

THE ULTIMATE THREAT

ATLAN knew it would be senseless to take command of the 10,000 robotships which were presently under control of their separate positronics.

Even on the flagship itself he had left the navigation to the auto-pilot system.

Atlan, the ancient but ever-youthful Admiral, did not intend to attack without warning. The fleet was an ultimate threat and RHODAN would understand it as such.

Soon the Moment of Truth would come for—

THE EMPEROR AND THE MONSTER

1/ BEAST AT BAY

TREMBLING.

His hands were trembling. His facial muscles tensed and he unconsciously ran his fingers over his uniform as though for comparison.

Although Maj. Hunts Krefenbac, First Officer of the linear-drive warship *Ironduke*, had a reputation for being self-controlled, the present situation was something he had never been prepared for. Who could have told him he would ever see the Chief in such a condition as this?

As he glanced surreptitiously at the tall figure of the Terran he believed to be Perry Rhodan he experienced an instinctive sense of horror and alarm. Strangely, the Administrator's top uniform button was the most fascinating focal point, not only because it bore the highest rank emblem in the Solar Imperium but especially because it had been let out to the last fastener on his collar. In spite of this, Rhodan's jugular vein was prominently swollen due to the tightness of the largest uniform available on board.

Krefenbac couldn't take his eyes off the Chief's reddened face. It seemed to be broader and flatter than ever before. He wondered if the runaway process of cell division was actually going to continue like this without abatement. He heard someone urgently clear his throat as though to warn him. It was Reginald Bell. But the warning came too late. The unsuspected impostor, Cardif-Rhodan, turned around with such a violent movement that the insignia button popped loose from his collar.

A dead silence pervaded the Control Central of the *Ironduke*. The Chief's mouth had opened as if to speak but he failed to utter a sound. The button shield rolled in ever narrowing circles on the deck until it finally came to rest directly in front of Dr. Carl Riebsam, the chief mathematician. All eyes stared at the gleaming button as though hypnotized.

In a momentary reaction of mortification, Cardif brought both hands to his throat and felt of the torn fastener. In a somewhat cracked voice he challenged Krefenbac. "You were about to say something, Major?"

There was a mixture of helplessness and sympathy in Krefenbac's expression. "Sir..." he began but groped cautiously for words.

Cardif suddenly drew himself up to his full height and the uniform stretched tightly over his body. It was no secret to the crew that in the past 3 days he had grown 3 cm and had also expanded his girth. It almost seemed as if the whole process were accelerating as they approached the planet Saos.

"Well, speak!" shouted Cardif, losing his composure. When he saw Riebsam bend down to pick up the button he pushed the mathematician out of the way. There was a nasty smile on his lips. "No, Doctor," he said scornfully, "not you!"

Krefenbac's face took on a slightly rosy hue. Reginald Bell stood with folded arms behind Cardif, whom he mistook for his best and closest friend.

Cardif glared threateningly at Krefenbac. "Well, Major, are you going to pick up that shield for your poor, sick superior?"

The colour vanished from Krefenbac's face and he became deathly pale. He knew that Rhodan wanted to belittle him. The Administrator's orders and actions and mannerisms were incomprehensible to him. Krefenbac was a great respecter of discipline. He was an excellent soldier and officer.

"Sir," he said tonelessly, "please release me from this order. I'll bring you a replacement shield to your cabin."

It was obvious to everyone in the Control Central that the major had met him halfway. But everyone else knew that Krefenbac would go no further. Although he was willing to lay down his pride he was not ready to bury it.

A fanatic gleam appeared in Cardif's eyes. He was able to interpret Krefenbac's attitude as well as anybody else. The major had backbone. Yet under the insidious effects of the cell activator Cardif-Rhodan could countenance no insubordination. He wanted *everyone* to obey him.

"Major," he half-whispered threateningly, "you will pick up the shield!"

Krefenbac tensed. His gaze met Cardif's squarely. Before he could say a word, everyone knew he was going to refuse the order. It was Bell who came to the rescue. He moved past Cardif, winked at

Krefenbac and picked up the button himself. Cardif remained silent. Bell reflectively weighed the cause of the disturbance in his hand.

"If it means that much to you, Perry..."

He tried to give it to Cardif but the false Administrator turned on his heel and left the Control Central. Bell lowered his hand and the tension subsided. He had taken Cardif by surprise although this solution had not been inopportune. After all, making such a test of authority with the major would not have had a good effect on the officer corps.

But such considerations were of secondary importance to Cardif now. For him there was one primary problem: how to bring his swiftly increasing size and weight to a halt and reverse the process? The only course that held any promise seemed to be an invasion of Saos. The priests of the Baalol cult had pushed him 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. And it did not occur to him anymore that he could be betrayed by the Antis.

He entered his cabin and made sure that the door was locked behind him. For awhile he stood there motionlessly in the room. Only the rise and fall of his chest gave a sign that he was alive. Then he started on a routine of activity that he followed every 12 hours.

He went to the opposite bulkhead where a vertical conduit casing served him as a measuring post. At the height of his head on the casing tube there were a number of variously coloured markings, each accompanied by small figures representing dates. In total there were 5 such markings. Cardif picked up a ruler from a nearby table then turned his back to the upright pipe. He placed the ruler on top of his head at right angles to the casing and then held it there while he turned and marked the spot with a coloured penzel he had in his pocket. Taking the ruler away he saw that the mark was higher than the previous ones. With a trembling hand, he wrote in the date: *2 Sept 2103*.

Since the last time he had stood here he had grown another half centimetre!

He suddenly struck the metal wall with his fist but the pain served to bring him back to his senses. From his pocket he produced a tape measure with which he carefully measured his waist. He then entered the figure in a notebook that lay on the table. Also here he noted an increase.

Cardif groaned softly to himself. He clutched at the place on his chest where the activator had half-buried itself in his flesh. The doctors had told him that it was no longer possible to remove it by surgery.

He knew it was useless to check his weight. It kept gradual pace with his increasing cell divisions. But he had another means of observing his condition which was much more conclusive. It was straightforward and brutal because there was no way he could be deceived by it. Rhodan's son hastily drew out from under his bed a mirror which was 1 meter wide and twice as long. This he set upright against the wall.

He saw himself standing there in the cabin with his arms at his sides and his hair all dishevelled. Although he did not actually appear to be ill there was no more of Perry Rhodan's muscular leanness to be seen. The oversized uniform was already too tight for him. With his fingers he felt of his body and noted that his flesh tone was no longer solid. Under pressure there was a certain sponginess to it.

Cardif stood there motionlessly as he regarded his reflection in the mirror. Inwardly torn by frustration, he felt that his burning hatred was ready to drive him out of his mind. He pointed to the image that was himself but which was supposed to represent another. The reflection simultaneously moved an arm to point to him.

"Hello, Rhodan!" he said in an almost garbled tone of voice. As though listening for an answer he cocked his head to one side.

Was it himself or the image speaking now? "*Whoever is Rhodan and holds his power firmly in his hands must be Rhodan! Do you understand?*" A sneering mask of a face looked back at him. It had lost much of the once-chiseled features of Rhodan.

"The game goes on," said Cardif. "I will not give up so easily. Saos will fall!" He took a step closer to the mirror. Something stirred in his subconscious but failed to break through "Maybe I'll just keep on growing and getting heavier!" he half-giggled. "One of these days the *Ironduke* won't be able to hold me!" The macabre vision of this seemed to amuse him. A confusion of thoughts shot through his brain. He ripped open his uniform jacket and thumped his chest. "Here is the fist of hell!" he babbled in desperation. "Its talons clutch my flesh and throb and pulse and give me no rest! Why can't you doctors help me?!"

No one answered him. He had always been alone. Somehow this thought reawakened his former pride. But only for a moment because as he started to straighten up, the uniform threatened to rip under the pressure of his increased size.

Was this the eternal life that he had promised himself with the falsely acquired activator?

He lay down on the bed to rest but found that he only tossed and turned. Should he order some more sleeping pills? A crazy idea began to creep into his mind. He imagined that while he was asleep Krefenbac would come in and he would be able to strangle him. Stupefied by the medicine he would not be able to defend himself in time.

He shook his head in desperation. He had to clear his mind. He must not forget his great goal. A large formation of the Solar Fleet was already in the Saos System. Involuntarily he happened to look again at the mirror. He got up and went over to it, strangely drawn to his reflection. He came so close to the glass that it became fogged by his breath. He wiped the patch of mistiness away with his sleeve in order to see better. Only centimetres away from the mirror's surface he stared into his own face.

And then he saw it!

He wanted to cry out or do anything but stand there staring, yet horror and panic momentarily paralysed him. He finally groped behind him toward the table and grasped a heavy paperweight. He lifted it and hurled it against the glass. His face exploded into countless fragments. The splintered shards clattered to the floor, bringing him back to his senses. He staggered back to the bed and collapsed onto it.

It was his eyes which had shocked him so. Their grey colouration had appeared to fade as he looked at himself, to be replaced by a baleful yellowish tone. And Cardif knew what was in that look.

What had stared back at him was a beast of prey!

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Krefenbac took a long deep breath. His voice was full of heart-felt conviction when he thanked Bell for his intervention. "Sir, you saved me from a very unpleasant situation," he concluded.

Reginald Bell's expression remained grave. His freckled face was deeply etched with worry and it was plain to see how weighted down he was with his present burdens. On the one hand he sought to continue backing up his unfortunate friend and yet these men who surrounded him had to be shielded from his incomprehensible moods.

"The situation is unpleasant *forall* of us," he told the major. "We mustn't forget that the Chief is badly afflicted by his illness. Also the after-effects of his imprisonment on Okul are bothering him. I've discussed this thing quite thoroughly with Dr. Alonzo who is a specialist in cytology research. He says Perry is suffering from an explosive process of cell division."

"I wish I could help him," said Jefe Claudrin in his booming voice. "You know, when I think of what we're planning to do here I can't seem to shake off an uneasy feeling. Alkher and Nolinov reported that their escape was cleverly plotted out by the Antis. But they also infer that there were some slipups that the priests hadn't counted on."

"And from that we can conclude that the Antis wanted us to come here," said Bell. "There's some special reason for it. Their military setup on Saos isn't capable of standing up under a prolonged attack by our forces. They must be perfectly aware of that."

"But they have a flair for underhanded trickery," remarked Claudrin grimly. "We really ought to teach that bunch a lesson."

The colonel was a man of action. Under his command the *Ironduke* had become the most effective warship of the Solar Fleet. In addition to this was the fact that the 800-meter sphere was equipped with linear spacedrive. Within the Saos system at the present moment were more than 4,000 Terran fighting units including a number of superbattleships. It was unthinkable that any alien vessel could slip through this barrier of energy and steel without being detected. Nor could any spaceship take off from Saos and any attempt to land there would have been suicide. The Terran ships were deployed in a massive shell-like formation around the 2nd planet of the sun known as 41-B-1847-ArqH. The small yellow star had no name other than the catalogue designation. Of the 2 planets circling it the outermost was Saos. It fell under the jurisdiction of Atlan and the Greater Imperium since it was close to star cluster M-13, some 33,218 light-years from Earth.

By human standards Saos was an inhospitable world. The atmosphere was poor in oxygen content and consisted mostly of nitrogen and carbon dioxide but the greatest problem was the planet's slow rate of rotation. A day and night period on Saos lasted 214 hours by Earth time, which brought with it the unpleasant effects that were largely typical of non-rotational worlds. Storms of hurricane magnitude raged in the transition zones between the day and night hemispheres and so all such regions were continually threatened by the violence of the natural conditions. Saos had not been able to develop any extensive areas of vegetation and had thus remained a desolate planet of deserts and wastelands.

It was not only from the descriptions of Alkher and Nolinov that Col. Claudrin knew what conditions faced him here, should the invasion actually take place. Like everyone else on board he was personally

hoping that the secret of Rhodan's metamorphosis could be wrested from the Antis. Yet he did not know that this hope was a wolf in sheep's clothing. No one in the Fleet knew the real identity of the Administrator. Everybody was still inclined to follow the commands of the false Rhodan. Of course his physical alteration might have been countenanced by his friends with reasonable composure were it not for the change that was becoming evident in his character.

Since Claudrin was a logical thinker he was the first to correct his own statement. "What I mean is, we should make our move against the Baalol priests on a broader basis. If we don't know their plans we're facing a rather confused situation."

"Well, they're certainly not going to divulge them to us of their own accord," commented Dr. Riebsam with obvious sarcasm.

No one contradicted him. If any information were to be extracted from the Antis it would have to be done on Saos. But that seemed to be just what the enemy was waiting for. Bell, who in the absence of his presumed friend was trying to minimize his shortcomings, found himself in an unhappy situation. He had to prove to Rhodan that an attack against this Anti world would be senseless. But to produce this proof he had to land on Saos. The stocky First Deputy Administrator was beginning to suspect that the priests had set up a trap that the Solar Fleet could more or less stumble into if more precautions were not taken. The hidden guarantee of this was Rhodan himself—or the man who wore his mask.

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Kutlos' policy had been simple and successful. It consisted of merely carrying out the instructions of the Baalol High Council in every case. For this reason he had been advanced to the officiating priest on Saos. If he ever felt in a contradictory mood he would only express it to underlings. He believed that to gain power one had to move among the mighty and know how to get along with them. For him this principle had always paid off. To other high priests Kutlos had always been known as a quiet and rather inconspicuous type. But one day he had come to Saos in a great long-ship and had taken over the office of the high priest there. He had stepped tall and lean from the airlock and turned his penetrating gaze to, the industrial area.

The installations of the Antis had been located in an 8-km basin surrounded by high and barren mountains. Being naturally protected from sandstorms it was an ideal place for a Baalol stronghold. The spaceport lay in the northern part of the canyon-like enclosure and the nearby manufacturing centre stretched out about 2 km from there. There were also subterranean installations which reached a depth of some 50 meters or so. Here on Saos the Antis produced the projector-generators for their individual defence screens.

In the centre of the circular area a pyramid structure towered to a height of 150 meters. Officially the Antis used it as their temple. Around this imposing edifice were arranged a number of long, low buildings in a square, and at the corners were 4 loftier structures crowned by metal domes. These marked the location of the 4 major power plants.

Since the day of his arrival Kutlos had not made a single change in the manufacturing operation unless it had been ordered by the High Council of Baalol. He submitted his reports at regular intervals and always avoided putting any pressure on his superiors or asking any inconvenient questions. Therefore, contrary

to expectations, the High Council had become convinced that Kutlos was one of the most capable high priests in the entire sphere of influence of the Antis.

At this particular moment Kutlos was in the Saos observation centre, which was located about halfway up inside the pyramid. Here the technical equipment had been installed for space surveillance. He was watching a slightly convex viewscreen which glittered with pinpoint points of light that were evenly spaced across the entire field of vision. The trace blips appeared to be harmless but that was purely an illusion.

Every one of the glowing light points represented a Terran ship. They formed a chain around Saos, preventing any Anti vessel from taking off or landing. Kutlos had been prepared for the arrival of a part of the Solar Fleet but he had not counted on its happening so fast. Transport ships loaded with high-precision machinery for the production of the individual defence screens still lay at the spaceport. Only the cylindrical ships of the Springers had been able to make a fast getaway in time. They had completed their assignment of staging a sham attack against the stronghold.

Kutlos straightened up. The familiar humming of the air-conditioning recalled him to the present.

"Shall I shut down, Kutlos?" asked the operator, who was a young priest. He was referring to the viewscreen.

The high priest nodded silently. The countless tracking devices in the room were keeping every Terran ship under close surveillance. Each change of location was instantly registered by them. Special radiation sensors were carefully monitoring the energy output of every vessel so that the start of the invasion could be detected immediately.

To Kutlos' way of thinking the Terrans were holding off too long. By Earth reckoning the Fleet task force had been lying out there for 3 days already. The high priest had hoped that all the Antis could get away in the transport ships *before* the arrival of the Terrans. The swiftness with which the spherical warships had broken through out of hyperspace had destroyed this part of the plan. Against their wishes the priests on Saos were forced to remain in the stronghold.

For the first time Kutlos saw his strategy doomed to failure. In case of invasion the most vigorous counter defence would eventually have to collapse. The high priest had no intention of giving up Saos without a fight but he knew it would end in destruction and defeat. Unobtrusively he ran a hand through his hair. The ships surrounding the planet did not make him particularly nervous but he struggled with a sense of resignation when he realized that his path to power was to be blocked by the unexpected velocity of 4,000 spaceships. Other than that he had no qualms: he felt that the manner in which he had conducted his life was justified.

A voice nearby intruded upon his deliberations. "When will they attack?"

He turned to look into the eyes of Tasnor, his deputy high priest. From the first day of meeting him, Kutlos had formed a definite opinion of Tasnor. The man was intelligent, considerably more intelligent than the high priest himself, but he would never rise to high honours within the hierarchy of the Baalol cult. Tasnor was guilty of 2 fatal errors: he talked too much and he talked with everybody. Moreover, he was always trying to mix in certain ideas of his own. Such a *modus operandi* was bound to hurt his career.

Kutlos regarded him in silence and Tasnor virtually froze in the cold glance of the high priest. To the latter it was immaterial what the younger servant of Baalol thought of him. Perhaps the man hated him but that did not alter the respect he gave him. In his association with the powerful and the mighty, Kutlos had learned how to gain such respect and to keep it.

"It's just that this waiting gets on a person's nerves," explained Tasnor.

Kutlos smiled in a way that reduced Tasnor suddenly to a nervous and inexperienced underling. The deputy high priest reddened; his eyes lowered and his hands fidgeted with his wide cape.

"I know," replied Kutlos, "but we should be grateful to the Terrans for this period of grace. It gives us time to carry out the second part of our plan."

Hepna-Kaloot turned in his seat. For an Anti he was a very small type and pudgy. "That sounds as if we still had a way out of this," he said. "It was never my intention to die a hero's death, Kutlos. What have you thought of that still gives you hope?"

Hepna-Kaloot was the only priest on Saos for whom Kutlos felt any sympathy. He tended to spare the little man from the treatment he accorded the others. Hepna-Kaloot had a way of transmitting to his surroundings the indifference he felt for all things. Even when he asked questions, as he did now, one felt that nothing could really disturb him. There was only one thing that could inspire the chubby little priest and that was the game called Paloot—an indulgence that was forbidden, of course.

However, Hepna-Kaloot was so familiar with the regulations that he could be suspected of getting around them from time to time. Occasionally on a quiet evening he would get carried away and start talking about playing Paloot. He had always represented himself as a mere onlooker but it was clear to his listeners that his role must have been otherwise and that he had actually been a participant.

So the most direct clue to Hepna-Kaloot's character was his gambling nature. But now they were all in a game together which was much more vital and for the first time the stakes were open on the table: this was a gamble for life itself. It was understandable that the little priest would have gladly pulled his stake from *this* game if the opportunity presented itself, so perhaps at the moment his words were a bit less indifferent than usual.

"I see no reason why we should not carry out the original plan," said Kutlos. "We shall adhere to the instructions of the High Council." Even before he had finished speaking he saw the gleam of resistance in Tasnor's eyes.

"When those orders came in from Baalol," the younger man reminded him, "we still didn't know that we would have no chance of getting away from Saos. The plans of the High Council were based on another premise."

Kutlos did not have to see the faces of the other Antis present to know that the majority of them shared Tasnor's view. And his second-in-command was quite aware of it. But this did not disturb Kutlos. This chattering gossip would not prevent him from experiencing a final triumph.

"The only thing that has changed," said the high priest calmly, "is that we are still *here* ."

Tasnor made the mistake of interpreting this as the beginning sign of weakness on Kutlos' part. He turned to the assembled Antis and raised his arms in a gesture of entreaty. "Kutlos is certainly right on that point!" he called out to them. "We are still here and all of our lives are in danger. 4,000 ships are ready to attack the planet and they will give us no quarter. If we were to let this happen it would be a senseless sacrifice. So my suggestion is this: let us reveal to the Terrans who their supposed Rhodan really is. They will imprison him and return to Earth."

"That's a bad suggestion!" cut in the high priest sharply. "If the Terrans discover they have been taking orders from Cardif they will make every effort to locate the genuine Rhodan. And where, may I ask, would they be most likely to find such information but here on Saos?" Kutlos paused to let his question sink in. "So if they know about Rhodan's son they are still going to land here. In fact, having learned that we tricked them they may be more determined to take us than ever before." He waved a hand in rejection. "Let us not deceive ourselves! We all know what dangerous antagonists the Terrans can be. Why provoke them further? We still have Cardif in the palm of our hand. We must not throw our trump card away so easily. As long as Thomas Cardif still wears the mask of the First Administrator the ships of Earth are relatively harmless to us. The High Council of Baalol has informed us that they are much more concerned about another mighty one in this galaxy."

"Imperator Gonozal VIII," interjected Hepna-Kaloot. "The Arkon admiral of the Greater Imperium."

Kutlos knew that the rotund little priest was trying to tell him he would not join forces with Tasnor. Hepna-Kaloot always considered his decisions to be well founded and this the other Antis were aware of. So Hepna-Kaloot's expression of loyalty was a great contribution to the high priest's prestige.

"That is correct," agreed Kutlos. "We know that Atlan is one of the few Arkonides who remained unaffected by the deterioration of his race, and since he took over from the robot Brain much has happened. Gonozal VIII acted with a strong hand and sought to shake the Imperium to a new state of wakefulness so that the deterioration process might come to a halt. And in this respect Perry Rhodan was a good ally. The 2 Imperiums together constitute a mighty factor of power. The 2 leading men in both stellar empires came to be friends." Kutlos smiled sarcastically. "But now in the meantime our mutual friend Thomas Cardif has managed to change the situation decisively. Today there are political differences between Arkon and Terra. One can practically speak of a cold war that's going on. Our agents have learned that Cardif has withdrawn all Terran personnel from the Arkonide planets, where they were in strategic positions of the administration. Rhodan's son has probably offended the Imperator a number of times by now. Things have come to the point where Solar Fleet formations are manoeuvring within the Greater Imperium itself."

Tasnor appeared to realize that this long-winded explanation was intended to win the priests over. "We know all that," he retorted stubbornly. "But it gets us nowhere."

The high priest did not allow himself to be distracted. As he continued to speak the volume of his voice hardly competed with the hum of the electronic equipment. What he said, however, was understood by everyone present. As ever before, Kutlos was careful not to interweave his personal thoughts into his exposition. He kept stressing the fact to his fellow Antis that he represented the will of Baalol. "Gonozal VIII has called for general mobilization," he said finally. "This indicates that he considers a serious conflict to be an imminent possibility."

Kutlos slapped his hands together as though to dispatch an annoying insect. He stood there, tall and lean, just as he had first appeared on Saos when he arrived on board the spaceship. He represented the High Council of Baalol which was the final and self-sufficient authority. It almost seemed as if an invisible strand reached down from the Anti leaders into Kutlos, imbuing him with their own totalitarian power. In effect, Kutlos was the long arm of Baalol.

"The High Council believes that we can help to agitate this conflict. Arkon and Terra are negatively disposed against our sect. So it's only logical that we should attempt to weaken both sides. To that end we can afford to sacrifice this base."

"And our lives along with it!" shouted Tasnor.

But he had already used this argument so many times that it failed now to have the desired effect. Kutlos had never doubted his own victory in this game of polemics and now he nodded to Hepna-Kaloot, who gave him a fathomless smile. By this Kutlos knew that Hepna-Kaloot was the only one whom he had not convinced. The wily little Anti was too adroit to admit it openly. The high priest was startled when he realized that Hepna-Kaloot was actually using his own strategy.

Kutlos concluded: "If Atlan and Cardif come to blows, we will have the last laugh," he explained. "This system is within the sphere of influence of the Greater Imperium. If the Solar Fleet attacks us it will be mixing into the internal affairs of Arkon—which is tantamount to opening the main invasion." He went over to the viewscreen again and turned it on. The tapestry of light points appeared as before. "The plan is good," he said. "And it will work."

With these few words, Kutlos had decided to destroy 4,000 Terran ships—or better yet, to let them destroy themselves. If thousands of Arkon robotships were also destroyed in the process, nothing would please the Antis more.

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One of the blips of light on the Antis' viewscreen was the linear-drive warship *Ironduke*, which held a steady orbit around the planet.

Lt. Brazo Alkher's lanky figure moved along the corridor that led from the Control Central to the officers' quarters. Directly behind him was Lt. Stant Nolinov, whose stocky frame and blind stubble of hair contrasted sharply with Alkher's tall and bony physique.

The two officers had known each other ever since the first mission of the *Fantasy*. Together with Perry Rhodan they had survived the shipwreck and had been rescued by Capt. Samuel Graybound. A bond of friendship had developed between the two which was far more than the usual G.I. buddy relationship. From a military standpoint the two were a fantastically coordinated team. One Brazo Alkher at the fire control centre of a spaceship was more deadly than 10 heavy cruisers.

If one were to question Alkher concerning his special abilities he would modestly reply: "I work the guns, that's all." But how he worked them was something else again.

Their imprisonment on Saos had drawn the two more closely together than ever. They knew that they had only one man to thank for their involuntary sojourn on the Anti planet—the man they all took to be Perry Rhodan. Cardif-Rhodan had ruthlessly abandoned them on the enemy's ship and on top of it had issued orders to open fire on the vessel.

"*Sonow* what does he want of us?" asked Nolinov. He had come to a stop. The mixed tone of suspicion and rejection in his voice was obvious.

Alkher shook his head regretfully. "You're talking about the Chief," he reminded his friend.

"Of course I am!" retorted Nolinov bitterly.

They had stopped in front of a cabin and now Alkher knocked on the door.

"Come in!"

Alkher opened the door and stepped into the small room. The floor was covered with the fragments of a shattered mirror. In some confusion, Alkher looked across at the bed where Perry Rhodan was lying.

The Administrator had taken off his uniform jacket and exchanged it for a bulky sweater. Over his eyes he wore a pair of dark goggles of a type used by technicians in the converter rooms. Alkher heard Nolinov come in behind him.

"You called us, sir?"

He could not make out Rhodan's eyes behind the opaque goggles. When the Administrator sat up, Alkher could not be sure whether he was looking at him or at Nolinov.

Unexpectedly, Rhodan seemed to be quite friendly. "You know that I consider you two to be my closest confidants," he told them.

"Yessir," answered the 2 lieutenants in unison.

Alkher felt rather than saw Nolinov's mystified glance. It was not evident to either of them why they should have arrived at such a special consideration.

"I selected you two to go to Wanderer with me," he reminded them. "Your special qualities have not escaped my notice."

Alkher felt his uneasiness increase. This whole approach was leading to something that was certainly not suitable for bolstering Rhodan's crumbling influence.

"We realize that, sir," said Alkher cautiously. He figured it was best for him to do the talking. Nolinov's impulsive nature might only get them into trouble.

As Rhodan stood up he stepped on one of the glass fragments and the grinding sound made Alkher shudder. Against the wall he saw the frame of what was left of the mirror. Apparently the Administrator had shattered it in a fit of rage.

"You were present during the undisciplined exhibition of Maj. Krefenbac," said Cardif-Rhodan. "You have witnessed how far an officer can go in his psychopathic arrogance."

Nolinov gasped audibly. Alkher nudged him with an elbow and hoped that Rhodan hadn't noticed it.

"We saw everything that happened," confirmed the lieutenant quietly.

"Maj. Krefenbac is the *Ironduke's* First Officer," said Rhodan, "but that's going to come to an end."

"Sir!" exclaimed Alkher, dismayed.

"I'm going to remove him from that responsible position," announced Rhodan. "It's just not suitable for that kind of a man to hold a position that is vital to the life of the ship. Major Krefenbac can't carry out a simple order—so what would he do in case of important decisions? I rather imagine that the major would

lose his nerve in a space battle and would refuse to obey a command."

Alkher forced himself to remain calm. His thoughts were racing in new confusion. He regretted that Bell was not present. Rhodan's closest friend was still the only one who had any influence over this sick man.

Nolinov could not suppress a comment: "Sir, I regard Maj. Krefenbac as a capable man and as my superior officer."

Rhodan nodded. He had sat down on the bed again and his hands began to dig into the covers repeatedly—like claws. "That only proves that you don't have an eye for such men, lieutenant," he said. "It's important to study the men around you. You practically have to dissect their character, Nolinov. If you put them in a carefully planned psychological situation—as I did—then you will find sometimes that a villainous disposition can be lurking under a very polished facade."

"Yessir," replied Nolinov but his tone was cool and aloof.

Suddenly Alkher felt that Rhodan's eyes were fixed upon him behind the dark goggle lenses. He strove to meet his unseen gaze with firmness.

"Lt. Alkher, you appear to me to be good officer material," Rhodan informed him.

"I do my best, sir," said Alkher, and he tried to make his voice sound friendlier than he was feeling at the moment.

Rhodan nodded in satisfaction. "Lieutenant, I am going to appoint you First Officer of the *Ironduke*."

For a moment Alkher was too perplexed to think of an answer. The problems that loomed up behind this fatal offer seemed to him to be insurmountable. He blinked in his confusion.

Rhodan laughed hoarsely. "That probably comes as a surprise to you, Alkher, doesn't it?"

"That would be no exaggeration, sir," the lieutenant managed to say.

Rhodan got up and walked toward him over the cracking and crunching fragments of glass. Alkher involuntarily took a step back but Rhodan clapped him on the shoulder.

"You'll be able to handle it alright," he told him with a cordiality that seemed to be overdone.

It made Alkher wince. Nolinov seemed to have stiffened into a post. Brazo glanced toward him helplessly then stared at Rhodan again. "Sir, I am grateful for your confidence in me," he stammered.

Rhodan's hand weighed heavily on his shoulder but Alkher didn't dare move. He suddenly remembered the first time he had met Rhodan. He had mistaken him for a mechanic and had treated him accordingly. But the Rhodan he remembered was a different man from the one who stood before him now.

"You and Nolinov know that stronghold on Saos better than anyone," said Rhodan. "You are both capable of leading the attack against the Antis. With Krefenbac eliminated, nothing more can go wrong. I shall relay my orders through you to the fighting units."

"Sir, I..." Alkher struggled to find words.

Rhodan's voice became sharp. "Perhaps you have an objection, Lieutenant?"

Alkher swallowed hard. His brown eyes acquired a feverish intensity. It was not the man himself who disturbed him so much—but his deeds, his history, his legend. With a courage born of desperation he finally blurted out: "Sir, I have to decline your offer—I'm very sorry, sir!"

"What?!" shouted Rhodan. "Are you insane, Lieutenant? I offer you the greatest chance of your life and you dare to refuse it?"

Brazo Alkher could only stare in wide-eyed consternation at the raving Administrator. He felt the colour draining from his face and there was sweat in the palms of his hands. He fought against a tendency to tremble in his agitation. Nolinov stood tight-lipped and silent nearby.

"Are you working in collusion with this useless Krefenbac?" Rhodan continued to rave. "I will see to it that my commands are obeyed!"

"Every one of your commands is obeyed, sir," Alkher half-whispered. "However, the regulations permit me to think about a promotion or to decline it if I do not feel qualified to handle the new assignment."

"Out!" shouted Rhodan. "Get out!"

Alkher and Nolinov saluted stiffly and made a hasty exit from the cabin. It was only when they were at a safe distance that Nolinov finally expressed himself with a note of relief.

"I thought for awhile there you were going to accept the promotion."

Alkher was breathing heavily from his ordeal and a slow burn of anger brought the colour back to his face in a hurry. "He almost had me fooled—until he brought up that button scene with Krefenbac. He's flipped!"

"Better watch that, buddy," said Nolinov, chiding him sarcastically. "You're *retalking* about the Chief!"

Alkher was either thinking too intently to catch the innuendo or he preferred to ignore it. "I wish there were some way I could help him," he said. "It's obvious his rockoff actions are tied to this creepy sickness of his. Did you notice the oversize sweater he's wearing?"

"The biggest uniform in the Fleet won't fit him anymore, Brazo. But what's with those welder goggles? He must have borrowed them from one of the technicians."

A nameless fear gripped Alkher as he thought about this. "It's plain that he's trying to hide something."

"Maybe he thinks the alterations in his face would be too much of a shock for us."

Alkher sounded depressed. "Do you think he will die?"

"The doctors won't say this growth is malignant. It all depends on how his organs and brain will react to the unnatural increase of his cells." Nolinov waved his hands helplessly. "If the medicos don't find a way to stop it there's going to be a real crisis sooner or later."

"Yes, but *when*?"

As they entered the Command Central together, Nolinov muttered softly: "Who knows?"

The mood on board the *Ironduke* was depressed. No cheerful words rang out. The officers only looked silently at the 2 lieutenants.

"How is he, Brazo?" asked Bell.

"He's very bitter, sir," reported Alkher. "He's planning to relieve Maj. Krefenbac of his duties. He offered to promote me to his position."

"You hear that, Major?" Bell called over his shoulder.

"Yessir," was Hunts Krefenbac's toneless answer. White-faced but self-controlled, the major had gotten up and walked over near Bell. In spite of his dejection he seemed to have more pride than ever. "I'll give you my bars, Lieutenant," he said to Alkher.

"No sir—no need for that. I turned down the offer. When I started to remind him of my rights under the service regulations, he practically threw us out of his cabin."

Col. Claudrin's voice thundered at them. "You're still First Officer, Hunts. Either Rhodan has to remove you personally from your commission or he has to give me an order to that effect."

"So I wait until it's official?" asked Krefenbac bitterly.

"I'll go talk to him," announced Reginald Bell.

No one contradicted him. If there was anyone now who might talk some sense into Perry Rhodan it had to be Bell. He was the Administrator's closest friend. He had known him the longest.

"He's wearing a sweater now, sir," said Nolinov. "And a pair of welding goggles."

Bell merely nodded to the men in silence and left the Control Central. He did not have much hope for the success of his mission. In recent days he had withdrawn inwardly from Rhodan. The ties of a true friendship, reaching across so many years, now seemed to have been torn asunder. Bell realized that his opposition to Rhodan's senseless orders was growing. The aftereffects of the shock treatment Rhodan had received on Okul were not subsiding at all.

When he came to Rhodan's cabin he figured it would be better to knock, although in other days such formality hadn't ever been necessary. In response he heard an angry voice yelling at him from inside. "Alkher, I told you to get out of my sight!"

Bell opened the door and stepped into the room. Rhodan was lying on the bed, just as the 2 lieutenants had described him. He raised up swiftly and scowled.

"It's only me," Bell told him simply.

Rhodan sank back and folded his arms behind his head. Apparently it would be only a matter of time before the bed would be too small for him. "What do you want?" he asked in an unfriendly tone.

"Just thought maybe you could use a little company," Bell explained calmly. "I'm not needed in the Control Central." He sat down on the end of Rhodan's bunk, noting that the other obviously regarded

this with resentment. He decided it was best to ignore his friend's antipathy and his unpleasant mood. "Well, I see you're wearing shades, Perry," he said pleasantly. "Has something happened to your eyes?"

"Those miserable babblers!" shouted Rhodan, referring to Alkher and Nolinov. "Right away they had to go tell everybody!"

Bell watched him calmly. What was there left of Perry's famous self-composure? What had happened to the legendary cool and calculating objectivity that had always distinguished him as Administrator?

"Do you want me to send for Dr. Gorsizia?"

Rhodan laughed bitterly. His lips curled in derision. "What good can Gorsizia do me when none of the specialists of Terra can help me?" He tugged at his shapeless sweater. "Even my uniform jacket's too small!" He suddenly sat up and lunged at Bell, grasping him by his collar with both hands and bringing his face very close to him. Behind the dark lenses Bell thought he could make out the vague outlines of his eyes. Rhodan's hot breath was on his cheeks. "Look at me!" he demanded hoarsely. "Go ahead! Have a good look! I'm slowly becoming something inhuman—I'm turning into a bloated monstrosity!"

Bell pleaded with him. "Perry, for God's sake get hold of yourself! Now calm down!"

"Calm down!" he blurted. In his panting desperation he was anything but the Administrator now. "What do you know about the torture I'm going through? Should I show you, Bell?" With a lightning movement he tore off the goggles and threw them aside.

Unable to speak, Bell looked into his friend's eyes. A yellowish fire of hate, despair, anger and fear was concentrated there. Bell suddenly recalled where he had been confronted by such a baleful glare before: as a youngster when he had visited the zoo and looked through bars at a captive beast of prey.

"Their colour has changed!" shouted Rhodan.

In spite of his iron nerves, Bell had to lower his eyes before the other's gaze.

"The Antis!" yelled Rhodan. "They're the guilty ones! And for that Saos must fall!"

At this moment the only thing Thomas Cardif had in common with his father was the name and the title he had appropriated. More and more his own characteristics were overriding the positive hereditary factors of the genuine Rhodan. Cardif had become a hate-filled fanatic consumed by his own desire for revenge.

Deeply shaken, Bell got to his feet. His shoulders slumped visibly as he went to the door.

"Bell!" came a cry of consternation behind him.

He did not turn around because those wolfish eyes had burned themselves into his mind like points of inextinguishable flame. He only came silently to a stop.

"You have to stick with me, Bell!" pleaded Cardif-Rhodan in a half-croaking voice.

All Bell could manage at the moment was a mute nod of his head. Just that cost him more self-control than he had ever exerted in his life. The man on the bed was a stranger to him. There was no inner bond between them anymore. With uprooted emotions, Bell left the cabin. He had completely forgotten his

own concerns.

When he returned to the Control Central, the only one to ask a question was Col. Claudrin. "What did the Chief say?"

When Bell looked at the Epsalian commander the latter's expectant expression faded.

"He took off his goggles," said Bell, almost inaudibly.

This was at exactly 18:45 hours, Standard Time. After that, no one asked anything more about Rhodan. A still deeper silence pervaded the Control Central. Everyone was waiting for Rhodan to appear. The arrival of the Administrator would unquestionably signal the start of the Saos invasion.

Undisturbed by all this, the *Ironduke* continued in its fixed orbit around the world of the Antis. Within its giant hull was a man whose sanity was being clouded more and more by his frightening cell growth. This man possessed the supreme power of command over the entire Solar Fleet. In the hands of a reasonable man these thousands of ships represented an effective political instrument. But Thomas Cardif was no longer a man of reason. Under his command the fleet was more dangerous to humanity than an uncontrolled nuclear fire.

2/ HARBINGERS OF BLACK DAWN

Throughout the galaxy there are many thousands of confirmations of the law of Cause and Effect. In fact there are countless variables. It often happens that an effect can be produced by 2 practically unrelated causes.

Maj. Albert Kulman did not suspect that his orders were to be one of two of the causes for launching 10,000 Arkonide robotships. Kulman was commander of one of the patrol cruisers which had penetrated the region of the Arkon Imperium on Cardif's orders. For him the orders were naturally from Rhodan because like any other officer of the Fleet he knew nothing of Cardif's clever masquerade.

Also his character may have played a subordinate role—for the major was overzealous. Under normal circumstances and in a part of the galaxy that belonged to the Solar Imperium, Kulman's concept of duty would have been fully defensible. However, in the middle of a region which an exasperated Imperator of Arkon considered to be rightfully imperial territory, the effect of an officer of Kulman's calibre was like that of a burning fuse in a powder keg.

For 2 days the light cruiser *Zumbasi* had been patrolling the sector assigned to it. The crewmen had been more or less uneasy and disgruntled about this procedure and only Kulman became fully involved with his assignment. He gave talks in the Control Central and pointed to the historical significance of their mission. According to the major it was just a matter of time until the Terrans would take over the Greater Imperium.

Kulman's great moment came when the tracking instruments of the *Zumbasi* picked up the presence of an alien spaceship which had just emerged from hyperspace. Fortunately it was no problem for the cruiser to reach the vicinity of the other vessel within minutes. Or at least the major considered this to be

fortunate.

He was standing now behind Pedro Villaseluces, who was acting as the pilot. Holding a microphone in his hand he watched the viewscreen where the outlines of the other vessel were clearly discernible.

"It's a Springer long-ship, sir," observed Villaseluces sourly. "Those cylindrical hulls are typical of the Galactic Traders."

Kulman's eyes began to gleam. He shouted into the mike, causing the pilot to duck his head between his shoulders. "Attention, Fire Control Centre!"

"Sir?" came the response over the speaker.

"Lay a warning shot across the bow of that Springer ship," Kulman ordered. "Do you have it in your sights?"

There was a brief moment of silence. Then came the puzzled voice of Mark Dickson, the Fire Control officer: "You mean—we give them a shot across the bow *before* challenging them to heave to?"

"Do you wish to argue the point with me?" inquired Kulman indignantly.

"No sir but—may I point out to you, sir, that we are in a region where the Springers may do as they please?"

Kulman drew himself up haughtily. "Those times are past, Lt. Dickson. Just keep the Administrator's new orders in mind!"

"Very well, sir," replied Dickson but his tone of voice left no doubt that he didn't think much of Rhodan's new orders.

Kulman could see on the viewscreen that the Springers seemed uncertain as to how they should react to the spherical warship. They were waiting it out in free fall. Then came a flash from one of the *Zumbasi's* bow guns and an arm-sized bolt of energy shot close across the course of the long-ship.

"Very good, Dickson," said Kulman appreciatively. "That will do for a starter."

Fleming called from the Com Room: "Springer ship requests video contact, sir. Shall I channel it through to you on the videophone?"

"Yes—hurry it up!" ordered the major.

The normal space vidcom screen lit up and a bearded face became visible. If Albert Kulman had ever seen an agitated expression it was this one. The major observed the Springer commander with obvious satisfaction.

"Do you have any plausible explanation for your action, Terran?" the Springer demanded to know.

"Prepare to take on a prize crew for inspection," announced Kulman dryly.

"Do you have any idea of your present position?" countered the other heatedly. "Do you at least know enough about cosmic navigation to realize that you are in the sphere of influence of the Greater

Imperium?"

The aspersion cast upon his astronomical capabilities served to kindle Kulman's zeal and goad his ambition. "Which is a region we also control," he retorted arrogantly.

"But we're just a harmless merchant ship! If you're going to harass us in this manner you will be responsible for the consequences. I am appealing to your reason!"

Kulman might have been a fair judge of men but in this case he misinterpreted the Trader's attitude. The major was convinced that the Springer was afraid of an inspection. The fear was probably well founded. No doubt there were contraband goods on board the long-ship. Kulman did not see the worried faces of his crew nor did he notice Villaseluces when the latter shook his head in dismay. He became totally absorbed in what he thought to be the fulfilment of his duty.

"Dickson!" he yelled into the mike. "Put another charge across his bow so that he'll know we mean what we say!"

Meanwhile the Trader had realized what he was up against. "Alright, Terran," he said in angry resignation, "we're heaving to!"

Kulman nodded his satisfaction and ordered Dickson to hold his fire for the time being. A few minutes later he had gotten a prize crew together and transferred across to the Springer ship in a commuter craft. The Traders stood by grimly during the inspection, knowing that their weapons were no match for a Terran patrol cruiser.

Kulman and his men carefully inspected the alien ship and found nothing that could be considered contraband or even suspicious-looking. Slowly the major had to grudgingly admit to himself that he had really stopped a harmless merchant ship and fired a shot across its bow. But Kulman figured that a Terran officer must not apologize to a Springer commander. In icy tones he ordered his boarding commandos to return with him.

"You may continue your flight," he told the Springer condescendingly.

The bearded commander didn't bother to answer him.

With the awareness of having deceived himself, Kulman came back on board the *Zumbasi*. However he was still convinced that he had carried out what his new set of orders implied.

The airlock hatch had hardly closed behind the major before the Springer ship sent out a hypercom dispatch in which Kulman's action was depicted. The message found its way through several relay stations to Arkon where it happened to join an incoming distress call from another group threatened by Terrans.

The effect of both hypercom messages really lent historical importance to Kulman's mission. But of course this was in a sense that was completely different from what the major had imagined.

* * * *

Imperator Gonozal VIII was the exalted ruler over the Greater Imperium but his reign was a very strange one. Among the decadent Arkonides there was hardly a one who was capable of being helpful to Atlan or standing by him. Without the former robot Regent the attempt of this immortal to consolidate the Imperium again would have been doomed to failure. It was a practical impossibility for one man to encompass the tremendous task of ruling a galactic empire that was light-years in extent. The robot Brain alone was able to encompass the entire complex of countless solar systems, to receive the river of messages from them all and assemble them into a logical overall picture.

In spite of this, Atlan was overburdened. He had always entrusted the smaller problems to the Brain since they were of course the most numerous but in the present confused political situation the Imperator required reports on every minor detail. The fact that a kind of cold war had broken out between Arkon and Terra had made Atlan try to cover all news items concerning what was for the time-being a merely political conflict.

The new relationship with his former ally had been very depressing. He had tried to understand the incomprehensible actions of Perry Rhodan but he could make no more sense out of them than could the totally transformed Solar Administrator himself. The activities of the Solar Fleet within the Greater Imperium had forced Atlan to ask the Akons for help. The mother race of the Arkonides had no cause to be fond of the Terrans. After having received a veiled threat from the false Rhodan, he had promised to send the Akons 1000 modern spaceships in return for their help. Hypno-training was in its full course on the planets of the Blue System. Intelligent and clear-thinking Akons lay under the hoods and contacts of the educational accelerators. In a short length of time Atlan would be able to man a giant fleet with an outstanding army of highly trained crews.

So the 2 allies had become enemies who now faced each other appraisingly. The obvious hardship and pressure this brought to bear on Arkon would have caused Atlan to attack where any other race was concerned. But Rhodan was his personal friend—or had been until his metamorphosis. Although the Imperator called them ‘Barbarians’ he harboured a great sympathy for the Terrans.

The logic circuits of the robot Brain had again called for an attack against the impudent Terran ships. Atlan continued to bypass the mammoth Brain’s conclusions and to operate on the basis of emotional considerations. He hoped that Perry Rhodan would come to his senses and put an end to this erroneous action.

All units of the Arkonide robot fleet had been placed on emergency standby alert. Atlan had held a number of consultations with high dignitaries, to whom his high-pitched activity was more or less a thorn in the side. At the meetings they talked themselves to exhaustion without arriving at any usable decisions.

In these days Atlan was lonelier than ever before...

* * * *

The wall in front of Atlan’s desk had the effect of being tiled except that each of the ‘tile’ faces happened to be a video tube. They were all remotely connected to the robot Brain, which utilized these multiple channels for relaying news to him.

A servant robot came into the office and brought the Emperor a steaming cup of some kind of stimulant. As the machine moved across the smooth floor it was almost noiseless. Atlan drew the cup to him without looking up. In general such types of servo-mechs gave voice to polite expressions during their work but Atlan had ordered this characteristic to be erased from the programs of his personal robots. He considered it nonsense to have one's self-addressed with cultured phrases by a machine.

The robot left the room as silently as it had entered.

The visitor who sat beside the Emperor's desk smiled discreetly. Gen. Alter Toseff waited until Atlan had sipped his brew.

"It's a Terran recipe, General," said Gonozal VIII. "You should try it sometime."

Toseff only smiled. "Thank you, Your Eminence. I'm afraid my palate is too accustomed to the delights of Saratan."

Saratan was the Arkonide colonial planet where Gen. Alter Toseff had been representing the interests of the Greater Imperium. He was different from most Arkonides by virtue of his vigour and vitality. In his search for such men, Atlan had located him. The computation sector of the Brain had called all usable officers to Arkon. The selection had been made according to strict specifications yet it had been a letdown for Atlan to find that only 43 men could meet the qualifications. Among the selectees the General had shown the highest number of plus factors. Atlan knew that the Brain's selection had been right again. No traces at all of decadence could be seen in Toseff.

"You may have to go without those delights for some time, General," announced Atlan. "There are important things for you to do."

"I stand prepared to fight anywhere in the interests of the Greater Imperium," declared Toseff decisively. "Do you have special orders for me, Emperor?"

Atlan turned the cup thoughtfully around in his hands. The General's short-cut snow-white hair contrasted sharply with a complexion that was too dark for an Arkonide. Atlan liked this man—he had good rapport with him and suspected that he could rely on him. In spite of an intensified search the robot Brain had only come up with 43 men with the same characteristics as Toseff.

43—in an entire Imperium.

Perry Rhodan had millions of men at his disposal, all of whom were so qualified. This was why Atlan needed the help of the still-vigorous and active Akons. However, he was planning to send an Arkonide of Gen. Toseff's quality to every fleet task force that was to be manned by Akons.

"The assignment you will receive from me can have life or death significance for our Imperium," Atlan revealed. "That's why I am giving you an opportunity to decline the offer—in which case you can then go back to Saratan *instatus quo*, the same as when you left it."

"I am at your command, Emperor," said the General. "For generations the Toseffs have stood loyally with the Imperium."

Atlan felt it would be unfair to keep the man in the dark any longer so he shoved an open file toward him across the desk. "Read that," he told him. "In there you will see..."

He was interrupted by a buzzer. In front of him on the wall of monitor screens a red light had come on. Toseff looked up and appeared to have forgotten the documents.

"Excuse me a moment," said Atlan. "This is an important message from the Brain." He switched on the communicator unit that was on his desk and another indicator lamp lit up.

An impartial-sounding voice said: "The high priest of Baalol on Saos requests permission to speak with the Emperor over hypercom transmission."

Annoyed, Atlan replied: "I'm busy now. The Anti can wait!"

Undeterred, the mechanical voice continued: "The matter concerns a new infringement by the Solar Fleet. The Emperor has ordered that every report of this nature shall immediately..."

"Alright!" interrupted Atlan swiftly. "Let's have the hookup!"

"The priest will speak to you on channel 23," came the instruction.

Toseff started to get up and leave but Atlan called to him. "Wait, General! It can't hurt anything to have you in on this. It definitely is connected with your assignment later."

Toseff took his seat again. One of the vid-screens on the wall brightened and out of blurred outlines emerged the lean features of the officiating high priest on Saos. The flick of a button by Atlan sufficed to enable the Anti to see a projection of the Emperor's face on the screens in the Control Central of the temple pyramid on Saos. Atlan had no reason for being kindly disposed toward the priests. Even among the planets of the Arkon System they had infiltrated their narcotic liqueur known as Liquitiv.

"What do you want?" asked the undying admiral coldly.

Kutlos' thin face remained expressionless and only his lips moved as he replied: "I have an item of news for you, Your Eminence." It was as though the item, in fact, were not of any special interest.

Atlan glanced questioningly at Toseff, then back to the screen. "Speak!" he commanded the Anti.

"The planet Saos belongs to the sovereign territory of the Greater Imperium," said Kutlos calmly.

Atlan became more impatient. "Are you trying to instruct me in astro-politics?" he inquired frostily.

Kutlos smiled. Seldom had Atlan ever seen such a humourless smile. He had to concede that the Anti was an expert in hiding his feelings, if he had any. In the other's cold, angular features there was not the slightest trace of emotion.

"By no means," the priest assured him sarcastically. "But perhaps a lesson in cosmic strategy."

Gen. Toseff harumphed angrily at this impudent remark but Atlan gave him a signal to calm himself. He surmised that the anti-mutant was merely trying to stage his announcement dramatically.

Nevertheless Kutlos' next statement came as a surprise because of the completely unchanged matter-of-factness in his tone of voice: "Saos is faced with an imminent invasion by a Solar Fleet task force which is under the command of Perry Rhodan."

Atlan started visibly when Perry's name was mentioned, as though his senses struggled to reject what he had heard. It took him several seconds to recover from the shock. "You are certain that they are Terran ships?" he asked.

"If you hurry you can see for yourself," suggested the Anti with obvious irony. "But don't wait too long because in the meantime Saos could evaporate under a barrage of fusion bombs. At any rate, Rhodan has appeared here with 4,000 ships."

"4,000..." Atlan repeated the figure gloomily. "He's leading an attack against a planet of the Greater Imperium with a major fleet formation. That is an open act of war!"

For the first time Kutlos revealed a spark of intensity. "Will you intervene?" he inquired.

Atlan's answering look was anything but friendly. It was no task to read the priest's mind at the moment. Nevertheless Rhodan's action was a monstrous provocation which in itself was the same as a declaration of war. "Why don't you think about that question?" said Atlan abruptly, and he cut off.

Toseff opened his mouth to say something but desisted when he noticed the Emperor's obvious agitation. He felt instinctively that he was not able to help this lonely man in his decisions now. Yet at the same time the General's loyalty found a still more solid anchorage here. He sensed the rapport between himself and the immortal which also made his devotion to the Greater Imperium indestructible.

"How could the Barbarian do such a thing?" muttered Atlan dejectedly. "Is he using every provocation possible to unleash a galactic war?"

"Perhaps the priest lied to you," suggested the General without too much conviction. "The Baalols might be quite interested in seeing a clash between Terra and Arkon because the 2 powers together are invincible to them."

"Oh, without doubt!" agreed Gonozal VIII. "But I believe the Anti has spoken the truth. He knows only too well that I have the means of checking out his information very swiftly. With a lie he would be risking the existence of the base on Saos."

The General was somewhat alarmed to see that Atlan was hesitating to reply in kind to the aggressive challenge of the Solar Fleet. His friendship with Perry Rhodan seemed to bind him in invisible chains. He could not bring himself to realize that the Earth's First Administrator could break every agreement and treaty in such a manner as this.

"Your Highness," admonished Toseff, "any further hesitance on our part will appear to our allied worlds and especially the rebellious colonies to be a sign of weakness. Also our failure to act will only invite more Terran aggressions. There has to be a limit somewhere. Forgive me for pressing you with these objections."

Atlan pressed the back of his hand across his forehead. The silence in the large room seemed oppressive to Toseff. There was also a pervading chilliness although it could have been his imagination.

"I thank you for your frankness, General," Atlan answered earnestly. "I like it when somebody speaks an opinion straight out with no flowery attachments. As you well know, that's very rare for our 'dignitaries' in the Council."

"They would have a hard time arriving at a decision, Emperor," said the representative from Saratan.

Atlan smiled humourlessly. "There's an old Arkonide proverb that the closer one gets to a breakup of friendships the more patience one must have. But how much patience is that, General?"

Atlan's question expressed the entire extent of the situation. While attempting on the one hand to avoid an open break with Rhodan he was occupied simultaneously on the other hand with the task of using every means at his disposal to protect the Greater Imperium against further military encroachments.

Who could say whether or not Atlan might have still considered his friendship with the Terrans—if it had not been for a certain Maj. Albert Kulman?

Just as Toseff was about to voice an opinion, the robot Brain buzzed and flashed another emergency signal, requesting a connection with Atlan. The General interrupted himself and waited while the Emperor worked his control buttons.

The same monotonous voice came from the speakers: "A further infringement of the Solar Fleet in the sovereign territory of the Greater Imperium has been reported. A hypercom message from a Springer ship has just been received. A Terran warship fired upon the merchant ship and ordered it to stop. A prize crew then boarded the Trader vessel and proceeded to subject it to inspection. Sonzomon, the Springer commander, is demanding reparations and a public apology from the Terran officer in charge."

Atlan interrupted the connection to his mechanical aide with the flat of his hand. His lips had thinned out to a sliver. "That is how far the patience goes!" he said coldly. "You stack it high enough and something's going to make it crash. This is it!"

"So, Your Highness?" Toseff watched him intently.

Atlan pulled a star map from a nearby chart rack and spread it out on the desk. The General leaned forward and studied it as Atlan took a marker and drew a circle around star cluster M-13. All the Arkonide colonial planets had been previously marked with red dots. Atlan's outstretched finger pointed to one of them.

"Here!" he said.

"What is your plan, Sire?" asked Toseff. The star chart drew him strangely as though here at this moment were new signs and symbols of historical destiny.

"The time has passed, once and for all, General, in which we will take any more from the barbarians of Earth. Arkon is striking back. We will stand for no further encroachments without retaliating!" These words of war were virtually shouted by Atlan. "Our Akon allies are still under the hypno-training process and can't be put to use yet. This means that we'll have to launch a robot fleet. It can match the Terrans in fire power but can't react as fast or come up with all the amazing trickery that Rhodan's men always employ during a cosmic space battle."

The Arkonide from Saratan tensed as he asked his next question: "Imperator, do you wish to send a fleet to rescue Saos?"

Atlan's fist slammed down on the map target. "10,000 ships should be enough," he said.

"Ten-thousand...?!" echoed Toseff, stammering in surprise.

"Further formations will be placed on standby for backup," declared the immortal admiral. "If Rhodan wants to conjure up a test of power, then he shall have it!"

The General gazed silently at the map. In his mind's eye he had a picture of the 10,000 Arkonide robotships bursting out of hyperspace upon the astonished Terrans. It was something to rekindle the vision of the Imperium's former splendour. He saw the names and faces of the great ones of previous generations passing before him. His eyes gleamed when he recalled such legendary figures as Ufagar, Salaston and Petesch III.

True, the Imperium had been scarred and wounded, it was splintered and torn, but it was still much more than an empty concept. At its head stood a determined man who was ready to use every means at his command to prevent a collapse.

"We shall defeat them, Emperor!" Toseff cried. "We'll sweep them out of the Greater Imperium and teach them such a lesson that they'll never dare come back again!"

Atlan shook his head. "Now you're speaking like a Terran, General," he said softly. "If, however, you can manage to operate like a Terran you'll know how hard it is to overcome them. They have an iron will not to be stopped by anything. This forward-striving compulsion is symbolized by just one man."

"Perry Rhodan," added Toseff.

"Who strikes him down gives a deadly blow to Terra," said Atlan. He pressed a button and the servant robot came in quietly—so soundlessly in fact that it startled Toseff. "My conference with Leschtos must be postponed indefinitely," Atlan reported to the robot. "I deeply regret that he has had to come this far in vain."

Toseff quickly caught the significance of this instruction. "Does that mean, Your Eminence, that you are going to accompany the Fleet?"

The Emperor chuckled briefly. "Just you and I as the only active Arkonides—leading the mechanical crews of 10,000 robotships. How does that strike you, General?"

Toseff smiled. Although a veteran warrior with much experience, he had still preserved a healthy sense of humour. "As quite promising," he answered.

3 minutes later, Atlan made contact with the Brain. Positronic programming circuits began to work at top speed. It was necessary to find the most strategic attack approach for lifting the siege of Saos. Meanwhile, Atlan made preparations for taking command of the flagship. Toseff was bubbling over with ideas. He was faster than the giant Arkon 'think tank' in working out a battle plan.

* * * *

Thousands of light-years distant, Maj. Albert Kulman sat in his command chair on board the light cruiser *Zumbasi* and spoke confidently to his pilot, Villaseluces. "I think we handled that situation correctly. Now the Springers know they can't get through any part of the galaxy without being checked. It will be a constructive warning to them." He leaned back into the pliant upholstery with a sense of satisfaction.

In that same instant a certain relay clicked in the robot Brain on Arkon 3. A directional signal beam was automatically transmitted. Minutes later the mighty impulse engines of 10,000 Arkonide warships thundered into life. They were harbingers of a black dawn in the history of the galaxy.

A tragic collision was threatened between 2 mighty fleets.

3/ THE GAME OF DEATH

Cardif's fingers clutched at the place where he knew the cell activator to be in his bloated chest. The Antis had lured him into the trap of procuring this device. It did not occur to Cardif's tortured mind that *It*, the multiple being on Wanderer, could have had something to do with this change of his cells. He had never comprehended the ambiguous warning nor did he see its significance now.

He would never understand it. The cell division was proportional in every part of his body. His brain had been affected as much as any other organ. Cardif's mental condition was such that he no longer even recognized the danger of a betrayal of his identity by the Antis. Blindly he relied on his plan of revenge which would place the planet Saos in his hands. There he hoped to obtain the information necessary for his cure.

He would show the men that he still knew how to command a fleet. He finally groaned and rolled out of the rumpled bed. He ran his hands testingly over the sweater he was wearing. The loose pullover seemed to be filling out. Was it becoming too tight already?

He changed his trousers and put his hair in order. Disdainfully he threw the dark goggles aside. Why should he, the Administrator, have to hide his face? Let the officers see the eyes of the man who would lead them to victory over the Antis. Cardif giggled softly in anticipation. The time of waiting was over. He had permitted Bell's admonishments to hold him back much too long. Later when he had consolidated his power, Bell would be one of the first to be liquidated.

Cardif double-checked his appearance. He did not wish to acknowledge his inner desperation and panic. He was preparing once more to act the part of Administrator of the Solar Imperium—a role that suited him less and less.

His appearance in the Control Central was met with various reactions. The comportment of the false Rhodan had placed the officers of the *Ironduke* under a very unusual strain. As Cardif stopped just inside the entrance hatchway and stood there looking searchingly at the men, his arms akimbo, he sensed their instinctive rejection of him. He drew himself to his full height and noticed that his hair brushed the upper frame of the doorway. It meant he had grown that much more in the meantime.

Then he stepped forward into the room and barked a command at Jefe Claudrin. "General orders to all ships, Colonel. We will begin the attack against Saos."

Claudrin heaved his ponderous bulk around and moved through the Control Central like a human tank. Over regular spacecom he established contact with the task force commanders. "Maybe it would be better, sir, if you spoke to them yourself," he suggested quietly. "That would give them a boost for the

forthcoming battle."

Thomas Cardif's grin of derision revealed again that he was losing his father's touch. In fact his voice was almost corrosive in its mockery. "For a conquest of this ridiculous little base, Colonel, *your* voice will be more than sufficient!"

"Very well, sir." Without further comment, the Epsalian-born commander carried out his instructions.

Cardif looked at the ship's chronometer. "In precisely one hour, Terra time," he said, "the first ships of our fleet will land on Saos."

"I can't help it, Perry," said Bell from his flight seat, "but I have an uneasy feeling about this show. The Antis are suspiciously quiet."

Cardif broke out into a shrill laugh as his bloated features twisted in a grimace of defiance. Most of the officers lowered their gaze or looked away to avoid the wild expression in the Administrator's eyes. But it was also clear to the last man on board the *Ironduke* that Rhodan would never abandon his purpose.

In monotonous tones, Jefe Claudrin communicated with the other ships. The commanders received their instructions calmly. Not one of them voiced any objections. Now as before, their confidence in the Rhodan personality was still unshakable.

"No one can stop us!" shouted Cardif. "We will smoke out this rat's nest!"

He still did not know how badly he had deceived himself.

* * * *

From whatever angle Kutlos regarded his conversation with Gonozal VIII he could not see that the results were very satisfactory. The Emperor had not shown anywhere near the amount of reaction that Kutlos had hoped for. The high priest realized that he had made a mistake in having irritated the immortal unnecessarily. It had only served to increase the Emperor's antipathy toward the Antis. It was now highly questionable whether or not at least a portion of the Arkon Fleet would fight for Saos.

He sat in the chair that was designated for his lofty station and was lost in thought while shreds of conversation from the other Antis filtered through his consciousness. Nowhere was there a trace of optimism to be detected. Everyone knew that in case of an attack by the Terran ships there could be no hope of rescue. The defeat on Okul had proved that the priests' individual defence screens were no longer effective against the men of Earth.

A cry of alarm rang out: "The Terran ships are changing their positions!"

It startled Kutlos out of his thoughts and it took him a second or two to become reoriented. The priests were crowding in front of the mass-energy detection consoles.

"Let me through," he demanded. His lean figure moved among them, shoving them roughly out of the way.

The glowing green tracking blips were in motion. Their deployment positions were forming an unmistakable pattern. Kutlos didn't have to be clairvoyant to know what this change signified. His face darkened. The invasion was about to begin.

Tasnor blurted out a bitter accusation: "Your plan has failed, Kutlos! They are attacking before Gonozal VIII can help us. I still doubt that he will even show up here with his ships."

The high priest realized that the younger man's harsh criticism was merely an outward expression of his fear of death. It would have been senseless to argue with him.

Meanwhile Hepna-Kaloot had climbed onto one of the chairs and was waving his arms for attention. Kutlos regarded this as an infringement upon his own authority but he did not protest. The stubby little priest's action would help to distract the others from Tasnor's panicky rebellion.

"Now there is no doubt that all of us must die!" declared Hepna-Kaloot. There was something in his little beady eyes that aroused more curiosity in Kutlos than anger so he continued to maintain his silence. "Should we wait for the Terrans to kill us one after the other?" continued the chubby one. As he paused for effect, Kutlos began to have a presentiment of what he was leading up to.

But that would be absurd, he thought. He can't possibly mean *that*! Could he be mistaken or was Hepna-Kaloot eyeing him scornfully? There was something about the little man now that momentarily blocked his resolve. Somehow he couldn't pull himself together to warn the priest and forbid him to speak.

"Only animals *wait* for death!" shouted Hepna-Kaloot. His chin shot forward and Kutlos began to see in him the signs of a deeply rooted brutality. It startled him more than the awareness of the impending invasion by the Solar Fleet. "Until the end comes, let's use the time like men! Let two fighters draw lots for the game of Paloot!"

Kutlos closed his eyes momentarily but the shouts of approval from the other priests stunned him out of his paralysis. Hepna-Kaloot climbed down from the chair and moved among the excited men. The high priest was aware of cold sweat on his brow. Tasnor, standing to one side, looked forlorn. His attack against his superior had been without effect. It was Hepna-Kaloot who dominated the situation.

"Stop!" shouted Kutlos.

The group of men in their wide capes separated to reveal the fat little priest who was already preparing the lots.

"The game is forbidden!" the high priest warned them but he was aware of striving to make his voice sound convincing.

Hepna-Kaloot threw the first lot to him. "Who will call us to account when we're dead?" he challenged.

Kutlos caught the lot and broke it in his hands. "It is forbidden!" he insisted stubbornly. He wished he could offer further reasons against it but couldn't think of any.

"The High Priest withdraws from the game!" said Hepna-Kaloot scornfully. "That means *only one* fighter is to be chosen—and I volunteer myself!"

Kutlos had once believed that nothing could make him lose his temper but at the moment he couldn't help himself. He fumed inwardly with rage as he regarded the stocky little priest warily. In Hepna-Kaloot's eyes he could see a silent question.

Kutlos heard himself speak although his hands were trembling: "No contenders need to be chosen. I will go against Hepna-Kaloot"

Hepna-Kaloot seemed to have expected nothing else. Unhesitatingly he began to remove his outer garments.

"Wait!" said the high priest. "I am not familiar with the rules!"

The stocky priest smiled. "When we fight to the limit of Taloosei, nothing is barred!"

"Then we might as well begin," said Kutlos. "Let's choose the referee. I nominate Egtoor."

It was agreeable to Hepna-Kaloot. Egtoor looked doubtfully at the high priest.

"Who will begin with the choice of weapons?" he asked uncertainly.

The first to choose had a disadvantage because the opponent could then select weapons more suitable for his defence. Of course the second to choose could not select a weapon already named.

"I'm in favour of each contender choosing 3 weapons," suggested Hepna-Kaloot. "If the high priest agrees, I will begin." It was an offer that advertised Hepna-Kaloot's low estimation of Kutlos' fighting capabilities. "I will take a monitor-spy, a Sostoos knife and a water can."

To the high priest the monitor-spy was a shrewd selection but what Hepna-Kaloot expected to do with the water can was beyond him. Nor was the knife an unusually dangerous weapon. But at least he knew that he himself could not avail himself of a monitor-spy.

"I'll take an energy gun, a Lagoo rope... Kutlos hesitated. "And Tasnor as my runner."

A runner was the only means of counteracting the advantage of the remote spy device. Tasnor accepted his choice as 'weapon #3' in silence. Hate flamed in his eyes but he could not refuse to be the runner. Although Tasnor could not himself attack, he would be in continuous danger. Hepna-Kaloot would be free to use any and all weapons against him. It would only be a question of how dangerous he might consider Tasnor to be as a runner against him. Kutlos was hoping that his second-in-command would give Hepna-Kaloot enough trouble to ease his own burden in the battle. But of course there was also the possibility that the belligerent little priest would disregard the runner entirely and come directly against Kutlos himself.

"The contest promises to be interesting," said Hepna-Kaloot "Too bad it will be a short one. The high priest does not have my experience."

This was an open confession that he had taken part before in the forbidden game of Paloot.

"I've gone as far as the Taloosei seven times already," he said proudly. "How often I've played the tamer versions I can't even say. *Too* often for you, Kutlos!"

The cutting challenge served to steady the high priest's mind, bringing back his cool calculation. He only

turned his gaze from his opponent to Tasnor, his runner. The latter's face was pale but he removed his outer garments. Agtlos went with Egtoor to get the weapons.

As first chooser, Hepna-Kaloot started out. He carried the water can in his right hand. The heavy dagger protruded from the belt of his skin-tight trousers. Above his head floated the monitor eye. The receiver and transmitting gear hung over one shoulder. In the little viewscreen provided, it would be possible for him to follow Kutlos' movements unless the latter succeeded in destroying the 'spy' part of the equipment.

"Luck to you, Hepna-Kaloot," said Egtoor, according to the tradition of the game.

"Follow him!" Kutlos ordered his unhappy runner. "I want continuous reports on his position. I also have to find out what he intends to do with that water!"

He holstered the energy gun and draped the Lagoo rope over his shoulder. Now he was prepared.

"Why do you not remove your cape, Kutlos?" asked Egtoor.

"It is the cape of a high priest," Kutlos replied with dignity. "I've worn it too long now to remove it merely for this."

He could see in the priests' faces what they were thinking. He had lived his life in this cape and he would fight his battles in it—even should Hepna-Kaloot force him into the deadly phase of Taloosei.

Taloosei had no equivalent in translation although it came close to what Japanese had once called *kamikaze*—except that this was suicide out of desperation. So it was that in its deadliest form the game of Paloot must end with the death of one of the contenders.

Tasnor went soundlessly out of the temple's Control Central. And now it was time for Kutlos to be on his way as well. He drew himself up gravely and headed for the exit but before he reached it the hypersensors set up a shrill sound of alarm. Transition shockwaves! Kutlos came to a stop abruptly. It couldn't be true, he thought—he couldn't be so lucky!

"Kutlos!" cried an excited voice.

He turned about and returned to his companions. The tracking blips representing the Terran ships had come to rest. The reason for it became clearly apparent immediately. At least 10,000 ships had emerged from hyperspace and were hurtling into the Saos System. These were not Solar Imperium forces. Kutlos had to support himself on the console with both hands in order not to stagger in the transport of relief he felt.

"They are coming!" he shouted, beside himself. "The Emperor is coming to our aid!"

A jubilant cheer drowned him out. The sensor equipment shook physically under the impact of the heavy shocks it was registering. In fact the building itself was trembling slightly. This meant that the mass formation had emerged from transition dangerously close to the planet. The colossal discharges of warp energy were enough to send seismic shockwaves through the shell of Saos itself.

Kutlos was filled with an incomparable sense of triumph. His strategy had won a new victory. The greatest of them all! Now it was only a question of time before the 2 great fleets would be in conflict with one another.

From the entrance of the chamber came a rasping sound. Kutlos looked up. He stared incredulously at the thing that was hovering there halfway between floor and ceiling. It was Hepna-Kaloot's spy monitor.

Either the other priest had not been informed of the turn of events or he was desperately determined to keep his game alive. Just for a moment Kutlos had deviated from his fixed policy of following High Council strategy and the result was this senseless fight with Hepna-Kaloot. Kutlos long-awaited battle of Titans in outer space was to have its tiny counterpart here on Saos.

The hovering electronic eye left no doubt that Hepna-Kaloot had made the first move.

Kutlos reached unobtrusively for his beamer. The monitor seemed to weave back and forth above the entrance like an insect blinded by the light. Somewhere Hepna-Kaloot lay in ambush, waiting for his antagonist. On his micro-screen he could follow every movement the high priest made.

Kutlos whipped out his weapon and fired just as the apparatus ducked beneath his aim. The searing beam bored a black hole in the wall. The spy-eye swept out of the room and was gone. The tracking sensors were making an undulating racket in response to the swift approach of the Arkonide fleet. Now the spherical ships of the Terrans were showing activity again. The blockade ring opened up its tight formation. For a moment Kutlos thought the Solar Fleet was going to make a run for it but it soon became apparent that the various units were merely changing position.

Tasnor came in. His hair was dangling in his face. He looked at Kutlos and through him as though still envisioning his recent ordeal. "Hepna-Kaloot is in Energy Station 3," he reported tonelessly. "The sham attack of the Springers has practically destroyed the place. He is hiding in the ruins." His eyes suddenly widened. "He came after me with the knife!"

Kutlos nodded grimly. His thin, sunken features hardened. He would have to pay for his triumph here. He took one last look at the viewscreens. The master plan was unfolding.

"Keep him under surveillance!" he ordered.

The deputy high priest went away to carry out his macabre task. Kutlos felt no compassion for the youngster. He was too busy thinking of the triumph of the plan—and of Hepna-Kaloot on the other hand, who waited to engage him in the death play of Taloosei.

When he left the Control Central of the temple he went resignedly to pay the price he knew he must pay—for having deserted the strategy of Great Baalol for even a single moment. Tall, lean, with stiff and measured tread, he exited the main observation centre while clutching his energy weapon so tightly that his knuckles were white.

There would be no returning.

4/ DOOMSDAY SHUFFLE

When Gen. Alter Toseff finally recovered from the pains of transition he saw that the Emperor was

already standing in front of the tracking and sensor consoles of the flagship. As he shook himself and got up from his convertible flight seat, Atlan turned to look at him.

"The priest was not lying. At least 4,000 ships have been deployed around Saos. By their present positions I'd say they are up to their ears in preparations for an invasion."

The mass-sensor instruments were showing a maximum registration. Thousands of tracking blips swarmed across the sweep-screens like fireflies and the energy-scopes were going wild with peak gyrations while on the viewscreen the crescent outline of Saos stood out in a firmament of ships—not stars. The planet's gravitational tendrils were plucking now at the Arkonide ships but the super-powerful impulse engines went into a braking mode which handled the pull with ease.

Atlan knew that at the moment it would be senseless to take command of the 10,000 robotships which were presently under control of their separate positronicons. Over translight data links, each was in contact with the robot Brain of Arkon. All inputs were handled simultaneously, processed within seconds for total strategic evaluation, and the giant Brain piloted them all accordingly. Even on the flagship itself Atlan had left the navigation to the autopilot system.

The ancient but ever-youthful Admiral did not intend to attack without warning. He was certain the Brain was placing the ships into attack positions but once that was accomplished it would automatically interrogate him. Without his specific direction, not one Arkonide shot would be fired. The robot fleet was an ultimate threat and Rhodan would understand it as such. Atlan was still hoping to work out something with his friend on the basis of reason.

Toseff was watching the screens closely. "Your Eminence, they don't seem to have landed on the planet as yet," he advised.

"They are holding up the landing manoeuvre," replied Atlan. "They spotted us immediately. Now let them scratch their heads a little, to see how they can manage to handle 10,000 ships at their backs while they're facing the ground defences of the Saos stronghold."

The Arkonide from Saratan pondered this statement. "Let's hope they don't think of one of their famous tricks that you give them so much credit for."

Atlan smiled gravely. "We have them on a leash. They're sharp enough to see their position. It won't be long now before they'll be trying to have a palaver."

For the General this whole situation brought with it a prickling sense of new awakening. He had spent most of his life on Saratan, a small fruitful planet with gently rolling hills and gentler beasts with furry pelts and large, wondering eyes. Looking back in his thoughts he found it incredible that he could have been satisfied with his existence there. He suddenly saw Saratan as the pastureland for old men who wished to fade away in blissful dreaming.

In astonishment he reflected that he had not realized this sooner. But for the present incident he might have spent his last days lying in a lotus bed. At last Toseff knew the meaning of his frequent spells of restlessness. It had been nothing more than the outward expression of an unconscious compulsion, his search for another field of activity.

As the General gazed at the quarter crescent of this alien world before him, he thought he must be dreaming. "Farewell, Saratan," he said softly.

If the Emperor heard him he made no comment. Old Toseff took a deep breath. Was it an evil compulsion that awakened in him the battle urge? Or was it just a natural reaction? Something had been dammed up within him that pressed now insistently for release.

He stood silently beside Atlan and watched the developments on the screens. The Terran ships were still changing their positions but now it was clearly evident that the attack configuration was breaking up. Instead, the spherical vessels of the Solar Fleet were regrouping into a typical defensive pattern. Three heavy ships formed an advance guard for each of the groups while 8 other units kept in motion around them, more or less forming a cone in terms of spatial geometry. The flanks of each cone were made up of smaller and faster cruisers.

Toseff could visualize the effectiveness of such formations. In case of enemy attack the 3 advance ships could thrust forward with lightning swiftness and attempt to 'wedge' through the attacking phalanx. Of course in most cases the daring ones in front would have to face the worst losses but the incoming opponent would be so busy with the flying wedges that he would not be able to concentrate sufficiently on the rest of the group. And here would be the decisive part of the battle since the flanking escorts, in spite of their smaller size, were noted for their considerable striking power.

The Terran commanders were gradually forming countless defence cones around Saos.

"They've been forced into defensive tactics," Atlan observed with grim satisfaction. "That should make them more ready to talk business."

Secretly he was not overly convinced of this, however. He had merely expressed what he fervently wished. Terrans had always been notoriously hardheaded and unapproachable when anybody pushed them for a capitulation. But that was precisely the purpose of these advancing 10,000 warships of Arkon.

Saos itself was a worthless planet. It would represent no economic loss to the Greater Imperium. It was military prestige alone that was at stake here. Atlan could not permit alien fleet units to enter his stellar domain and start attacking planets. For the sake of survival he had to maintain face among his countless internal allies and all the colonial worlds.

With a heavy heart Atlan made contact with the former robot Regent, which was being of incalculable service to him now. "Hold all ships in attack position," he ordered calmly. "All weapons batteries in combat readiness. I will issue further instructions directly to all robot units."

The mammoth positronicon confirmed the message, after which Atlan turned to Gen. Toseff. In the bright illumination of the command consoles he could see the sensitive little lines that were etched in the features of the Saratan officer.

"We'll give them 30 minutes to make contact with us," he said.

In Toseff's eyes was an unspoken but obvious question.

"Then we attack!"

For Atlan these words were no longer part of his troubled dreams. In this bitter hour they had emerged into hard reality.

* * * *

Thomas Cardif sensed the continuous deterioration of his mind. He could follow the process as clearly as if it were being projected on a screen before him. More and more his primitive instincts were overriding logic and reason. His long, bellowing outburst when the Arkonide ships emerged from hyperspace, his reckless order for an immediate attack which Bell had to struggle hard to talk him out of—all this pointed to the fact that he was losing his powers of judgment.

He fought against the encroaching mental disability, forcing himself where he could to act with discernment and to express himself more objectively. Yet every time the fragile veneer of reason was shattered by his more brutal instincts, by the uprooting of his psyche and these despotic fits of temperament. More and more Cardif was becoming the prisoner of a split personality.

On the other hand the silent concern of his officers and the serious looks that were being exchanged in the tense atmosphere on board the *Ironduke* were not conducive to calming his nerves. He was more sensitive than a wounded bull. The most diplomatic criticism was enough to make him lose his head.

With burning eyes he watched the viewscreens where it became clearly evident that the Arkonide ships were lining up for an attack. Against the blackness of the outer void they were like so many pearls being carefully threaded onto imaginary strings.

"That force must contain at least 10,000 ships," Bell remarked. It was merely a technical observation but Cardif thought his stocky deputy was trying to give him a warning.

"So what!" he fumed. "They can't stop me!" He looked down at himself and pulled at his sweater to adjust it. "I want the robots to get me a new uniform jacket immediately," he growled, "and this time I want one that fits! If this self-inflated star king wants to deal with me, I'm going to face him with full dress and rank!"

Bell's sceptical glance informed him that no one was going to expect Atlan to make the first move in a radio contact. The officers thought it much more likely that the Arkonide admiral was waiting for Rhodan to do the calling.

Maj. Krefenbac passed on the order for a new uniform jacket. So far Cardif had not made any further attempt to replace the First Officer with another man.

Bell took another look at the tracking indicators and seemed to be momentarily relieved. "It doesn't look as if they're planning to jump us right away," he said. "They're holding their present positions."

"A lousy swarm of gnats!" shouted Cardif, burning with hate.

He paced rapidly back and forth in front of the hypersensor panels like a caged animal. He had a hunted look. He was now taller than any man on board. A horrible change was becoming apparent in his features. The recognizable outlines of his face were fading in a mass of shapeless flesh. His skin was becoming visibly porous—an effect which became more prominent as he broke out into a sweat. Only his eyes gave a semblance of character to his dissolving countenance but they were the yellow-gleaming eyes of a carnivorous cat. They dominated the bloated mass like 2 smouldering orbs in a desolate wasteland. The man whom everyone took for Perry Rhodan was turning into a monstrosity whose very appearance was upsetting to those around him.

"They're a little nastier than gnats," insinuated Col. Claudrin. "If Atlan gives the order to attack we won't be able to hold out very long against a mass assault by those robotships."

By now it had become impossible for the Epsalian commander to read the Administrator's reactions in that swollen face. It was very disconcerting to him. He was accustomed to detecting the secret thoughts of anyone he was talking to by their facial reactions. Not that Rhodan's face was expressionless by any means but its present contortions could hardly be interpreted. For Claudrin that jerking of puffed-up flesh and the barely detectable tensing of the now flabby skin transmitted little or nothing to him.

As for the colonel's own physiology, he was not typically human. The heavier gravity of Epsal had developed him into a man who was more like a walking grizzly. Claudrin was almost as wide as he was tall, which was not much over 5 feet. Nevertheless his appearance was not repugnant. His physical structure had adapted itself to the natural conditions of his native planet. From an Epsalian's viewpoint the Terrans themselves were somewhat 'deformed', like many other humanoid intelligences. After all, toads might seem repugnant to humans but perhaps for lack of speech the latter creatures could not express how ugly their beholders seemed to them. The question of beauty—or its opposite, ugliness—was thus a relative matter which could only be judged within each species or type, and only there.

To a Terran maiden, Jefe Claudrin might have seemed to be a clumsy-looking oaf, whereas an Epsalian girl—being almost as broad as the colonel—might have been carried away by his splendid appearance.

But Rhodan's repulsiveness was not in any category but its own. Members of his own species had to consider him now as a physical abnormality. Certain types of birds on Earth were known to kill their deformed young and cast them out of the nest without mercy. Every species including the human race had an instinctive prejudice against deformities within their own phylum. By the laws of Nature, of course, such an attitude was all a part of the built-in compulsion toward survival through natural selection. However, the human mind alone, by virtue of its unique ability to think independently, had fortunately improved upon Nature with laws of its own—such as tolerance and equality.

Yet in human emotions the instinctive uneasiness remained. Goodwill and compassion failed to camouflage the fact that the Frankenstein complex was inextinguishable in human nature. A person scarred by burns might awaken pity yet only the victim realized how obviously he was shunned. Although humans did not kill the deformed of their kind, perhaps they committed unconsciously something that was much more horrible: psychologically they ostracized such objects of pity by avoiding contact with them.

The officers of the *Ironduke* were also human, governed by feelings and emotions. Gradually Rhodan was becoming one of the psychologically ostracized—an alien thing. The worse his deformity became, the greater was their pity, accompanied by the wish to be separated from this creature.

Himself a model of human tolerance, Jefe Claudrin was aware of the wall that was growing between him and Rhodan. Rhodan was going through a metamorphosis that made him appear to be inhuman—or at least he was no longer human in the traditional sense. To put it another way, what was happening to him was not *ahuman* change.

Cardif interrupted his deck pacing in front of the consoles. "Atlan's trying to intimidate us," he said suddenly. "He's putting the pressure on, hoping he can make us come crawling! He's in for an unpleasant surprise—isn't that right, Bell?" He practically bellowed the last few words.

Bell's deadly earnest expression remained unchanged. His voice was strangely husky when he spoke.

"Atlan has more than twice our own firing power. Under the circumstances I say it's suicide to try landing on Saos, because that's all the Arkonides will let it come to—*atry!*"

Cardif only laughed. "I'm going back to my cabin," he announced. "When the robots are ready with my new uniform, then I'll be ready to talk to Atlan." He hastily left the Control Central.

Col. Claudrin cleared his throat for attention. "Excuse me, sir," he said, turning to Bell. "I see our present situation as purely untenable. Strategically we're at the bottom of the hill. If the Arkonides start blasting—they'll simply burn us out."

Bell nodded glumly. At the moment they were in a high-stake gamble with a low-card hand. There was no chance of bluffing here because a shave-tail space cadet could look at their hemmed-in formations and see through every play.

"We can only hope that..." Bell was interrupted by an excited shout from Maj. Krefenbac.

"Sir—the radio! Somebody's hailing us on ordinary vidcom!"

Rhodan's First Deputy dashed to the console and flipped on voice-video reception while everyone looked at the videoscreen tensely. They were all hoping to see the distinctive features of Atlan.

But it was not the immortal Admiral who was hailing the *Ironduke*. The man who appeared was baldheaded except for a sparse ring of hair around the sides. His intelligent face was shadowed by deep concern.

"Mercant!" exclaimed Bell in amazement. "How the devil did *you* get here!"

"Maybe with these 10,000 ships milling around over your heads you missed our little warp-shock on the sensors," explained the Chief of Solar Intelligence. "I've just been granted safe conduct through Atlan's lines. At present I am on board the fast cruiser *Acapulco*, commanded by Maj. Burggraf."

Somehow Mercant's presence here was a relief to Bell. The little man was one of Rhodan's closest confidants. Perhaps his influence might still serve to save the situation. "Allan," he said warmly, "I'm sure glad you're here!"

Mercant grinned. "I don't think this cruiser's going to shift the balance of power in this sector of space."

"So you've already noted that Arkon's robotships are not here to support us?"

"That's been rather drastically impressed upon me," said Mercant. With his typical self-composure he sounded as though he were discussing a Sunday picnic. "We scraped through under the impulse batteries of the giant flagship and a certain Gen. Toseff was looking down our throats, under orders from Atlan. I presume the Imperator is also on board with him." Mercant smiled. "Apparently we were permitted to join your camp because we weren't considered to be very dangerous."

Col. Claudrin had been watching the approach of the *Acapulco* on his screens. "We'll shuttle you over, sir," he offered.

"Very well," said Mercant. "Maj. Burggraf feels that the Arkonides granted us safe passage because they're sure we'll never make it back—if this powder keg explodes."

"The major may have a point there," said Bell. "Perry won't be budged from his plan to attack the Antis on Saos. "He's..." He hesitated. "But it's best for you to see for yourself."

"You mean his physical alteration is continuing," Mercant guessed. A shadow of tragedy touched his already worried features.

"Not only *physical* , Mercant."

"I understand." For a moment or two the man who held in his hand's the galaxy's most gigantic Intelligence machine was seen to close his eyes. Finally he said: "You don't have to shuttle me over. Major Burggraf has just informed me a space-jet is ready. I'll come across to the *Ironduke* . Then we'll confer to see what can be done to stop this thing."

"Alright, Mercant," Bell agreed.

The Security Chief's face faded from the screen. But there was a new glimmer of hope now that they might still find a way out of a very blind alley.

* * * *

When Allan D. Mercant entered the Control Central of the *Ironduke* he looked questioningly at the assembled officers. "Where is *he*? " he asked.

"In his cabin," Bell told him. "He's waiting for the robots to finish his new uniform because his old one got too tight for him. When he faces Atlan he wants to be in the full brass of a First Administrator."

"Strange," commented the baldheaded chief of Intelligence. "I can't remember when Rhodan ever thought the uniform made the man."

"He's changed his thinking in a lot of ways," said Bell without any particular rancour. "Sometimes it seems that the Chief has turned into a completely different person."

Bell had never come so close to the truth. He still did not harbour the slightest suspicion of Cardif-Rhodan yet he was definitely aware of this change in his friend's inner nature. There was hardly anyone who knew Rhodan better than Bell.

"One day he will get over all this," said Mercant hopefully. "But in the meantime we have to run interference for humanity if we're going to block an irretrievable calamity."

Dr. Riebsam was the logical type who couldn't avoid the obvious. He pointed to the viewscreens and other indicators. "And what would you call *that* , sir?"

"We'll have to talk to Atlan," said Mercant decisively. "What do you think, Bell?"

Bell tightened his lips perplexed and ran a hand through his short red hair while Mercant watched him expectantly.

"You mean—go ahead on our own, without telling Perry?"

The Security Chief spread out his arms. For a man his hands were carefully manicured. As always he wore his simple uniform. "What else can we do? The Emperor has to be told about the Chief's condition. That might hold off his attack."

"I agree with you, sir!" rumbled Jefe Claudrin. His leathery hide seemed to flush with excitement. Here was the chance everybody had been waiting for.

In the final analysis, however, it all depended upon Bell's decision. He and Mercant would have to carry the responsibility for such an action.

Bell was troubled. "When the First Administrator is on board a ship he's automatically the commander. In fact he's Commander-in-Chief of this whole fleet. All orders have to come from him. If he finds out that we've gone behind his back..." He left the statement dangling.

"I understand your apprehension." Mercant raised his voice slightly. "Nevertheless we should risk it. After all, Rhodan hasn't given any order that *prevents* us from speaking to the Admiral."

"Perry figures that Atlan must open the palaver," Bell reminded everyone. He turned to Maj. Krefenbac. "Major, find out when the robots will be finished with that uniform."

Krefenbac switched on the intercom and connected himself with the appropriate department. After a few seconds he reported: "It will still take awhile, sir."

"I don't like a decision like this," said Bell in a low tone. "It seems to have a flavour of conspiracy."

"Is it treason if the lives of thousands of men are spared?" asked Mercant. "If we want to help the Chief, we can do it by avoiding any conflict that could develop into a cosmic war. Don't we need every minute possible to be able to combat Rhodan's terrible illness? On Saos we'll never find out anything about this mysterious planet Trakarath if we shoot down the Antis. Besides, Atlan wouldn't permit that."

"You win," said Bell, finally yielding. "Colonel, try to make contact with the Arkonide flagship."

Claudrin's hefty physique usually made him appear to move slowly but in this case he responded to the order with unexpected swiftness.

Bell spoke to Krefenbac. "Tell them to let us know when Rhodan has his new uniform. I don't want him to show up here just when we're in the middle of a conversation with Atlan."

In his mind he had a distressing vision of Rhodan storming in, shouting at everybody and glaring around with those smouldering eyes of his in search of the guilty ones. It caused a strange feeling to come over him. At first he could not define it but finally he knew.

It was fear!

Whether it was a fear of losing his friend completely or due to some other cause was immaterial at the moment. Only one thing was plain: his uneasiness had developed into a sense of fear. It would not be long, perhaps, before the feeling would give way to horror.

And then?

Bell closed his eyes. Suddenly he wished that he were far away from all this—away from Saos and the *Ironduke* and this whole nasty business. He longed for quiet and seclusion. He told himself it was his nerves. The constant overstrain and stress was getting to him.

He watched silently while Claudrin made the necessary connections for transmitting. He kept glancing uneasily toward the entrance hatch of the Control Central. With Rhodan's present unpredictability it was possible for him to show up at any time.

In his haste, Claudrin had completely bypassed the Communications Central. He switched on the video portion of the space-com channel. "We are in contact, sir," he announced,

Bell approached the console slowly. It was a distasteful task to have to inform Atlan in this manner. He experienced a sense of guilt when he thought of the trouble they had given the Emperor, their ancient friend who had taken over the power from the robot Brain on Arkon 3.

But it was not the Admiral's face that appeared on the screen. Bell saw an unknown Arkonide with white hair and a dark complexion.

"Gen. Toseff here," said the stranger. "What do you want, Terran?"

The voice was cold and haughty. For an Arkonide the General radiated a surprising amount of personal energy. Bell got hold of himself. Now was not the time to act offended. He had to deal with the man.

"My name is Reginald Bell," he said calmly. "Connect me with Gonozal VIII, Emperor of Arkon."

Toseff's smile seemed to be arrogant and scornful. "His Highness will only speak to the First Administrator," he retorted.

Bell took an involuntary step toward the video panel. His fists were clenched. Mercant sensed Bell's indignation in time to intervene.

"Rhodan is sick. Transmit that to the Emperor. Tell him that it's vitally necessary..."

Toseff interrupted sharply. "It is useless for you to try such a ruse!"

Before Bell could tell the Arkonide that he was an inflated pipsqueak, the General disappeared from the screen and Atlan took his place. The immortal looked weary.

"Alright, Bell," he said calmly, "Gen. Toseff was only following my orders."

Bell's glowering expression did not change. "Perry does not know that we are talking to you," he explained. "All of us—Mercant, John Marshall, Freyt, Claudrin and everybody else—would like to pull the Solar Fleet out of the Arkonide Imperium. But that's not so easy. A change has come over Perry since his imprisonment on Okul. He hasn't yet gotten over the shock. Besides that he's suffering from something the doctors describe as an explosive cell division. He keeps on growing heavier and taller. You'd hardly recognize him anymore."

"I don't get the connection," said Atlan coldly. "What has his sickness to do with Saos?"

"Perry believes the Antis are responsible for his illness. He wants to force them to help him. He figures

they may be able to stop the uncontrolled expansion of his cell-growth. We are in search of a mysterious planet called Trakarat. It's supposed to be the central world of the Baalol cult. The priests tried to fool us into believing that Saos is Trakarat."

"The encroachments of the Solar Fleet are increasing," complained the Emperor. "No one can expect us to keep putting up with Rhodan's dangerous extravagances."

Mercant had tried to remain passive during this but finally had to break in again urgently: "We are Rhodan's friends, Atlan, as well as yourself. Please give us support in helping him as quickly as possible. His present condition is so serious that we must fear the worst if something isn't done soon. He issues commands and instructions that he would have considered ludicrous in the past."

"Pull the Terran ships out of here," Atlan demanded. "There is no other alternative."

"If you could only see him!" shouted Bell heatedly. "How can you refuse to help us? Have you forgotten what he's done for you and your Imperium? Do you think all that would have been done with the intention of destroying it? No, Perry is sick, and that's why we can't condemn him for his actions. We have to capture the acting high priest of Saos. He's bound to have information that can help us further in our search."

A deep furrow formed between Atlan's brows and for a moment his hand was visible as he briefly covered his eyes. It struck Bell as astonishing how similar this man was to Perry Rhodan—the *old* Rhodan! After a period of deliberation in which the only sound was the humming of the equipment, the undying Admiral finally spoke.

"This means—that you will attack Saos?"

"Yes." Bell and Mercant answered simultaneously.

"You know, this conversation *could* be a diversionary trick on your part. Otherwise I have no recourse but to believe that you speak the truth."

"As we have many times before this," said Bell quietly. He was not inclined to contest Atlan's suspicions because if he had been in the Emperor's boots he would probably be thinking the same way. In any event it didn't hurt to remind Atlan that he had always trusted his Terran friends in the past.

"I may be committing a grave error," said Atlan, "but for the time being I'll hold back the fleet. I'll deploy all ships into a spherical formation that will enclose the Saos System. If anything happens that isn't in line with this discussion I will order an immediate attack. No Terran ship will be able to get through the defence wall of major-class robot warships."

For the first time a smile appeared on Bell's face. "There is a possibility of preventing a full-scale attack against Saos," he said cryptically. He noted that both Atlan and Mercant were looking at him with awakened interest but he did not feel inclined to enlighten them further. "It's just a thought," he hastened to explain. "Now everything will depend on what Perry decides to do."

Maj. Krefenbac interrupted. "Sir! The robots have finished the uniform. They have just delivered it to Rhodan in his cabin."

"Let's cut this off, Admiral," Bell suggested. "Let's all keep our thumbs up!" It was a spaceman's phrase that was untranslatable yet universally understood.

Atlan slowly raised both hands showing upright thumbs but he moved them back and forth significantly. "I only have two," he replied but for the first time his voice sounded somewhat friendlier.

No one had to explain to the officers of the *Ironduke* what the Emperor was trying to tell them. It was hope mixed with pragmatic realism, as though to say he did not foresee a very good outcome for the situation. Both sides had become too deeply committed.

Jefe Claudrin shut off the vidcom. "We still have a chance of holding him off," he commented.

Everything now depended upon Rhodan. Bell couldn't help shuddering inwardly at the thought of Rhodan's return to the Control Central. A double responsibility lay on his own shoulders. He was also under obligation to Atlan.

Allan D. Mercant raised his voice slightly. "Mr. Bell, it's time to let us share your thoughts..."

* * * *

Thomas Cardif slipped into his uniform and zipped it up. The robot that had delivered it had already left the cabin. In secret appraisal he glanced down at himself. It seemed to him that the uniform alterations set him off to advantage. His bloated body acquired a new appearance of firmness. Without any qualms of propriety he fastened to his chest all of the medals and orders of merit that his father had rightfully been entitled to. His hands trembled in the process because he was in a hurry now.

He was firmly convinced that Atlan would talk to him and beg for peace. If necessary he could call in many more Terran ships to the Saos theatre of action.

He regarded himself in what was left of the shattered mirror. A wide crack in the glass near the upper frame divided his face in halves so that his appearance was even more demonic than it was in actuality. He chuckled grimly to himself. It was time for this demon to *force* the search for his salvation.

Thus resolved, he marched stiffly from the cabin. The passage he followed was only intermittently lighted and each time he moved beyond a circle of illumination a distorted shadow leapt before him across the deck, only to be obliterated by another pool of light. He avoided using the conveyor strip, preferring to continue in this manner along the corridor, somehow fascinated by the phenomenon. Through narrowed eyes he watched the constant jumping and fading of his shadow. A strange parallel here, he thought—like a moth leaping from flame to flame, repeatedly repelled and darting forward again...

Suddenly, another shape appeared. The insane impression shot through Cardif's mind that this might be the physical embodiment of his shadow. He reached out his hands for it gropingly.

"Sir..." someone uttered.

It required an effort for Cardif to tear himself out of his strange fixation. He focussed his eyes sharply upon the figure of the deck-watch officer. "What's the matter?" he rasped out angrily.

The confused officer stammered: "I—I thought you weren't feeling well, sir!"

Cardif stood there like a giant bird of prey, slightly crouched forward with his hands out like talons. He saw a glimmer of fear in the other man's eyes and caught the nervous trembling of his face muscles. The officer's reaction transmitted to Cardif a sense of superiority—which saved the man from a perhaps more terrifying scene.

"Get out of my way!" commanded the Administrator. "If I don't feel well I'll go to a doctor."

"Yessir!" replied the embarrassed officer.

The man stepped to one side and pressed his back against the wall. Without giving him another glance, Cardif went past him. He knew, however, that the latter's wondering gaze followed him.

When Thomas Cardif entered the Control Central his instinct told him that something of a momentous nature had transpired here. He could not determine *what* it was but just the certainty of it served to increase his psychopathic suspicions. He forced himself to be calm as he approached the indicators. He could see that the Arkonide ships were in motion again but this time there was no attack formation.

"What's the meaning of this, Colonel?" he asked Claudrin.

"They're closing us in," explained the Epsalian. "They're forming an impenetrable blockade shell around Saos, sir. It means we can't leave the system unless Atlan permits us to."

Cardif-Rhodan waved a hand disdainfully. "It's obvious that Atlan has cold feet," he declared, self-satisfied. "If he were so sure of himself he would have attacked by now." As he turned from Claudrin he noted Mercant's presence for the first time "Where the devil did *you* come from?"

The security chief forced a smile. Inwardly he couldn't suppress a shudder over Rhodan's appearance. The Administrator had become a giant. "I figured you might need me here," said Mercant. "When we attack that nest of Antis down below I'll be right beside you to help."

"There are still a few valiant Terrans left, after all!" commented Cardif enthusiastically. "All I get on board the *Ironduke* is a bunch of yellow-livered yammering!"

Mercant drew himself up proudly as though appreciative of the open compliment. Claudrin watched him grimly, reflecting that the Intelligence Chief had missed his calling—he should have been an actor.

"It's only action that brings success," said Mercant, looking about him aggressively. "But Mr. Bell and the other officers think it'll take *all* of our ships to attack such a ridiculous little Anti base..."

Rhodan laughed scornfully. He clapped the little man jovially on the shoulder. Mercant looked at the latter's display of medals with mixed feelings. Formerly the Administrator had always preferred a simple combat uniform. Cardif's confused mind was no longer shrewd enough to see through the security chief's clever trap. Mercant had deliberately provoked the Administrator into a contradiction—which came immediately.

"All of our ships?" Rhodan repeated sarcastically. "I'll guarantee you we can take Saos with only 10 fighting units."

"That will allow the rest of the ships to hold off any action by Atlan," said Mercant, and now he made no secret of his satisfaction.

With an almost indolent gesture, Cardif ended the discussion. "We attack," he ordered.

Mercant and Bell only looked at each other without saying a word. When Rhodan began to pick out the 10 ships he wanted, Reginald Bell's strategy went into effect. Lieutenants Brazo Alkher and Stant Nolinov were to be part of the attack group's top command. They were the best informed concerning the Anti stronghold.

Thomas Cardif could not know that a second group was going to land at the same time as his attack force moved in.

But everything hinged on how long Atlan would stand still. His mighty robotships surrounded Saos with a ring of steel while multi-thousands of heavy gun turrets swivelled threateningly.

10 heavy cruisers dropped away from the Terran fleet and plunged into the upper atmosphere of the planet. Their powerful retro-engines blasted through the heavy strata of nitrogen and carbon dioxide gases, causing the sky to tremble.

The battle for Saos had begun.

5/ THE NEMESIS EYE

Hanoor was the oldest priest stationed on Saos. This may have been the reason he had been appointed temporary acting High Priest so that Kutlos and his deputy Tasnor could go groping around in the ruins of the power plant while Hepna-Kaloot led them into the deadliest phase of the game of Paloot.

Hanoor did not feel in any way that his new assignment was a burden. He was an old man who had seen and experienced much in his life. Inwardly he was governed by a special kind of calm. He only did whatever was absolutely necessary.

When the operators at the indicator consoles announced that the Arkonide fleet was drawing back and forming a barrier shell around the Saos System, Hanoor surmised that Gonozal VIII was going to remain as an observer for the time being. He gave the order to man all the ground defence batteries and put them in combat readiness. The underground defence installations opened their hatches and elevated the long-barreled projectors of their energy guns. Hanoor also had hand weapons issued because inevitably it would come to a matter of close combat. The old priest allowed himself no illusions about being able to stop the Terran ships before they made a landing.

With cool composure he watched the spherical Arkonide spaceships change their positions. It did not disturb him that the Emperor had decided to go into a holding formation. His unshakable calm had its effect on the other priests as well. Willingly they followed the instructions of this ancient and bearded one in his venerable cape as he hurried from station to station to personally convince himself of the fighting morale of the Antis.

When he returned to the observation centre of the great pyramid he held a short briefing session. "If Gonozal VIII does not come to our aid," he told them in his frail voice, "we will lose this battle.

Nevertheless we will not surrender. Each of us is duty-bound to hold out with all the strength at our command."

He inspected his own energy weapon and took a seat in front of the panoramic viewscreens. Reports were coming to him from all sides. Every move of the spaceships was being watched.

Hanoor looked at his hands, which had long since lost their youthful vigour and tone. How old did a man have to be, he thought, before he must fight no longer? Never too old, perhaps. He wondered at the phlegmatic processes of his thoughts now. If a man became old enough he simply died and then it was over with. As a secret smile came to his face the priests sitting near him looked at him in wonderment.

Well then, he thought serenely, this was a time for dying, so let it come. In earlier days such thoughts would have disturbed him and the approach of death would have upset his inner composure completely.

Someone shouted: "Hanoor!"

It startled him out of his reveries. He knew immediately what had happened. The screens clearly revealed what was transpiring in the upper layers of the atmosphere: 10 Terran ships had separated from the fleet and were thundering toward the surface of Saos. Hanoor hunched forward in his seat and watched the viewscreen before him. His lusterless eyes were like two stones.

His ancient voice became shrill. "Attention, all defence batteries and combat stations!" he shouted. "Stand ready to fire!"

The confirmations came back immediately. The Antis behind their heavy energy guns and at the ground-to-air torpedo ramps held themselves tensely in readiness. Once again the Saos stronghold awakened to hectic activity.

Hanoor's calm challenge sounded forth from every loudspeaker: "Give them a reception they will not soon forget!"

Even Kutlos, the former acting High Priest, was able to hear this call to action. But he had no time to think about it: 50 meters ahead of him lay Tasnor and 20 meters beyond him his antagonist was waiting for him.

* * * *

Kutlos lay flat on the ground. His pulse was racing. Ahead of him where Tasnor's crumpled figure was lying a haze of dust hung in the air. Tasnor had fallen in the rubble of a wall that had failed to resist the Springers' sham attack. He was badly wounded. Hepna-Kaloot's treacherous attack had come too swiftly for the youngster. The chubby little priest had guided the monitor skilfully so that it had struck him like a lightning bolt.

Kutlos had not dared to aim a shot at the spy device for fear of hitting Tasnor, his runner. The thing had then shot away low over the ground and since then Hepna-Kaloot had remained in hiding.

The ground under Kutlos was strangely still. The stamping and rumbling of the giant manufacturing plant

for producing defence screen projectors had long since been silenced. For Kutlos the noise of the automatic installations had become a familiar part of his life on Saos. Now the disassembled feeder lines were stored in the transport ships at the spaceport. The robot-controlled production centres had been rendered useless through the sham attack of the Springers. Now it appeared that the valuable equipment in the ships' holds would not ever be salvaged or brought to safety. The Solar Fleet had gotten here much sooner than expected.

Kutlos looked about him warily. He had to keep a continuous lookout for the silent approach of the monitor eye which could give Hepna-Kaloot a clear view of his location and movements. However he could see no sign of it at the moment. The balance of weapons-strength had now gone to Hepna-Kaloot's advantage. As Kutlos' runner, Tasnor was badly wounded and out of action, while Hepna-Kaloot could still use all his weapons the same as before.

In spite of this the stocky little Anti had remained deliberately on the defensive. He had steadily retreated from Kutlos, who had no other recourse but to keep following his enemy's trail. But the brutal attack on Tasnor had changed this pattern to the extent that the retreating movement stopped because Kutlos had stopped. The treacherous innovation with the floating monitor had made him especially cautious.

What Kutlos still couldn't figure out was what Hepna-Kaloot expected to do with his canister of water. Rack his brain though he might he could not imagine how water could be used as a weapon. Yet his opponent had represented himself as an experienced Paloot fighter. He must certainly have a definite purpose in mind in choosing the canister because he had seemed so sure that he could overcome Kutlos with it.

Still gripping his raygun, Kutlos remained hidden behind his cover. He was thinking of the order he had heard Hanoor issue over the P.A. system. The Terrans evidently were not giving up their invasion plan. Which was a good thing in one sense, thought Kutlos, because it would serve to goad the Emperor into action.

His train of thought was interrupted by a groan from Tasnor.

He didn't want to risk calling out any words of encouragement to him for fear of betraying his own location. Kutlos did not exclude the possibility that Hepna-Kaloot knew where he was but was playing it safe for the moment. The dust raised by Tasnor's fall by the ruined wall had begun to settle again. It deposited a grey coating over the young priest's remaining clothing. Kutlos belly-crawled around 2 larger segments of shattered masonry, which made him conscious again of the impractical cape he still wore. Yet he still hesitated to remove this symbol of his dignity and station.

Then he saw the spying eye!

All this time it had been in his immediate vicinity. Instead of being overhead where he had expected it to appear, it was ahead of him between 2 broken wall segments. Through the narrow cleft the insidious device gleamed like a smouldering ember—balefully. It was by pure chance that he had discovered it. So Hepna-Kaloot knew exactly where the high priest was located and what he was doing. Kutlos was grudgingly forced to admire the skilful manner in which the TV eye was being utilized.

By a conscious act of will he suppressed his initial reaction to fire at the robot spy. Undoubtedly Hepna-Kaloot was watching him like a cat and at his first suspicious movement he would make the thing flit out of range.

The high priest avoided looking directly at the hiding place of the monitor. He knew he mustn't let on

that he had seen it. He lay there in tense perplexity, realizing that he'd probably have only a single chance to strike a counterblow. The main thing was to be very clever about it. A quick shot was out of the question as Hepna-Kaloot would react instantly and besides the flying camera was well protected behind its barrier.

He bit his lower lip, tensing for new action. Turning on his side he glanced unobtrusively toward the glowering eye. And then an idea came to him. Carefully and calmly he began to unwind the Lagoo rope. He had to make it appear to Hepna-Kaloot that he merely wanted to examine the line. As the elastic material slipped through his hands it seemed to be like a snake—and in a certain sense a Lagoo rope was designed to operate like a reptile. Generally the priests used it for binding prisoners. The cord had a spontaneous reflex of its own. Once it was set in motion toward an opponent the latter was usually powerless to escape from it.

Initially Kutlos had intended to use the rope while in close combat with Hepna-Kaloot but now his plan was changed. He would use it against the other priest's most dangerous weapon.

Against the nemesis eye!

* * * *

He could feel his pulse pounding harder now and the rush of blood brought a flush of heat to his scalp. Hepna-Kaloot had placed his microscreen in front of him and was intently observing the high priest's movements as well as everything in the surrounding area.

The robot spy had 3 'eyes', any of which the operator could switch on at his option. The frontal orb was flanked by 2 auxiliary eyes. In its present position the frontal eye was sufficient since it was the only one that could give a direct line of sight toward Kutlos' hiding place between the masonry fragments.

Hepna-Kaloot was gratified to notice his opponent's increasing nervousness. Kutlos kept looking above him and fumbling around with his Lagoo rope. Tasnor was already knocked out of the combat. Hepna-Kaloot practically caressed the water canister and his Sostoos knife. Before he died in the attack bombardment of the Terrans he wanted to prove to himself and the high priest that he—the insignificant little man with no influence or apparent importance—was the stronger of the two after all.

He knew that Kutlos couldn't hold out much longer in his present position. Soon he would attempt to leave his cover and come hunting for him—and that would be the end of him.

A dark shadow flitted across the viewscreen. It happened so suddenly that Hepna-Kaloot needed a second or so to collect his wits. The picture fluttered, became blurred and then vanished. He shouted a curse and shook the micro-receiver. But in the next moment he froze, gripped by a sudden realization.

"By Holy Baalol!" he exclaimed to himself. "He's released the Lagoo rope against the monitor!"

Apparently one of the rope's multiple tendrils had wrapped itself around the frontal lens of the viewer and was trying to draw the device upward into the line of fire of Kutlos' raygun. Hepna-Kaloot went into frenzied action. He spun the main rheostat of the control box around to its limit so that all energy reserves of the monitor would be turned on. The raster of the micro-screen flickered uncertainly, alternately

producing a pattern of lines and an intermittent picture of the high priest's grimly determined features.

Hepna-Kaloot switched on one of the lateral 'eyes' of the remote device. From what he could determine there were now 2 arms of the rope which had wrapped themselves around the monitor. One of them was directly over the frontal lens, blurring his reception, and through the lateral lens Kutlos could not be seen.

He switched the remote power to full and drew the monitor back, low over the ground. The ropy tendrils were dragged along a short distance before they could anchor themselves on some chunks of fallen masonry. This happened within 5 meters of Kudos' hiding place. Hepna-Kaloot activated the other auxiliary lens and saw to his horror that another rope strand was taking hold of the flying instrument. He knew he could not keep the driving force of the device going at maximum power because it would soon drain the batteries. Quickly he manipulated his control switches and the robot spy dropped toward the ground. The Lagoo strands coiled like rubber and dragged the stone anchorage with them. There was a recoil action which banged the monitor against the earth.

Hepna-Kaloot threw in a new burst of maximum power and drove the box at full speed toward Kutlos' location. This freed the camera eye and it raced onward. He cried out in triumph but in that moment one of the Lagoo tendrils whipped out from behind and attached itself to one of the side lenses. The rest of the rope coils rolled after it with a feathery lightness while Hepna-Kaloot glowered at the picture transmitted by the forward lens. Kutlos couldn't be seen from this angle anymore but he was no doubt waiting for a chance to take a shot at the monitor.

Now the rope strands swept over the box like so many tentacles. He shut down the power because at the moment an attempt to break away would have been useless. He had made poor use of his chance to free the robot viewer. Instead of getting it up into the clear he had only brought it more completely into the rope's range of action.

But it was useless to brood about the mistake at this stage. He alternately switched on one lens of the box after another but none of them offered a clear picture transmission. The Lagoo rope had ensnared the monitor entirely. In fact it was slowly raising the device into the air—a process which he knew would continue until Kutlos could get a clear shot at it.

At that moment, however, would be the time to take swift action. If Kutlos didn't want to risk destroying the rope, which was one of his weapons, he would have to wait until the strands had let go. In that fraction of a second while the spy box hung free in the air, everything would depend upon who was the quickest to act: Hepna-Kaloot at his remote controls or Kutlos with his trigger finger.

The two Antis were so engrossed in their own battle that they were not aware of the approaching 10 cruisers of the Solar Fleet until one of the other energy plants went up in a mighty explosion.

6/ TRACKING DOWN TRAKARAT

The explosive eruption of dust, torn earth, molten pieces of metal and plastic, flaming wood fragments and bubbling globules of incandescent glass was only discernible as an energy burst on the sensor indicator of the Corvette space-jet.

"It's started!" exclaimed Lt. Stant Nolinov as he switched on the propulsion system of the small craft. The ponderous airlock hatches of the hangar had opened and the rush of air into the outer void created enough suction to ripple the rubber flange guides on the doors.

Bell's freckled face appeared on the vidcom screen. "You know what's at stake for us in this action," he said gravely. "Take no unnecessary chances. Our 10 ships have met with heavy defence fire. The fight can't last another hour. You know what you have to do."

"You can count on us, sir," answered Nolinov, and Alkher added a confirming, "Roger, sir!"

"One of the round dome structures has just been wiped out," Bell reported.

"That has to be one of the Antis' four power stations," commented Alkher. "We detected the explosion on the sensor."

"Take off now," Bell ordered. "And good luck!"

The viewscreen went blank. The Corvette, long nicknamed 'Guppy' by the Solar Fleet, was designated simply as the *F-32*. Now it swept out of the hangar and shot into space in the vicinity of Saos. On board was a 32-man team which was operating under special orders of Reginald Bell and Allan D. Mercant. The combat commandos were equipped with a new kind of special weapon. It was a combination impulse beamer and automatic rifle. The double-barreled handgun simultaneously fired a thermo-beam along with a stream of antimagnetic plastic bullets. The normal projectiles were released a fraction of a second later than the light-speed energy beam so that both types of shots would reach the target together.

It was thus a weapon that was effective no matter what the enemy did. If the Antis were using the mental phase of their defence screen the plastic bullets would get through. If they switched to normal screening the heat ray would get through. It wasn't possible for the Antis to switch back and forth fast enough to avoid destruction in one form or another.

The task assignment had been clearly outlined for the 2 lieutenants. They were to work swiftly under cover of the general attack of the 10 ships led by the Administrator. As a result of their previous imprisonment on Saos, Nolinov and Alkher were most familiar with the terrain. Their objective was to capture the acting high priest of the Anti stronghold. By means of interrogating this important man, Bell and Mercant hoped to obtain vital data concerning the mystery-shrouded planet Trakarath which was supposed to be the homeworld of the Baalol sect.

Bell and Mercant doubted that Cardif's 10-ship attack against the base would be successful. This is why they had placed the Guppy at the disposal of the 2 lieutenants. Thirty determined men accompanied by 2 officers who had begun their main careers on board the linear-drive spaceship Fantasy. There were no mutants in this group since it would have been useless to use them against the paranormal capabilities of the Antis.

Stant Nolinov flew the small craft in wide circles as he spiralled down into the planet's atmosphere. The guppy was not going to land. All hands wore the Arkonide combat suits which would enable them to make a high-altitude jump. Also the suits' deflectors could provide them with almost complete invisibility. In other words the complex screening kept the commandos from reflecting any light. Everywhere in the universe normal optical vision depended upon light reflections, which the brain reassembled into the corresponding objects out of a confused pattern of impressions.

The ship's autopilot would guide it back to the hangar of the *Ironduke* and at any time it was needed it could be resummoned by means of radio.

Brazo Alkher was watching the tracking indicator. "The Antis don't seem to be thinking of any capitulation," he said.

"Maybe they're still hoping that Atlan will come to their aid," commented Nolinov. His crewcut hair took on a golden sheen in the reflection of the indicator lights.

Alkher scratched the back of his head thoughtfully. "It would be best to make our jump in the area of the spaceport," he suggested. "The main heat of the battle should be around the pyramid and the power stations."

"Don't you think, sir, that those transport ships will be guarded?" This question came from Jeremy Mitchum, a young man with amazingly long arms.

"That's more than possible," admitted Alkher, "but we have the advantage of surprise. Don't forget that the Antis are only going to know we're there when our 2-way shooters are under their noses." Their special double-barreled weapons had already received this nickname from Bell although he personally preferred 'double persuaders'.

Mitchum pretended to aim an imaginary 'persuader'. Not finding a suitable opponent he stretched his arms out toward a companion, who drew back in mock horror. It was something to see whenever Mitchum really extended his arms. In his homeland in South America it was said of him that he could shake hands with somebody clear across the Amazon.

"Alright, Mitchum, hold it down," Alkher told him, grinning. "You'll have plenty of chance to be an eager beaver when we get there."

Nolinov still held the Guppy in its spiral descent pattern but Alkher was keeping a close eye on the indicators and he finally raised a hand.

"That's low enough, Stant."

Nolinov switched over to automatic and allowed the ship to hover on its antigravs.

Alkher spoke to Bell over the microphone. "We're bailing out, sir!"

Bell's voice returned over the audio: "OK, Lieutenant—we'll be hauling in the *F-32* on the guidance beam."

Brazo hooked his double-barreled weapon to the utility belt on his combat suit. "We'll jump at intervals of 3 seconds each," he ordered. "Don't forget to switch on your deflectors. As soon as we land we'll make ourselves visible and start the attack. If the spaceport is unguarded we'll fly immediately to the central base. By that time the landing units from the ships will have shown up there."

The 32 men lined up facing the airlock. Alkher was in the lead, suddenly silhouetted against the dreary-looking sky as the outer hatch opened. He turned on his antigrav, nodded once to Nolinov and disappeared.

"After him!" shouted Nolinov hoarsely over his helmet phone.

When he made his jump he saw a distant lightning bolt which was caused by a tremendous explosion. It was followed by a delayed roll of thunder.

"That was Power Station #2, Stant!" called Alkher.

Nolinov spread out his arms although it was not necessary. The antigrav system sustained him easily as he floated downward. When he turned his head to look back he saw only the receding *F-32* because the commando troops were invisible. The sounds of battle increased. The sustained thunder overriding the hissing and roaring of energy weapons came from the impulse engines of the invading cruisers.

Nolinov shook his head involuntarily. He could not understand why Rhodan was actually attempting a landing here. Why didn't he hold them above the base and have his men descend as he and the special commandos were doing? As it turned out later only two of the cruisers made a landing and that was only because the ground fire had put them out of commission.

Alkher, still in the lead, saw the flat area of the spaceport appear beyond the shoulders of the mountains. The ships of the Antis seemed to be so many toys lying there below on the field, being forced to await their fate while the Antis continued to put up a stubborn resistance.

Alkher was first to land and he shut off his deflector. He had set himself down between two of the transport-ships, where no Antis were in evidence. One after another the other men appeared in quick succession around him. Nolinov was the last to appear but his short and stocky figure continued in motion. He ran across the plastic steel landing pad to the bow of the nearest Baalol ship and then rose up on his antigrav to survey the entire area.

"It's a ghost town here," he reported to Alkher. "They've concentrated their total defence at the centre of the base."

Alkher smiled grimly. "Let's give Mitchum a chance to let off some of that steam! Deflectors on again—we fly to the pyramid!"

They lifted up invisibly from the smooth surface of the spaceport and floated away toward the centre of the conflict.

* * * *

The shockwave of the second explosion was so powerful that Kutlos thought his lungs would collapse. He gasped for air and threw himself onto the ground on his back. There was an audible sound like heavy hail as the particles of debris rained down from the sky. He finally raised up on his elbows and tried to see through the swirling clouds of dust.

Hepna-Kaloot's spy monitor lay shattered near Tasnor's body. The Lagoo rope was nowhere to be seen. The high priest was seized by a violent fit of coughing.

The Terrans were attacking in spite of the hovering presence of the Arkonide fleet, from which Kutlos

had expected assistance. He began to realize his error in having permitted Hepna-Kaloot to draw him into this game of death. In spite of the threat of an alien invasion he had been distracted by this private matter and had answered the other priest's impudent challenge. He was more horrified by his dereliction of duty than he was by the attack of the Terrans. He knew he had to return immediately to the temple's control room in order to lead the defence.

He arose and stood there, swaying for a moment between the ruins of the wall until a grating sound made him turn. A figure staggered out of the pall of dust. "Hepna-Kaloot!" shouted Kutlos. "The Solar Fleet is attacking!"

The little priest still carried the water canister although it had burst open on one side and had lost much of its contents. Kutlos decided to ignore him and turned away down a nearby passage. Everywhere he had to clamber over rubble and destruction. He could tell by the repeated whistling sounds that the defence batteries had gotten the ground-to-air missiles into action. Up in Control Central somebody must have taken command in time. He breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps there was still something that could be saved.

A group of heavily armed priests was running toward him.

"This way!" he shouted. "Follow me! We must go to the spaceport!"

They did not appear to recognize him because they came to a stop and warily raised their weapons. Kutlos looked down at himself and realized he was covered with dust and dirt and his clothing was in shreds.

"It's the High Priest!" yelled one of the Antis.

Kutlos passed his palm over his face and it felt as though it was covered with a layer of fuzz and scum. He looked through one of the nearby windows just as one of the low-roofed buildings exploded. The entire roof soared upward and was engulfed in clouds of burning gases and smoke while the supporting walls sagged inward, broke asunder and dissolved into rubble and dust.

"To the spaceport!" he shouted again.

Acrid smoke was coming in from all sides and farther ahead a grey-black cloud of it was pouring through a break in the wall, threatening to obscure their vision entirely. Through the general bedlam came Hanoor's voice over the loudspeakers but Kutlos couldn't understand what the old priest was saying.

The armed group of Antis joined him and he ran ahead of them, leading the way. Someone behind him reached a weapon to him. The weight of the heavy metal against his hip was reassuring. The men were coughing and gasping and the smoke brought tears to their eyes as they stumbled over fallen beams and great chunks of masonry. They came to the place that had served as cover to Kutlos during his contest with Hepna-Kaloot. The belligerent little priest was nowhere to be seen but Tasnor was still there. He had sat up finally and was looking about him in wide-eyed perplexity, muttering incoherently to himself. Kutlos came to the younger man's side and bent over him to see his condition. Tasnor's gaze was blank and lusterless, being focussed on what Kutlos silently presumed to be the realm of death.

"Go away!" Tasnor mumbled. There was neither hate nor anger in his voice—only rejection and an infinite yearning for peace. Kutlos placed both arms around the youngster to support him.

"You have to get out of here!" he said gently. "The Terrans are attacking the station in their ships."

For a moment it seemed to him that he might succeed in pulling the priest back to the present. There was a momentary flicker of life in the staring eyes but it was only an unconscious reaction. Tasnor's will was not behind it. Kutlos let him sink back gently.

He straightened up and turned to the others. "Let's continue," he said tonelessly.

They moved around Tasnor's body without looking at him and hurried their steps to escape the sight of their dying companion.

The main force of the Terran attack was being concentrated on the central station, of that Kutlos was certain. He had also noted that a relatively small number of ships were engaged in the action. This could mean that the main forces of the Solar Fleet were in a space battle with the robot flotillas of the Emperor. For Kutlos it was a reassuring thought although he had no facts to substantiate it.

His deliberations were interrupted when a number of men penetrated the passageway through a nearby hole in the wall. In the dust and smoke it was difficult to recognize who they were but in any case they were a welcome reinforcement to his group.

Then Kutlos came to a stop. These were no servants of Baalol nor were they the hoped-for Arkonides. They were Terrans!

Out of pure instinct the high priest turned on his individual defence screen and opened fire.

* * * *

They landed in the area of the third power station and Brazo Alkher shut off his deflector. Nolinov emerged out of invisibility near him. He was streaming sweat but he grinned.

"Familiar territory!" Brazo called to him, referring to their imprisonment here.

He looked around him warily. Cardif had not yet landed with troops but the Antis' defensive fire had already grown weaker.

A commando named Buster Coleman came up to him. "Over there, sir!" he said. "The walls have fallen in and we can enter without having to blast an opening."

"Mitchum!" Alkher called out.

The man from Brazil appeared at his side and looked at him expectantly.

"Take 3 men and check that broken wall. If things are clear inside we'll use it as our entrance."

"Yessir!" Mitchum picked out 3 men and started out.

Alkher watched as the four of them ran toward the building with the double persuaders in their hands. They clambered over fallen rubble and Mitchum was the first to duck inside the structure. Immediately he

reappeared and signalled with his long arms, as if to say "All clear." In that same moment a small ammunition depot blew up under the impact of an impulse beam.

"No danger at all," commented Nolinov dryly. Apparently there was more danger of being hit by their own ships than there was of being caught in Anti counter-fire.

Alkher lifted his weapon arm. "Let's go!" he shouted.

Mitchum's lanky figure was discoloured by smoke and half covered with dust when they reached him.

"Everything's in order, sir," reported the South American. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Inside—it's all clear."

They squeezed through the opening in the shattered wall and entered a smoke-filled corridor in which nothing could be seen beyond a distance of 20 meters or so.

"Sir, I'd say we'd better—"

Whatever Mitchum was going to say remained unfinished. Alkher was shocked to see the Brazilian raise his hands in the air, after which he collapsed silently to the ground. In front of them, vague figures in waving capes were emerging out of the opaque clouds of smoke.

"Antis!" yelled Nolinov.

Alkher reacted almost instinctively. In one jump he was behind a shoulder of the broken wall, where he readied his weapon. Somebody cried out in sudden pain and then the passage was filled with the roaring and hissing bedlam of combat fire. Alkher felt a painful knot in his stomach when he saw 4 dead Terran commandos who had not gotten out of the way in time. Biting his lip in a mixture of rage and anguish, he moved into the battle and opened fire.

A strange thought came to him in the midst of it. He was thinking that while he was here fighting for his life there were countless young men like himself back on Earth who were pleasantly pursuing more peaceful occupations without the slightest awareness of a certain Lt. Brazo Alkher. By his presence here, along with the crews of the Solar Fleet, he was helping to guarantee that men of Earth and all humans on far colonial planets would be able to live in peace.

* * * *

The first time Kutlos was hit he knew that he would never reach the transport-ships alive. Against the special weapons of the invaders his individual screen was not enough to protect him any longer. He lay motionlessly behind a shattered switch cabinet and pressed his face against the cool surface of the metal. One after the other they would end like this. Gonozal VIII had abandoned them. The plan of Holy Baalol had failed.

Someone close to him groaned. Kutlos started to move away from the cabinet while waves of pain raged through his body. He peered across a burst jumble of wires, coils and shattered tubes. Before he could see his wounded companion he was hit again. This time there wasn't much to feel except that the

strength ebbed swiftly from his legs.

The unknown wounded man groaned again. Kutlos grasped 2 protruding fuse boxes and drew himself over the polished surface of the fallen cabinet. He slipped over the other side of it onto the floor. He saw no one. A strange sensation pervaded the lower part of his body and it almost seemed as if his legs were made of wax. He ran his hands over his body and when he brought them back they were smeared with blood. He began to wonder why nobody around him was putting up any resistance against the Terrans.

"They've run away," he muttered to himself bitterly. But then he noticed that the sound of fighting in the passage had ceased entirely.

Footsteps approached him. Kutlos strained with all his might to get up but nothing happened. It cost him such an effort that he had to close his eyes in complete exhaustion. Somebody pulled the blasted switch cabinet away and the screeching of metal seemed to him to be excruciatingly loud.

He opened his eyes and saw a row of combat boots. When he elevated his gaze he saw the owners of the boots and finally their faces looking down at him from high above as through a mist: Terrans. One of the faces came nearer to him, lean and angular with earnest brown eyes. Somehow this man seemed to be familiar—and then he remembered: he was one of the prisoners they had allowed to escape during the sham battle with the Springers.

"Kutlos!" the Terran called out to him.

"I hear you," he answered with dignity, speaking in Intercosmo. "Whatever it is you want from me you must hurry—*Tav dordo*... I am dying."

Brazo Alkher swiftly inspected the high priest and saw that he was wounded in 2 places. He frowned while struggling with mixed feelings. Young Mitchum lay behind him already dead.

"Kutlos—is the planet Trakarat the central world of the Baalol cult?" he asked.

Kutlos only nodded since speech was difficult for him now.

Alkher interrogated swiftly. "Can you give us the position data for Trakarat or any other information on it?"

"I could," said Kutlos with an effort.

"Then speak!" demanded the Terran.

"No." It was a flat denial but quite simple since he could speak no more. Knowing that death was claiming him now he either remained silent in response to each question or laughed in scorn.

Shortly after that his head sank back and his eyes stared lifelessly. Brazo Alkher straightened up resignedly and seemed to swallow with difficulty.

"No use," he said with a note of despair in his voice. "It was all for nothing."

* * * *

The Baalol defence lines gradually collapsed and Cardif's attack rolled onward in full force against the last pockets of resistance. The special commando team under Alkher and Nolinov pulled back to the spaceport. The 2 lieutenants did not have much to say to each other. Behind them in the ruins lay five of their men for whom nothing more could be done. They had brought 2 more with them who were gravely wounded. The men were in a dejected mood since the price had been high for little or no information concerning Trakarar.

"Maybe Rhodan has had more luck than we did," said Nolinov finally.

Alkher remained sceptical. "The Antis fought in sheer desperation and those 10 cruisers weren't exactly out to spare anybody—if there are any enemy survivors at all."

"Sir!" exclaimed somebody suddenly. It was Coleman.

Brazo turned to see what he was pointing at. Two figures were running straight across the open area. Although they were not wearing the clothing of Anti priests they were obviously not Terrans. Apparently the 2 men were fleeing and their goal was the spaceport.

"After them!" he ordered.

He picked out 4 men, who switched on their antigravs and flew toward the fugitives.

Nolinov watched them pensively. "Somehow those two seem to look familiar to me," he said.

"That's impossible," Alkher told him. "How could you know them?"

Nolinov didn't seem to want to express his suspicion. He remained silent as they continued their march toward the transport ships. On account of the wounded, whose suits were damaged, they had refrained from using their antigravs. Within 10 minutes they overtook the other 4 commandos, who had meanwhile captured the strangers. They were big, burly and savage looking, their eyes wild with fear. One of them looked at Alkher and Nolinov with an incredulous expression on his face.

"I was right!" exclaimed Nolinov triumphantly and as Alkher looked at him uncomprehendingly he smiled and pointed to the 2 prisoners. "Old friends of ours, Brazo," he said sarcastically. "But the last time we saw them they were supposed to be badly wounded."

"The Springers!" murmured Alkher.

It all came back to him now in vivid detail. He and Nolinov had been permitted to escape from the Antis as a part of the Baalol plan and in the process they had run into these 2 men. The priests had deliberately drawn the two Terrans to take cover on a plateau, which was the planned landing area of the Springer space lifeboat. It had been made to look like an emergency landing but naturally these two Springers had not actually been wounded. It had all been part of the sham attack for the benefit of the two Terrans. Apparently these two had not been able to return to the long-ships of their clan. Instead they had been caught here in a real attack which had led to the defeat of their allies.

Alkher stepped up to one of the Springers and clapped him roughly on the shoulder. "What happened to your injuries?" he asked ironically. "Didn't you heal up rather quickly?"

"We are peaceful Traders," the man replied. "We haven't anything to do with this situation."

His companion nodded urgently in confirmation. Alkher regarded the statement with scepticism since he knew that Galactic Traders only demonstrated their peace-loving natures when their lives were threatened. Otherwise they were not squeamish about committing any deed of violence.

"You don't say!" exclaimed Nolinov in mock astonishment. He joined his companion and aimed the persuader at the captives. "Alright," he said with sudden sharpness, "let's see how peaceful you *really* are if you're such innocent little lambs!"

Anyone who didn't know Nolinov would have been frightened of him at this moment. His eyes flashed dangerously and his face muscles hardened menacingly. It startled the two Springers, who were already intimidated. They thought despairingly of their chances for escape.

"We'll tell you anything we know," said one of the Traders quickly.

"We're searching for a specific planet," said Alkher. "It is supposed to be the central world of the Baalol cult. It is called Trakarat. What do you know about it?"

The first Springer who had spoken looked uneasily at Nolinov's double-barreled weapon before answering. "We've heard that the priests often talk about this planet. We don't know its location but it must be easy to identify because of its unusual appearance."

"What's that supposed to mean?" urged Nolinov.

"Trakarat has a double ring around it," the Springer reported, "something like one of your own planets in the Sol System. I think you call that one Saturn."

The Trader hesitated but when Alkher nodded to him he continued. "Trakarat's in a family of 15 other planets that circle a red binary star. The name of the binary is Aptut. Judging from the conversations of the priests it must be close to the centre of the galaxy."

The 2 lieutenants exchanged glances. Nolinov lowered his weapon, much to the obvious relief of the two Springers.

Alkher spoke to them. "You'll be held captive until we've determined the truth of what you've told us. If you've told us lies you'll simply have to face the alternative—tell us the truth or else!"

Inwardly, however, he was already convinced of the validity of their information. The Traders were much too frightened to risk angering the Terrans with fictitious data. He turned to Nolinov. "Let's contact the *Ironduke*. Bell and Mercant may be glad to hear about this. At least we've picked up some pretty good clues and a system like Aptut's should be pretty identifiable."

"They'd better send us the guppy now," said Nolinov. "Our mission on Saos has been completed."

He activated his micro-transmitter. They were already beyond the area that had been receiving the brunt of the cruisers' annihilating bombardments. It would be only a matter of minutes before the last Anti resistance was broken and then Rhodan would be making his ground invasion of the station's ruins.

7/ COSMIC DETENTE

He clambered over mountains of debris, staggered onward between caved-in sections of the walls, charged across small open areas and pressed through choked or half-fallen doorways. He had long since ceased looking back to see if the troops were still following him. There was a constant ringing in his ears that seemed to drown out all other sounds. In the eerie twilight dimness of the shattered pyramid he came upon a maze of passages, ruptured lift-shafts and staircases that had been blasted to fragments.

Thomas Cardif felt a piercing pain in the area of his heart and had to come to a stop. Sweat covered his body, ran down between his eyebrows and stung his eyes. Suddenly he sensed the presence of men around him and as he turned around fiercely he saw them standing there—the space infantry of the Solar Fleet. They had gathered behind him shoulder to shoulder, grim-faced, silent, holding their double-barreled persuaders, in readiness.

For the first time Cardif sensed what it would feel like *to really* be Perry Rhodan. These men were following him into a battle which they considered to be senseless but they were at his side for the concept, legend or symbol that Rhodan represented to them.

He lowered his weapon and stared through them or beyond them with a salty taste in his mouth, thinking desperately of his physical condition and his need for a cure, whether from the Antis or any other source. No matter how much he had stormed and raved at the doctors in Terrania over the space hypercom their findings had been of little consolation to him. Of course the top specialists were working day and night on the problem but no remedy was able to arrest the disastrous effects of the cell activator. As far as an operation was concerned they had told him repeatedly that such a procedure would be fatal.

"Sir!" said one of the men.

Cardif focussed his gaze on an older man with a small moustache and large grey eyes. As the soldier came up to him he recognized Sgt. Mulford, who was pointing to the heaps of debris.

"We have to try getting farther upstairs in the pyramid," said the sergeant. "I suggest we send some men up the shafts in combat suits, using their antigravs, so they can check the place out."

"The Sergeant is right, sir," agreed Lt. Yakinawo. "We can't get any farther this way."

There was no logical reason to object to such a plan yet Cardif did so: "I differ with you there," he said. "The men could be taken by surprise in the shafts. You don't know where the priests may still have nests of resistance. So we'll get upstairs the way we're going."

Yakinawo looked at him in amazement but remained silent. Cardif continued onward sullenly. Mulford's idea was the correct one, he knew, and he would have been glad to go along with it if he himself could have accompanied the men. But nowhere was there a combat suit to be found that would fit him. So he had ordered them to continue in the normal manner because he wanted to be present in case they discovered any Antis. His distrust of everyone around him had grown to the point where he would not relinquish the leadership to any subordinate officer.

"We could try this staircase here, sir," suggested Mulford matter-of-factly and he pointed out a jumble of

fallen masonry and tangled conduits and wire nearby where some stairs were visible.

Cardif looked at the sergeant speculatively. "Alright, Mulford," he said finally, "you lead the way."

Mulford was an old veteran who usually took everything in stride but in this case his big eyes widened incredulously. "You mean—you want *me* to climb up there, sir?"

"It's your suggestion," Cardif barked at him sharply. "What's the matter, do you have cold feet or something, Sergeant?"

Mulford drew up stiffly. "No sir!" he answered grimly.

He slung his persuader over his shoulder and marched toward the remains of the staircase. Without hesitation he grasped a sprung reinforcement rod and pulled himself up into the mess. Stones and rubble lying on the twisted stairs fell behind him onto the floor. The entire stair frame of partially melted light metal began to sway. The sergeant seemed to be a giant insect on a large seesaw which gently rocked him back and forth.

"Looks like it's holding, sir!" he called back. "I think you can follow me."

Smart alec!—thought Cardif angrily. Trying to rub it in and call my shots, is he? Does he think I'm yellow?

He climbed after Mulford and Yakinawo followed close behind him.

"Careful, sir!" Mulford's voice rang out from an uncertain elevation. "From here on it's dangerous."

Cardif looked up ahead. In one place the staircase was completely blasted to shreds and consisted practically of only 2 mangled support beams which spread out sharp twisted splinters in all directions. Mulford was like a gymnast or perhaps more like a squirrel, it seemed, as he wriggled his way on upward.

The other men were coming up the stair frame now, almost hand over hand, which swayed dangerously and seemed to bend under their weight to the accompaniment of alarming grinding noises. Cardif began to wish that he had agreed with Mulford's first suggestion. This side of the pyramid had been ripped open by a powerful explosion, exposing them to the outside. Its collapse had completely crushed one of the adjacent side buildings. Cardif didn't dare to look below him.

"Far as she goes, sir!" called Mulford with relief. "This is the last level. There were more above it but our ships' fire has levelled the place to here." From a safe landing platform he grinned and looked down at Cardif, who was ponderously clambering toward him.

"Can you see anybody?" asked the Administrator.

Mulford looked around behind him. "Hard to tell, sir. Place is pretty badly wrecked. There's a stink of burned wiring and cables. Looks like there was a lot of equipment up here."

Mulford's crude manner of expression was beginning to get on Cardif's nerves. However he forced himself to hold his temper because there were more important things to worry about now than putting a soldier in his place.

"Can you make it, sir?" echoed Yakinawo's worried voice behind him.

He didn't answer him as he kept on climbing. Finally Mulford was able to give him a hand and soon he was standing beside the old soldier. They turned to help Yakinawo and the other men.

"I don't think we should let so many troops come up here, sir," suggested Yakinawo. "It looks pretty dilapidated."

Cardif nodded and the Japanese officer shouted instructions into the depths. His voice echoed away into the shafts and passageways below. Cardif looked about him. At first he gathered the same impression of dust-covered debris and chaotic destruction.

Then he saw the Anti—a dark figure against a dark background who sat motionlessly in the remains of a control chair and stared at him, Cardif grasped Yakinawo's arm. The lieutenant nodded. Together with Mulford they approached the priest who sat there as though petrified. The Baalol servant was old, one of the oldest Cardif had ever seen. The ancient one was still alive, his colourless eyes shifting restlessly from Cardif to the lieutenant.

Suddenly Cardif guessed the reason for it and he raised his weapon. The priest knew exactly who he was. If the Anti were to betray him now, everything would be out in the open. But the old man remained silent. Cardif had been on the verge of shooting him but he finally lowered his persuader. His desperation and state of confusion were so great now that he would have fired at the oldster without compunction.

"Where can we find the High Priest?" Cardif demanded harshly.

Hanoor looked at him without expression. "Who can say?" His voice was so feeble that Cardif had to lean forward to hear him. "The realm of death is far and wide. Kudos can be anywhere."

"Are any of his deputy high priests still alive?"

"Yes," said Hanoor, "I!"

"I have to know the location of Trakarath, old man," Cardif told him. "Tell us that and you will be free."

"Freedom," said the Anti thoughtfully, "is an ambiguous term. What form of non-freedom should an old man like me have to fear?"

Cardif was at the limit of his self-control. "The location!" he shouted. "Out with it!"

"I am weary," said Hanoor faintly. "Do not torment me."

Cardif was about to attack the helpless old man but the voice of the Japanese lieutenant deterred him. "Sir—he's not going to talk."

Hanoor closed his eyes and leaned back against the busted headrest of the chair. He folded his thin arms over his wasted chest and his face remained as expressionless as stone. Cardif knew he would not learn the planet's position from this one—nor from any other Anti who might be found here in these ruins.

He had raised his hand to force another point but dropped it as though he had lost his strength. Without another word he shoved his way between Mulford and Yakinawo and returned to the staircase. The Japanese lieutenant watched him go, gathering the impression of a man who was lost.

* * * *

With a concluding wave of his hand Lt. Brazo Alkher finished his report. "And that was all we could learn from the Springers, sir," he said.

The two lieutenants had returned to the Control Central of the *Ironduke* and had related their adventure to Bell, Mercant and the other officers.

Allan D. Mercant scratched his chin reflectively. "At least it's something," he said slowly, "but we can't do very much with it. There is a possibility, however, that the robot Brain on Arkon 3 might be able to do more with such information."

This brought a worried frown to Bell's face. "That would mean we'd have to get Atlan's cooperation. With the way things are at the moment he won't be in a very friendly mood—although he did hold back his robot fleet."

Claudrin broke into the discussion. "I think it's our duty to inform the Arkonide concerning the success of the commando mission since it was only his holding still that made it possible."

"Alright, Jefe," Mercant agreed. "Set up a contact with Atlan." On the Arkonide flagship Gen. Alter Toseff had watched events on his viewscreens with a burning intentness, expecting that Gonozal VIII would order an attack. But the Emperor had merely sat there silently observing while deep in thought. Toseff had not dared to disturb the immortal in his deliberations yet he was filled with resentment against the Terrans who had attacked a planet of the Greater Imperium under the very guns of an Arkonide fleet.

If Gen. Toseff had suspected that Atlan was wishing his former allies luck, so that they could help Perry Rhodan, his rancour would have known no bounds.

The buzzing of the vidcom panel broke into Toseff's brooding train of thought. He switched on the receiver in order to take the call and in that moment the Emperor stirred out of his inactivity. He got up and came to his side. "Take it easy, General," he said.

Reginald Bell's broad face came into view. Behind him were Allan D. Mercant and that splendid fellow Claudrin, the commander of the *Ironduke*. Atlan simply could not suppress his feelings of sympathy for these men. "Well?" he inquired succinctly.

Bell looked at him uncertainly and cleared his throat noisily. "Perry has shot the blazes out of the base on Saos," he blurted out, his tone of voice making it clear that he did not approve of the action. "He'll soon be back on board without the information he was after. But my own plan worked out a little better. Lts. Alkher and Nolinov have captured two Springers who turned out to know a few facts about the central world of Baalol."

"Which world is it?" asked Atlan.

"We have the name of the sun it orbits. It's known as Aptut. It's supposed to be a binary star. The planet Trakarar is said to have rings around it like Saturn."

Atlan exchanged glances with Gen. Toseff. The Saratanian shook his head.

"I have never heard of such a system," said the Emperor.

Mercant spoke up. "It's supposed to be close to the centre of the galaxy. I know that area isn't exactly lacking in other stars and planets but this system is unusual enough, perhaps, to have been listed with its coördinates in the catalogues. At any rate there must be some kind of information about it in the memory banks of the robot Regent."

Bell hastily added: "We wanted to ask you to help us in our search for Trakarat. The Regent's help would certainly make it easier to figure out the points of reference."

Without hesitation Atlan gave him his assurance. "I'll do all I can to locate this peculiar solar system."

The Terrans' expressions of gratitude did him good. There he still saw his old true friends who would help him in any precarious situation. They suffered under the burden of Rhodan's illness as much as he.

"We'll transmit all the data we've picked up from the Springers," Bell told him. "You'll get a full transcript of the entire hearing."

"Every clue can be important," Atlan reminded him, "no matter how small. You should cross-examine the Traders again."

"Imperator," said Mercant solemnly, "there's one thing I'll promise you. You know this action here was not of our own doing, so as soon as it's wrapped up the Solar Fleet will remove itself from sovereign territory of the Greater Imperium."

They continued to discuss further details until Maj. Krefenbac advised that the 10 cruisers had come back and that Perry Rhodan was shuttling over to the *Ironduke* in a commuter craft. By special request of Reginald Bell the communication was cut off.

Atlan had become increasingly concerned over the description of Rhodan's illness and he decided to call his old friend personally after he had returned and taken over command of the *Ironduke* again. Even Bell's objections could not deter him from this decision.

After the connection with the Terran ship had been cut off, Atlan turned to Gen. Toseff. "Once more we have avoided having a war between the two Imperiums," he said.

"Wasn't the price a little too high, Your Eminence?" asked Toseff.

"Our prestige is still intact because the Solar Fleet will withdraw, so we can chalk it up to a military success that was achieved without bloodshed."

It was plain to see that the General might have wished to contradict him but either he was not sure of himself or his awe of Atlan was too great.

For some time they discussed the next steps that the undying Admiral would be taking and thus Gen. Toseff was gradually introduced to the whole plan and concept of rebuilding the Greater Imperium. The chief of the Saratan government came to see that Gonozal VIII intended to install Terran assistants everywhere. It could even be said theoretically that once a general agreement had been established the

Greater Imperium would soon be strongly under Earthly influence, while the scope of power of the present decadent dignitaries would become limited.

Atlan concluded: "I'm convinced that once Rhodan has gotten his health back we'll quickly reestablish the old friendly relations. The Terran assistants will return to their previous positions and our mutual trust will be strengthened even more. Believe me, General, without the Terrans we won't be able to hold the Greater Imperium together. We need their help to keep us from falling apart into a countless number of little kingdoms and empires."

"I hope that your reasoning in this is correct, Your Highness," said Toseff.

"Now I wish to speak to my very sick friend," Atlan told him. "Try to contact the *Ironduke*, General."

When the viewscreen began to flicker after a few seconds Atlan could not suppress a certain tension in his solar plexus. Somehow it was a strange feeling to be seeing Rhodan again under these conditions. How would Perry react to his call?

The screen cleared up and he could see into the Control Central of the *Ironduke*. In the background he made out a number of officers who were seated at their control consoles. Then a figure came into view from one side and filled the screen. Atlan opened his mouth in horror and irrepressibly blurted out, "Oh no!" He had to force himself to continue looking at this apparition which had once been Perry Rhodan. The First Administrator of the Solar Imperium had turned into a shapeless giant with a bloated face.

"What do you want?" was the question he heard on his speaker.

The Emperor could only continue staring in consternation. "Perry!" he moaned. "I didn't know it was as bad as this!"

"You can keep all your pitying drivel, Arkonide," replied Cardif-Rhodan angrily. "If you have something to say then get on with it—but don't give me all that tearful old-woman blubbering!"

Atlan endured the abuse in silence. He didn't notice that Gen. Toseff's hands were gripping certain control levers in such rage that his knuckles turned white. At this moment Atlan was swearing to himself that he would help his deformed friend no matter what the cost.

"You may count on my complete support, Perry," he said, and he cut the connection before Rhodan could insult him further.

"You shouldn't have submitted to that, Emperor!" shouted Toseff, beside himself with outrage.

Atlan had a mental vision again of all the adventures that he and Rhodan had come through together. He recalled their duel in the distant past and thought of the tacit understanding that had developed between them in the course of time. *Of these* things the General knew nothing. He only saw the present.

In the quiet interior of the robotship Atlan's voice sounded out with firm determination. "He is my friend, General, and I will do all I can to save him."

Toseff knew then that nothing would stand in the way of the Emperor's decision. Quietly he left the Control Central. He knew when a man wanted to be by himself. He appreciated the magnitude of Atlan's responsibility.

ORDER OF THE ACTION

[1/ BEAST AT BAY](#)

[2/ HARBINGERS OF BLACK DAWN](#)

[3/ THE GAME OF DEATH](#)

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[5/ THE NEMESIS EYE](#)

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THE EMPEROR AND THE MONSTER

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

GRIMLY, Bell spoke.

"I won't hold anything back, Atlan. We're at the brink of disaster."

"Trouble is starting to brew in the Fleet officers' corps. Even some of the mutants, our most important people"

"A revolt is taking shape!"

"If there's to be any hope of saving the Solar Imperium, we have to place Rhodan in protective custody immediately."

Rhodan in protective custody? But there must be a million troops blindly committed to the Administrator!

The explosive situation leads next issue to—

DUEL UNDER THE DOUBLE SUN

By

K.-H. Scheer

An Atlan Adventure