'm coming over in the space-jet, Bell," he said. "Pass the order on to the Fleet units that the Anti ship is not to be hindered, once I leave its airlock. Over and out!"

While he spoke he happened to touch his chest. His fingers contacted the egg-shaped device that he carried against his skin: the 21st activator—that miracle from a superhuman world which also made *him* an immortal!

On the basis of that immortality he was quickly building his new plan—to break the power of the Antis, to eliminate Perry Rhodan forever and to dethrone the self-styled Emperor, Gonozal VIII!

He, Thomas Cardif, was both Terran and Arkonide. He intended to rule both empires.

* * * *

He was racing toward the *Ironduke*. The space-jet's engines were on full-power thrust. The spherical outlines of the linear-drive ship were looming rapidly nearer. Cardif was in constant radio contact with the *Ironduke* during the crossing. He had just passed beyond firing range of the *Baa-Lo*, according to his computer.

He suddenly shouted into his microphone: "Attack the long-ship! Alert the Fleet units now approaching! Total destruction!" His voice rang out with rapt impact. The order was irrevocable.

Jefe Claudrin responded immediately. Cardif was already grinning in triumph as he saw how swiftly the 800-meter *Ironduke* leapt out of its free fall course and began to accelerate. The big sphere shot past the space-jet like a phantom within only 50 kilometres. He could see the polar gun turrets open up with all the firepower at their command.

But almost in the same moment his hypersensor reacted. In spite of severe engine damage, the *Baa-Lo*

had made a hyperjump from free fall! Cardif stared at the sensor panel, looking in vain for any coordinate values. The counters rested at zero. And then he understood what had happened. The Antis had been able to make a complete disappearance by use of their mental powers. The space-time continuum failed to react as the *Baa-Lo* made its hypertransition and re-emerged somewhere among distant stars, back in the normal universe.

A half-hour later the I-109 landed in one of the *Ironduke's* space-jet hangars. Minutes later, Cardif-Rhodan entered the Control Central.

"Perry!" shouted Bell exuberantly. He ran both hands through his stubble of red hair, not knowing how else to express his relief.

Even Mercant's eyes had a high luster as he spoke: "Thank God you are with us again, sir!"

Although he expressed his compliments he was also raging over the fact that the alien long-ship had escaped him.

It was some time later that Bell casually asked an innocent question: "Where did Nolinov and Alkher go, Perry—back to their stations?"

Cardif-Rhodan had been expecting this question since entering the Control Central. "No," he answered, shaking his head. "The two lieutenants didn't come back with me. I believe they are dead."

In the few second of stunned silence which followed, the chill of outer space seemed to pervade the room.

"Perry, you only *believe* they are dead? You don't know it for sure?" Bell half stuttered the words but he moved closer to the Chief and stared at him. "Come on, Perry—tell me I didn't hear you right! Man, what on earth were you thinking of when you gave that order to destroy the Anti ship?"

"Just what I got through telling you, Bell!" answered Cardif-Rhodan sharply. His eyes flashed a challenge.

The men in the Control Central held their breaths. All eyes were focussed on just one man: the Chief. But this Perry Rhodan acted like a complete stranger to them. When had he ever left one of his own men in the lurch? And much more to the point—when had he *ever* given an order to attack and destroy when the, life of a single one of them was in question?

Perry! Bell's voice carried a note of desperation but Cardif-Rhodan cut him off.

"Do you think I wouldn't regret the death of those 2 men? I saw a robot take them away. They seemed to be dead at the time. Unfortunately the Antis wouldn't tell me anything when I asked about Alkher and Nolinov. You know *I could* have simply told you they were dead—flat out! That would have avoided any misunderstandings."

Bell was visibly shaken. "Perry, you've never thought or operated this way before. I don't understand you. Oh sure! I get most of what happened on Pluto... Banavol brought you a report that an Anti was going to show up at the Springer base there. But what *Idon't* get was why you took such a highly personal interest in verifying that information. What is Solar Intelligence for?"

Again, Cardif-Rhodan interrupted him. "Solar Intelligence can prove right now whether or not it is still

what it was!" As he said this he glanced at Allan D. Mercant.

"What's that supposed to mean?" demanded Bell angrily. That this exchange of words was going on in the Control Central was making him nervous.

"What does it mean?" Cardif-Rhodan's tone expressed bitter scorn. "You will soon find out! It certainly should be interesting to find out why the Antis attacked me and how they knew of my flight to Wanderer. It's not a mere matter of curiosity, Bell—I will find out! And now I'd advise you to hang onto yourself when I tell you this: either Stana Nolinov or Brazo Alkher, or both of them, must have advised the Antis of my flight to Wanderer. There is no other answer because the Antis made it quite clear to me that they had been waiting in ambush for the space-jet!"

Behind him, somebody cleared his throat. It was Jefe Claudrin who as commander of the *Ironduke* was directly in charge of the 2 lieutenants whom the Chief was so badly maligning. "Sir...!" he rumbled warningly—but Cardif-Rhodan also cut him off.

"I didn't ask for your opinion, Claudrin! Mercant, I demand that your organization be put to work at once on this. In the shortest possible time I want to know where the *Baa-Lo* has landed, where the Antis have gone and whether Alkher and Nolinov are actually dead or alive! Within one week I want to have some satisfactory answers to these questions!"

Mercant's face was expressionless and he ignored Bell's significant glance. The Solar Marshal could not remember ever having heard the Chief give him an assignment in this manner before. Nor had Perry Rhodan ever doubted the ability of Solar Intelligence. "Sir," he remonstrated calmly, "you are asking something almost impossible..."

Cardif-Rhodan's imperious hand gesture cut him off. "Possible or impossible, Mercant! I'm not interested in guesswork! Do you know what's involved here? Do you know what's fallen into the hands of the Antis, thanks to the traitorous help of one of those officers of the Solar Fleet or both of them? Haven't you asked yourselves why the Antis turned me over unconditionally?"

"20 cell activators have fallen into their hands! The same type of cell activator that Atlan wears—but until now he was the *only* possessor of such a device!"

This announcement silenced even Mercant. Bell seemed to be trying desperately to catch his breath. Many of the officers in the Control Central had turned visibly pale. Their Epsalian commander had apparently forgotten the Chief's rough reprimand.

And Cardif-Rhodan stood there triumphantly in their midst. He himself broke the uncanny pall of silence: "Is it understandable now why I issued the order to attack and destroy?"

Thomas Cardif exulted inwardly when he perceived that even Solar Marshal Mercant's attitude was less accusing. And the underhanded chess play he had made, branding the 2 blameless officers as traitors, was now bearing fruit.

There was only one man present who would not be moved from his own opinion. The thunderous voice of the Epsalian filled the room. "Sir, I beg your pardon but I cannot believe that Alkher or Nolinov betrayed you to the Antis! If that were true, then I'd cease to believe in humanity itself. In that case, you could also call me a traitor to yourself and the Solar Imperium!"

Cardif-Rhodan had allowed the *Ironduke*'s commander to finish speaking. Now he walked over to him

and laid a hand on his shoulder in a traditional Rhodan gesture. "Claudrin," he asked "can you explain to me then how the Antis knew of my flight to Wanderer? If I have suspected the 2 lieutenants unjustly, then is there someone else or perhaps several others you'd care to suggest, on board this ship, who might have committed this act of treason? And one thing more, Claudrin: how is it that the servants of Baalol asked me about the cell activators as soon as they captured me?"

The commander stared at him with widened eyes and finally shook his ponderous head. "I'm sorry, sir, but not even that is going to convince me that those men could be traitors. Something else has to be involved here which we know nothing about. Maybe Solar Intelligence can come up with an answer."

Cardif-Rhodan did not have a chance to reply.

"Claudrin," said Mercant swiftly, "I'll tell you one thing right now... In fact, I'll swear it! Solar Intelligence will furnish that answer—or my name isn't Allan D. Mercant!"

ORDER OF THE ACTION

[1/ GALACTIC ENEMY #1](#)

[2/ THE EXTORTIONIST](#)

[3/ WHEN "IT" LAUGHED](#)

[4/ LONG ARM OF BAALOL](#)

[5/ DAY OF THE ANTI-RHODAN](#)

[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

THE MAN WITH TWO FACES

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

"DIE, Kalal! Die!"

It reverberated in his head like an agonized cry and made him utter similar screams of anguish. An invisible power lifted him from his cot and hurled him to the floor, where he remained writhing and shrieking violently.

However he also could feel the pain he suffered as he hit the floor and it was proof for him that he was still alive. He had repulsed the onslaught and remained victorious—victorious over the combined awesome power of the 10 mighty brains.

The mental shield he had created around himself had proved effective. It had withstood the murderous command and hurled it back to its source.

He prepared a message in the code use for radio communication with the friendly nation of Springers.
FRIENDS! KALAL ON UTIK REQUESTS YOUR ASSISTANCE. EXTREMELY URGENT!
PLEASE COME AT ONCE!

"Dangerous Opponents"... "Subterranean Discoveries"... "Shocking Surprise"... "Violet Flower: Violent Hour"—these are some of the fascinating chapters you will read next in—

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