

BOOKAZINE #1

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From here to–ETERNITY!

1/ RHODAN: MAD?

FOR TERRANS he was and remained: *Atlan, the Lonely One of Time*.

Many didn't even know that Emperor Gonozal VIII was that same Arkonide fleet admiral Atlan who had first set foot on Earth more than 10,000 years ago. This was why most people gave little thought to the matter when they read the official announcement in the Terran papers:

On the basis of the Special Powers Act, Section 4, paragraph 45, and Section 2, paragraph 193, First Administrator Perry Rhodan has issued the following directive, effective 25 August 2103: Within 5 days of date, all Terrans in any way connected with or active for the Imperium of Gonozal VIII are to return to the Solar System. This is an official order of the Solar Imperium Administration, approved and signed by Perry Rhodan.

Reginald Bell, Rhodan's First Deputy and second-in-command, had just sat down to breakfast. He had opened his favourite newspaper, the *Terrania Post*, and was preparing to become absorbed in its general contents when he chanced upon the announcement almost at first glance.

As he read it, his eyes slowly widened to an incredulous glare of anger. Suddenly he jammed the paper into a ball and threw it to the floor. It took him a few moments to regain his self-control to the point where he could bring himself to retrieve it and look at it again. He picked up the crumpled bundle and carefully straightened it out so that he could read the announcement a second time.

He leaned over the table with both hands before him on the spread-out front page and spoke aloud to himself: "So I'm not dreaming—it's for real!" He read the text again, very carefully. "Glord!" he exclaimed. "Everything we've sweated to build up over decades—is Perry trying to tear it all down in just a few days? Blast his one-sided decisions! I can't believe it! It's just not possible—!"

His stocky figure straightened up slowly. He stared at the newspaper for another incredulous

moment—then made a dash for the videophone. The kitchen clock revealed that it was only 10 after 6 in the morning. No doubt Solar Marshal Mercant was still asleep at this early hour but Bell took no heed of such considerations now. The vid-screen's grey raster leapt to life.

After a number of urgent rings, Mercant's voice was heard: "Alright, I'm coming!"

Shortly after, Bell saw Mercant's face appear on the screen. Although he looked sleepy, the Solar Marshal's mental faculties were fully awake. He suspected that Bell wouldn't be making a social call at this time of the morning. "So what is it now?" he asked.

"Hold on!" Bell said, and Mercant saw him disappear from his screen for a moment. When he returned he held up the front page of the *Terrania Post* to the videophone. "This is what's up—can you read it?"

There was no answer. Bell finally pulled the paper away from the vid-camera pick-up. The 2 men stared at each other speechlessly. Finally one of them slowly shook his head. This was Allan D. Mercant, Solar Marshal and Chief of Solar Intelligence. His facial muscles were strangely rigid and his lips were tightly compressed as though in despair. But finally he spoke. "Bell, has Atlan been heard from yet?"

Bell shook his head. "He hasn't contacted me so far but maybe he's talked to the Chief."

"I'll be with you in 5 minutes, Bell—unshaven and unwashed, if you please."

By 7:30 a.m., Bell and Mercant had come to a conclusion: They did not propose to give Perry Rhodan a call. They knew it would do no good.

Ever since the catastrophe on Okul when Perry Rhodan had fallen into the hands of the Antis as well as his son Thomas Cardif, the Chief had changed to an alarming degree. Everything that had formerly distinguished him, the genius that had singled him alone out for his special position, none of this was in evidence anymore, or at least it appeared now only in very rare instances. Rhodan had never attempted to obtain dictatorial powers before but now he had wrested such authority from Parliament and had become a full-fledged dictator. The best example of this was his present edict to the effect that all Terrans within the stellar empire of star cluster M-13 were to return at once.

This autocratic command could unleash a galactic catastrophe and cause Gonozal VIII to doubt the quality of Rhodan's friendship. The Imperator could not dispense with the active assistance of several hundred thousand Terrans who presently occupied Arkon's most vital administrative positions. They formed the backbone of his structure of government since they were the only reliable leaders among billions of degenerated Arkonides.

Bell and Mercant had not spoken of these things. No one knew better than they what kind of interstellar mess was brewing. But they also knew how useless it would be to go to Rhodan and try to make him see these dangers or to get him to change his mind. Ever since he had begun to make vital decisions in solitude he had been closed to any advice whatsoever. He avoided everyone—even his best friend, Reginald Bell.

And where Bell was concerned, day by day Perry Rhodan became a bigger mystery. He placed the blame on the doctors for Rhodan's change of character. After Rhodan had been brought back from Okul in a greatly disturbed mental condition, Bell had been very suspicious of the shock therapy that had been used on him. Even the doctors weren't quite sure of themselves, having avoided any concrete statements on the subject.

But even Rhodan's second-in-command had failed to suspect that the man he took for Perry Rhodan could actually be Thomas Cardif. He and all the rest of Rhodan's closest colleagues had fallen into the trap of believing that the Chief was still sick and that for this reason they should not take any stringent measures against him.

"I can't take any more!" Bell suddenly shouted. "I can't stand by any longer in silence and blindly accept this insanity!"

Mercant looked up at him. Bell had finally stopped pacing the floor. With quiet deliberation, as was his custom, Mercant observed: "You know, ever since Okul, the Chief has been over-sensitive to your outbreaks of temper, Bell."

Bell frowned in response. "But we can't be accessories to the crime, Mercant—we can't just keep our mouths shut! If this keeps up, one of these days—not too long from now—we'll all be hauled before the public and stoned, because we gave Rhodan a free hand!"

Mercant remained calm. "Mr. Bell, we can't put up any resistance against him now. The way the situation is at the moment we'd better consider that he's liable to be ruthless with his special powers."

Bell stared in gaping astonishment at the Intelligence chief. It was only with an effort that he found his voice again. "Are you trying to tell me that Perry would just slammer us and call us enemies of the State because we don't support his views?"

"That's exactly what I'm trying to tell you, Mr. Bell."

Bell sat down heavily in his chair. "Alright," he growled, "so we're agreed on that point, Mercant. But I still haven't any taste for having rocks thrown at me one of these days!"

Mercant raised a hand to calm his impulsive friend. "Mr. Bell, it's a little too early for us to start talking conspiracy or to discuss any revolutionary actions. Such conversations are extremely repugnant to me. I'd much rather suggest that we place the Chief under much stronger surveillance and seek to slow him down wherever possible."

"So where will that get you, Mercant?" asked Bell peevishly.

"Perhaps we will gain time. Perhaps..."

Bell interrupted. "Are you starting all your sentences with 'perhaps' again, Mercant?"

The Solar Marshal smiled. "I discussed this subject yesterday with Deringhouse and Freyt. The three of us agreed to hold back our responses to Rhodan's orders as long as possible, whenever they involved possibly grave consequences—at least until our side had done everything we could to avoid a catastrophe."

"So what about this one?" asked Bell sarcastically as he held up the *Terrania Post*. "Come on, my friend, are you going to glue the splinters together after Rhodan's wrecked the place? Do you know what Atlan is going to tell him?"

"It could mean a break between Arkon and ourselves."

"That's the understatement of the year, Mercant!" retorted Bell grimly. "This fast shuffle of the Chief's

has ripped the treaty with Arkon to shreds! *We* have broken the treaty—the Solar Imperium! We..."

The videophone rang. Bell got out of his chair and went over to it. The Solar Marshal's adjutant wanted to speak to his chief.

"For you, Mercant!" said Bell, and he stepped to one side.

Mercant took his place before the apparatus. "What is it?"

The adjutant's manner and tone were strictly according to regulations. "Solar Marshal, sir—I have just learned by hypercom inquiry from Arkon 1 that the Chief gave direct orders to agents of Solar Intelligence last night. All personnel operating on Arkonide planets have been reassigned. The general order reads: Effective immediately, all Arkonide fleet bases are to be placed under sharpest surveillance! All fleet movements of any nature are to be reported at once. Reports concerning combat strengths of Arkon fleet units are to be sent to Terrania every 6 hours.

"That is the content of the hypercom information, sir. I've taken the liberty of calling you because I don't find any documentation of the Chief's general order in your files."

Mercant did not reveal outwardly what an impact the message had for him. Over his head, Perry Rhodan had issued orders to Solar Intelligence which sooner or later would have to lead to a military entanglement with Arkon. In spite of this, Mercant answered with admirable self-control: "Thanks for taking the trouble, adjutant. I've known about it for some time. My confirmation orders are in process." When he shut off the videophone he still stood there staring at it.

He was not aware of the air shimmering behind him and he failed to see Pucky materialize. The little fellow had teleported himself from his bungalow to Bell's place and Mercant was only alerted to his presence when he heard his chirping voice. "I'd like to catch the wise-guy who said the early bird scratches the worm," he almost screeched in his excitement, "and shove him into a whole *can* of them—because that's what we've got right now! The Chief has ordered most of the mutants off on a special mission to Arkon and its colony planets—special surveillance stuff!" Pucky's great mouse eyes were glittering and his high-pitched voice was trembling with anger.

Meanwhile, Mercant had turned to him. "Tell us about it, Pucky."

There wasn't much more he could say. The majority of the mutants were already en route to the Arkon Imperium. The only reason Pucky was still in Terrania was that he was in the 6th detachment, which was due to board the State-class cruiser *Burma* by 10 a.m. standard time.

Once again, of course, the mousebeaver had used his telepathic faculty on Bell and Mercant and had read their thoughts. He knew that he was going against a very long-standing order, which was still in effect, but he did not seem to care at the moment.

"Where's John Marshall?" Bell wanted to know.

"He blasted out with the first wave," replied Pucky in his typically non-regulation manner.

Bell and Mercant communicated with each other by their glances but the mind-reading mousebeaver didn't have to hear them speak. In fact he surprised them with further news he knew they weren't aware of yet. "Also the special commando team in search of Alkher and Nolinov is on its way to the Arkon Imperium!"

This brought an end to Mercant's self-control. "Pucky, if you're kidding around...!"

But the mousebeaver was equally agitated. "Allan, I know when to kid around and when not to! Right now isn't the time for fun and games. I've even been probing the Chief's mind, if you want to know! Since he's lost his telepathic sense I've been able to do it without being caught. But what do I pick up? Nothing. He seems to think only in fragments these days. You might figure that's pretty weird because thinking like that isn't normal—but it could be something else again. He could be learning to turn some of his thought impulses inward and he might be absorbing them—like a shock-wave damper in a hyper-compensator. What's more, each day that goes by he gets better at it..."

"Pucky..." Mercant tried to interrupt but once the mousebeaver got into the swing of explaining his troubles it was hard to stop him.

Finally, just as Mercant found his chance to get a word in, a massive takeoff of spaceships outside made all conversation impossible. When the first thunderbolt of the hellish din shook the bungalow, the three ran out onto the terrace.

A magnificent spectacle met their eyes. In a concerted thunder of impulse engines, heavy and super-class units of the Solar Fleet were lifting up from Terrania's giant spaceport and heading into space. The gleaming spheres, measuring somewhere between a half mile to almost a mile in diameter, were escorted by both classes of cruiser formations. Surrounded in turn by the super-fast State-class ships, the whole mighty task force hurtled upward into the cloudless morning sky.

Pucky suddenly felt somebody gripping and shaking his shoulder. Bell was shouting into his ear: "What's going on? Who issued the order *forthat* operation!"

Bell's question was not unjustified. He had figured that Pucky's unfailing curiosity would have caused him to probe the minds of some of the spaceship commanders and that way it would be possible to know where this massive fighting force was headed.

Pucky chirped back angrily: "Let's go, you big ape—or I won't tell you a thing!"

The threat produced results. Even Mercant leaned down curiously to listen to the mousebeaver.

And Pucky reported: "Target zone—Arkon Imperium, star cluster M-13 in Hercules!"

"So what are our ships supposed to do there?" demanded Bell.

"I don't know, Fatso. Because no space commander out there knows it either! They all have orders just to go there and take up a standby position for further instructions."

The spherical spaceships rose higher and higher into the sky and the roar of their impulse engines ebbed away. Then the peace of a sunlit morning returned to the capital city of the Solar Imperium. Bell and Mercant left the terrace on their way back into the house but Pucky was ahead of them by means of a short teleport hop. When the 2 men entered the room, Pucky was just helping himself to some carrot juice.

"What's good for the juice is good for the panda," he said with a grandiose gesture, "and that goes for mousebeavers once in awhile!" He wiped his mouth and drew his paw along the few whiskers he possessed.

"And using my glass, no less!" grumbled Bell, giving him a sharp look. He retrieved the glass from Pucky and rubbed its rim with his thumb as though to remove imaginary chin whiskers.

Pucky was in awe of only one man: Perry Rhodan. He was not concerned with the fact that Mercant was the Solar Marshal or that Bell was Rhodan's second-in-command. He addressed Mercant abruptly. "The Chief must be in telepathic contact with somebody. Unfortunately I can't make out who it is. In fact all I got was the words 'Perry Rhodan, you will become too big and too powerful if you do not...'. That's where the contact broke off, as if the sender had noticed me. Isn't that a weird one for you? I've never run into anything like that before—and yet that mental voice was familiar!"

* * * *

Cardif-Rhodan again heard the voice Pucky had mentioned. It sounded in his subconscious as though it were imploring him to listen: *You have until the end of the stipulated time, Perry Rhodan, and that is only a few days more. I warn you! Remove the cell activator or you will become too big and too powerful!*

Although it was still early morning and Cardif-Rhodan had worked late into the previous night, he was already at the window of his office, observing the mass takeoff of the warships into the morning sky. He knew that voice in his subconscious. Day after day since his return from Wanderer he had continued to hear it. The voice had urged him to lay the activator aside. It had given him a deadline of 50 days.

But he had only laughed at this warning from the multiplex entity on Wanderer. He could never become too big or too great! The Solar Imperium would grow, it would reach out in the foreseeable future and rule the entire galaxy! Thomas Cardif let *It* call to him as *It* pleased but he only laughed out loud. He had just reviewed Rhodan's knowledge of this community intelligence but could not find it within himself to regard the eternal being with the same degree of awe and esteem.

He had never yet had any respect for anybody he could deceive. The only thing *It* was good for now was to supply him with super technological weapons, precisely according to his specifications. *It* was a weapons supplier and nothing else.

Cardif lifted a hand to the activator on his chest. He had just felt the device pulsate and now he also sensed the new current of life-preserving energy course through his limbs. He was taking on immortality!

But it hadn't worked for the Antis.

A cynical laugh twisted his features. His was a face which billions of Terrans and Arkonides still watched in increasing wonderment. Cardif did not realize at this moment how ugly he looked; he was still less aware that he was adding new features to Rhodan's countenance—features which were beginning to reflect his original character.

From time to time he had to touch up the grey colouration of his eyes so that their natural reddish hue would not betray him as Thomas Cardif. But now they gleamed coldly. He was gloating. The demise of high priests Kalal and Utik was an obvious indication that *It* must have discovered the theft of the 20 activators by the Antis somehow and had acted at once, from Wanderer, to convert the devices into

instruments of death.

It did not occur to Cardif that his suppositions were completely devoid of logic. Much less did he suspect that the entity on Wanderer had long since penetrated his disguise.

Or you will become too big and too powerful...!

For him this sentence seemed to contain something prophetic: powerful yes, as ruler of the galaxy; and big in mentality. Could either one ever become *too* great?

He lifted his gaze again to the cloudless sky where a small part of the Fleet had just disappeared. Its departure was the beginning of a new move on the cosmic chessboard. With this he was about to prove that he was greater than his father and he wanted to show the Antis that instead of being a marionette to them he was someone they would yet learn to fear.

His plan had reached the next phase: the fall of Arkon!

On all the Arkon worlds where Terrans had been active, mobilization was now in progress to bring them back to the Sol System. The abandonment of their positions could mean nothing less than a catastrophe for Atlan's Imperium. It would lead to its decline and decay and finally the Sol System's takeover would succeed. It was quite clear to Cardif that this was playing with fire. He was well aware of Arkon's powerful robot fleets. But he had not forgotten to consider Atlan's mentality in his sophisticated plan.

As Admiral Atlan, Emperor Gonozal VIII had lived on Earth for more than 10,000 years. Today in his thinking and methods of operation he was much more Terran than Arkonide. For him a pact of friendship represented far more than a mere piece of paper. For him the rupture of all treaties and agreements would constitute a heavy psychological shock. Under such pressure, Atlan would be bound to make some errors in decision. But every wrong move would work in the favour of the Solar Imperium. The outbreak of disturbances and the Terran pullback as well as the penetration of the Solar Fleet were designed to create an avalanche of power politics which would sweep Gonozal VIII from his throne and force the obligation upon him, Thomas Cardif, as Rhodan, to invade the Greater Imperium in order to reestablish law and order.

"Invade..." he said half aloud and he nodded with a smirk. Taking control meant invasion. His plan was in operation. Nothing could stop him now. He, Cardif, had outplayed them all. Very soon now, in less than a half-hour or even the next quarter hour, they would all be facing *afait accompli!*

It was not for nothing that he had requested a direct continuous contact with the giant brain on Venus. It was only with the help of the colossal positronic computer that he as an individual had been able to undertake an operation of this magnitude and complexity and carry it to a logical conclusion.

And all along he had been aware of the warning voice of the far community's entity. From Rhodan's knowledge he knew about the multiple being's farcical sense of humour. He knew what *It* considered to be a joke but he was not to be taken in by such play; he could not permit his great opportunity to pass unutilized.

He stood motionlessly at the window and looked out over the sea of rooftops of Terrania. He was becoming ever more fascinated by this panorama. It represented something of the power which lay behind the Solar Imperium. And the hunger and greed for power had taken possession of him.

He could still recall the time when a Springer patriarch had wanted to make him the Administrator. At

the time he had brusquely rejected the suggestion because he had been consumed by a passion of vengeance which had as its goal his father's destruction. This vengeance drive had long since lost some of its impetus. His zeal for power had partially replaced it although he was not aware of it.

Suddenly his thoughts digressed to something else. In his mind's eye he saw the 2 young officers Brazo Alkher and Stant Nolinov standing before him. After his return from the Antis' long-ship *Baa-lo*, he had told their comrades in the Control Central of the *Ironduke* that they were under suspicion of having committed treason. On this point he had collided head-on with Col. Jefe Claudrin's opposition and also Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant had refused to accept his assertion.

Cardif nodded. Even this subsidiary plan had been carefully interwoven so that the 2 officers would be whitewashed of all suspicion of treason while yet sparing him certain inconvenient questions, such as *who* might have known that he was going to Wanderer to ask for the cell activators. It hadn't been on any basis of decency that he had reestablished the 2 officers but solely for quite pragmatic reasons. If the lieutenants remained in captivity among the anti-mutants there would always be the danger that one day they could manage to escape. In which case it wouldn't be too difficult for them to prove on their own that they had not leaked any information to the Baalol followers concerning their Chief's journey to Wanderer. Also, Cardif was not unaware of the fact that his closest coworkers regarded him either with reservations, confusion or straight-out suspicion.

This continued to vex him and he had resolved from now on to operate, think and decide like Rhodan. But the ego in him was stronger than his will. He was also aware that the knowledge he had gained from his father on Okul was slowly but surely fading away. The hypnotic transference on Okul had been hurried because of the pressure of time and it had not been 100% complete. Many things in Rhodan's life were entirely lacking in his superimposed memory. Often he was seized with terror when he found a gap in the transmitted knowledge and so he had finally decided to become a recluse in order to prevent any discovery of his identity.

He knew that he would still have to live a number of years in this hermit-like existence—but not forever! The time would come when the top staff would be due for their next biological cell shower on Wanderer. He himself had an activator so he didn't need this cell-shower treatment; but Reginald Bell would require it—except that he wouldn't get it! None of the old friends of his father! All of them would meet their deaths. He would surround himself with his *own* friends and not have to see any more of the old faces which had looked up all their lives with such admiration to Perry Rhodan, the man he hated as the murderer of his mother.

Behind him he heard the video intercom buzz. He turned about casually and took his seat at the desk, after which he glanced at the viewscreen to his right. It was the duty officer at the main hypercom station. He announced that he had an incoming call from Arkon 1, the Crystal World. Emperor Gonozal VIII wished to speak to Perry Rhodan.

A symbol appeared on the screen that always identified the Emperor's official call. After a few seconds it disappeared and Atlan's intense face was seen.

"Perry Rhodan!" The Emperor called out to his friend excitedly across an abyss of 34,000 light-years. "I've just learned about your order! In 5 days all Terrans in the Arkonide Imperium are to relinquish their positions here. Barbarian, would you care to explain what you're trying to do? May I also say that your order has come as a very great shock and that I'm beginning to doubt your integrity?"

"Aren't we sounding off a bit pompously, Admiral?" retorted Cardif-Rhodan cynically. "I'm surprised that you've called. Didn't I explain to you in our conversation of a week ago that I would have to

mobilize all manpower reserves in order to cut the Sol System's 10-year plan to 8 years? Didn't I mention a number of times that I meant *all* reserves? Now do you wish to accuse me of not informing you or going behind your back? Admiral, I categorically deny both accusations!"

The Arkonide's face froze. There was a pause of many seconds during which the receiver hummed with the undulating carrier sounds of the hypercom transmission. Finally he asked: "How do you explain the fact, Perry Rhodan, that for some hours now the Solar Fleet has been on course for star cluster M-13?"

Cardif-Rhodan's tone became frigid. "You mean a part of the Solar Fleet, Admiral! And there's another question that surprises me. In the first place, according to treaty the Solar Fleet is permitted to fly into and out of the Arkon Imperium at will, and secondly you seem to forget that neither Arkon nor the Solar Imperium is equipped with the type of matter transmitters they have in the Blue System. Those ships are under way for purposes of transporting Terran personnel back to Earth. Are you saying you perceive an element of threat in the approach of my ships?"

The Arkonide's features grew more livid with anger. "Terran, if I were not face to face with you over this hypercom channel, I would swear I was talking to a stranger. The fact of the matter is, I'm looking at a supposed friend who is suddenly showing his true colours! Rhodan, admit it! You've finally chosen the most strategic time to make your move! You've always known when to hold off and when to strike. My compliments, Barbarian! Fool that I am, I believed in your integrity, yet I've lived long enough on your Earth to actually know better. I congratulate you, scoundrel though you are!"

Cardif-Rhodan had listened without the quiver of an eyelash but now he laughed sarcastically. "Imperator, Perry Rhodan does not forget either favours or insults. As for your dubious compliment, may I repay you in kind? Just so there'll be no misunderstanding I am telling you here in plain English that neither I nor the Sol System are willing any longer to support a conglomeration of degenerated races of people. We are fresh out of compassion and tolerance, for one basic reason, Imperator Gonozal. The Sol System is not a welfare operation!"

The Arkonide managed to maintain his composure. "Perry Rhodan, I am indebted to you for your unusual frankness. I understand you perfectly now. However, under the circumstances you surely can't expect to get your ships into the Arkon Imperium without opposition! Inform your fleet formations that within the hour the robot fleets of Arkon will be alerted. They will be programmed to seek and destroy any Terran ship attempting to enter the Empire!"

"Are you threatening me with war, Imperator?" asked Cardif-Rhodan coldly. At this moment he was relying entirely on the judgment of the Venus brain. Giving a probability factor of 67.4% to its conclusion, it had informed him that Arkon was not in a position to wage a war against the Sol System.

"Rhodan, I did not express the word. I have no desire to go down in history as the destroyer of a great part of the galaxy. I have no such criminal ambition."

Cardif-Rhodan raised his voice in sudden anger. "Imperator, your robots will not keep me from retrieving all Terran personnel who have been ordered to return!"

It had never been customary for Rhodan or Atlan to use each other's titles in addressing one another so Rhodan's use of the word 'Imperator' was doubly obvious to the Arkonide now.

However, when Atlan spoke again it was to make an earnest plea. "Rhodan, I have just had to scratch the word 'friendship' from my vocabulary but I am appealing to your reason and I am asking you not to carry this game too far! Remember that billions of lives are at stake and that Terra itself may be

destroyed. And I stress once more, Rhodan, that if your fleet units..."

The Arkonide on his distant Crystal World fell silent. He had seen Rhodan turn away from the screen momentarily and from his familiarity with the other's office he knew the Terran was looking at another video setup on his desk. The shaken man on Arkon I was able to hear the message coming over the other instrument and thus he knew that 21 major formations of the Terran fleet had just materialized out of hyperspace. They had arrived in star cluster M-13.

When Rhodan's face came back on Atlan's screen it wore a cynical grin. "Atlan, I hope you won't try to stop my ships from picking up all Terran personnel on your planets. In my opinion your time for any effective counteraction has passed, as a matter of fact."

The Arkonide's red eyes mirrored despair as he searched in vain for any familiar features in the face of his former friend. What he saw on his viewscreen was a complete stranger whose words had seemed frighteningly alien. Again the hypercom undulations hummed in the gap of silence between the 2 men. Across 34,000 light-years Atlan's gaze bored into the man whom he took to be Rhodan.

"Terran," Atlan said finally, "this very day the order will go out to the Arkon Imperium for total mobilization. Prepare yourself accordingly! I have nothing more to say to you!"

Rhodan's double remained silent. He kept looking at Atlan until the Imperator on Arkon 1 broke the connection. Then he got up and went back to his favourite window. Below him stretched Terrania's vast sea of buildings. The symbolism of the picture came to him once more: the might of the Solar Imperium lay at his feet!

2/ ATLAN FEELS BETRAYED;

AURIS DEFENDS PERRY

Some months before this, Rhodan had called the Arkon Imperator a 'sad old hound dog' but the remark had referred to the Imperator's enslavement to court etiquette and protocol and all the official ceremonies he had to endure. At first the Arkonide didn't think of this when he read the news reports which were suddenly coming in from all parts of the stellar empire. In effect the reports were all more or less the same: hasty departure of Terrans, the appearance of heavy formations of the Terran fleet, heightened activity of Solar Intelligence throughout the Arkon Imperium.

But finally he saw himself indeed as a 'sad old hound dog'.

He had trusted his friend Rhodan as much as any man could trust a close confidant. He had done much to return the friendship; much had been done for Rhodan at the expense of the Imperium. And now this man had betrayed him in the most insidious manner. But that was not all. With indescribable impudence Rhodan had given him to understand that the Arkon Imperium with its degenerated Arkonides was no less than a ripe plum which was merely waiting to be picked by the Solar Fleet!

Atlan had recourse to one special asset: the logic sector of his 'extra' brain. This he turned to now for advice. In accordance with its name, this mental mechanism based all of its deliberations on pure logic

alone. It was free of any feelings or other diverting influences, nor did it take issue now with Rhodan's betrayal.

The invasion of the Terran fleet and the withdrawal of Terrans from the Imperium represented treason, yes—but also an accomplished fact. Atlan's logic sector had no interest in whether this was good or bad.

The only way out of this catastrophic situation is a military alliance with the Blue System!

The 'sad dog' Arkonide had been forced to live on Earth more than 10,000 years and during that time he had grown very fond of humanity—yet he followed the advice of his logic sector.

He began to take action accordingly.

* * * *

The Ruling Council of Akon had been called into a special session.

Sphinx or Drorah, the 5th planet circling the blue-white sun of Akon, was alive with rumours. It was said that just a few hours ago an urgent distress call had been received from the Arkon Emperor, Gonozal VIII. It had something to do with seeking help against the Terran, Perry Rhodan, and it was claimed that at present the latter was attempting to shake the Arkon Imperium in its foundations so that he could move in and take it over.

Aside from a small number of officials, no Akon knew whether such rumours were based on fact or fiction. Yet this sudden convening of the Ruling Council left no doubt that top political events were taking place in the galaxy. These rumours gave rise to unexpected psychological repercussions within the Blue System. For more than 20,000 years the Akons had looked upon Arkonides as deteriorated and debased offshoots of their race. Then, a few months ago, in alliance with the Terran, Rhodan, they had been regarded as an acute source of danger to the Blue System. But now they were suddenly finding a place in the hearts of the Akons.

That mysterious principle which gives cohesive force to all races of men became manifest in every Akon as he found new empathy for the threatened Arkonides. Suddenly Akon sympathy knew no bounds and widely embraced those far colonial worlds which had turned their backs on the mother empire so many centuries ago. They were not aware of the basic validity of their feelings and actions; instinctively they saw in this Terran named Rhodan the greatest threat to their security. They had not yet gotten over the blow of defeat that Rhodan had recently delivered.

The executive branches of the Ruling Council had long since stretched out feelers into all levels of the Akon populace to test the mood of the people. As a result of the fullest accord of Akon citizens with rescue action, the special session of the Ruling Council had been convened.

Among the council members was a woman, Auris of Las-Toor, a young Akon of unusual grace and beauty. Her specialty was *Terrans and the Solar Imperium*. No one knew the Terrans better than she. During the recent encounter she had been in close contact with First Administrator Rhodan as well as the Arkon Emperor Gonozal VIII, whom Rhodan had addressed as Atlan.

The meeting of the Ruling Council was opened by the Elder Akon, Sa-Ga. He announced briefly that the full Council had been convened in order to examine the message from Emperor Gonozal VIII. After that he opened the session to debate.

The first to be consulted was the alternate chairman, Lempart of Fere-Khar. With reference to the racial kinship and common history between Akons and Arkonides, he made a conservative statement concerning the threat to the Blue System which had arisen because of the Terrans. And with 3 sentences he disposed of the Terran trading base on the planet. It was his very conservatism which gave weight to his arguments. He had cleverly delayed mentioning the Sol System's commercial settlement on Drorah until the end of his speech. In fact, he had even refrained from pointing out that it was a camouflaged military base.

After Lempart of Fere-Khar, 8 other Akons had taken the floor. Three of them were experts in military matters and they operated with figures and numerical data. Their exposition boiled down to specific requirements: The Arkon Imperium would have to turn over 1,000 of their most modern ships to the Blue System. Also the Arkon Imperium would have to agree to place hypno-trained Akons in responsible positions within the Arkonide fleet.

These demands were met with a murmur of approval. Only one member of the Council was not in agreement: Auris of Las-Toor. She asked to be heard.

"If you please!" said old Sa-Ga, and his shrewd eyes looked toward the young woman expectantly.

In a cleverly phrased introduction, Auris pointed out that she could say nothing concerning the advice of the military experts since this was not in her field of experience or responsibility. However, she stressed that she had very much to say about their *unconsidered* judgment of the Terrans. Turning to the recent past, she spoke exclusively of one Terran in particular: Perry Rhodan. She refreshed every Council member's memory with a recounting of Akon provocation, and having gotten that far she brought up a series of rhetorical questions: "How would we have reacted in Rhodan's place? Wouldn't war, demoralization and death have come to the galaxy again? In Rhodan's place would we not have completely destroyed these overbearing Akons?"

These questions were regarded as an enormity and an affront. She was met with sharp rejoinders because her words caused agitation and indignation among the councillors.

But Auris of Las-Toor would not be interrupted and she continued in Perry Rhodan's defence. "The situation can't be what Gonozal VIII represents it to be in his Imperium. It can't be true that Rhodan has betrayed his friend the Emperor! There must be misunderstandings here, or circumstances must be involved which we are not able to judge at this distance. From my own position I must warn you: do not grant Emperor Gonozal VIII this assistance immediately! Use diplomatic subterfuge if you have to! It is the duty of the Ruling Council to find out the causes of this terrible misunderstanding between the Arkon Imperium and Perry Rhodan!

"I'd like to say personally, right here and now, that Perry Rhodan is not capable of the treason which the Arkonide accuses him of! A man like this Terran who places such high value on each individual human life must also know what it means to have friends! Honourable Ruling Council, may the wisdom of the gods and the insight of the great ones among our people be with us today and lead us to a correct decision!"

The eyes of all present followed Auris of Las-Toor as she went back to her seat. No one could free himself from the impression her words had made. But finally the third military expert asked for the floor

again.

Resorting to unemotional logic, he plucked the girl's argument to pieces and in the end his figures and numbers prevailed. By the time he sat down, they might as well have dispensed with the formality of a vote. The decision was already there. There was an almost unanimous agreement that the required assistance would be given to Emperor Gonozal VIII.

One hour later the largest transmitter of the Blue System beamed out an answer from the Ruling Council to the Greater Imperium. The answer consisted of terms and conditions representing unbreakable chains of commitment, which Atlan would be binding himself with if he were to agree to the demands of the Akons.

* * * *

In the Crystal Palace on Arkon 1, the force of Arkonide fighting machines standing guard over the Emperor had been tripled. One hour previously the robot Brain on Arkon 3 had relayed the Blue System's message to Atlan and at the same time it had sent him its evaluation. The gigantic positronicon had warned him to accept the Akon offer. It recommended a test of strength with the Sol System.

Logical evaluation indicates a strength ratio of 58:42 in favour of the Arkon Imperium if the Emperor succeeds in obtaining the help of the Galactic Traders or the priests of Baalol...

This was probably the 20th time Atlan had read the giant robot's evaluation since receiving it, and finally he lost his patience. "That thing is crazy!" he exclaimed. "The Brain is mad! Of all people, I should make a pact with the Antis? In that case it would be better to make an unconditional surrender to Terra!"

He had good reason to distrust the Brain's conclusions. The colossal computer had never been able to outguess Perry Rhodan. It thought in Arkonide patterns and had not been able to make an adjustment to the Earthly mentality. Time and again the Terran had made his clever chess plays to outsmart the mechanical monster—a feat that was formerly considered to be simply out of the question.

Atlan's red eyes were aflame with weariness. Sleepless and still shaken by Rhodan's inconceivable betrayal of their friendship, he sat there staring at the Akon message and its evaluation. "Galactic Traders!" he muttered tonelessly. "They're only waiting for the chance to strike the best bargain of their lives! If I were to just go and ask for help, all I would get would be a sneer and a cold shoulder. And the Antis are out of the question. Yes, Rhodan, I believe you have chosen the vital moment; the Arkon Imperium may not be an independent state much longer."

In hostile rejection he read the military ratio figures again. 58:42 was false. 80:20 would be more like it—in favour of the Solar Imperium! He supported his head in his hands. This was the deepest despair he had ever experienced in his long span of existence. He kept on thinking it must all be a bad dream, yet the constant stream of reports coming in from all parts of the star cluster only served to confirm the reality of Rhodan's betrayal.

"I don't understand it!" he groaned aloud. "I simply can't!"

Sad old hound dog... He could still hear Perry Rhodan calling him this but it had been in a moment of

sympathy. He visualized again the circle of courtiers around him who had sought to deter him from flying to Arkon 3 on board the *Ironduke* .

"A man doesn't say this to another when he is planning to betray him!" Atlan seemed to listen to his own words reflectively and once more he envisioned the situation where Rhodan had coined the description of 'sad dog'. But this old hound dog, Atlan, knew his humans well; he knew their good and their bad sides and he had encountered his share of traitors and deceivers—but he could not conceive of Rhodan ever deceiving him. Something simply *did not* come together here.

"Bell!" he thought aloud. "Or Mercant or Deringhouse...!" He had already switched on his microphone. On an impulse he requested a hypercom channel to Terrania—person-to-person with Reginald Bell.

Then came the waiting.

But not silence. New emergency reports and alarm calls kept pouring in. By now there were approximately 21,000 Terran spaceships stationed at the centre of star cluster M-13. The strategy behind their deployment pattern was becoming obvious. They were taking up standby positions around the most important defence fortresses of the Arkonide Imperium. Atlan needed no star charts to realize that this demonstration of power was making the Imperium's helpless state unmistakably clear. It also became apparent that the movements of the Solar Fleet were following a very carefully prepared plan. Almost at a glance the Arkonide recognized Rhodan's fine strategic hand.

Then came the hypercom connection.

The metallic voice of the robot operator in the Crystal Palace announced the call: "Your Highness, Mr. Reginald Bell in Terrania, planet Earth, is ready to speak to you."

Atlan's viewscreen flickered to life. He waited until Bell's broad, rugged face became visible. Then Atlan began to talk. And Bell listened to everything he had to say. He only nodded now and then.

But finally it was his turn. "Arkonide, for 3 days now the Chief has not permitted any contact with him. We only know what's he's doing after it's done. We're all in the dark, without exception. It's possible that he's even monitoring this conversation—and that's OK with me because at least it gives me a chance to let him know where I stand."

The Emperor interrupted impatiently. "Bell, don't give me any long dissertations! I don't have time for that! From your side, how is it that nothing was done to block this treasonous action by Rhodan?"

Bell answered without the quiver of an eyelash: "Because in the past few weeks Rhodan has wrangled dictatorial powers from Parliament. Mercant, Freyt and everybody else you can name... all of us have our hands tied. We have to go along with it—or else! Do you understand our situation?"

"But I don't understand Rhodan's betrayal."

"Do you think *we* can understand what he's doing?" retorted Bell vehemently. He struggled to control his feelings. "The Chief *must* be sick, Atlan! There's no other way to explain the change that's come over him!"

The Emperor's voice was equally vehement. "I thought you Terrans were always so proud of being individualists! What's happened to all that? Where is your famous initiative—your spirit of responsibility? Believe me, Terran, it isn't easy for me to say this, but under the circumstances I'd say you have your

head in a bucket!"

Then Bell thundered at him as though he wanted his voice to be heard across 34,000 light-years. "Look, Atlan, I know you've got an axe to grind but if you can't understand that ever since Perry's come back from Okul he's been mentally sick..."

"All the more reason for you to do your job as First Deputy of the Solar Imperium!" Atlan interjected. "You should have stepped in!"

Bell waved off the criticism with a weary gesture. "But who could know he was *this* sick? Nobody! Not even the doctors! Anyway, Arkonide, why do you presume that the *worst* will happen?"

"Because it can't get any worse than it is right now! With all the Terrans going back, my Imperium has been brought to the brink of disaster. I cannot stand by any longer without taking action. I shall have to proceed according to the requirements of the situation!"

Atlan intended to end the unfruitful conversation at this point but Bell rather hastily repeated his question.

"What makes you think the *worst* will happen?"

Imperator Gonozal VIII took note of this. Bell had made a point of stating the question twice. But his tone was almost hostile when he replied: "I have lost all faith in Terrans, which leaves nothing but an unspeakable contempt!" Wherewith he cut the connection.

The die was cast! Now he had to accept the conditions imposed by the Blue System. One way or another, Arkon's days as a gigantic independent stellar empire were numbered.

"Perry—!" Atlan cried aloud to himself. It was a futile cry for help which remained unanswered. Within the Arkon Imperium the fleets of the Sol System were moving into attack positions!

* * * *

Thomas Cardif had eavesdropped on the hypercom conversation between Atlan and Reginald Bell. He had smiled with satisfaction when Bell spoke of Rhodan being mentally sick, offering it as an explanation for his personality change. On the other hand his attention had been drawn suddenly to Bell's cryptic question: *Anyway, Arkonide, why do you presume that the worst will happen?*

He suspected what Bell, Mercant and Freyt were planning. But he had also taken precautions against even this eventuality. They'd never get to make their move—not one of them!

It was night in Terrania. In the cloudless sky glowed the great belt of the Milky Way. Those millions of suns were far points of light in the vastness, sending their combined light to Earth. As Thomas Cardif looked up at them it was not in awed wonderment but with eyes that hungered for power.

He was heir to the universe! *He*, Rhodan's son!

Now his gaze swept to the distant spaceport. In the field lights he could see the spherical shape of the

Ironduke . "Hmm..." he murmured to himself.

The intercom buzzed suddenly. He walked over to it and uttered a clipped "Yes!" which all in Terrania had begun to fear.

The operator spoke briefly: "Solar Marshal Mercant wishes to speak to the First Administrator concerning Nolinov and Alkher."

How many had wanted to speak to him in these past few days, ever since the fleet had taken off for Arkon? He, 'Perry Rhodan', had not received any of them. But now he would make an exception and he knew why. "I shall be expecting Mercant," he said into the microphone.

He waited calmly for the arrival of the Intelligence Chief. He sat comfortably in his chair, completely relaxed, master of the situation. Meanwhile, he felt the sudden activity of his cell activator. He sensed a life-giving current pass through his body from the device.

The touch of eternal life!

But at the same moment his subconscious echoed the distant laughter which had become so familiar to him. *It* had announced *Its* presence in this disconcerting manner at least once every day. Cardif listened only with half a mental 'ear' to the voice within him. The same old stereotyped warning was beginning to bore him: *If you do not wish to become too big and powerful, Perry Rhodan, remove the cell activator!* Even now he was hearing this message again. Cardif attempted to ignore it—but then he started because the multiplex being on Wanderer was saying more today than usual: *Perry Rhodan, you have just one more day to take off the activator! Take care too much of greatness can also have too great a price! You must know what you are doing, Perry Rhodan!*

His only reply was a rebellious laugh. *His* weapon supplier on Wanderer had long ceased to be the uncanny mental colossus which Perry Rhodan had always considered *It* to be. He, Thomas Cardif, had learned how limited the horizons of *It* really were! He had proved that the community entity's faculty for gasping the contents of another's thoughts was also limited. His deception on Wanderer had succeeded and he had no intention of removing the activator.

With the same indescribable laughter, *It* withdrew from Thomas Cardif's inner consciousness. The last cosmic titter ebbed away as Solar Marshal Mercant made his appearance in spite of the lateness of the hour.

Cardif-Rhodan was purposely friendly. "Have a seat, Mercant," he invited. "What have you to report? Political unrest in the Arkon System... Arkonide robotships attacking the Fleet? Ah yes, it almost slipped my mind! You've come here about the Nolinov-Alkher situation. Are there any new details on that?"

Mercant nodded slightly as he placed his folder on a small, low coffee table. "Sir, there are astonishing new details but unfortunately on the whole they are something of a riddle."

Cardif-Rhodan leaned forward with interest. "At times I regret having lost my slight telepathic capability, and this is one of them. I can only wait until you've satisfied my curiosity."

The Solar Marshal sat back and crossed his legs. "Sir, in just the last few hours we've run into some surprises. This all started when we made a routine inspection of space-jet I-109 on board the *Ironduke*—the one you flew with Alkher and Nolinov to Wanderer. Back in under the flight console we found a micro-transmitter..."

"What?" Cardif-Rhodan's feigned surprise was extremely well done. "In the space-jet's control room...? You mean a device like the one that was surgically implanted in the Anti at the Springer trading post on Pluto?"

"No, sir, Although there's no doubt it's from the workshops of the Swoons. In some way that's still a puzzle to us, somebody must have brought this midget sender on board the space-jet..."

"Please, Mercant, get to the point. I'm not in the mood tonight for solving riddles. What is the nature of the transmitter? What was its purpose and function?"

This was a typical Rhodan characteristic. He had never had patience for long-winded discussions and always insisted on hearing the essentials.

"Well," began Mercant, "this micro-transmitter drew its power from the ship's positronicon but at the same time it was able to pick up from it the space-jet's position data. Sir, its transmission range is 100 light-years."

If Mercant had expected the Chief to react to this he was disappointed. He continued: "So the device could register all conversations in the space-jet's control room and transmit them in short pulse-bursts along with the position data. The pulse duration was 5 microseconds! The transmitter remained active as long as the jet's engines were functioning. Further lab investigation revealed that it stopped working when the Antis arrived in their long-ship and crippled the space-jet with their mental field."

"Hm-m..." Rhodan's double managed to be appropriately thoughtful as he looked at Mercant. "That could mean that my suspicions concerning Alkher and Nolinov are unjustified! Mercant, if this is true, I'll be the first to apologize to these 2 men in every way I can—provided they are not actually dead. It will be a great satisfaction to me to publicly reinstate them. But how could anyone know that the I-109 would be the specific ship I would use?"

A faint smile touched Mercant's lips. The Chief's apparent sympathetic attitude was not the only reason for it, however. For the first time in weeks he felt that he was facing the old Perry Rhodan, who was healthy again and in possession of those faculties which had given him such an incredible talent for directing his fellow men. His last question was a clear indication of the old alertness and penetration.

"Sir, we more or less beat our brains out on that question for awhile—until we cross-examined the hangar officer. His mental processes at the time of your departure gave us the most obvious answer. When he heard that you were going to need a space-jet, naturally his mind turned to the most modern one on board the *Ironduke*, which was the I-109. Nothing would have prevented the real culprit from arriving at the same conclusion. "I..."

"Just a moment, Mercant, there's something I have to get off my conscience. Before we go on, I want to say this: put out a general Fleet bulletin over the hypercom channels. Express my regret for having suspected the 2 lieutenants and that I shall not neglect to apologize to them and make full restitution, in case they return... That's it, Mercant. Was there anything else?"

"Nothing, sir—except that I must tell you your closest staff members have been watching the movements of the Solar Fleet in the Arkon Imperium and..."

Cardif-Rhodan rose to his feet. Mercant fell silent as a brief flickering of hope was extinguished within him.

"Mercant, I still have work to do!"

The Solar Marshal made a slight bow. He took his papers and left.

But his blood ran cold. The alien personality that had suddenly projected itself through Perry Rhodan was frightening. Although Mercant was a top expert in his field, in the Alkher-Nolinov situation he still did not suspect that the man he took to be his chief was worse than mentally ill. By means of the hidden micro-transmitter he had deliberately led him up the garden path.

In a moment of reflection, Thomas Cardif had come to realize that he had pushed too far in accusing Alkher and Nolinov of treason—it was fraught with the danger of bringing himself too much under scrutiny. This latter consideration had been his sole motivation for reinstating the good reputation of the officers who had accompanied him to Wanderer. That Mercant and the experts of Solar Intelligence were ‘beating their brains out’ to find out who could have concealed the micro-device on board the space-jet did not concern Cardif at all. It would never occur to the Solar Marshal that the Chief himself, after his return to Earth, had personally hidden the micro-transmitter there!

He glanced at the clock. 3:18 a.m. Terra time. In a little over an hour, dawn would be breaking. During the night a certain man had arrived on Earth on one of the cylindrical long-ships—a Springer freighter belonging to one of their clans on Aralon, the world of the Galactic Medicos. This man brought him greetings from ‘Fut-Gii’ and he was to meet him at 4:30 a.m.

When the first contact had come in he had faced a stranger on his viewscreen. He wouldn’t have needed a minute’s conversation with him to be reminded of the cue-word ‘Fut-Gii’.

Fut-Gii had been a relatively unimportant Springer. Today he might still be alive if he had not made the mistake of refusing to work for the Antis. Shortly after that, Fut-Gii had met with a ‘fatal accident’. In other words: by order of the Antis.

Thomas Cardif knew all the facts. For almost 5 decades he had worked for the Baalol followers as a famous doctor named Edmond Hugher. At the time he hadn’t known who he really was. When the Baalol temple on Lepso had been under attack by the Solar Fleet, the anti-mutants had discovered his hypno-block and had released him from it.

He had awakened from a dream of 58 years! He knew once more who he was, nor had he forgotten any of his experiences during the time he had been Edmond Hugher. His hatred for his father knew no bounds. He felt that he had been cheated out of the best years of his life and he did not forget also that Rhodan was supposed to have been responsible for Thora’s death, the Arkonide princess who had been his mother.

And now he seemed to be close to his final goal. Perry Rhodan had been swept aside and was a prisoner of the Antis, hidden somewhere in the distant star jungles. He, as Perry Rhodan, had acquired dictatorial powers in the past few weeks. How he had used those powers was demonstrated by the events of these past 4 days. The Arkon Imperium was close to collapse. The Solar Fleet was merely waiting for the right moment in which to take over the most strategic worlds of the Arkonide stellar empire.

He was not worried over the fact that an agent of the Baalol priests had announced himself a few hours ago, using the code word *Fut-Gii*. He was backed up by enough convincing arguments to win over the most suspicious Anti to his side. Cardif opened a drawer in his desk which contained a small arsenal of

weapons. He carefully selected 2 small shock-guns, checked their charges and then concealed them on his person.

Shortly after that he announced to his night board: "I'll be gone for 3 hours."

Using the antigrav lift he ascended to the landing pad on the roof. Here there were always 3 aircars standing at his disposal. The 2 robots guarding a total group of a dozen air vehicles probed for his brainwave patterns. They identified him as Perry Rhodan and then paid him no further attention.

Thomas Cardif got into the fastest antigrav commuter available. The motor responded with a low hum. His flight panel began to light up with green indicator lamps. Then the all-clear signal blinked at him. The aircar was ready for flight.

Cardif rose upward, deciding to dispense with the headlights. Leisurely gaining altitude he took a course straight to the West as the wide expanse of Terrania slipped back and away from him. He flew toward a region that had been one of the hottest areas of the Gobi Desert some 150 years ago. This was not an unknown route because he as well as the genuine Rhodan had flown it often. At the end of it lay a small bungalow which a grateful Springer clan member had given Rhodan 30 years ago. A Solar Fleet cruiser had saved the heavily damaged ship of the patriarch in a space emergency.

In the grey dawn-light, Cardif set his craft down between the trees of a park in front of the bungalow. After shutting everything down, he left the ship and approached the wide-rambling terrace veranda without looking to his right or his left. In this lonely region he did not have to worry about his security. The extensive terrain was guarded by a detail of 30 combat robots who were attuned solely to his brainwave patterns and were highly programmed for defensive action.

Being familiar with every landmark, he crossed the terrace, went into the bungalow and turned the first light on when he reached the den. He went to one wall that was clear, rolled it aside and faced a large switchboard. After he had readjusted a main control dial, a hidden viewscreen came into position and started to flicker.

It was a tracking screen which provided a surveillance sweep of the airspace above the bungalow. The position indicator field was divided into quadrants. Cardif looked at his watch. If the anti-mutants agent was the punctual type, he should be seeing his aircar any minute now on the screen. In fact he had no sooner thought of this than a glowing green blip appeared in sector 2-east and moved slowly toward 5west. Cardif switched on the short-range radio.

"Yes?" as asked, by way of hailing the craft.

"Fut-Gii!" came the code word out of the speaker.

It was a signal to Cardif to deactivate the robots until after the visitor's ship had landed. This constituted no risk to him. The den was surrounded by a super-powerful defence screen. Also a closed-system TV installation enabled him to determine whether or not the agent was alone or if he had company with him.

The antigrav hovercraft landed close beside his own aircar. The door swung back and a man stepped out. Cardif cut in his infrared optical system. The pickup camera near the terrace automatically focussed on the ship and brought it into a telescopic close-up. The infrared revealed that it was empty. The Anti agent had come alone.

Cardif nodded, satisfied, and switched off his surveillance gear. He let the wall roll back into place and

then cut off the defence screen that surrounded the den. After that he calmly went out to meet the agent.

The grey of morning was in the east. In this remote sector of the Gobi parkland, the bungalow lay in the twilight of dawn. Cardif met the agent on the terrace, greeted him curtly and offered him a seat. The man sat down, after which he produced an object from his pocket and placed it on the patio table in front of Cardif. "My credentials," he explained.

It was a tiny pyramid, fashioned to represent a typical Baalol temple. Cardif shoved it back toward his guest. He now knew that they had not sent an ordinary ambassador but a man with full authority to negotiate. The tiny pyramid told him that much. Cardif knew the customs and practices of the Antis better than any other Terran.

"High Priest Rhobal sends you his greetings, Cardif," began the agent, who had not introduced himself. "But all the servants of Baalol are angry with you. They mourn the death of High Priest Kalal on the planet Utik, who was practically worried into his grave by your cell activator."

Cardif's irritating laugh caused the agent to become silent. "Tell the Antis and above all Rhobal that I am not responsible for Kalal's death! That the cell activator brought him death instead of eternal life is in my opinion the fault of Rhobal himself, because he forced me to hand the activators over to him. My secret agents have informed me how Kalal died. To hold me responsible for his death is ridiculous. I am not the invisible being on Wanderer who creates the cell activators. But it's my guess that anybody who can produce eternal life through such a device wouldn't have to stop there. By remote control, from Wanderer, *It* must have been able to alter the effect of the activators because they fell into unauthorized hands!"

"Are you saying, then, that *all* activators have been altered, Cardif?"

The man in the plain uniform of the Administrator answered coldly. "I am not the creature on Wanderer! I don't know for sure but in view of the nature of Kalal's death wouldn't logic indicate that the other 19 activators have also been changed? Is this a possibility they have still failed to recognize on Trakarar?"

He ignored the other's barely perceptible startled reaction. Then, since the agent continued to remain silent, he continued. "You have come here with special powers to negotiate. In that case we can end the discussion concerning cell activators and..."

Surprisingly, the agent interrupted. "I am instructed to advise you that the proposal of the Galactic Traders concerning another 300 commercial bases in the Solar Imperium must have immediate approval!"

Cardif gave his guest a pitying look. "The servants of Baalol must have a very limited political perspective. They seem to overlook the developments of the past 4 days in the Arkon Empire. The Greater Imperium is soon to be taken over by the Solar System! At such a historical moment am I supposed to manufacture internal political headaches by letting the Springers set up 300 more trading stations in addition to what they have here now? I don't intend to, and there's even less chance of forcing me to do it! Have the servants of Baalol forgotten that my advantage is theirs as well?"

With some hesitation the agent replied: "We have reliable information that Emperor Gonozal VIII is going to make an alliance with the Blue System. The conditions are that he'll have to commit himself to place 1,000 of his most modern spaceships at the Akons' disposal. In return the Akons will furnish him hypno-trained officers for all Arkon ships."

Swiftly, Cardif referred inwardly to the knowledge he had taken over from his father. From this he gleaned the fact that with the exception of the ships of their Energy Command the Blue System did not use space travel anymore. Instead of this they handled their traffic from world to world through thousands of super-powerful transmitter stations. Further, any such alliance between Akon and Arkon would inevitably have but one end result: at the conclusion of the treaty period the Imperium would become the Blue System's sovereign territory.

Cardif asked casually: "What is Baalol's reaction to Atlan's idea of making a treaty with the mother race of the Arkonides?"

"The Arkon Imperium is hostile to us, Cardif! Is that answer enough for you?"

"No, it is not! It's totally undefined. I must know to what extent the Antis are prepared to back me up in my fight against Arkon."

The other man suddenly stiffened. He stared incredulously at Perry Rhodan's likeness.

"Well?" Cardif spoke as though aware of how available his time was. "Are you empowered to make binding agreements here—or are you not?"

In some confusion the agent hurled an accusation: "And your order to attack the *Baa-lo* is supposed to be forgotten?"

"Trivialities!" retorted Cardif with a wave of his hand. "What did Rhobal expect me to do—embrace him with joy when he ambushed me? If he's such a fool I've overestimated him! What does it matter that we both tried to trick each other? What's involved now is whether or not we can take over the Arkon Imperium in just a few days or not! The stronger I am the greater the advantage it is to us all!"

"What binding assurances will the Solar Imperium give to us, Cardif?" asked the agent, now apparently turning greedy.

The false Administrator laughed in his face. "Assurances?!" he repeated, and laughed again. "Perhaps you also mean signed and sealed? Listen, agent—whoever you are—I feel squeamish enough as it is in your extortionist hands, and now do you think I'm foolish enough to bind myself even more to the Antis? No, I hate you too much for that! Do I make myself clear?"

"Cardif, are you unprepared to make any commitment at all?"

"No. There will be no assurances! No deals! No promises! What do you want with them? Hasn't Rhobal always assured me that I'm a mere puppet in his hands? Fine! If that's true, then after I've taken over the Arkon Imperium doesn't that also give the Antis what they want?"

"That's a mere play on words, Cardif!" retorted the agent angrily.

"Thank you!" Cardif smirked at him. There was a bright gleam in his eyes. "Your words tell me that the Antis are a little more unsure of me than they pretend to be."

"May I remind you of the 2 officers Brazo Alkher and Stant Nolinov, who were supposed to have advised us of your flight to Wanderer?" as the other. It was an obvious attempt to pull him into the blackmail trap again.

Cardif gave him a look that was almost sympathetic. "You know, these days it seems that you Antis always pull your trump cards forward after they've long since ceased to mean anything. I believe I may assume by now that as of an hour or so ago all ships of the Solar Fleet have been advised by general hypercom bulletin that Lts. Alkher and Nolinov have been reinstated and that upon their return the First Administrator will give them a full apology! Well, agent, do we begin our negotiations now or do we have nothing more to say to each other?"

The fully authorized ambassador of the Antis realized at this early morning hour that he was facing an ice-blooded Terran who knew how to take unscrupulous advantage of every possibility.

"There's nothing to negotiate, Cardif." The agent had to struggle to speak these words with certainty. He was now convinced that the anti-mutants had completely failed to take the measure of Thomas Cardif. If he succeeded in taking over the Arkon Imperium, the day was not far off when he would be able to free himself from Baalol's influence.

Cardif smiled faintly and rose to his feet. "If there is nothing to negotiate, agent, then I believe we may consider this discussion closed. May I ask that you return to your flier?"

The other felt it necessary to warn him again. "Cardif, do not underestimate Baalol's power!"

Rhodan's son answered gruffly: "Sorry—that won't even buy you a cup of coffee—not here, not anymore! Now will you please go?"

The other suddenly had a change of mind. He recalled that Cardif had used the planetary name Trakarat. From all indications Rhodan's son did not suspect what was behind this name but at this moment the agent was evaluating Solar Intelligence correctly. He was convinced that the men under Solar Marshal Mercant would not give up their investigations until they knew where in the galaxy Trakarat was located. Solely for this reason he surprised Cardif with a parting statement:

"Cardif, the Antis will not place any obstacle in the way of your attempt to take over the Arkon Imperium."

With this the agent departed, leaving behind him a somewhat contemplative Thomas Cardif.

3/ "IT" STRIKES THE HOUR

50 days before, masquerading as Perry Rhodan, Thomas Cardif had received 21 cell activators from the multiplex being on Wanderer. Twenty of the devices were equipped with automatic adjustment for individual frequencies and these had fallen into the hands of Antis. Cardif's space-jet, flown by Alkher and Nolinov, had been ambushed by the cylindrical long-ship *Baa-lo*.

Every day during those 50 days the community entity known as *It* had sent the same mental warning into his subconscious: *Remove the cell activator, Perry Rhodan, or you will become too big and too powerful!*

All 50 times Thomas Cardif had misunderstood the invisible master of Wanderer, just as he had done

today when receiving *anot* -so-stereotyped message: *Perry Rhodan, you still have 5 minutes to take off the activator. I urgently advise you to do this and to beware of one thing: too much of greatness and power can have too great a price!*

Another thing different about the latest communication was that it was not followed as usual by *Its* mysterious laughter. The message had ended abruptly and now Cardif was alone with his activator which clung to his chest beneath his clothing.

He was sorting through important dispatches from trans-galactic star cluster M-13. Solar Intelligence agents active there were unanimous in their reports concerning upheavals in the Arkon Imperium, including economic upsets and a sudden rash of political activity on the part of the Galactic Traders. The common denominator of all reports added up to one conclusion: Atlan's Imperium was heading toward an inevitable collapse.

Cardif sat there looking at these results which he had achieved while wearing the simple uniform of the First Administrator—in one moment at a pinnacle of triumph but in the next...? He had just shoved the first stack of dispatches to one side when a lightning bolt of pain shot through his body.

Although on Aralon under the name of Edmond Hugher he had become an outstanding physician, in this moment he had neither time nor the strength to diagnose his condition. He shot from his chair and fell writhing to the floor, shrieking in agony. The maddening pain was everywhere—in his head, his chest, his fingers, arms and legs—in every part of him! Cold sweat broke out of his pores. He thought he was going mad with pain. His cries were no longer human; a tortured creature lay there whining for help.

Cardif-Rhodan was no longer aware of who came rushing in to his aid. He didn't know who lifted him up and placed him on the couch. He did not hear the emergency call going out for the leading doctors in Terrania. All he could do was to turn and toss in his torment.

Then the doctor arrived...

"Give him an injection!" exclaimed Reginald Bell. In his highly agitated state he was demanding action—fast

The doctor at first refused to give the Chief an injection without examining him. But Cardif-Rhodan didn't give him a chance in his violent reactions. Rivers of sweat ran down his body; his eyes rolled upward wildly.

"I can't stand seeing a man like that!" Bell shouted at the doctor. "What's holding you up? Give him a shot—something to knock him out!"

4 strong hands pinned down Cardif-Rhodan's left arm. His sleeve was rolled up high. The doctor aimed at his arm muscle with a pressurized hypodermic. At the first hiss of the needle, the Administrator writhed in a new paroxysm of pain and the anaesthetic spurted into the air.

"Can't take any more! I can't...!" These were the Chief's first words. For a period of 5 seconds he lay still while Bell raged at the doctor for not taking advantage of the lull with his hypodermic.

Then Cardif arched again and yelled in pain, threatening to fall off the couch. The doctor made a second attempt. About three-fourths of the hypo reached its mark inside the muscle tissue. In the midst of an outcry the Chief seemed to collapse. He straightened out, turned half on his side and then suddenly appeared to fall asleep.

Bell realized that he himself was bathed in sweat. He groaned aloud. "What's wrong with Perry? Doctor, for God's sake will you *examine* him?!"

No one could be offended by Bell's outburst because everybody knew what close ties of friendship there were between him and Rhodan. However, the doctor snapped his satchel together and shook his head.

"Sir—this isn't a case for me. Just look at the Chief's left arm if you will. Here... or here or here! Even here where there is no muscle the tissue is cramped and hard as stone—something I've never seen or heard of in medicine! So please don't ask me to examine him. Any diagnosis of mine would be shooting in the dark!"

Bell himself investigated Cardif-Rhodan's strange physical condition. True, his left arm felt as hard as stone but he made another observation. "Does he have a fever? Or is this body heat an effect of the shot you gave him?"

The doctor took hold of Rhodan's arm hastily and was obviously startled. He felt for the pulse and began a silent count. The longer he counted the more astonished he became. "Completely normal!" he exclaimed. "That contradicts the anaesthetic effects! His pulse rate should be at least 25% less than normal—and in addition, this fever..."

He dropped the arm and placed his hand on the Chief's forehead. It fairly glowed with heat. Opening his satchel again, the doctor brought out an Ara device for fever measurements and placed it on the patient's forehead. The instrument determined his bodily temperature within 3 seconds.

"98..." The doctor fairly stammered as he read the indication. "That can't be right—the Administrator must have a temperature of at least 104!"

He reached into his bag and pulled out a spare temperature indicator. When he made his measurement again he silently showed Bell the scale reading: again 98°!

"I have to strip off some of his clothes," said the doctor, not knowing what else to do. "May I ask you people to leave the room? But please wait outside in case the Administrator needs you again."

Bell stayed put. He would not be shut out and the doctor didn't try to argue with him.

When Cardif-Rhodan had been stripped to his undershirt, Bell exclaimed, "What the devil is that?" A low protuberance was visible on his chest beneath the undershirt.

At the moment Bell thought of every possibility except the truth. How could he have conceived of the presence here of an activator? Every 62 years he and Perry and their closest colleagues received their biological cell shower on Wanderer, which was quite sufficient to avoid any aging during that period.

The doctor removed the undershirt and Cardif-Rhodan's chest lay bared before them. "What... what is that?" stammered the doctor, repeating Bell's question. He pointed to the metallic, egg-shaped device which was half-embedded in the Chief's body.

"Why that's... that's..." Bell didn't bring himself to say what it was. Now he was at a complete loss to understand anything. Perry Rhodan was wearing a cell activator!

* * * *

They had brought the Chief's unconscious body into the clinic. The staff of doctors had insisted upon it. Three surgeons had just completed their examination of him but they refrained from revealing their findings. A team of 6 neurologists were applying contacts to him. Chief neurologist Meissner had just tested a reflex which in his opinion was unnatural. The part he had probed was too unresponsive.

The neuro-recorder went into operation. This was an Ara device which was able to trace out and indicate the maze of nerve paths with amazing speed and precision. Neurologist Ginseng kept his eyes steadily on the Chief, noting that he was taking an over-saturation of trace pulses without reaction—which was also abnormal, even for one who was unconscious.

More than 20 doctors shook their heads. Always before, the Chief had come through routine examinations as a top specimen of health, normal in every respect, but in this instance he was like a medical freak.

Dr. Meissner stared incredulously at the visual recording of nerve patterns and groaned aloud: "What has happened to the Chief?!"

Bell exploded. The anxiety he felt for his friend was intolerable. The bewildered expressions on the faces of the scientists were enough to drive him up the wall. He couldn't understand their technical jargon and he demanded an explanation.

They made the mistake of trying to make him leave, as would have been their right in a normal situation—but this was far from normal. In this case the life of the First Administrator was at stake and Reginald Bell was his second-in-command.

He bristled threateningly at Prof. Legrand. "Don't get pushy with *me* —I'm staying!" he growled. "Get out of my way or I'm liable not to be polite!"

Prof. Manoli sought to rescue the situation. He apologized to Bell but Bell wasn't interested in apologies—he wanted to know why Chief Neurologist Meissner seemed to be losing his mind over the neuro-trace recorder.

"I'm talking to *you!*" he yelled at the specialist "Don't give me any of your secret mumbo-jumbo—I want it in plain everyday English and I want it now!"

Dr. Meissner complied. "Do you see these line tracings here, Mr. Bell?" he asked, pointing to the electronic graph of the neuro-recorder. "These are nerve channels. And this empty space you see here, in the shape of an egg, is the cell activator. As for what it all shows I can't understand it. *I mean* —as far as medical knowledge is concerned there is no explanation for what is visible here."

"Let's have it, Doc! What's with the activator?"

"Prepare yourself for a shock, Mr. Bell—and I mean, prepare for the worst! The Chief has undergone an unimaginable process of transformation. He suddenly possesses a nervous system that is unknown to normal men. All nerve channels have made an *organic contact* with the cell activator! That means just

one thing: the activator may no longer be removed even by surgery! If such an operation were to be attempted, the Chief wouldn't live through it!"

"But that thing's metal, Doc! How can metal make a bond with nerve cells? You can't possibly believe such nonsense!" Bell shouted, more agitated than before.

"Whether I want to or not, Mr. Bell," the doctor replied adroitly, "I must believe what the neuro-recorder tells me. May I ask you to make room for my colleagues here so they can make sure I haven't made a false diagnosis?"

The other doctors soon confirmed the chief neurologist's analysis. But they were also, unable to explain it. It was a riddle to them how completely alien nerve channels could materialize in Rhodan's body; it was a mystery how anything organic could form a connective bond with a metallic object; they were unable to say how the activator had become half-buried in Rhodan's chest; and they were also at a loss to explain what had caused the Chief's sudden attack of pain.

But one man present might have given them all an explanation; he was the only one among them who was *not* a doctor: Reginald Bell! He was thinking of the multiple being on Wanderer. *It* must have thought this up. *It* was the only one capable of making such a thing come to pass. Bell was torn by mixed feelings. In spite of having a strange form of humour, so far the unimaginable entity had never operated contrary to the best interests of humanity. Now all of a sudden was *It* being unmasked as Perry Rhodan's deadly enemy? Bell felt that some puzzle pieces didn't fit together here—even that his thoughts could be based on false premises—but he failed to detect the source of the error.

Prof. Manoli spoke up. "The Chief is coming to!"

The neurologist worked feverishly to remove all their electrical contacts from his body. There were still 3 wires attached to his heart area when Cardif-Rhodan opened his eyes. At the same time he tried to rise up, looking about him in confusion. Bell stood behind the doctors and was silent for the moment.

"What happened...?" Sudden fear made Cardif-Rhodan speechless. Involuntarily his hand had reached for the cell activator and he realized that it was half-embedded in his chest. It could no longer be removed.

Fear would have turned to horror if he had not felt in that moment a new pulsation from the activator. He knew that the current flowing through his body was another dispensation of eternal life. And suddenly all his tension subsided, at last bringing memory of what had happened. A lightning attack of indescribably intense pain had come close to driving him mad, until he received the hypo. Now he had regained consciousness in Terrania's neuro-surgical clinic.

"I believe I can manage by myself, gentlemen..." His voice sounded completely normal. His appearance was improving from second to second. Against the protests of several doctors he raised himself up and looked down at the activator. Then he managed to look back at the doctors with a slightly amused expression on his face. "This situation certainly must have raised some questions in your minds, wouldn't you say? If it's any consolation to you, gentlemen, I don't have the answers to all of them myself."

He did not suspect what effect his words had on Reginald Bell. The latter was secretly overjoyed because he was completely sure now that Perry had come through the worst of his condition and that he would soon be his old self again. He merely stepped forward without a word and handed him his clothes while grinning from ear to ear.

"Thanks, Fatso," said the Chief. As he took the clothing he smiled in the genuine Rhodan manner and this strengthened the hope in Bell more than ever that the worst was over for his friend.

In spite of Cardif-Rhodan's remarkable recovery, three of the doctors insisted on accompanying him when he left the clinic and they ordered him to his bed for a day or so. He pretended to yield to this demand unwillingly but secretly he was glad to have an excuse to take it easy for awhile. The mysterious attack he had been through had drained his reserves of strength. However, he was accustomed to being alone and he finally sent the doctors away along with Reginald Bell, whose face was beginning to get on his nerves.

They had no sooner left him than the doctor in him came into action. In front of a mirror he observed the deep position the activator had taken in his chest. He could not understand how the device had been able to dig itself in like that and yet he was not worried about it. He believed that somehow he had been completely successful in passing some kind of test the entity on Wanderer had given him. Of course he had paid the price of terrible pain but now the reward seemed to be that *It* had caused the cell activator to anchor itself in its final and proper position so that he, Cardif, would never be able to lose it.

Cardif-Rhodan went back to his bed. In the elated awareness of possessing eternal life, he finally fell asleep.

* * * *

The disguised Springer freighter was actually one of the fastest transition-type ships available. It had left Earth and was racing now toward a sun that was listed in Arkonide star catalogues as 41-B-1847 ArqH. It was a small yellow sun, 33,218 light-years from Terra, encircled by only 2 planets. The outermost one was inhabited although it was not exactly a pleasure to live on Saos. In addition to a 1.3 gravity, the planet had a rotational rate of 214 hours. The unusually long day and night periods created twilight zones in which there were continuous storms, thus making life all the more difficult. As for the atmosphere, its oxygen content was relatively small in comparison to heavier quantities of nitrogen and carbon dioxide.

The agent who had met Cardif-Rhodan at his bungalow in the early morning hours was now en route to Saos. He was burning with impatience to get back to the manufacturing base that was located on the inhospitable planet of perpetual storms. He had beamed one short pulse-burst signal ahead to announce his coming. He knew that the Antis, there beneath their invincible defence screens, were waiting with equal impatience to talk to him.

While en route to Earth originally he had not imagined that he would be returning to his base with such a tremendously vital piece of information. The Solar Intelligence agents knew the name, *Trakar*! The agent felt he knew how they might have come by it. On Utik, High Priest Kalal might have inadvertently betrayed his people during his death throes, his demise having been surrounded by very mysterious circumstances.

For hours now the name of the planet Trakar had weighed on the agent's mind. The whole disturbing matter pursued him like a phantom. Trakar, their ultimate secret!

"When do we land?" he demanded gruffly addressing the ship's commander.

The latter was obviously subservient and anxious to please. "In just about 3 hours, Your Excellence!"

"I don't have that much time, Mingo!" protested the highly empowered ambassador-agent. "Why did you cut the hypertransition so short? We should have come out much closer to Saos!"

Mingo nodded obsequiously as he explained: "My Lord, please remember that Saos is surrounded by a wide meteor belt. I am responsible for your safety and would also like to enjoy many years yet in service to Baalol!"

The agent narrowed his eyes at the commander. He had actually forgotten about the meteor zone but had no intention of admitting it. His gaze returned to the viewscreen. The left-hand portion of the screen was taken up by a great concentration of numberless suns. This was the core centre of the Arkonide Imperium, star cluster M-13 in the constellation of Hercules. Against the deep blackness of the void it stood out in all its magnificent splendour. It was framed in a pale glow like mother-of-pearl, which made it appear to be larger than it was in actuality.

For more than 20,000 years, cluster M-13 had been ruled by the Arkonides, descendants of the Akons in the Blue System. For 15,000 years their development in every field of endeavour had continued on a steeply upward curve. But then the processes of degeneration had begun and even Atlan himself had been unable to arrest the phenomenon.

When the agent caught himself thinking about this he was surprised. Heretofore the fate of the Greater Imperium had been of little importance to him. As a member of a race which had produced the anti-mutants he knew only one goal: to help make the Baalol cult the dominant factor of power among all the intelligent races of the galaxy.

The sight of star cluster M-13 had brought him a certain sense of regret. Unconsciously he had made a comparison between the personality of Gonozal VIII and that of the man who was called Perry Rhodan but who was actually his son. Even though the Imperator had shown his hostility to the anti-mutants, to the agent he towered far above Thomas Cardif, who justified every available means to destroy his father and strengthen his own position.

After the fast courier ship had landed on Saos, the agent still carried these thoughts in his mind, plus the lingering impression of star cluster M-13 as he had viewed it on the screen. A short while later he was facing the servants of Baalol, who had been waiting so impatiently for him. He was immediately alerted to a strange atmosphere of unusual unrest among them.

"I have spoken to Cardif," he announced but then he fell silent.

He gazed about him at the others. There were 5 Antis present, only three of whom were permanently stationed on Saos. They were responsible for the manufacture of defence screen projectors. The agent didn't know the other two but by their clothing he knew that they must be important personages.

"Has something happened here on Saos?" he asked apprehensively.

The wizened little man who was the production chief shook his head. The agent's first uncontrolled thought was that Thomas Cardif was dead.

"Cardif has suddenly become very ill," was the answer. "They've removed him to the neuro-surgical clinic in Terrania. At present we don't know his condition. Our contact there was probably apprehended in the middle of his hypercom message by Solar Intelligence. For hours now we haven't been able to

communicate with our secret post in Terrania."

The agent had to digest this for a moment. In his mind's eye he could still see the man who had so far managed to disguise himself in Rhodan's role of First Administrator. In the grey light of morning his features had revealed no sign of illness; on the contrary, Thomas Cardif had appeared to be in the vital prime of youth.

The little Anti continued: "If this last intelligence we have received is valid, it is obvious that Cardif's sudden illness must be caused by the activator he is wearing."

The agent started visibly at this announcement. The reaction was a violation of custom and etiquette among the anti-mutants but they forgave him wordlessly because they recalled that their own reactions had been much the same.

This was not because they had taken Cardif's well being to heart but because as Perry Rhodan he was the most important piece in their game of empire. Thomas Cardif had to do what they required of him or they might as well abandon their lofty goals. By now they were all seated around a conference table and the agent had been served a stimulating beverage, which at the moment he was glad to sample.

The same speaker went on. "Our brother, High Priest Rhobal, committed a grave error when he held Cardif prisoner on board the *Baa-lo*. He should have searched him more thoroughly, in which case he would have discovered the 21st cell activator. If Rhodan's son dies like our brother Kalal on the planet Utik, then everything we have accomplished so far will have been in vain."

The agent nodded. He took another drink from his glass and set it down on the table. Without any preamble, he said: "Thomas Cardif mentioned the planet Trakarat to me."

5 Antis sprang up in a common reaction of alarm. Almost simultaneously they exclaimed: "Trakarat?!"

"That's right. He was telling me he suspected that all 20 cell activators would not achieve what was expected of them but in this connection he asked me: *Is this a possibility they have still failed to recognize on Trakarat?* He spoke of it like one who knew exactly what was to be found on the planet."

"Perhaps Kalal!" gasped one of the Antis.

"It must have been. No one else could have mentioned Trakarat, of that I'm certain."

It took awhile for the servants of Baalol to calm themselves. The shock of this revelation had shaken them too deeply.

"It was not this matter alone which brought me back here so swiftly," announced the agent, satisfied to see how attentively they were listening to him now. "There is something else of vital importance. We have to set up a false trail for Solar Intelligence to follow. If they give us time and we don't overplay our hand, then our 2 prisoners here might help us to convert Saos into the planet Trakarat!"

One of the Antis whom the agent didn't know spoke up. "Do you mean the Terrans Alkher and Nolinov—the ones Rhobal brought here?"

"Of course. They are Terrans. Solar Intelligence would believe them much sooner than they would believe Arkonides, Springers or Aras. If we plan a clever setup whereby we can let slip that the other name for Saos is actually Trakarat, then for starters we will have established the groundwork for leading

Terran Intelligence in a false direction. If we also indicate that a major base is located here, without explaining what the base is for, we might be able to lure one of Rhodan's fleet formations to us. If we make the proper preparations in the meantime, it should be a simple matter for us to set off a heavy explosion just as the Terran ships are making a landing." The agent had worked himself up to a state of enthusiasm.

The unknown Anti challenged him. "What kind of crazy plan is that? And what have the two Solar Fleet officers to do with it?"

Realizing his error, the agent accepted the other's tone of authority and added: "We must find a way of enabling the 2 prisoners to escape from Saos—that is, to escape with the false information that we secretly refer to Saos as Trakarat. They must also be convinced that we have a large underground central base, located in the mountains of the northern hemisphere. At present these two Terrans are of no use to us at all but by their escape they could perform a tremendous service for Baalol. They could cause Solar Intelligence to divert and cease its search for our actual training centre!"

The production chief for the defence-screen projectors failed to see the plan. "I have to give a rebuttal to that! There is too great a danger of having our projectors fall into the hands of the Terrans..."

The unknown Anti spokesman made an imperious gesture and the shrivelled little man fell silent, obviously intimidated. The visiting authority turned again to the agent.

"We should make a thorough examination of this plan. Perhaps it should be carried through as quickly as possible. It is no great problem to transfer the manufacturing facilities for the field-projectors and generators to another planet. The more difficult task would be to set up indications in the mountains of the northern hemisphere which might lead someone to believe that there is a major underground base there."

The agent was pleased to see how quickly his plan had found acceptance. He hastily explained: "It would be enough to fool the Terrans if we had a spaceport there with maybe one building on the edge of the field and a road that leads off somewhere and ends at the face of a cliff. In addition to the atomic explosive charges inside the mountain we would have to have a number of actual machines hidden under the ground so that they will radiate sufficient energy pulses. We should not forget that the Sol ships are equipped with first-class energy-tracing instruments. Our visitors would become suspicious if they failed to detect such emissions in the area of the spaceport."

The two Antis who seemed to have come directly to Saos from Trakarat looked at each other questioningly and then they nodded simultaneously. One of them issued instructions.

"Work out every detail of your plan. Don't forget to explain how the Terran officers are to be informed that they are on Trakarat. Come back here in 2 hours and present the whole thing with all of the facts. We believe that Baalol will be greatly in your debt!"

* * * *

1,000 Arkon ships had just come off the assembly lines and been put through their initial flight tests. En masse, they made a transition through hyperspace en route to the Blue System. Atlan had accepted the conditions of the Akons and was having the ships flown to Drorah, their central world, under the control

of robot crews. Three of the ships were loaded with equipment required for the hypno-training process.

* * * *

In Thomas Cardif's sleeping chamber the alarm clock went off at 11:00 a.m. It awakened Cardif from a deep and refreshing sleep. He looked over at the clock, yawned, and sat up to stretch his arms. Still half in a fog from his sleep, he wondered why he had set the alarm for this hour. Then he suddenly remembered. At 12 noon he was expecting the daily report from all Fleet task forces in the Arkon area and at 12:30 Solar Marshal Mercant was to also give him a report.

Cardif got up and went into the bathroom. After washing up, he started to get dressed. The fresh uniform, neatly folded over a hanger, represented the custom handiwork of his positronic valet. He drew on his trousers and was about to zip them up when he stopped in surprise, finding that they were too small. He looked down at himself in amazement.

"Well now," he heard himself say aloud, "since when have I developed a tummy?"

He checked the trouser fastenings and finally his medical curiosity was awakened. Holding his pants together, he went over to the bed and stretched out on it. With his highly trained hands he probed and pressed his abdominal region repeatedly but without discovering anything he could properly diagnose.

Finally he muttered an oath and spoke half aloud to himself. "But there's still something wrong..." He paused, arriving at a new thought. "Could be gas—maybe bloated a bit..." He still wasn't satisfied with the diagnosis, however. "Hm-m..." He got up again and forcefully closed his trouser fastenings. "Three cm too small for me! Yet there's nothing wrong with me—I feel fine..."

In some irritation he went to the videophone and requested a connection with the same doctor who had first seen him during his pain seizure. The physician came on the screen wearing an expression of great concern.

"It's nothing," Cardif assured him. "Just send me a fast-working purgative, Doctor—that's all. Preferably I'd say—get me some Gelontifad..." He instantly regretted having mentioned this preparation. It had only just completed its successful trial tests on the worlds of the Galactic Medicos. Although a few specialists in the Solar Imperium might have heard of the drug it was still not available on Terra.

And there came the echo: "Gelontifad?" queried the doctor in some amazement. "Sir, I don't seem to recall that name. However, I'll call the pharmaceutical distribution centre at once and order it for you."

Cardif could only nod. He had committed an inexcusable error. When the video screen darkened, he pulled his shirt over his head and snuggled it down into place—then froze. The shirt was too tight at the shoulders!

A naked fear began to take hold of Cardif. Pants too small, shirt tight at the shoulders... Yesterday these garments had fitted him perfectly. Rhodan's son turned around toward the robot valet, which stood in a corner awaiting his orders.

"Get me another change of uniform!" he ordered. "The pants and shirt!"

He saw the robot move toward the built-in wardrobe; then he went back into the bathroom. The robot was practically at his heels with the requested clothing. Cardif jerked the articles out of the metal creature's hand and hurried to try on the second pair of trousers.

With the same result!

"Ye gods!" he exclaimed softly, still talking to himself. "I've been putting on a spare tire and didn't notice it until this morning! That's the way it is when a man doesn't have time anymore to take care of himself!" He chuckled to himself. That was the whole solution. He could forget about the purgative. All he had to do was make sure of having enough physical activity.

The robot was still standing there. "Is there a tape measure around here?" he asked of the machine.

"Yessir," it answered, turning at once to fetch it. Cardif had no sooner approached the mirror in his bedroom than the robot was back again with the tape. "Here you are, sir."

Cardif measured his waist. The tape showed him the result: slightly over 39 inches. Handing it back to the robot he went to the videophone and made a connection. "Hello, emergency clinic? I'll be available in my office in 5 minutes."

* * * *

Meanwhile the doctor's inquiry concerning Gelontifad had created quite a stir in the great clinic of Terrania. Perry Rhodan wanted some Gelontifad immediately but no such item was available. The doctor was adamant. The Chief had asked for Gelontifad. It was some kind of laxative—it had to be found.

The positronicon was questioned. Answer: negative. The emergency doctor expected at any moment to receive a sharp inquiry from Rhodan, asking him where his medicine was. He shouted in desperation: "There must be some somewhere! The Chief knows it exists. Just find it and bring it to me!" It was enough to raise a storm of confusion in the normally sedate atmosphere of the clinic.

Even Solar Intelligence had gotten wind of this disturbance but the major who received the information made a slight error. He should have transmitted the data immediately to Allan D. Mercant but he had been celebrating the previous night and happened to be suffering the consequences. He read the message concerning the seemingly minor skirmish over a purgative and then dismissed it, sweeping it from his desk—at the same time taking an oath to absorb less festive 'cheer' in the future, however pleasant the experience.

The frantic physicians at the clinic chanced upon a colleague who wasn't aware of the official nature of the emergency but who had something to say that was informative. He stared at his amazingly confused comrades in some perplexity.

"Gelontifad?" he echoed, mystified. "Of course I'm familiar with it. But nobody could know about it here. The Aras have just brought it out as a new preparation. I ought to know, since I've just come back from Aralon!!"

Not one of the doctors caught on to the obvious discrepancy involved. They were all too relieved to finally be informed about the medicine.

"But it is a purgative?" asked one of them, wanting to be sure.

The doctor who had just returned from Aralon three weeks ago shook his head in confirmation.

Thus, by a hair's breadth, Thomas Cardif had escaped discovery.

4/ IT ALL BEGAN ON OKUL

Brazo Alkher, looking even now like a lanky youngster as ever, looked up apathetically when the 2 combat robots brought Stant Nolinov back into their cell.

Nolinov was returning from his 18th or 20th cross-examination. He himself had about as many hearings behind him. After a few days of quiet the Antis had started early this morning with their questionings again. But this time the 2 young officers were in the dark as to what the Antis were after.

Nolinov sat down silently beside Alkher and waited for the robots to leave. The door closed and they could both be sure that the energy screen was still there which barred any chance of escape.

"Watch it, Brazo—it's your turn again in 10 minutes!" This was all Stant had to say about the interrogation he had just come through

Here it was impossible to carry on any productive conversation. They knew that every word could be overheard and 3 closed-circuit video-cams watched them continuously. During the first few hours of their imprisonment they had discovered this surveillance system and conducted themselves accordingly.

Brazo Alkher, formerly the weapons officer of the linear-drive ship *Ironduke*, got up and started his pacing again, 5 steps to the door, 5 steps to the wall. The door was of seamless metal and escape-proof; also the walls. Moreover, they figured they were about 40 or 50 meters beneath the surface of the inhospitable planet of Saos.

"Are they starting to get to you, old buddy?" Nolinov asked him in light sarcasm.

"They keep you too uptight around here to fall apart!" Alkher told him curtly.

This much they dared say to each other and no more. Alkher kept up his incessant pacing because he was pondering something. He had noticed that on his last 3 trips today to the hearing chamber they had taken him there each time by a different route. He was wondering if this had been intentional on the part of his captors and, if so, what purpose was behind it.

The floor reverberated, announcing the heavy footsteps of the approaching robots. The massive door swung back silently. A hard, metallic voice commanded Brazo Alkher to accompany them. He nodded quickly to his companion and went out. Two robots escorted him between them. A third machine formed the rear guard and a fourth led the way.

He attempted to pay much more attention than before to the route they were taking but after 10 minutes had lost his orientation completely. He wasn't sure whether or not they were leading him in circles. The way to the hearing chamber seemed to be endless.

He remembered the impression he had obtained on his arrival of this settlement of the Antis. The *Baa-lo*'s engines had been severely damaged by his beam-cannon shots so the ship had taken about 5 times as long as would normally be required to make a landing. He and Nolinov were not prevented from looking at the viewscreens during the approach and they had observed the building installations and the surrounding terrain from above.

They had seen a circular complex of various kinds of buildings which had been located in a deep canyon-like basin surrounded by high, rugged-looking mountains. The basin, measuring about 2 km in diameter, was dominated by a pyramid structure that was considerably more than 100 meters high. The temple stood in the centre of an approximately circular area if one discounted 4 large dome-roofed buildings equally spaced around it, forming a square. While they had been conducted toward the temple, still in their spacesuits, they had been able to catch a glimpse of the interior of one of the domes. The large machines and power plants there were; a clear indication of a heavy energy setup to support a large industrial complex.

Suddenly his recollections were interrupted as he found himself facing the familiar antigrav shaft which would take him up into the pyramid. He had long since given up trying to figure out what subterranean sector he had come through. Accompanied by the robots, he soon arrived again in the hearing room. This time he was surprised, however, to discover 2 strange faces among his interrogators.

One of the strange Antis introduced Alkher to the other one. "Terran," he said, "you will be cross-examined by High Priest Kutlos."

Alkher remained expressionless.

The session began. The Antis asked him one catch-question after another. But the young lieutenant had learned his lessons well in the Space Academy of the Solar Fleet; he was well trained in the art of avoiding their verbal snares.

Suddenly the questioning was interrupted. A small, shriveled-looking old Anti came out of an adjacent room and approached Kutlos. He bowed to him and asked him to accompany him into the nearby room. Alkher kept his ears open as best he could but only caught an indication that an important call had come through for the *Centre*. With every sign of impatience, Kutlos got up and ordered the other Anti, who had introduced him, to continue interrogating the Terran.

But in Alkher's opinion the latter found this to be an unexpected task. He seemed to be struggling to come up with questions. In the midst of it Alkher heard the name *Trakarar*. He did not realize that it had been intended for him to hear it.

Nor did he know that the shouted reply of Kutlos in the next room was designed for him: "*Even the Springers can't threaten us! Tell them this is Central Control—we know how to defend ourselves!*"

A half-hour later, when he was taken back to his underground prison, he paid no attention to the way he came. He couldn't get 2 items out of his mind: the names *Trakarar* and *Central Control*. Somehow he had to transmit this discovery to Nolinov. He had a strong hunch that the data was important. He was struggling to figure out how this inhospitable planet could have 2 names: Saos, according to the Arkonide

star catalogues, but also Trakarat!

The *Central* idea had made the deepest impression on him.

Was this layout one of those 'iceberg' situations? The 2-km circular settlement he had seen when landing could be the small visible portion of it. Beneath the planet's surface might be the whole hidden Headquarters of the Baalol cult!

* * * *

Kutlos' sharp-lined features twisted into a smile. It was meant for the man who had met with Cardif-Rhodan at dawn on the terrace of the bungalow near Terrania.

"What do you think?" he asked of the agent. There was a note of expectancy in his voice.

"I believe the simplified plan is more effective. That Terran lieutenant seems to be a mere youngster—I watched him closely when Trakarat was mentioned. He pricked up his ears, there can be no doubt about it—swallowed the bait completely. Now if we don't lay it on too thick we should be able to lay a false trail which might even bring Cardif to us. At the same time it will give us a chance to put the Terrans in a still worse light with Imperator Gonozal VIII!"

The smile broadened on Kutlos' face. He rubbed his hands together. With lofty solemnity he spread out his arms. "For Baalol the Day of the Prophecy is dawning!" Wherewith he momentarily bowed his head and muttered some unintelligible words. Then he turned and left the room.

The simplified plan omitted the part about setting up a false Central in the northern hemisphere of Saos. It was now all in the hands of the man who had assured Thomas Cardif that the Antis would not stand in the way of his move against Arkon. It was even being considered that the promise would be kept. Moreover, the Antis were making ready to increase the tensions between Terra and Arkon.

They believed they knew how far they could go and they were sure of success because the only man who could really be dangerous to them was in their power: the genuine Perry Rhodan!

* * * *

When Bell stormed into the private chambers of Allan D. Mercant he saw that the Solar Marshal had a visitor: Col. Nike Quinto.

He greeted the stocky little chief of Secret Division 3 with obvious relief. "I'm glad you're here, Quinto," he said. "I've just come from seeing the Chief. No chance to get a word in with him. After the first 5 minutes I wasn't interested any more in talking to him. Gentlemen..." He paused. So far he had been standing up but now he took a seat. "Gents, I fear the worst for the Chief. I was with him for 30 minutes. During that period do you know what I saw him doing—at least 8 times? He had a tape measure and he

was measuring his waist!"

He stared tensely at Mercant and Quinto but to his surprise the Intelligence Chief dismissed it with a wave of the hand.

"It's all over town that Rhodan is ill, Mr. Bell. I learned this morning, by the way, that he has a case of indigestion, that's all. Also he's probably worried that he might have another seizure of pain again."

During this, Col. Nike Quinto had straightened up to listen attentively. He had a question but Bell beat him to it.

"So that's why the latest is the belly measure? What's happened these last few days is too much for me, Mercant! How come Perry has to have a cell activator in addition to the physiotron treatments? And that spook on Wanderer I understand even less. Why should *It* hand over this device to Perry? Quinto, how does all this compute with you?"

The latter shook his head gravely. "Mr. Bell, there's nothing to say as long as the Chief maintains this screen of silence around him. But the situation concerning the tape measure is interesting..."

"You mean its crazy!" Bell interrupted loudly, starting to lose his temper. But then he suddenly calmed himself. "Mercant, I didn't just drop in for a chat. Since you're the Solar Marshal I'm telling you—the time has come for us to..."

"No!" Mercant got up swiftly. He understood but refused. "Too early for that! I've spoken to half a dozen physicians. There are no indications of mental derangement, Mr. Bell. You must understand what that means."

Bell started pacing the floor, much more emotionally involved than Mercant or Quinto in the struggle between the loyalty of friendship and his duty to the Solar Imperium. He finally stopped abruptly in front of the Solar Marshal. "But you also understand that things can't go any farther! In 2 or 3 days we'll have a galactic war on our hands and billions of lives will be lost if our Fleet units continue to provoke the Arkonide Imperium. What Atlan thinks of us—well, you couldn't put it into words anymore!"

Mercant looked at him sharply. "Mr. Bell, do you want to overthrow the Chief on the mere suspicion that he is ill?"

The heavysset First Deputy snorted. "John Marshal's just come back from Arkon and today he asked me the same stupid question! Listen, you know I'm the last one to ever betray Perry Rhodan but as his responsible top staff we can't just let the Solar Imperium go to the dogs!" Behind his words was a deep sense of responsibility and concern for billions of people. "I read Marshall a riot act and finally forced him to dig into the Chief's thoughts. Since Perry has lost his ESP there's no chance of his noticing it. And what was Marshall able to tell me? The Chief *thinks inwardly!* Whatever that's supposed to mean, Marshall couldn't explain."

Mercant made no comment. Bell stormed out. Mercant and Quinto sat in silence as they heard his footsteps fade away.

* * * *

Perry Rhodan had always been among the early risers and, Cardif-Rhodan followed the same routine but this morning his yawn was not a hearty one and he did not feel refreshed by his sleep. The first thing he did was to reach for the tape measure on his nightstand and go through the ritual that had disturbed Bell so much the day before. He measured his waist again. His eyes widened as he read the results: another inch of girth!

He tried to laugh it off. "I must be seeing things!" he muttered to himself. Then he dropped the tape and stretched.

Barefooted, he went into the bathroom and, as was his custom, got onto the scales. "What...?" He had to reach for support. His knees began to tremble. He couldn't believe his eyes. Although he had not had anything to eat or drink the previous night, he had nevertheless gained almost 1½ pounds!

He looked into the mirror. An alien face looked back at him, etched with lines of anxiety and dread.

He quickly removed his pyjama shirt and the mirror reflected all too clearly the sunken state of the metal activator in his chest. But just at that moment it began to throb and he felt the reassuring flow of new current through his body.

The anxiety and dread vanished from his face.

"Don't get edgy, *Rhodan!*" he said aloud to himself, and he laughed.

But with the back of his hand he wiped the cold sweat from his brow.

* * * *

On Saos a day and a night was 214 Earthly hours long. When Brazo Alkher was led to his last interrogation and was seated once more in front of Kutlos, grey dawn was breaking over this desolate world. The long Saos day began with thundering hurricanes which were not even deterred by the 150-meter pyramid in their raging attack, causing the mighty structure to rattle in its foundations. Only once on his way back to his cell did Brazo have a chance to look outside and see the dust clouds whipping across the circular compound.

After the robots had locked him back in the escape-proof room and he found his companion in destiny to be sound asleep, he returned to his own cot. Although thoughts were racing in his mind he finally also fell asleep.

Soon he thought he was experiencing a nightmare. He stood in the midst of a terrible storm. Thunder shook the earth as bolt after bolt of lightning flashed. And then somebody grasped him roughly by the shoulder.

"Get up! We're under heavy fire from outer space!" Stant Nolinov was yelling in his ear.

In an instant Alkher was wide awake. He sat up and then leapt from his cot. The floor swayed under his

feet as a hellish blast of battle sounds smote his ears. The industrial settlement must be under heavy bombardment, he thought. And then he recalled the statement he had overheard Kutlos make during a hypercom conversation in the room next to the hearing chamber: "Even the Springers can't threaten us! Tell them this is Central Control—we know how to defend ourselves!"

The two Terrans were suddenly thrown to the floor in their cell.

"Bombs!" shouted Alkher. And he was the one to know because he was a weapons officer—a heavy ordnance man. And he also knew who in this part of the Milky Way preferred to use bombs in their attacks: the Galactic Traders!

So they had made good their threat against the anti-mutants. The attack from space continued. The whole planet seemed to be ready to fly to pieces.

"The door!" he cried out suddenly.

It has ceased to exist. But had the energy screen in front of it also been annihilated? He picked up a small stool and threw it out into the passage. He saw it shatter against the far wall.

"Let's go, Stant!" he yelled in the same moment.

The attack over the settlement increased in magnitude. Apparently a large Springer fleet was somewhere above the Anti stronghold, letting loose with every weapon at its command. Alkher and Nolinov raced along the passages they had so often traversed on their way to the hearings.

Close ahead of them the corridor was suddenly split asunder. A 3-meter chasm yawned before them and Brazo just managed to block his comrade from it at the last moment. But he saw a branching passage. At the end of it was an antigrav shaft which probably meant their salvation, provided it had not already been put out of commission. They ran, wondering at the fact that they had encountered no robots as yet. They reached the antigrav and found that it worked. They jumped into it and it bore them upward. It was impossible to exchange any words because this second planet of a nameless small star was being threatened with extinction.

Alkher had an instinctive urge to leave the shaft in a hurry. Nolinov was hesitant about it so he yanked him out at the next level. "To the left!" he yelled in Nolinov's ear.

Here they encountered 2 robots. The 2 officers threw themselves to the floor, expecting a ray barrage. Nothing happened. The robots were not fighting machines but automatons who were employed in the manufacture of the Antis' individual defence screens. The 2 men ran onward and discovered a running conveyor belt. They jumped on it as a means of transportation onward.

The belt was just carrying them into a tunnel when a bomb exploded close by, creating earth tremors which caused the band to stop. Fortunately the lighting was still in order so they crawled forward on their hands and knees. After a few more meters the tunnel opened into a giant chamber where the individual defence screen generators were being produced. Work robots were still busily working at their tasks.

The two Terrans were not molested so they ran toward the large entrance gate. They felt that they were taking forever but only 5 minutes had passed since they left their cell. As Alkher reached the gate portal he let out a cry and disappeared beyond the opening where the great door was hanging awry on its hinges.

Nolinov was right on his heels. The room beyond was a spacesuit depot! This discovery had in no way been helped by the Antis. It had been pure chance and finding their own suits here also was a real piece of luck. They inspected them thoroughly, following all rules they had been taught in the Solar Space Academy, and then grinned at each other eagerly as they both finished simultaneously. Once they were in the suits, Nolinov gave the signal to go and they continued their way to the surface. The still-raging battle offered them a chance to escape during the confusion.

The next antigravitor was not working. They could not know that the Antis had just shut the shaft off seconds before this so that the Terrans would be forced to use the emergency stairs nearby. They raced up the steps which led them to the ground floor. The Terrans pushed onward shoulder to shoulder, not suspecting that the Antis were following their movements over video circuits.

Somewhere an Anti was speaking calmly into a microphone: "Fire—target zone 8!"

Target zone 8 was struck by fire from a cylindrical spaceship hovering over the temple area. Directly in front of Alkher and Nolinov the airlock door was blown to pieces. The brilliant beam melted a crater in the floor and its glare blinded the 2 officers momentarily. Before the shockwave reached them, however, they had closed their helmets and clapped their faceplate filters into position.

Heedless of the raging inferno they made long running leaps until they were out in the open. They were trying to reach the cover of a bearing wall of one of the low buildings when it was blasted by a direct hit from a raybeam, and in the turbulence they had to separate. Alkher flattened himself against the ground beneath the shockwave in a storm of dust and expanding gasses. He did not know where Nolinov was and he didn't dare to call to him over his radio helmet.

The blinding dust cloud was dispersed in all directions by the hurricane. As Alkher sprang to his feet he was once more aware of the fact that Saos' gravity was greater than the Earth's. He was about to make a dash for more distant cover when he saw an anti-mutant about 30 meters away who was running straight across the open space between the buildings. Alkher found himself next to another wall and when he drew back quickly he discovered a door. He swiftly depressed the latch and slipped inside.

Just at this moment the Springer attacks lessened somewhat. Alkher found himself in a small airlock where he waited, calculating how long it would take the Anti to reach the other side of the clearing. Meanwhile he thought of using the lull to contact Nolinov by helmet radio.

His earphones came to life but before he could speak his eyes opened wide in astonishment. What was he hearing? An anti-mutant was speaking pleasantly with somebody on board one of the Springer ships that was making the attack! He heard the Springer answering in his broad Intercosmo. Then the Anti responded again. He heard a name: *Extan* —unmistakably the name of a Galactic Trader clan. What was this clan, Extan, supposed to do now? Alter their firing range?

Alkher didn't get to hear more because Nolinov was calling him on the emergency band and he had to switch over. Regretfully he did so and sent his I.D. signal.

He heard Nolinov's voice: "Flight direction—300 meters straight on." It was an instruction of how to find him—also a signal alerting him to the fact that he could leave his cover in the small airlock. He moved out but he would have preferred switching to the other frequency again and hearing what else the Springer and the Anti were saying to each other. He wanted to know how it was possible for a congenial conversation like that between an Anti and an attacking Galactic Trader from the Extan clan—especially when the Anti was even advising the other how to direct his fire!

But he ran out of time to think about it just now. He was sprinting across the large clearing or plaza toward one of the large dome structures which contained one of the 4 power stations. A renewed blast of enemy fire was coming through the heavy cloud layers of the storm planet. Energy beams splashed fountains of blinding fire to the right and the left of him as he ran.

Over the radio, Stant Nolinov could hear his companion's laboured breathing. Second later, Alkher came plunging through the haze of dust and smoke, and then the two Terrans were silently off together. They moved shoulder to shoulder, only daring to cast quick glances to either side and hoping not to be caught in a direct beam shot. They had just gotten past the large power station when a disintegrator beam struck near the industrial complex and made a swirling vortex of destruction 30 meters into the ground. Alkher, who was considerably faster in his reactions, darted to his left while pulling Nolinov with him.

They left the last coverage that the temple compound afforded them and came to the open floor of the basin.

* * * *

Allan D. Mercant took a seat without invitation. He didn't even look up when Bell snapped at him angrily.

"I don't recall having asked you to come here, Mercant!" As the latter kept searching through his file folder, Bell reached out and tapped him on the shoulder. "Mercant, I think I made that plain enough!"

Finally the Chief of Solar Intelligence looked up from his papers. His face was expressionless. There was little to indicate that he had gone through his second night without sleep. He spoke quietly while presenting a report. "Mr. Bell, we can talk about that after you have read this."

Unsuspectingly, although with some reluctance, Bell took the sheet and couldn't help reading it because the words fairly leapt at him: *Secret agreement between the Ruling Council of Akon and Emperor Gonozal VIII...*

Bell quickly read that Atlan had placed 1,000 of his most modern spaceships at the disposal of the Akons in the Blue System! He learned further that 3 major shiploads of hypno-training equipment had been sent to Drorah, with which it would be possible to convert inexperienced mother-race Arkonides into experienced spacemen within a very short period of time!

Bell's face paled as he looked up and stared at the Solar Marshal. "Does the Chief know about this?" he asked tonelessly.

"Yes."

Bell exploded. "Don't make me have to arm-wrestle you for every word, Mercant! What did the Chief have to say about this?"

"What would you expect him to say about it, Mister..."

Bell slapped the desk with the flat of his hand, which made no apparent impression on Mercant. "I'll tell

you what I'd expect him to say!" shouted Bell as the colour came back to his face in his new anger. "It's the same as I'm saying now, Mercant! This thing Atlan has done is a stab in the back, a colossal impudence and an insult! And besides that, I'll have you know it's a... it's a... Well, all right then, what *did* Perry say?" he finally asked grudgingly.

Without a word, Mercant took back the report and placed it neatly in his file folder. "Bell, the Chief didn't express himself one way or another. I was only with him about 15 minutes but during that quarter of an hour he kept checking his weight. He must have gotten onto the scales at least 4 times while I was there..."

"I don't think I heard you right, Mercant. It sounded like... you mean he was *weighing* himself—at a time like this? Four times in 15 minutes...?"

Mercant merely looked at him in silence. In fact both men stared at each other without a word for what seemed to be minutes.

"This time he's done it!" exclaimed Bell finally. "He's flipped his lid!"

"No," came the Solar Marshal's prompt denial. "But he does seem to be driven by some kind of fear or deep anxiety."

"And you think that's connected with his bathroom scales?"

"Perhaps. But how could I really know? Who can say today that he's been taken into the Chief's confidence? Since Operation Okul that's a thing of the past! It seems that the Liquitiv situation may have been weighing too heavily on his conscience."

"If anything, it's Thomas Cardif, wherever he is, who should be having his father on his conscience! Mercant, hasn't your Intelligence organization ever found a trace of that lunatic?"

"Thomas Cardif has disappeared among the stars as completely as the Arkonide, Banavol."

"*Whois* Banavol?"

"Have you forgotten who it was who advised the Chief that an Anti may have infiltrated into the Springer base on Pluto? According to the Chief himself, Banavol was the one who tipped him off. I've thrown everything we've got into the mystery of Banavol's whereabouts and there's no trace whatsoever. Somewhere between Earth and star cluster M-13, the trail simply disappears."

"Mercant, you didn't bring up the subject if you weren't leading to something—so get it off your chest!"

Mercant raised a hand as though in self-defence. "Naturally I'm leading to something, Mr. Bell. Lately there have been too many people who disappear on me—after being in private sessions with the Chief."

Bell suddenly got up from his chair and walked swiftly to the window. He remained there for some time, his arms spread out while he leaned on the windowsill. Mercant watched his motionless figure, waiting for him to pick up the conversation again. Finally he heard him speak as though he were talking aloud to himself.

"Banavol comes here and then disappears. An Anti meets the Chief at the Pluto base and dies. Perry flies with Alkher and Nolinov to Wanderer and the 2 officers fail to return... If I narrow it down to one

common denominator I can say *eventhat* had its beginnings on Okul! On Okul, father and son came face to face with each other alone for the first time in many years. Mercant—wouldn't you say that Thomas Cardif also disappeared without a trace—since that time?"

The other answered impatiently. "Mr. Bell, your speculations now are a little careless."

Bell turned to face his visitor but remained by the window. "Alright, but can you deny that all this started on Okul?"

"What are you getting at?" asked Mercant cautiously.

"Couldn't the Antis have brainwashed the Chief in some manner?—you know, with methods that are unknown to our doctors and maybe also the Aras?"

"You'll have to speak more plainly than that, Mr. Bell."

Bell crossed his arms on his chest. "I'll be glad to!" he answered but he took a deep breath before continuing. "I haven't been able to get this thing off my mind ever since John Marshall told me the Chief was projecting his thought patterns *sinwardly*. Mercant, I'm coming to the conclusion that these frightening changes in Rhodan are due to a lot more than the shock therapy. It would be hard for you to imagine how shook up I am over the fact that Perry brought back a cell activator with him from Wanderer and that now the thing is half sunk into his rib-cage and has become a part of his anatomy. We all know that *It* has a sense of humour that's not for humans but I don't think that spook would try anything really creepy. Mercant, do you think maybe It is trying to tell us something or that *It*'s sort of rapping Rhodan's knuckles for him? I'm wondering if Perry tried something on Wanderer that he wouldn't have thought of doing if he were in his right mind."

"Bell, you're playing with fire again—trying to sell the idea that the Chief is insane!" Mercant's voice carried a note of warning. "You know if he hears about it you're liable to get yourself in trouble!"

Bell laughed grimly. "If you only knew how little I care about that! I've given up that kind of thinking. The real steamroller for me is time! It's only a matter of hours now before I'll have to take action. And if it comes to that, Mercant, you know I'll be working for my sick friend but never *against* him. Is that clear?"

"You didn't even have to mention it, Mr. Bell. I know how you feel about the Chief—even at present. It's just that I fear you'll step in too soon..."

Bell's heavysset figure seemed to bristle as he interrupted the wily Chief of Intelligence. "Too soon, eh?—when 2 Imperiums are ready to wipe each other out? Too soon, when Atlan starts making deals with the Akons? He might as well throw a noose around his neck and get it over with! In our last conversation I made it plain enough to him that he should play it cool—that what he feared from the presence of our Fleet in the Arkon Imperium would not come about."

In matter-of-fact tones, Mercant remarked: "Intelligence has indications that the Chief overheard you slip that little assurance to Atlan."

Bell shrugged without quivering an eyelash. "That's fine with me! I have nothing to hide—but I can't understand Atlan."

"Maybe I can," said Mercant dourly. "Atlan once told me that he could have had many friends during his

life here on Earth but it was only after more than 10,000 years that he found *the* friend! One can't blame him for his bitterness, considering the state of affairs. And don't forget that in many ways Atlan thinks as we do and not like an Arkonide."

Bell flared up at him. "Doesn't he have an extra brain he refers to as his *logic sector*?" As the videophone buzzed he glanced at it in new exasperation. "All right, *sonow* what...?" he muttered.

The main clinic in Terrania announced: "Administrator Perry Rhodan has been admitted here a few minutes ago. The nature of the problem is unknown at this time."

5/ THE LOOM OF DOOM

Brazo Alkher and Stant Nolinov had landed on a plateau that was approximately 300 meters over the basin floor and perhaps 5-km distant from the temple area. Although they had hardly hoped to come through the murderous barrage of energy beams they had finally reached a point of relative safety and were sure that by now the Antis must consider them to be casualties. What neither one suspected, however, was that the energy barrage had been unleashed for the express purpose of driving them to this spot. Nor did they know that the Antis had been keeping them under continuous observation by means of television.

Having ducked into a small rocky crevice, the two Solar Fleet officers tried to recover from the exertions of their flight. Knowing that voice traffic between their helmet phones could easily be intercepted, they had shut off their radios. Alkher kept thinking of the chance conversation he had overheard between an Anti and one of the attacking Springers and it was still a mystery to him that the Galactic Trader up there in his long-ship had actually received instructions on where to place his beam fire. It tempted him to switch on his radiophone but at the last moment he desisted, realizing that it was too much of a risk.

Thus Nolinov was still, in the dark concerning what he had accidentally heard and soon Alkher had other things to think about as a new attack on the Anti stronghold broke out. Nolinov felt Alkher grip his arm and the 2 men looked at each other, passing a signal between them with their eyes. Alkher cautiously slipped out of the niche in the rock, adjusting his defence screen against the raging hurricane and crept to the edge of the plateau.

He wanted to see what was left of this manufacturing centre after the heavy attack. There was nothing but an impenetrable sea of clouds. He could not make out the slightest sign of the Baalol temple complex. He turned up his outside microphone even though the thunder of explosions in the valley basin threatened to rupture his eardrums. As he listened he heard the occasional roar of impulse engines. A large fleet of the Traders' long-ships had to be circling over the area, which served to strengthen his suspicions. Under such a massive attack by heavily armed ships, shouldn't the whole installation have been destroyed by now?

In other words, had the attack against the temple been genuine?

Yet the terrific tongues of flame blasting out from impact points below were so convincing that Alkher was about ready to abandon his suspicions. Following the wildly spreading flames of explosion came a

thunderous blast that left him momentarily deaf.

Suddenly, off to his right, he saw a shadowy shape which turned out to be a wobbling and careening auxiliary spacecraft. It was a type of lifeboat used by the Springers on their cylindrical long-ships in case of a space catastrophe. It landed 100 meters behind him, about 30 meters away from the niche where Nolinov was waiting for him to return.

Alkher decided to take a risk. He switched on his helmet radio. "Stant..."

His companion seemed to have been waiting for his call. "OK," Nolinov promptly interrupted him. "I'll see what can be done!"

What Stant Nolinov could do when he spoke in this tone had become a small tradition in the Solar Fleet. From his concealment he had observed the lifeboat landing and behind his faceplate his eyes had narrowed suspiciously. He wasn't sure whether or not the small craft's careening gyrations were genuine or merely a trick to lure him into a trap. He could not detect any sign of damage to the hull but then he was amazed to see the airlock open to reveal 2 staggering figures—apparently wounded Springers. One of them had to be supported by the other. The latter finally dragged his companion toward the stern.

Nolinov watched them, ready for action, but burning to know if these two were the entire crew. He and Alkher were weaponless so they had to be very careful.

"But maybe we can do something about that..." Nolinov heard himself mutter.

He took another look at the two Springers who were looking at the propulsion end of their ship. As a thick cloud of smoke came over the rim of the plateau and drifted toward the spacecraft, Nolinov plunged in its wake, using it for cover. Twice he fell in the process but his suit protected him from bruises. In spite of the 1.3 gravity he managed to jump into the open airlock. One look into the interior of the ship told him that it was empty! He heaved a sigh of relief.

From his training he was familiar with this make of vessel and he knew where the weapons cabinet was located. In 3 steps he was in front of it. He opened it and found a small arsenal. He helped himself swiftly but did not neglect looking them over for their charge indications. After checking the third weapon he had chosen, he grinned in satisfaction. The Springer in charge of this cabinet must be the careful type, he thought. Every blaster was loaded to its maximum charge.

Then he looked about inside the craft. The tail end revealed signs of a relatively harmless hit. When he happened to glance at the floor he noticed a puddle of blood which gave mute testimony that what he had seen must be real. This emergency landing could not be a ruse, he thought. Yet he was unaware that the blood was artificial and that the spacecraft's landing was all a part of the Antis' strategy.

Suddenly Alkher's voice rattled in his helmet phones: "Stant, I've got them—both of them!"

With weapons in hand, Nolinov moved outside swiftly. At the moment the visibility was good on the plateau. The closest cloudbanks raced away more than 100 meters below, driven before the storm. Nolinov ran toward the stern end of the ship and found Alkher with his knee on one of the Springers while the other one lay motionlessly nearby on the ground...

"One of them's wounded, Brazo!" Nolinov advised over his radio.

"I sort of got that idea, myself," came the answer. "They both folded before I even had to get rough."

Nolinov joined him and turned the motionless figure over on its back. He saw a bearded face, one side of which was smeared with blood. By all appearances the man was unconscious.

"What'll we do with them?" he asked hastily. He was suddenly in a huff to get going. If they could get the auxiliary craft started and the engines had not been seriously damaged, it was likely that the two of them could be back on the good old *Ironduke* in a matter of hours.

"We leave them here!" Alkher decided. "This character will be coming around soon and it's not too far to the temple. There are enough of the big boats swarming around upstairs—he'll make contact with them. Let's hope this little flier can get off the ground!"

Nolinov handed him one of the weapons and the two Terrans took one last look at the motionless Springers before they made a dash for the airlock. Once inside, Nolinov showed Alkher the light damage to the hull. To Alkher it looked like a plant and he was again reminded of the incongruously friendly conversation he had overheard between the Anti and the Springer concerning the latter's firing strategy.

"Close airlock—air pressure on, Stant!"

Alkher swept into the pilot seat. Nolinov made no objection to being subordinated in command. He closed the lock door and set the air pumps going to get rid of the Saos atmosphere inside. Meanwhile, Alkher checked the engines by inspecting the instrument board.

"It's a setup!" Nolinov heard him say. But he didn't know what Alkher meant by it nor did he ask. There was little time for conversation now, as every second could be crucial.

Neither Alkher nor Nolinov could know, of course, that at this moment Kutlos was rubbing his hands in satisfaction as he watched his viewscreen. It showed him a small Springer spacecraft sitting on a rocky plateau, high above the valley basin. Although the two Terrans were unaware of this surveillance, on the other hand Kutlos did not realize that his very costly plan to identify Saos as Trakarath was almost a complete failure already. The young Solar Fleet officer who looked like such an innocent youngster was just about in a position to see through the entire camouflage.

"Red herring or not, we'll take it!" Nolinov heard Alkher say. "What's the cabin pressure?"

Nolinov checked the manometer and advised that it was normal. The spacecraft's hull began to tremble as Alkher fired up the engines. A warm-up period was not necessary because the ship had just been in operation. Meanwhile the 2 men had opened their helmets in the pressurized cabin.

The auxiliary ship shot away like a torpedo. Alkher banked it sharply before the cliff walls and came around. Seated beside him in the co-pilot spot, Nolinov could see by the instruments that they were flying toward the north.

"What are you trying to do!" he yelled. "You want to saw off the top of the pyramid?"

"No, but I want to see how many of those Springer longboats are there and what kind of a clambake they're having with the Antis."

"What are you, a humorist or something?" asked Nolinov, confused. "You should be grabbing all the sky you can get, man!"

"I think somebody's putting on a show and I'd like to know who the sponsor is... There—you see those ships down there?"

They caught a glimpse of the temple complex through a rift in the clouds. The whole area should have been nothing but wreckage and ashes by now but there was actually very little evidence of any damage. Still more remarkable was the fact that 7 or 8 cylindrical warships lay peacefully on the landing field with their personnel ramps plainly extended.

"Fire from the left!" shouted Nolinov sharply.

A raybeam-shot from an Anti ground battery came just a hair too late. Alkher swung the ship so sharply that it strained the hull but the risk involved paid off: the energy beam missed them by at least a kilometre.

"You think that wasn't a put-on?" growled Alkher, glancing at his companion.

"You're an optimist!" countered Nolinov, Although he was beginning to go along with the theory. "Maybe just another streak of luck. You make it sound as if the Antis brought us this boat for a bye-bye present!"

"You're getting the picture, Stant—that's exactly what they did! Even the raid by the Traders was a bluff! We were supposed to fall for it. They wanted us to escape, those helpful little brothers of Baalol—so we could go to the Chief like good little boy scouts and tell him that Saos is also known as Trakarar! And I was mighty close to being sucked in! It was lucky I happened to overhear them plotting our escape. You see anything on the tracker yet—any ships following us?"

"No. All the time you've been talking I've been wondering about that. With that fleet down there it would be simple to rake us in. What did you overhear—something on their radio band?"

Alkher told him of his experience while the small craft gained altitude and Saos dropped away below them. When he finished, Nolinov let out a whistle and stared at him wonderingly.

"I don't know if I would have caught on as quickly as you did," he confessed. "But have you ever heard of Trakarar before?"

"Never. But I'll lay you odds that Trakarar is an Anti top secret. Stant, set up a message tape for the hypercom. I have a hunch this information can't get to the Chief any too soon!"

Within a few minutes Nolinov prepared the text of the dispatch and managed to put it into a simple code. This particular ship was not equipped with pulse-burst and scrambler transmission devices but it did have a small positronicon. Nolinov used it to process his tape, tying in the last known code-of-the-day for the Fleet. The computer only required a few seconds to convert everything into positronic language and transfer it to the transmitter.

Within half a minute they received a response: "Text unclear—repeat!" Alkher and Nolinov only grinned at each other.

"The devil we will!" retorted Nolinov. "That would be real friendly, to tell it to the galaxy in open text so that the Antis can know we've caught on to their tricks! I'll just beam out a distress signal. I'm not going to breathe easy until I'm on board the *Ironduke* again. If only..." He fell silent as though he had said too much.

"What's the 'if only' part?" insisted Alkher while programming the computer for a transition.

"If only I had my thinking straight—about the Chief. That's the thing that dims the whole scene about going back to Earth, Brazo. I guess I must be skoned or something."

"Then you've got company, Stant. That's *areal* dim scene. I even have cold feet when I think of facing the Chief again. Coming back from Wanderer and while we were on board the *Baa-lo*, he came on real skondola for me—weird—I still don't understand it!"

* * * *

Kutlos was seated between the video surveillance panel and the hypercom console. He watched the screen as the auxiliary craft carrying the two Terran officers broke through the line of Springer ships above the base and raced into the void.

He gave instructions to the radioman: "The lifeboat is not to be followed!"

The agent who had met Thomas Cardif on Earth expressed his apprehensions. "But the Terrans flew quite low over the temple, Kutlos. They could have seen the long-ships that were sitting there."

"So?" queried the other sharply. "Couldn't they look like our own ships—perhaps surprised by the Springers' attack? We've brought this plan too far along now—it has to be carried through We'll have to hurry to dismantle the production facilities here and trans-ship them out of here before a fleet formation from Earth shows up over Saos."

The agent still appeared to be concerned. "I hope everything develops the way we planned, Kutlos. But when I think of that young lieutenant, I keep wondering if he could be so easily fooled. When I was on Terra I did some investigating. He happens to be the best weapons officer in the Solar Fleet!"

Kutlos grinned back. "So much the better! The Terran's report will carry more weight with his fleet command." Kutlos' grin faded and his eyes suddenly flared angrily. "But why do I learn only now about his importance?"

The temple's hypercom receiver picked up the first message that Alkher and Nolinov beamed out to the Solar Fleet.

"It's in code," said the operator, "but we'll have the clear text available within a few minutes!"

It was not an underestimation. The positronic decode machine made child's play of the simple code, But then the Antis on Saos had the same problem as the crew of the cruiser who radioed back to the fugitives: "Text unclear—repeat!"

While he read and re-read the decoded text of the message the Anti agent frowned in puzzlement, even though he knew the Terran language as well as his own. Finally he shrugged resignedly. "I don't understand it!"

Kutlos wasn't interested in knowing what the other did not understand about it—he just wanted to know

if the name Trakarar was in the message.

"Twice, without mentioning any other names. Once it mentions the word 'Central' but I can't make out the related context..."

The hypercom interrupted him and the agent immediately translated the intercepted message. The 3 words were significant as well as the identification. A Solar Fleet cruiser somewhere in star cluster M-13 was asking the 2 fugitives to repeat their information.

Kutlos' features finally relaxed and he slowly got to his feet. "We should be satisfied," he said. "The Terrans have swallowed the bait. The plan is in operation."

* * * *

The hyper room message from Alkher and Nolinov had been picked up by State-class cruiser *Ganges*, 6th Task Fleet Pursuit Flotilla. The request for a repeat had already gone out before the commander learned about it. The names Alkher and Nolinov alerted him immediately and he had some harsh words for his Corn Central officer.

"How is it possible those 2 names didn't ring a bell with you? Those are the 2 men who flew with the Chief to Wanderer—the ones who were held captive on the *Baa-lo* after the Chief was released from the Antis. And after we were all sure they were dead...! Lt. Bilk, don't blank out on me completely! Get out a dispatch to the Chief and Solar Intelligence. And while you're doing it, transmit Alkher's message just as you received it. I'll expect a completion report in 3 minutes!"

The commander had no sooner given this order than the hypersensor sounded out. It had detected the hypertransition of the fugitives' spaceboat.

"Coördinates!" he demanded.

The synchro-system cut in and the impulse engines of the *Ganges* opened to maximum thrust. The spherical spacer was about to leap through semispace to the indicated emergence sector so that the two Terran officers could be picked up. The main nav-computer was already racing to prepare for the jump.

* * * *

The physicians would not admit Bell and Mercant into the room where the Chief was being examined. They both decided to respect the order but they would not leave the antechamber. The doctor who had the thankless task of keeping them out spoke frankly.

"Unless the Chief lifts the order for secrecy we are not in a position to reveal the slightest detail concerning the results of the examination."

"Well, he'll lift that order," Bell asserted but he sounded more certain than he actually felt.

The doctor left the 2 men alone. In the next room Cardif-Rhodan was still with the other physicians. The positronicon had put out a complete tabulation on everything that was medically known concerning him. The information was not disputable and in fact was corroborated by the findings of the examination just completed.

"Sir, said internist Bock, "organically you are completely healthy."

Cardif-Rhodan interrupted him gruffly. "That doesn't interest me. Explain to me my increase in weight of almost 2 pounds! How is it that I've grown a full centimetre and my waist has increased by 3 centimetres! This is why I am here. It's these questions I want answers for—from all of you!" He ignored the fact that his arrogant manner and speech was irritating to the doctors and that they regarded him indignantly.

"Sir, we have no explanations for those 3 points but if you insist on determining the causes it will be necessary to admit you into the clinic."

"What's that supposed to mean? Please express yourself more clearly, doctor!" he demanded imperiously. Inwardly he felt a surge of new panic.

He felt healthy; he felt the activator working and each time the device sent its currents into his body it, was as though he were bathed in a fountain of youth. But the fact that he had not only grown stouter but also taller, against all the laws of Nature, had brought him to the doctors in a panic of fear.

Today it was a struggle for him not to betray himself because of his medical knowledge. Every professional phrase or medical term was clear to him since as Dr. Hugher he had been known elsewhere as a famous physician. In his present state of fear it was costing him a severe effort to still pretend he was a mere layman in such matters. In fact he was close to losing all control.

"Why don't you speak?" he asked sharply, looking around him at the doctors.

He already had a presentiment of why he had grown and acquired more weight. This was supported by his medical knowledge yet he tried to reject his suspicions. Every instinct fought against what was creeping into his awareness. He strove to deceive himself, he wanted to be deceived by these top medicos in the Solar Imperium. They must find a reason for these changes in him yet they must not find the reason which had been filling him with dread during the past few hours.

Dr. Bock very cautiously expressed himself: "Sir, we might have to resort to surgery."

Cardif-Rhodan snorted. "With the present political crisis? What are you thinking of?!"

Prof. Manoli now found it necessary to lead the conversation. "Sir, I can assure you that no such operation would incapacitate you more than 3 hours at the most. However, may I suggest first that we just do a surface biopsy? That would hardly inconvenience you but it might possibly give us some valuable information."

Prof. Manoli couldn't understand why the Chief's gaze seemed to lose its steadiness all of a sudden—as though he were a haunted man at his wits' end. He saw the beads of sweat on Rhodan's brow and observed the trembling of his lips. It seemed incongruous for a man who had been the indefatigable architect of the Solar Imperium.

Almost indecisively he was heard to say: "Gentlemen, proceed with a skin biopsy."

The preparations had already been made. The tissue sampling only required a minute or so. The small incision on Cardif-Rhodan's forearm disappeared under the effects of an Ara spray and within 3 hours it was entirely healed without a scar. The biopsy tests proceeded. The Chief had gotten dressed again and stood at the window which gave him a view of the clinic's inner courtyard.

He couldn't face the doctors directly because he knew his features must be drawn with fear. He feared the results of the tests more than he had ever feared anything in his life. The voice whispering inside of him grew louder and louder, telling him what his problem was. He finally didn't have the strength to resist it any longer.

Suddenly he had gained 3 centimetres in girth, he thought. He felt the sweat in the palms of his hands but he had to go on. He didn't have the will to stop the course of his thoughts. After only a few days he had also grown a centimetre in height! His uniform was too tight for him and also too short...

His tortured broodings were momentarily interrupted by the strong pulsation of the cell activator. A refreshing current of life flowed through his body and gave him the strength to straighten up. With a fervour of desperation he clung to the thought: the activator guarantees you an eternal life!

Behind him he heard a door close. Three doctors had just entered the room from the lab and were approaching him. Wild panic seized him and yet he mastered it with a tremendous effort of will. He turned to them with an outward calm. "Yes?"

"Sir," said Dr. Redstone, "I have the unpleasant duty to inform you that you are suffering from a cell-division explosion!"

At that moment Thomas Cardif seemed to hear the ghostly voice from eternity again: *Perry Rhodan, remove the cell activator or you will become too big and powerful!*

Only now did he comprehend. Now he understood what the daily warning had meant and why the community being on Wanderer had kept warning him of his deadline. *It* had always addressed him as Perry Rhodan as though deliberately to remind him that in reality he was *not* Rhodan! But he, Cardif, had not wished to understand the warning!

Cell-division explosion! He knew what this meant. The normal process of cell-division in his body had increased to explosive proportions and was continuing. And it was all being generated by the activator which was now an integral part of his nervous system!

"Sir..." As though from a great distance he heard Dr. Redstone talking to him. "Barring any unforeseen miscalculations in our analysis we believe we can say that this cell proliferation is not of a malignant nature. However, what the rapidity of the growth may cause in terms of other effects is something we are unable to know at the present stage."

Thomas Cardif had to struggle inwardly to keep from shouting to them in his despair. The cause of the cell explosion was now a part of his thorax! *This thing* in his chest that was supposed to bring him eternal life had unmasked itself and shown him the face of death!

But instead he said rather shakily, "Thank you." As he started to leave, Dr. Redstone sought to console him.

"Sir, we're certain that within a few days we'll be able to arrest the cell-explosion process."

The medico didn't realize he was speaking to another doctor who knew as well as they did that there was no cure for the condition, since he was the first man in the galaxy to ever have such an affliction. Until this very day the malady had been unknown in the annals of history.

"Thank you, Doctor," Cardif-Rhodan repeated.

But he paused on his way to the door to listen. A call for him was coming in over the nearby vid-intercom. The interstellar hypercom station had important news.

It was a dispatch from the fast cruiser *Ganges* operating with the Solar Fleet in the Arkon Theatre. It was en route to pick up the missing lieutenants, Alkher and Nolinov. At the end of the dispatch the text of the fugitives' message was transmitted.

When he heard their names he remembered how scandalously he had treated them, agreeing to leave them behind in captivity on board the *Baa-lo* and then attempting the ship's destruction. But he also caught the sense of their cryptic message. He suddenly recalled the last words of the dying anti-mutant Kalal on the planet Utik and that he had mentioned a world called Trakarat.

An insane hope flared up within him. In wild desperation he clung to the thought that the special knowledge of the anti-mutants must help him to conquer the cell-explosion process. He had to get to Saos as soon as possible! Cardif-Rhodan forgot entirely that he was surrounded by doctors who were virtually dissecting the play of emotions on his face.

He was already forging a plan whereby the Antis could be forced to help him yet at the same time he considered the possibility that they would refuse. In which case the Saos installation and the entire planet were nearing the last days of their existence!

"This malady must be cured!" he exclaimed harshly.

It startled the doctors, who could only shake their heads as they watched him leave.

* * * *

In the antechamber the 2 men waiting for Rhodan had heard the vid-com speaker and listened at the door, which was legitimate since the commander of the *Ganges* had directed the message to Mercant as well as to the Chief. The last syllable had hardly been pronounced before Mercant tugged at Bell's arm with an excitement that was rare for him. He signalled the Solar First Deputy to come with him quickly.

Their high-speed aircar was waiting for them outside the clinic. They got in and raced to Intelligence Headquarters while Mercant even issued directives en route by means of the radio. By the time he and Bell arrived at his office the most important preparations had been concluded. A fast briefing session had been called such as Rhodan himself had often held in the past.

Mercant quickly addressed the 5 top members of his staff. "Gentlemen, the objective is to find the

galactic position of the planet Trakarat. If I interpret Alkher's message correctly, it means that there must be Antis on Saos who could give us some information about that. You are familiar with the time and circumstances under which we first heard of the existence of this place called Trakarat. Apparently that world is either the point of origin of the Antis or it's where their central headquarters is located today. In connection with this assignment, it's top secret and you'll be expected to maintain silence at all times. I'll want all of your reports to come through me or Mr. Bell exclusively. Have I made myself clear? All right, that should about wrap it up. No, wait! Something's coming in..."

The videophone screen flickered on, revealing the broad face of Jefe Claudrin, the Epsalian commander of the *Ironduke*. He thus became an eyewitness to the fact of Mercant's secret briefing session and immediately drew his own conclusions.

As usual his thunderous voice rattled the speaker. "Solar Marshal, the Chief has just given me startling orders. Takeoff is at 15:10 and the destination is the Saos System in star cluster M-13. I'm also aware that the Chief has alerted Fleet reserve groups which are to be deployed to the Saos area. The Chief is boarding ship at 14:50 hours!"

Mercant nodded to Jefe Claudrin and shut off the videophone. He turned to look sharply at his colleagues. "You are now as fully informed as I am, gentlemen. You will only take along those assistants who have your absolute confidence. Other than that, there's nothing more I can tell you. Our rendezvous is at 14:30 on board the *Ironduke*. You have 20 minutes to complete your preparations. That is all."

When the staff members had exited, Bell asked: "Did you happen to run through all the music on this particular opera?"

"I know what you're referring to, Mr. Bell—it's Atlan. If the Emperor learns that additional Solar Fleet units are entering the M-13 sector he will possibly regard it as a prelude to invasion. It could lead him to an official declaration of war. Mr. Bell, you are the only one who is in a position to avoid such a catastrophe. If Atlan still has any last trace of trust in any of us it would be in you. Now what I believe..."

There was a knock at the door and then Prof. Manoli came in. He was greeted by silence but he took a seat anyway. "Any persons who could be interested in this do not know I am here." The statement seemed strange but not as strange as that which followed: "Gentlemen, the Chief is afflicted with explosive cell-division—a runaway condition of growth. Duty compels me to impart this information to you."

Bell and Mercant stared at each other. The description of the malady left them momentarily unprepared to cope with the concept. Without being asked, Manoli went on to describe the Chief's condition in some detail. The longer he spoke the more colour drained from Bell's face.

Bell's voice sounded husky when he finally blurted out his question: "You mean—he will die?"

"I have no hopes for him. Some of my colleagues think otherwise. It's possible I could be wrong. But nobody can be sure one way or another. The malady is unique in medical history—anywhere in the galaxy, to our knowledge."

Bell's intensity was obvious. "Professor, is that cell activator what caused it?"

Manoli asked a counter-question: "Mr. Bell, would you think that *It* is capable of cold-blooded murder?"

All 3 men had already visited the synthetic planet a number of times while receiving their biological

cell-shower treatments. They were all familiar with the multiplex entity who lived on Wanderer.

"No!" Bell's answer was flat and emphatic.

"Then... you see there must be another cause for the Chief's illness. But we don't know what it is—not yet."

Mercant's eyes revealed a faint glimmer. "So you aren't giving up hope?"

Manoli's fleeting smile was pained. "We're only human; we still live by hope. We often keep hoping until our last breath. Therefore we are hoping that the Chief will be saved by a miracle. Otherwise he will become a monstrosity." Manoli was speaking so softly during this last part that he could hardly be heard.

Bell groped for his next words. "Manoli, would you object violently if I again bring up the subject of electro-cranial treatments?"

"No, Mr. Bell. That's been on my mind constantly and yet the Antis could just as well have been the cause of this abnormality. We shouldn't forget, you know, that on Okul the Chief was in their hands for quite awhile."

When Bell glanced sharply at Mercant the latter anticipated his comments. "We're thinking the same thing, Mr. Bell. It seems we now have 2 missions to accomplish. We have to determine whether or not the Chief's condition may be attributed to the Antis. If so, then we have to force them to cure him. Although that's much easier said than done we have no recourse but to make the attempt."

Bell checked his watch. He got to his feet. "It's time to go. Professor, don't you want to go with us on this flight?"

Manoli declined. "We all know how the Chief's disposition has changed in these past few weeks. I wouldn't want him to become suspicious of me, which might happen if I were to board the *Ironduke* at this time. In case he prefers to keep silent concerning his condition, you gentlemen are in a better position to keep an eye on him."

Further conversation was cut off by the thunder of hundreds of impulse engines. All ran to the window and saw a large formation of fast State-class ships hurtle skyward. Destination: the planet Saos in star cluster M-13.

"Let's go!" said Bell as the worst of the bedlam subsided.

Outside the office they separated from Manoli. The fast aircar brought Bell and Mercant under the vast-looming 800-meter hull of the linear-drive ship *Ironduke*. They entered the warship through airlock C.

Bell instructed the boarding officer: "Our presence on board is not to be reported. If there's any trouble, refer it to me!" He ignored the nonplussed expression of the veteran officer. He was convinced there was no other way he could handle the situation.

They went directly to the quarters which were always reserved for Mercant. Over the intercom they learned that the Chief had come on board punctually. At the precise moment scheduled for departure the *Ironduke* lifted off from the landing pad.

The powerful vessel accelerated at a rate which exceeded all regulations. Cardif-Rhodan had given the order. Fear for his life was driving him madly toward Saos.

ORDER OF THE ACTION

[1/ RHODAN: MAD?](#)

[2/ ATLAN FEELS BETRAYED; AURIS DEFENDS PERRY](#)

[3/ "IT" STRIKES THE HOUR](#)

[4/ IT ALL BEGAN ON OKUL](#)

[5/ THE LOOM OF DOOM](#)

[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

CALLER FROM ETERNITY

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE ONLY COURSE that held any promise seemed to be an invasion of Saos. The priests of the Baalol cult had pushed Cardif into this idea of procuring the cell activators from Wanderer. They must have known the frightful effect the device would have on him. Since they were not inclined to help him willingly he was going to have to force them to do it.

Cardif was no longer capable of thinking logically.

The cell proliferation worked like a tumour, gradually interspersing immature brain matter among his normal nerve cells. He merely knew that he was backed up by the might of the Solar Fleet.

But it did not occur to him anymore that he could be betrayed by the Antis.

An engrossing tale of a game of death, a doomsday shuffle, a nemesis eye is—

"The Emperor & The Monster"

By William Voltz