

CROSSROADS OF EMPIRE

CHIEF of the Mutant Corps to ATLAN:

"Rhodan was captured by his son. The Antis paramechanically brainwashed him, unlawfully altered his personality. Now he wants to find Trakarath and attack it."

"The survival of the Solar Empire is threatened. War is imminent. We must have the full cooperation of the Baalol scientists."

"For Perry Rhodanis the Earth"

The crisis leads to—

DUEL UNDER THE DOUBLE SUN

1/ CROSSROAD OF EMPIRES

HEAT!

In my helmet phones I heard the metallic voice of a robot: "It is getting warm, Your Highness."

I turned my gaze toward the rugged horizon where the yellow sun of the Saos System was just topping the horizon. Yes, it was going to get pretty hot. My spacesuit's automatic filter system shoved the ultraviolet shield across my faceplate. Against the hard contours of the land the nearby heaps of debris and ruination suddenly took on a less desolate aspect. Here and there I thought I detected a movement but of course it was merely an illusion.

On Saos, the second planet of a catalogue star without a name, there was nothing left alive—not since Terran ships and Arkonide squadrons had penetrated the atmospheric envelope. We had captured a stronghold of the Antis and had obtained some information that hadn't been immediately usable. The surviving members of the Baalol cult who had been taken prisoner could not enlighten us because they did not know where the legendary planet of Trakarath was located.

The most important details had been picked up from two Galactic Traders. At the present time they were on Earth where an attempt was being made to check out their information. But apparently they had spoken the truth. Trakarath was no doubt the home world of the Antis.

"Your Eminence should not remain outside too long."

I murmured a confirmation into my helmet mike. The ship's automatic analysers had recognized the dangers of my planetary environment. I was wearing a light spacesuit that was not equipped with a heavy-duty air-conditioning unit.

"I'll be there in a few minutes," I said. "Do we have any positive tracking coordinates yet?"

"Not yet, Your Excellence."

My chronometer indicated 10 a.m., standard galactic time. The Terrans were not being very punctual. I fell to brooding again. Ever since the illness of my friend Perry Rhodan relatively insignificant things had a way of getting on my nerves. Even this slight delay of our rendezvous time made me uneasy. A few months previously I would not have been concerned about such trivialities but now I was already in a panic just because the time agreed upon had been exceeded by merely 10 minutes.

I shook my head in my perplexity and bumped against the earphones.

From my extra-brain my logic sector chided me: *an insignificant factor, considering the distance of 33,000 light-years.*

I became impatient with myself. Of course 10 minutes were insignificant. Even if the Terran delegation arrived 10 hours late it would still not be a matter for argument.

The catalogue sun, known only as 41-B-1847-ArqH, was high enough now to bathe the nearby mountaintops with a dark-red tint. It seemed as if blood had been spilled down their sides. Blood! I shivered although my air-conditioning meter indicated an outside temperature of more than 70° Fahrenheit. Saos was a desert world without a breathable atmosphere. The planet belonged to the Arkonide Imperium and was thus under my jurisdiction.

On my home world, Arkon 1, no one knew where I had gone in the fast robot cruiser. My sole object was to be able to confer with the leading men of Earth and to express myself directly concerning the current situation.

The reports concerning the state of Rhodan's health were very alarming. It had been determined that his cell activator had grown into his body and caused an unknown phenomenon of 'explosive cell division'. It was not possible to remove the dangerous device by means of surgery. Inasmuch as my own cell activator had kept me healthy and youthful for 10,000 years, by Earthly reckoning. I could not understand how Rhodan's activator had produced such an effect.

Had some mistake been made in the activator's programming? Was it possible that the individual synchronization adjustments were not properly aligned with Rhodan's biological frequencies? Unknown to Terran intelligence agents I had flown to the synthetic planet Wanderer in an attempt to answer these questions. I had hoped to be able to discuss the problem with the composite entity who lived there. However, the disembodied intelligence called *It* was not available for such a contact. In other words, *It* preferred to maintain silence. So I had been forced to make the long return journey without bringing any new help for Rhodan.

The outside temperature continued to increase. The sun rose above the mountain chain and flooded the rugged terrain with its brilliant light. The dreary desolation of the ruined Anti base was suddenly accentuated by the stark illumination. Here the god-priests of the Baalol cult had tried to lure the Terrans onto a false trail. But 2 young officers of the Solar Fleet had been able to see through the deception in time.

Saos was not the home world of the Antis, after all. Meanwhile I had refrained from taking action against the Terran landing manoeuvres because I had not considered it to be a serious threat to my position as Emperor of the stellar empire. In fact I had just recently learned that the Antis had been trying to provoke a military conflict between Arkon and Terra.

But none of these things could explain why my friend was gradually becoming a monstrosity. The Security Chief of the Solar Imperium, Allan D. Mercant, had informed me that the explosive cell division was causing uncontrolled growth. He said that Rhodan would increase in height about 1 cm per day. I did some calculating. Since our last contact, which even then had only been via spacecom videophone, 51 days had passed. At present the date by earth reckoning was Oct. 20, 2103.

I wondered what he would probably look like now that wiry Terran who had united humanity and brought it peace. 51 days—that meant an equal number of centimetres of growth, in height as well as girth! Perry must have become a colossus by now.

I lifted a hand to shade my eyes which were dazzled by the light in spite of the automatic filters. The broad kettle basin containing the ruins of the Anti stronghold was hardly inspiring enough to make me want to linger here any longer. Also in my present state of mind it was not good for me to brood intensively over insoluble problems. I was not able to use the one advantage I had gained from all of these strange events. I still needed the final evaluations of the robot Regent of Arkon.

Slowly I made my way down the steep slope of the basin, taking great care not to stumble and fall. Saos had a gravity reading of 1.3 and was in general a very unpleasant world. This is why it had never been settled by Arkonide colonists.

My cruiser lay 100 meters away on the canyon floor. I was the only living passenger. However, the robot crew was just as reliable as Arkonide personnel—in fact perhaps better, I had to confess. The mental and physical decadence among the Arkonides of the realm could no longer be denied. I was already toying with certain considerations of which the humans knew nothing as yet. Had it not been for Rhodan's illness I might have introduced certain steps of negotiation weeks before this. In my position as the absolute ruler I led a phantom existence. At my disposal were a giant fleet, thousands of colonial worlds and several hundred million fighting machines of every description but I lacked both true friends and capable crewmen to man my spaceships.

Within the stellar empire chaotic conditions were developing. It was difficult to counteract uprisings and revolutions with the robot fleet alone because I could never monitor and supervise the measures taken by the robot central control, at least not to the extent that it was necessary and desirable to do so. So this had led to harsh treatment and misunderstandings which had only served to increase colonial anger and resentment. For some weeks now I had known that my position was untenable. I needed help from the Terrans under Rhodan's leadership. If he were to use his excellently well trained men, who were in every respect more alert and active than Arkonides, there was a chance of still saving the weakened Imperium. If I had been backed up by such personnel it would never have occurred to me to entertain thoughts of surrendering or even voluntary annexation. But in the best interests of the Empire I had come to consider this as the best solution.

Khrest, the long-dead Arkonide scientist, had always maintained that by physical necessity the Terrans would inherit the Imperium. And finally it had come to this—or it might have if Perry Rhodan hadn't changed over night. I had known the human race for thousands of years. In laughter and sorrow, in victory and defeat, I had shared their destinies with them. But I also knew how quickly these intelligent inhabitants of the third Sol planet could fall into despair and resignation, which happened especially in

cases of serious illness. I had always considered Rhodan to be strong-willed and disciplined but even he had now gone from one extreme to the other.

Prior to the catastrophe with the cell activator he had been a clear-thinking man of tolerance and forbearance but shortly after the abnormal cell division had started he had become a carping and hot-tempered person with very unpleasant characteristics. He irritated his oldest and closest friends, even deceiving them, and he had taken every opportunity to insult and provoke me. Whereas his political operations had formerly been worked out with ingenuity and tactfully handled his policy had now degenerated into a crude demonstration of his military power.

This was not the Perry Rhodan into whose hands I could entrust the destiny of the Arkonide Imperium. In the course of recent events he had made such massive threats that I had been forced with a heavy heart to arrive at a critical decision. I hardly dared to think of it and yet my commitment was now irretrievable.

I knew that indirectly I was stabbing Earth's humanity in the back. Since I could see no other way of blocking Rhodan's military intervention, I had promised the Akons 1,000 modern spaceships. By special order all troops and officials had been recalled to Earth. From a strategic standpoint this had undermined my laboriously built-up plans for recovery and dealt a staggering blow to my whole administrative structure. The representatives of my venerable race were not reliable enough. There were very few Arkonides I could depend upon in terms of spaceship crews and personnel. I was lacking in effective manpower everywhere. So it was that I had been forced to fall back on help from the Akons, who were the direct descendants of our mother race.

Since the Akons had no reason to be fond of Rhodan or the Earth they had immediately agreed to assist but had demanded the 1,000 ships because they had very few of their own. I had acquiesced in this but the ships were still on Arkon 2 since the Akon crews had not yet completed their hypno-training. I had deliberately held back on supplying the hypno-training equipment because I had still hoped for a change of mind on the part of Rhodan. However, judging by the latest reports his condition had worsened.

Such was the situation on that 20th day of October of the year 2103. Reginald Bell, who was Rhodan's closest friend and second-in-command, had requested a secret conference with me. I had agreed at once and suggested the planet Saos as a meeting point. So now I was waiting for the Terrans to arrive.

I had just reached the first landing strut of the cruiser when the Control Central made an announcement over my helmet radio.

"We have a tracking indication, Your Eminence. The sensors have registered a clear transition warp-shock. Object entering system at speol (speed of light) commencing retropulsion manoeuvres. Energy trace being received at magnitude 17. It is a Terran cruiser, Your Highness."

I stopped involuntarily and looked up. They were here! They were only 30 minutes off schedule which in cosmonautical terms was an expert performance. I did not feel enthusiasm, however, because this demonstration of their usual efficiency only served to emphasize my own problem. I knew if I had 100 million men like these I would be able to resurrect the crumbling Imperium of my ancestors within a year. With inner resignation I entered the groundlock. The landing would not take place for another half-hour or so.

I returned to my quarters, where I put in another call to the robot Regent. The calculations were nearing completion. I would have the results by the time the Terrans arrived. So I sat there and waited while I contemplated 2 main problems.

The first, of course, was to help Rhodan—this had to be taken care of, no matter how. But I also had to make it clear to Reginald Bell why I had turned to the Akons for help. The Terrans should be made to understand that it was no light matter to keep on challenging the Arkonide Imperium.

They did not make threats, you fool!—retorted my logic sector.*It was only the sick one!*

I struggled for my self-composure. It was with mixed feelings that I looked forward to the imminent conference.

2/ THE TWISTED TYRANT

The little man with the golden crown of hair could hardly conceal his consternation. Allan D. Mercant, Solar Marshal and Chief of Intelligence, pressed his fingers together so tightly that his knuckles crackled audibly.

We were in the command wardroom adjacent to the Control Central of the light cruiser *Atlantis*. Reginald Bell remained silent. After my announcement he had quickly exchanged glances with John Marshall, who was Chief of the Mutant Corps. Professor Eric Manoli pushed the film cassette to one side indecisively. In his capacity as physician he had given me a report on Perry Rhodan's condition.

Mercant cleared his throat. In his close-fitting uniform he appeared to be more unpretentious than usual but the impression was deceptive. Mercant was unquestionably one of the most dangerous men in the Solar Imperium.

"Have I understood you correctly, sir? You have promised the Akons 1000 ships?—1,000 modern spaceships?" His blue eyes turned to me questioningly.

"I had no other alternative. Perry's threats were the same as an indirect declaration of war. There's not a Terran left in the Imperium and you know my difficulties. It's not only a matter of counteracting Rhodan's actions. Beyond that I've been forced to keep a lot of turmoil under control within the realm itself. That is only possible with an effective fleet."

"Sir, I believe you have approximately 100,000 robot units at your disposal."

I waved a hand impatiently. Mercant knew his argument was not applicable. "*Robot* units—that's just the point! My opponents have long since learned how to handle ships that are positronically controlled. I need elite organic crews."

Bell came into the discussion. His broad face was expressionless. "Let's drop that part of the subject," he said decisively. His gaze seemed very pensive as he turned to me. "Atlan, under certain conditions would you be willing to break off your alliance with the Akons?"

"What conditions?"

John Marshall finally sat down. He had avoided any attempts to probe the contents of my mind. Nor

would he have succeeded because after the Terran cruiser landed I had built up my paramental monoscreen.

Bell walked over to Manoli and picked up the film cassette. "We've shown you what's happened to Rhodan. No one could blame you if you thought of him as a monster. I'll confess that I've had that impression more than once, myself."

"What conditions?" I asked, deliberately interrupting him.

"You are very adamant, sir," interjected Marshall.

"Not at all. As long as I'm still asking questions, as long as I'm still here negotiating with you—Rome is not lost."

Mercant smiled. He was probably thinking of my past. But aside from that it must have seemed strange to hear an Arkonide Emperor speak of an ancient Earthly city. However, the colloquialism appeared to relieve some of the tension.

Bell put the film cassette to one side. "OK, then we'll lay our cards on the table. Perry is in the process of ruining everything we've built up since the 20th century. Of course his actions and attitudes can be excused on a personal basis but in a larger sense they can't be tolerated any longer. He no longer accepts the advice of old friends. You wouldn't believe what kinds of underhanded chicanery we've had to put up with in the past few weeks. It all started with the unexpected activity of the cell activator, which we didn't even know he had—and now the thing's practically buried in his chest. He's irritable, impatient and both unfair and unjust in everything he does or says."

"He's completely changed from the old Rhodan," confirmed Manoli. He spoke with authority because he had also been a member of the unique astronaut team over 100 years ago which had landed on Earth's moon. There the 4 men had found the representatives of my own race and from that point onward everything had begun which had led to the creation of the Solar Imperium.

I at first sought to make a logical assessment of what Bell was inferring but finally I didn't dare to contemplate the conclusions. Instead I reported my fruitless flight to the artificial planet, Wanderer, where Homunk the bio-robot advised me by radio that *t* was not available for consultation.

Mercant studied me for some moments before he spoke. "Sir, we had expected you to make a move of this sort. We're grateful to you but I could have told you at once that it would be useless to try it. We've run our own evaluations using computerized logic and the indications are that It is not interested in helping Rhodan. The cell activator, which he obtained under mysterious circumstances, appears to be a form of punishment for him. What transgression he may be charged with is beyond our knowledge."

This statement alerted me. Mercant's tone of voice was strange. When I looked at him searchingly he dropped his gaze. What was he getting at? What did he suspect? If he had something definite in mind, why didn't he come right out with it?

"Alright, Mercant," said Bell gruffly, "get off the cloak and dagger bit! Why should a composite entity like that be interested in punishing somebody who's probably the most important puzzle piece in his whole galactic game? What do you mean by 'punishment' anyway? We've been studying this thing for weeks. The smartest brains in human civilization have been working on this question and the most modern computer equipment has been put to use. The whole thing has to be a technical failure of some kind." He turned abruptly and came up to me. "Or have you ever experienced a similar malfunction with

your own device, Atlan?"

It felt good to be addressed by my own name once more. It sounded much better than 'Your Eminence'. It was astonishing how much rapport I seemed to have with these men. Each of them was a personality who was interesting or even fascinating in his own right. I belonged with them—I could sense it intuitively.

I touched my chest. Under the thin material of my uniform I could feel the egg-shaped rejuvenation device which had never failed me in 10,000 years of time by Earthly reckoning. "No, Bell," I answered.

"So that settles it!" he exclaimed. "It has to be a chance coincidence—a fluke!" He slammed a fist emphatically against the palm of his hand. With his head thrust stubbornly between his shoulders he paced the length of the wardroom.

"Take it easy," warned Prof. Manoli. "Your nerves are on edge."

Bell made a hefty gesture with his hand. His rusty red shock of hair was standing out almost rigidly from his angular skull. I had never seen him so worked up before. He came back to me then and placed both hands on my shoulders, gently shaking me in the process. I held my position rigidly.

"Atlan, I've asked for this conference because we need your help. Do you understand? We need your help!"

Something began to stir in me that I could not define. The men of Earth needed me! It was a wonderful feeling. "Tell me about it, Bell."

He laughed but with an irony of lament. "I won't hold anything back, Atlan—not anymore. Perry has turned into a tyrant. Certain members of the Solar Government have been arrested for very flimsy reasons. He's making a very tricky use of the emergency powers act. Officers and crewmembers are punished without cause and non—human intelligences are insulted and challenged. We're at the brink of disaster. The result is that trouble is starting to brew in the Fleet officers' corps. Even some of the mutants, our most important people, are beginning to sulk and bristle. 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. Solar Marshal Freyt, Deringhouse and other top Chiefs of Staff send you their best compliments through me. Mercant, Marshall and Manoli have come here personally. Atlan, you're an old friend of humanity—you have to help us!"

Bell seemed to be at the edge of a nervous crisis. Manoli gave me a warning signal and the telepath had his eyes closed. Apparently Marshall was probing Bell's consciousness. I was shaken. Groping for a solution I looked across imploringly at Mercant. He was the pivotal point of stabilization in this circle of Terrans. A plan could only be put together with Mercant and Marshall. Behind them, were Solar Intelligence and the powerful Mutant Corps.

"How can you speak of protective custody?" I asked. "There must be a million troops who are blindly committed to Rhodan. His human greatness in the past has not been forgotten by these men. Probably they will never fully understand how much the Administrator has changed. Or have you generally let it be known what his condition is?"

"We've avoided that," said Mercant dryly. "Sir, we are anxious to have Perry safeguarded and in security. The Galactic Medicos and our own specialists are working day and night to find a cure for the explosive cell division. Rhodan himself is of the opinion that he can only get help from the Antis. He

knows that 20 cell activators with automatic individual adjustments fell into their hands. He seems to overlook the fact that a number of Antis have met with disaster because of an operative failure of even those devices. The only thing he's interested in is to find Trakarat. It's useless to try to advise him that there can be no help for him there. I'm convinced the Baalol priests are powerless. They are also in the dark as to why those supposedly life-prolonging activators have such fatal side effects."

I decided to play my trump card although I didn't have the calculation results as yet. I knew the Regent would be reporting shortly. "It's probable that within a few minutes I can tell you where the red binary star Aptut is located."

Mercant looked startled. Bell sprang to his feet and Marshall's eyes widened in astonishment. I raised a hand defensively.

"Calm down. I'm expecting a hypercom message. We should not discard any means that might be of possible help to Perry. I think the protective custody idea is preposterous. Let him carry on as is but watch every step he takes. You still have time before you remove him from office. You can't risk a revolution just because a few leading officers are getting restless. You are no longer living in the Middle Ages of your planet's history."

Bell sat down again. Mercant leaned his back against a viewscreen cabinet. After awhile, Marshall spoke up with his characteristic self-composure. "Why do you think, sir, that you have found the planet Trakarat?"

I breathed a secret sigh of relief. With this question the conference became more objective. It was also high time to tone down the emotional tensions here. These 4 men were not usurpers—quite the contrary! Rhodan could not have found more trustworthy friends than they were. But if they were already playing with the idea of a preventive arrest of their leader, then the Earth must really be in trouble.

Mercant gave me a challenging look. "Why, sir?"

"Because a Terran commando group was able to capture two Springers. They were present in the Anti stronghold by some previous arrangement. High Priest Kutlos did not reveal anything more concerning the galactic position of Trakarat but it seems the two Springers testified that they had heard the Antis discussing it. And so the Terran specialists picked up a bit of information. Trakarat is said to be an unusually beautiful world with 2 rings formed of cosmic dust material. Moreover, this celestial body orbits around an equally unusual double red binary sun which possesses altogether 16 planets. You will recall that you transmitted these data to me about 50 Terran days ago. I promised you that I would check out this information."

Mercant remembered this very clearly. It was only now that I realized he had not come here merely to discuss Perry Rhodan's arrest. There was still more involved. I chuckled in some vexation. It had taken me a long time to see through the shrewd fellow. Being a semi-mutant with a slight telepathic faculty, he was even trying to break through my monoscreen.

"Stop that, Mercant!" I snapped at him angrily. "You'll probably never get over the habit of mistrusting people."

"It won't happen again. Please, what have you been able to determine? Have you found the name of the planet in your computer memory banks?"

"No, it is unknown to the Regent as well as to the Akons."

Bell cursed aloud but immediately apologized. I walked past him toward the gallery of viewing screens but as I did so I clapped him on the shoulder. "That's all right, old friend, just let it all out," I told him, and then I returned to the subject. "When the Regent wasn't able to find any point of reference in his memory registers, I turned to the Akons. You know that Rhodan's attack against them resulted in the destruction of their blue energy screen. They weren't too cooperative. But after I agreed to supply them with 1,000 spaceships they said they would open the Akon archives. In those records they even had the names of the men and women who founded the Arkonide Imperium about 20,000 years ago. I approached the research with the assumption that the Antis weren't necessarily descendants of *Arkonide* emigrants but might have originated directly from the common mother world. And this assumption proved to be correct."

Mercant took a deep breath. "My compliments! No one but you thought of that."

I gave him a mock bow. It was surprising that he himself had not thought of it. "The precise historical records of the Akons might make it possible to find the name of the planet Trakarat, I thought. This did not develop although they came across data concerning a strange red binary star. Both of the suns are almost equal in mass—which you'll admit is an unusual phenomenon. Moreover, the double sun turned out to have 16 planets! That was enough for me. I have turned over the Akon figures to the robot Regent for astronomical calculation. As I mentioned, the results should be coming in now any minute."

Nobody said a word. Only Bell's heavy breathing could be heard. Mercant cracked his knuckles again. It was a habit I had not noticed before. So even he was on edge.

"How is it," he asked, "that the name of the red sun is known but not the name of the planet?"

"There can be many reasons for it," I said. "In the course of thousands of years its original identity could have been changed. At the time of its colonization perhaps there was little contact anymore with the Akons themselves. On the other hand we know now that the Antis are not descendants of my race. They have originated directly from the mother race of the Akons. I am convinced that the Baalols only acquired their strange faculties many thousands of years after their first emigration. From then on their expansion began throughout the worlds of the known galaxy. We have seen how dangerous these intelligences can be. Their paramental development is anti-mutant—they have powers which counteract the forces of the mutants of Terra, Mercant. Don't think it's such an easy matter to attack Trakarat."

"We've developed a few special weapons, sir," he told me casually. When I stared at him with a sudden new intentness he smiled again. "I shall take the liberty of letting you have one of our combination double-barreled 'persuaders'. These weapons were used for the first time a few weeks ago. We haven't been asleep, sir!"

I could believe that unconditionally. The Terrans had never fallen asleep yet, ever since they took their first step into space. They were an admirable people and I knew I had more empathy for humans than I did for Arkonides.

But I was impatient now as I looked at the clock. My time was very limited. On Arkon 1, the Crystal World of the realm, an Akon delegation was waiting for me. My flight to Saos had already upset the protocol. Bell followed my gaze. A machine began to hum somewhere in the cruiser's Control Central which was adjacent to the officers' wardroom. On the viewscreen connected with the outside cameras I could see my robotship. Now that the sun was higher in the sky its light glittered among the mountainous ruins. The last shadows disappeared. The contours of the only partially crumpled temple pyramid stood out sharply against the barren cliff walls.

I pointed to the viewscreen. "You really worked this place over," I said, "but to what purpose? Did it get you any help for Rhodan?"

"Perhaps," said Marshall. "At least we picked up some information about Trakarat."

"Alright, I'll grant you that. But if we can determine the galactic position of this world—what do you expect to gain from an attack?"

"Diplomatic relations have been broken between the Solar Imperium and the race of the Antis, sir. The ultimatum we gave them terminates within 5 hours."

"So it's war?"

"Yessir. A terrible war, I might add. Up till now these intelligences have been able to camouflage their actual goals. The Baalol cult is an underground organization in disguise. Their object is to gain political influence over all the known races of the galaxy and they've already succeeded on many worlds. It's time to clear up these relationships."

"But that still doesn't explain what you hope to achieve through the discovery of the Antis' home world. Do you really suspect that they have a possibility of curing Rhodan's explosive cell division?"

"He's firmly convinced of it, sir," Mercant explained. "Let's give it a try."

I looked at him dubiously. This man was too smart to even seriously consider a mere stab in the dark.

"We believe we can come to an agreement with the Antis, sir," said Bell quickly. "Atlan, you know yourself what potentialities these entities have. Our own telepaths can't penetrate into Rhodan's consciousness but maybe the Antis can. A few doctors have asserted that the harmful activity of the cell activator could be attributed to a mental short-circuit which might have caused an undetectably small distortion of Perry's individual frequencies. You ought to know how dangerous such small inaccuracies can be since you yourself carry an activator."

Logical—reported my extra-brain. I nodded thoughtfully. "That's a reasonable consideration, Bell. Are you saying that the paramechanical brainwashing the Antis put him through could have changed Rhodan's brainwave frequencies?"

"That's right, sir," confirmed Marshall. "The Chief was captured by his son. We found out how he was processed during their hearings. After his escape he acquired the activator but he didn't seem to suspect that he had come away from there with a personality alteration. This is the only explanation we've come up with so far, and there's nothing to disprove it. Help us to discover Trakarat. The Antis will be able to tell us what equipment they used on Perry. Meanwhile he seems to have realized what was done to him at that brainwash hearing. So that's why we understand why he wants to find Trakarat and attack it—which must be done. If you look at the basic facts, a leading statesman has been injured or impaired through the unlawful use of force. Since this impairment also threatens the survival of the Solar Imperium, Marshall Freyt will issue a declaration of war. Although we are ready to negotiate we want the full cooperation of the Baalol scientists. Please understand that Rhodan is the Earth!"

Yes, I could definitely understand this. If Rhodan were to die the existence of the Solar Imperium would be questionable, which was sufficient cause for the humans to take serious steps.

A few seconds later my robot cruiser's Control Central signalled me and the Com Room of the *Atlantis* channelled the call into the wardroom. The Regent was on the hypercom. I asked for direct transmission to us and the receiver screen brightened to reveal the line symbol announcing the Regent.

The message was short. It made little difference to this greatest robot Brain of the galaxy what the purpose of its data might be. It performed its duty in accordance with its previous instructions.

"This is the Regent speaking," the brain announced, bringing a metallic ring to the speaker. "Subject: program IP-60-157. Conversion of Akon data in relation to cosmonautic factors: Terra and Greater Imperium. Result: binary star Aptut is 38,439 light-years from Terra. It has 16 planets. Hypertransition coördinates will be sent separately. It was possible to establish the galactic position with 100% certainty. The double sun Aptut belongs to the so-called pincushion sector of the 14th central galactic arm, per Arkonide catalogue notation. On the basis of furnished inputs it may be assumed with 99% certainty that the planet Trakarar is the 6th world of the Aptut System. That is all."

I returned a coded impulse from my command sender in order to confirm the perfect reception of the rough data. It was only then that the Regent started sending the detail data. It wouldn't have done us much good to merely have a reference to the pincushion sector in the 14th central galactic arm. It would have left us with the task of hunting through probably about 300,000 stars.

We waited until the robotship had deciphered the coded data and relayed the figures through the Terran cruiser's digital indicators. It took more than an hour, however, before we had the computer readouts of the coördinates on plastic strips in our hands. Mercant appeared to be inwardly very excited. Reginald Bell who was the only cosmonaut among the top officers immediately requested the corresponding microtapes from the catalogue racks. I could see that he was no longer available for conversation.

The officer of the watch helped me into my spacesuit. There wasn't much more to say. I had to get back. But as I said goodbye, Prof. Manoli made a special request. His tone of voice was urgent.

"Sir, please keep this meeting between us a top secret. Perry knows nothing about it. In his present frame of mind he'd interpret our discussion as a treasonable contact with the enemy."

The doctor said nothing more but his words impressed upon me how tyrannical Rhodan had become. Minutes later I floated down to the ground from the polar airlock. Marshall and 3 of the cruiser's crew accompanied me to my ship.

When I regained my quarters on board I switched on the outside observation screen. I saw John Marshall's tall, familiar figure and his congenial smile as he waved to me. He seemed to know that at the moment I was staring anxiously at the screen. Then the 4 men were gone and I was alone once more with all my miseries and worries.

"Imperator, you're a sad old hound dog!" That's what Rhodan had said to me the last time we had met in person. It seemed that ever since his experiences with Thomas Cardif he had avoided confronting me. Our telecom communications had been insignificant and in recent times actually unpleasant.

As these thoughts forced themselves upon me it was with a great effort that I kept myself from falling into a serious state of depression. Yes, I was a mighty man but also a lonely one. In a few minutes now my friends would blast off. At home the Akon delegation was waiting. Political complications were looming on the horizon. I could only keep on hoping that the Terrans would succeed in normalizing Rhodan's condition. To attack the Earth was to me an unimaginable thing. No one is fond of shooting at something that's grown close to one's heart and which one clutches to him in his silent moments. I had many silent

hours in which my memories haunted me. They were the only things of beauty that was left to me.

It took me a long time to conquer my mood of depression. I finally stepped into the cruiser's Control Central. I was the only person there because for me robots were not 'persons'. When one of them addressed me with the title of Emperor, something tightened inside me. Why couldn't they simply say "Atlan"—or as far as I was concerned, just "Sir"? Among humans I had taken it so much for granted.

I bellowed at the machines around me but they only gave me their stereotyped smiles.

"Your Eminence requires rest," said a plastic-clothed medorobot which had been especially constructed to watch over my health.

I scolded it, using Terran words which I had first heard in the days of the Hohenstaufen Emperor Barbarossa. My photographic memory had not permitted me to forget them. I had accompanied Red Beard over the Alps on several campaigns and had sought to talk him out of his Italian policies. After the battle of Tusculum, I had given him an injection from my scanty provisions of Arkonide antibiotics but wasn't able to counteract the ravages of the plague. In 1177 a negotiated peace had been arranged in Venice with Pope Alexander. At the time I had thought of being able to found a world empire with the help of these 2 important men but it seemed that humans had not yet become mature enough for that.

Somebody was nudging me urgently. I awakened from my reveries. My extra-brain had almost taken complete possession of me. Seconds went by before I realized where I was. The Control Central of an Arkonide robotship was no place for the vision of a red-bearded Kaiser.

As I turned angrily toward the commanding robot, it took a step back from me. "Your Highness, there is a hypercom message. It is of top priority," the machine insisted.

It was only then, I became aware of the shrilling of the callboard. My anger subsided as I hurried to the Com Room and switched on the receiver.

The Regent immediately announced himself. "His Administrative Excellence, Perry Rhodan, wishes urgently to speak to Your Eminence. What shall I tell him?"

The question was brief but it was more significant than the robot Brain realized. As my thoughts raced I felt a rising tension. What did the Terran want? Until now he had avoided asking for my advice. Actually it was only owing to Bell's decisiveness that I had even been able to contact Perry at all on the hypercom.

"Attention—Imperator to Regent: ask the Administrator to be patient. Tell him I'm making a surveillance flight on board a robot cruiser and that I shall contact him shortly."

"Understood, Your Highness. I shall keep this channel open and stand by."

The scanning lines formed a red triangle. I knew I could rely upon the Brain.

I called Allan D. Mercant on the normal video band. He appeared to be astonished. The *Atlantis* was ready for takeoff.

"Don't ask questions, Mercant," I cut in swiftly. "Rhodan wants to talk to me. Delay your takeoff and listen in on what he has to say."

"What—Perry...?!" somebody exclaimed beside him, and then Bell's face came onto my screen. "He called you? I don't get it. What's wrong?"

"I don't know that yet. The Regent is letting on that he can't locate me yet. Rhodan is waiting. Apparently he's using Terrania's main transmitter. Stand by at your receiver and I'll transfer the incoming hypercom to you on the normal video band."

"He mustn't find out that we're here."

I nodded and moved away from the pickup camera. The ship's central computer robot made the channel conversions so that the crew of the *Atlantis* could listen in. I gave instructions to the robot Brain on Arkon 3 to pick up the incoming transmission from the Earth, to decode it, amplify it again and beam it out to my cruiser. There was no better relay station in the galaxy. Although the Arkon System was relatively close, the Brain had 10 million kilowatts of broadcast power at its disposal.

"The message is not coded," explained the Regent before he switched over.

This news was anything but reassuring to me. I had always known Perry Rhodan to be far-sighted and cautious. He had never sent even the most innocuous or unimportant message before without using pulse-burst coding and a scrambler. So this made me think that there was more involved here than just a message across an abyss of more than 43,000 light-years.

I attempted to pull myself together as I took a seat in front of the hypercom console. The outlines of a human figure took shape on the screen. I waited until the Regent had made the proper adjustments for clarity. Then I was looking into a part of the main Terranian transmitter station and everything was so clear that I might as well have been physically present in the room. I did not recognize the officer who first appeared. He asked me to hold on for "just a moment" because the Administrator was temporarily occupied.

"Carry on, Major," I answered. "I'll wait!"

I turned to look at a separate viewscreen which could not be seen by anyone in Terrania. There were the faces of Mercant and Bell, who nodded to me wordlessly. Apparently they were now in a position to listen in.

This transmission is costing hundreds of thousands, announced my logic sector.

I became angry at the unnecessary remark. Naturally the required expenditure of power for such a trans-stellar message was not going to be cheap.

A few minutes later I was aware of strange noises. It sounded something like the death-rattle of a dying animal or—yes, that was it—the heavy panting of overfed monsters such as I had hunted on many a primitive world. My eyes began to water, which for an Arkonide was a sign of high agitation. But I realized that I must not show any signs of my reactions. I forced a smile onto my face and checked my expression in the reflecting surface of a blank viewscreen. I resolved to keep the smile going, no matter what happened.

A deformed figure loomed into the wide-angled optic's range of vision. I closed my eyes briefly only to open them wide again. I saw a monstrosity, a gigantic figure which could hardly be called human anymore. A bloated face came into view in which nothing was normal with the possible exception of the eyes. They had not become distended or spongy like the rest of the bodily tissue.

But they were terrible eyes, no longer the ones I had known and held so dear. They had lost their grey-green sparkle of irony. Now they were a baleful yellow with the predatory look of a wolf—over-bright, filled with a nervous quick movement and devoid of any trace of feeling.

The owner of these eyes was—impossibly!—Perry Rhodan.

The pickup microphones in the Terranian station seemed to be supersensitive. I heard the thud of the body as it settled into the seat before the screen. Mighty hands became visible which were also deformed and grossly porous looking.

So this was what my friend had become! This was the man whose dry humour I had learned to treasure as much as his warlike severity. Now all I saw in him was a horror of dissolution.

"Hello?" came the first word from my speaker. "Atlan? Is that you? No imitation?"

"The genuine article, little Barbarian," I answered hesitantly.

His face contorted into a scowling grimace and without reason he shouted curses at me. "...and I'll not stand for your impudent form of address! Let's get it clear right now who is the mightiest here, little admiral king of the robots! Or is there something else you can show for yourself? Bare your chest! Did you hear me? You will show me your cell activator!"

By this time he was acting like a madman. I saw his giant fists strike against the shielded pickup camera in blind rage. I sat there in frozen shock. I had not imagined that his mental deterioration had come to this point although Manoli had told me I must prepare myself for anything.

I tried to convince myself that any consideration at this point would be inappropriate. This man could only be restrained with harsh words and massive threats. But then I realized how false such a procedure would be. Let him insult me, I thought, let him rage. There was still a possibility of helping him. I pulled down the mag-zipper of my uniform and tore open my undershirt. I knew this would enable him to see the cell activator hanging on my naked chest.

He became silent immediately. The balled fists disappeared. The distorted face appeared again. He stared entranced at the device. His parted lips were trembling. "That... that's really your activator?"

"Yes, friend, you are looking at it."

I couldn't smile any longer. Still apparently out of his mind, Rhodan dropped his huge head into his arms and sobbed. It was agonizing for me to see him in this condition. I decided there would be no skirmish of words. Only a few moments before I had been ready to tell him that he was not the mightiest in the universe. Instead I spoke rapidly in order to calm him down. "Friend, are you looking for the planet Trakarar? Rest your mind—I have found it."

Never in my life had I heard such an outcry nor had I ever seen such a desperate hope in another man's eyes. And I had seen much suffering and dying in my time. He had raised up with his mouth gaping wide and seemed ready to crawl right into the hypercom optics. "Where... where is it located?"

"Right after we're through here the Regent will transmit the data to you immediately. I'm in the process of checking out the information from the Akons. No—now get hold of yourself and listen! It wasn't treason to contact them because only the Akons could know where the double sun of Aptut was to be

found."

"That's immaterial!" he shouted. "Are the coordinates valid? I don't care *where* you got them! Are they the right ones? Man—you answer me!"

He started to fume again but I became calmer. "They are correct. The Regent is working out the Akon details in 2 directions—one set related to Terran requirements and one for my own."

"How long will it take? I demand on the basis of our alliance that you back me up with every available unit of your fleet! When will the data get here? I'll take off at once!"

I answered him in a sharper tone than I had intended. "You will wait for my signal or you'll make the attack alone!"

He did not start raving again but I would never be able to forget the malicious look he gave me. Finally he even smiled and I had to close my eyes. "Not a very pleasant sight, am I?"

I looked at him again. "At the moment that's not important. I need about 24 hours to get the Arkonide Fleet under way. Even if I wanted to I can't move any faster than that. By then you will have received the necessary data for a rendezvous point. What are you using as your flagship?"

"The *Ironduke*. I demand that you come on board. I want to have you where I can watch you."

He laughed wickedly. Very deeply disturbed, I cut off the connection, after assuring him several times that the coordinate data were exact. By way of saying goodbye he had openly threatened to ruthlessly destroy my "miserable political structure along with its decadent robot ruler" in case I thought to betray him.

I groaned aloud and buried my face in my hands. Which brought the medorobot immediately to my side again. I dismissed it with an imperious wave of my hand and then looked at the other viewscreen.

"I ask you to forgive him, sir," said Mercant in depressed tones. "Perhaps now you have an idea of what's going on back on Terra. Still, the way he treated you was quite moderate by comparison."

I closed my uniform. "Forget it, Mercant."

"May I make a suggestion, sir?"

I only nodded to him, at a loss for words at the moment. How could a man change like that?—I asked myself.

"Since you have informed Rhodan concerning Trakarath it's no longer possible for us to deliver the data to him. He would become suspicious immediately. So we'll fly back and wait for the official reception of the coordinates. Do you agree with that?"

As I nodded again, Bell intervened. "Atlan, are you really coming on board the *Ironduke*? He'll give you a bad time."

"So what if he does? No one will ever be able to say I left a friend in the lurch. I only ask that you clear up one thing with the battleship's officers and crew."

"What's that?"

"Well, how should I express it? Inform the men that they should not take part in any possible hostilities between me and Rhodan. I know how to take care of myself. Do you have anything else to say? My time's running short."

"No, that's about it. Thanks for now—and don't forget the navdata concerning the rendezvous point. Our war declaration against the Antis will go out over an open intergalactic broadcast. Such a measure has already been justified by the 10,000-year plan of these criminal intelligences."

10 minutes later I heard the thundering of the Terran engines. Named after the island continent on ancient Earth which I had colonized, the *Atlantis* broke through the atmosphere of Saos and disappeared into the outer void.

I took off shortly thereafter. I failed in my attempts to avoid thoughts of Perry Rhodan. His deformed face continued to rise before me. When the robotic autopilot guided the ship into hypertransition and the first pains of dematerialisation touched me, it occurred to me that Mercant had not given me the new weapon he had promised me—but that could be taken care of later.

3/ OPERATION: "DESTINATION"

It was the 23rd of October, Terra time, 2103. Twenty hours before, the first units of the Arkonide robot fleet had emerged from hyperspace. At that time they formed a squadron at rendezvous point 'Destination', the centre of which was marked by a blue super giant without a planetary system. The star was located on the edge of the so-called 'pin-cushion sector' at a distance of 418.25 light-years from the red double sun Aptut.

The approach flight to the zone of operations had been made under cover of the strictest secrecy. Not a single Arkonide official or officer was informed of the undertaking. It had been difficult to program the robot Regent in this regard. No one could have helped me so I had been forced to remain day and night in the control central so that the corresponding instructions could be loaded into the Brain's positronic registers.

Because of this task the departure of my main fleet had been delayed, all of which made it necessary to send additional hypercom messages to Earth. And of course Rhodan had gone into another fit. After the robot Regent had issued the rendezvous coördinates the Solar Fleet had plunged into hyperspace under one command. So when my own cruiser formations arrived, the Terran forces were already there.

I had been forced to wait until the last minute. Rhodan didn't seem to understand the internal political difficulties I had to contend with. Naturally the mass takeoffs had been noticed. I had avoided unpleasant questions from suspicious members of the Supreme Council by making vague references to fleet manoeuvres. I had gotten rid of questioning admirals with harsh commands and by pointing out the incompetence of officers and crews. In the process I acquired new enemies but I didn't dare utter a word concerning operation 'Destination'. The god-priests of the Baalol cult had their spies everywhere. Whereas the robot Regent was reliable I could not trust the later descendants of those Arkonides who had constructed the giant Brain. For me it was all very depressing.

20 hours after the departure of the lighter squadrons I had taken off with the heavier units. Prior to this I had been forced to contact Reginald Bell, using top secret pulse-code in which I beseeched him to restrict Rhodan's insistent calls. In his great impatience he didn't seem to realize how revealing such repeated communications could be. Bell had finally managed to put Rhodan in front of dead microphones, so that his calls were unheard, and I was able to complete my preparations without any further disturbance.

For a single programmer it was a problem to launch a fleet of 10,000 spaceships in just 50 hours. I didn't have any commanders whom I could have briefed concerning the plan. But I was served by many millions of robots. They could think independently and make correct decisions, provided they had been correspondingly programmed beforehand. Without the registry banks and distribution circuits of the Regent it would have been impossible. Simultaneously with its instructions the Brain provided robot crews for 10,000 ships.

For the fleet flagship I had selected the new *Teparo*, one of the super class measuring 1,500 meters in diameter. I was the only living being on board the giant. After I had embarked and one formation after the other vanished into the blue sky of Arkon 3, I finally saw the paradox of my situation: 10,000 modern battleships—and 1 soldier! It was pure insanity to hope that the men of my worthy race could ever again pull themselves together or perform deeds on a scale equal to their forefathers. In the course of the past 10 years or so I had been forced more and more to fall back upon robot crews. All my hopes had been dashed to nothing through the increasing decadence of the Arkonides.

The laws of Nature were unrelenting. The Akons from whom we had originated had remained healthy and active. We, the descendants of former Akon colonists, had been subjected to the effects of environmental adaptation. Among scientists of space-faring peoples it had already been known for a long time that interstellar emigrants in the course of thousands of years would lose all the technical knowledge and moral maturity with which they had been endowed by the mother world.

Disturbed by bitter feelings I had gone into the first transition with a group of 3,000 warships and superbattleships. In spite of troubled experiences I had had with Arkonide auxiliary races, 3 manned cruisers had been assigned to the task force. Their crews consisted of Zalites. But after the first hyperjump of only 4,000 light-years I was compelled to send the 3 commanders home again. As usual they had made a faulty manoeuvre, having considered certain decimal fractions of the transition calculations to be 'negligible'. As a result they had come out of the hyper-universe into the Einstein continuum 100 light-years off course.

Capt. Felicete had informed me by hypercom that one of his engine reactors was acting up. He said he was working on repairs of the main auto-synchronizer controlling the cooler-stabilizer thermostats. I had waited 2 hours. I found out that the thermostats had been replaced but the coolers were still running too hot. It had not occurred to them to check their field-chamber circulating pumps and so they had again dismantled and reinstalled their thermostats.

This was an example of inadequate training and mental sluggishness. No attack mission could be flown with such people. By the time I went into the next transition with the robotships the 3 manned cruisers had set a course for their home planet. No doubt such a small malfunction would have been discovered in minutes by Terran engineers.

24 hours after the arrival of my lighter groups I finally appeared with my heavier forces at the mobilization and rendezvous point which was code-named 'Destination'. Rhodan had brought 8,000 ships into the action, including every major warship available, and I began to fear for the Imperium when

I saw this armada. I was finally getting an idea of what his lunar shipyards could produce. It wasn't the number of warships that disturbed me for I still held the advantage over him there. But when I thought of the men who were performing their duties on board those 8,000 ships, I saw my actual disadvantage. They were the best fighting men in the galaxy, each a doer and self-starter. Although each was a specialist in his own field, he was so well-rounded out in his training that he could have been switched to 3 or 4 different positions in an emergency.

These were men who did not wait around too long for orders in a difficult situation. They always knew what they had to do. If I were to say that I felt no envy for Perry Rhodan—nevertheless I'd have been very happy to have such fighting men as these behind me.

I had not yet come out of the painful effects of rematerialisation before Rhodan started calling me. And of course he was rough and crude in his complaints over my tardiness.

But before he could make any more threats I had cut him off short. So that was the end of that.

* * * *

The green indicator lamp lit up over the inner door of the airlock chamber. I waited a few moments until the hiss of escaping air had subsided. Then I pressed a button which caused the outer steel door to open. The Terran destroyer had been hauled in on tractor beams and now lay inside the *Teparo's* Hangar 27. Rhodan had not wasted a second. The fact that the destroyer was here already meant that he must have launched it from the *Ironduke* immediately after my emergence from hyperspace.

Once more I was alone. I had sent back the robots of the airlock guard detail. From now on my hypercom command transceiver would be my only link with the relay stations.

A sleek, silvery shape with a sharply pointed bow rested on the wide guide-rails of the mag-buffer field. The built-in impulse cannon in the nose of the ship was very impressive. I had witnessed how dangerous this weapon could be, even for heavy-class ships.

As I approached the craft I was aware of heatwaves still radiating from its stern section. Behind the transparent canopy a narrow hatch slid to one side. I was not surprised when the suited figure in the opening turned out to be that of Reginald Bell.

"Welcome to mobilization sector 'Destination', Atlan. Are you ready?"

I pressed myself against the highly polished hull and sprang forward. His powerful hand drew me into the narrow airlock.

"Our jet ring is pretty hot—we had to retro-brake like crazy. Don't you have any luggage?"

"I never brought any before on a mission with Rhodan. Who is your pilot?"

"Lt. Brazo Alkher. You know him."

I had heard that Alkher and another young officer had played a decisive role in the procurement of the

cell activators from Wanderer. Saying nothing, I pressed my way past Bell, who closed the lock behind us. Just beyond the converter chamber housing the breech end of the energy cannon, a tall young man got up from the pilot seat. Brazo Alkher had not changed. He made a precise salute but it seemed an effort for him to look me in the eye. When I followed the Terran custom of shaking hands with him he became embarrassed.

"How—how are you, sir?" he asked quickly.

I laughed. "As well as can be expected, Alkher, considering the circumstances. So you are to bring me to the *Ironduke*?"

"Yessir, but one thing I refuse to do—if you'll permit the expression. I'm not going to fly this ship as crazily as I was forced to coming over."

I raised a brow at him curiously. Bell silently pointed out my seat behind the tracking console. It was cramped in the little cabin.

"How do you mean that?" I asked. "Was there some kind of risk?"

"A risk that was forced upon us," Bell corrected me peevisly. "Things weren't going fast enough for Perry. I hadn't even secured the inner hatch before we were launched. He shot us out of the tube with at least 100 gravs. The inertial absorber hadn't come up to full power yet. We were hit with at least 20 gravs and I was caught short at the hatch. My backbone feels like it's been through a wringer. But let's forget it—don't worry about it."

I suspected that this wasn't quite the whole story. Brazo Alkher was a very reliable officer of the Solar Fleet but even he appeared to be angry or indignant. Of course the attitude here wasn't exactly mutinous but when men like this started to weigh the right or wrong of certain orders the situation was becoming critical. It was high time to seriously bring Rhodan into line. He could not give me orders and moreover I was still depending upon our old friendly relationship.

As I watched Alkher's deft manipulation of the controls I noticed that the boyish youthfulness in him seemed to harden proportionately with the sharp alertness of his eyes. The acceleration shocks and the reactor screen began to function.

"Clear for launching manoeuvre, sir."

I lifted my arm and spoke into my command transceiver, giving the necessary orders to the central control station on the flagship. The stationary main robot confirmed. We listened to the whistling of the turbo pumps. Seconds later the green indicators came on. The launch tube's hermetic hatch swung back in the outer armoured bulkhead, revealing a glittering patch of the cosmos.

Here close to the centre of the galaxy the stars were even more concentrated than in star cluster M-13. They formed a maze of varicoloured light points which seemed to coalesce in spite of their relative proximity to us.

"Commander to His Eminence—Terran flagship is closing in at high velocity. Instructions..."

Bell snapped his jaws together so tightly that I heard the gnashing of his teeth. I frowned in puzzlement when I saw that Alkher was struggling to conceal his nervousness.

"That's idiotic!" Bell exclaimed harshly. His hands gripped the arms of his flight seat. "He can't lay off but wait till you hear him! Atlan, this is just some friendly advice: stay here—don't go on board the *Ironduke*. I know you so let's not kid each other. No matter how much you try to be tolerant and considerate, after about the 5th insult you're going to lose your self-control."

I sensed that he meant every word he said. However, my mind was made up. I had to see this man who had turned into a despot in the space of just a few months. I couldn't quite say why I insisted on it. Perhaps it was a matter of sentiment.

"Thanks but I'm going along," I answered.

Bell tried again to dissuade me. "You're taking a bigger risk than you think. It's our guess that you're about to throw your whole rulership status into the gamble. Or maybe you think you can put pressure on Perry. Don't overlook the fact that he now knows where to find the Anti planet, Trakarar. You shouldn't have given out that galactic position so soon. You gave away your one ace in the hole."

"That's right," I admitted calmly. "But I did it as a favour to you, old friend. I was hoping to pacify Perry and divert him from his disastrous state of mind. And perhaps I succeeded."

"At a very high price, sir," said Alkher in a low tone. "May I take off?"

I nodded to him and leaned back in the seat. The inertial absorber developed a high-pitched howl. Moments later the robot commander activated the launch release. The mag-fields swept the sleek craft along the guide-rails. As the autopilot switched high power to the propulsion system we sensed very little acceleration pressure. Yet the grav-indicator cycled off the scale as the destroyer hurtled at high speed into the starry void.

The wave spikes on the mass-detector scope flared into a crazy dance in response to the presence of thousands of ships in the area. There would have been no way at the moment of evaluating the readings. Alkher was flying the flagship's guide-beam and 3 minutes later the destroyer was taken over by remote control. We were pulled a 10th of a degree off the vertical red indicator that marked our course.

I heard Bell muttering as the engine thundered wildly. Sharply angling nav-jets turned us abruptly and we were snapped up with such force by the tractor beam of the flagship that the inertials could barely take up the shock. We were being handled in a very irresponsible manner. I quickly activated the emergency closure of my Arkonide spacesuit and simultaneously turned on my individual defence screen. And so we flew toward the flagship at a forbidden range of velocity and its 3-D image grew quickly on the screen. The *Ironduke*, the largest and most modern linear-drive warship in the Solar Fleet, stood off at some 4 million-km from the *Teparo*.

The braking manoeuvre resembled the first solo flight of an astronaut beginner. The destroyer was whirled about on its short axis, its stern was roughly whipped to one side and then it was jerked into line again just as roughly. Just before we reached the collision screen, about 15 gravs of pressure broke through the absorbers. It threw our bodies painfully against our safety belts. The elasticity of the belt material wasn't too great and under such an inertial thrust the jolt was very considerable. This was followed by our being thrown back almost just as hard into our seats again.

Bell was swearing a blue streak. I remained as calm as I could but I could not understand why the crewmen at the remote controls could let such a thing happen. Even if they had received orders to bring us on board as fast as possible, such a wild manoeuvre would not have been necessary. I only learned later that Rhodan had personally handled the controls. It seemed that his madness knew no bounds. The

wild flight ended in a launch chamber of the battleship. When I got out of the destroyer I ached in every limb.

My friends were there already and waiting for me. Jefe Claudrin, the commander of the *Ironduke*, had accompanied them. His mighty figure was hardly to be overlooked. Next to him Allan D. Mercant seemed almost childlike by comparison. I greeted them swiftly with very few words because they seemed to know everything that had happened. John Marshall simply waved at me. But over in a corner was the melancholy little figure of an unearthly intelligence whose amazing paranormal faculties had brought him galactic fame. The wide and innocent-mischievous eyes which had earned for the mousebeaver the nickname of 'Lt. Puck'—or just plain Pucky—were noticeably devoid of their lively sparkle now.

I walked over to him and squatted down in front of him. That way I could look directly into his sharp-snouted mouse face. "How is it going, little one?" I asked gently.

He touched my face with his delicate paw-like hand. He heaved a deep, audible sigh. "Don't ask—it's bad," he chirped. "Can you imagine that Perry doesn't like me anymore?"

"What?!"

Pucky nodded vigorously. A certain glitter returned to his eyes. "That's what I'm telling you—he doesn't care about me anymore! It's been weeks now since he's scratched or petted me. And he knows how much I like that! Here everybody's gone crazy. Can you do something for us?"

I grasped him under the arms and picked him up. He was only 3 feet in height and weighed very little. The poor fellow was in a state of despair. "We'll try, Pucky. How do you see the situation?"

"I'm afraid," he admitted frankly. "Not for myself but for Perry. I can't get into his mind anymore. He has a terribly strong mono-block. If he'd only open it just once! Maybe then we might be able to help him. The doctors think his personal frequencies have shifted a little and that's why his cell activator isn't working the way it was programmed, which is obvious. Can you talk Perry into letting down his screen so I can work on him? I won't steal any of his thoughts!"

I looked around me. The top-ranking officers were silent. Pucky had already said about everything that could be mentioned in this regard.

"The Chief is waiting for you, sir," boomed Claudrin's thunderous voice. As usual he was wearing his small grav-generator, which provided him with the natural gravitational conditions of his homeworld of Epsal. Jefe was accustomed to 2.1 gravities.

I set Pucky down on the deck and scratched his silky neck fur. It made him laugh at last. I knew that things really must be bad to have brought the normally cheerful mousebeaver to such an apathetic state. What was going on in Rhodan's brain? I took off my spacesuit and accepted the Imperator's shoulder cape from Brazo Alkher. The Terrans saluted when I went to the central lift-shaft.

Mercant came to my side and whispered rapidly: "Sir, please try not to show your reactions when you see him. He's grown to a frightening extent. At the moment he measures 7 feet 8 inches in height and his shoulder width has increased proportionately. Yet by comparison his weight increase has been minimal. The explosive cell division process has caused his tissue structure to swell but at the same time to lose its tone and firmness. The more it expands the lighter it becomes. He's been informed about his condition but in his psychopathic imagination he seems to think that his enormous size must mean that he has a giant's strength. He keeps on trying to prove how strong he is. Do us the favour of failing to your knees in

an act of pain when you shake hands with him. Actually Rhodan is weaker than he ever was. But he will be waiting for your reaction—almost paranoically. There's hardly any other way to describe his suspicious manner of watching people these days."

"I see you're still a top psychologist, Mercant."

"It's a good thing I know something about it," replied the shrewd little man bitterly. "But you know humans better than I by now. Whatever Rhodan says or does, just put yourself in the place of a psychotherapist. I found that's about the easiest way to tolerate his actions."

I was firmly resolved not to regard Perry's actions from the standpoint of a statesman but to look upon him as a friend. As the Emperor I would have had to take a position in regard to all this but as a friend I could even deceive myself if need be, convincing myself that this or that might not be meant the way it appeared to be.

We were gliding upward in the antigravitor when Rhodan's bellowing voice was heard over the ship's P.A. system. He announced that we "traitorous lame brains" had better get to him on the double and he added that this was especially meant "for that degenerate Arkonide admiral!"

He was starting his massive abuse already. It was only then I realized how difficult it was going to be for me to maintain the role of an all-forgiving friend and understanding psychotherapist.

4/ THE EMPEROR PLAYS DETECTIVE

He was waiting for me in the Control Central of the battleship. His manner was like that of a tyrant ruler who held the power of life and death in his hands. The last thing one could have detected in his wolfish eyes was human warmth. There was a lurking predatory intentness to them and they were filled with sharp suspicion. Was this still the great man of Earth?

His stature was that of a Colossus. They had made him a uniform out of highly elastic synthetic fabric. Although the material could stretch to the limit of its tensile strength it was already tight across his shoulders.

A giant over 7½ feet tall staggered toward me. The old athletic gait had been lost through his illness. His hands had become distended paws. He didn't seem to have any sense of feeling in them. A few minutes earlier Mercant had told me that Rhodan had handled the launch retrieval himself. After one look at those hands I could understand why the control manipulations had been such a threat to our lives. So I was ready to forgive him immediately. Perhaps he had not purposely given us such a bad time. But in his stubborn fixation he seemed unwilling to admit that from here on he was incapable of handling such matters effectively. Why didn't he limit himself to giving orders? Why didn't he pull himself together and put all his hopes in the forthcoming mission, which had a strong possibility of being able to solve his problem?

I had meanwhile taken the view that the Antis on Trakarot would be forced to consider the matter if they were given a choice of either going down in flames of atomic destruction or doing everything in their power to save the Terran they had so gravely injured.

Perry came closer, almost groping his way. His terrible eyes filled me with horror. The distorted face hardly held a trace of the old familiar features. When he stopped in front of me I had to lean my head back to look up at him. His voice had not changed. Perhaps it had become a bit husky or hoarse but his vocal cords did not seem to have been very badly affected by the cell division as yet.

I smiled at him, putting everything into it that I had ever felt for him.

He responded by flaring up at me. "I'll have you understand, Arkonide, that there is discipline on board my fleet flagship."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said there is discipline here!" he repeated, this time more sharply. There was a gleam of insane anger in his eyes again. Evidently he could lose his composure very quickly.

"I don't quite understand you, my friend."

"Grinning is not permitted!" he shouted at me.

My smile disappeared. I look about me helplessly. The men of the Control Central stood at stiff attention before their assigned stations. Even the commander and Bell and Mercant did not budge. I was horrified. Rhodan must have gone mad. In spite of my resolve I glanced at him ironically. My instinctive reactions were upsetting my good intentions faster than I had anticipated.

"That wasn't a grin—it was a happy smile. Or can't you imagine anymore that I could be happy to see you again after such a long time?"

He paled as a terrible rage twisted his features still more. But in spite of this he reacted differently than expected. In the expression of his feelings he seemed to be unpredictable. "Ha—glad to see me after such a long time? You mean *likethis*?" He turned all the way around while holding his arms out and he laughed irritably.

It was my first lesson concerning the new Perry Rhodan. He sought continuously to twist harmless statements around so as to give them another meaning. "You misunderstood me, Perry. I meant yourself, your personality—to put it simply, my friend. This other matter—well, we're going to find a cure for it."

He glared at me suspiciously but apparently made a struggle to control himself. "Let's hope so. Welcome on board."

He reached out his giant hand. Taking a deep breath I was about to grasp it but then I drew my own hand back suddenly. I had never seen such a tense stare in a man. Something within him actually did seem to be lurking, as though waiting in ambush! Mercant had described the situation precisely. My extra-brain reminded me of the Security Chief's admonishment. Rhodan believed he was abnormally strong.

"Good luck to our joint venture," I said, and I shook hands.

I was startled because my hand seemed to be enclosed by a sponge. If I had gripped harder it probably would have harmed him. I saw his twisted mouth. He pressed with all his strength but I hardly felt anything. Nevertheless I gasped sharply and spread my legs like an overpowered wrestler, throwing my

right shoulder forward. Then I recalled the mock antics of Earthly wrestlers and knew what I was supposed to do. I grimaced and slowly went to my knees. He finally let go then and I was able to withdraw my hand.

His laugh was repugnant to me. Yet I told myself immediately that this was only a demonstration of his sickness and it was not right for me to have any feeling of aversion. When I attempted to smile, however, he again twisted its meaning.

"I could have crushed you, Arkonide," he asserted, obviously pleased with himself. "I'll grant you, you're strong. Do you still remember the duel we had in the Venus museum? I've never forgotten it. I remember every detail as if it were only yesterday. You tried to humble me then."

"You were about to kill me, friend. You were armed with a modern weapon and mine was quite ancient."

"That's cowardly hogwash! I had thrown my beamer away by the time you came at me with your rapier. I grabbed a rapier too and fought fair with you. Today it would take more than that to overcome me."

My extra-brain provided me with an eidetic memory. While these long-gone scenes raced through my mind as in a fast-motion film, I remained expressionless. I could see out of the corner of an eye that Mercant was growing tense. For the moment my extra-brain had taken over my conscious actions and I hardly recognized my own voice. "Oh, are you sure you can still remember accurately?"

"Such things I do not forget. That was when we made peace. I discovered your true origin. Or are you trying to infer that I would have shot you even though you weren't adequately armed?"

"No, you really didn't shoot. I misled you with a psychological trick so that you wouldn't use your energy gun."

"If that's what you call smashing my ankle with your sword. But forget it, Arkonide—just remember that today you wouldn't have a chance with me."

He turned about ponderously and headed for the main flight console. Which apparently put an end to the reception. Mercant was eyeing me urgently. I nodded to him and looked about for Pucky. The mousebeaver was lying all rolled up in a spacious flight seat.

Hadn't he caught any of this or noticed anything? I felt as though my head were on fire. My extra-brain was busy dissecting Rhodan's declarations word for word. It was an unpleasant process but I had to wait it out. Finally I heard from that sector of my mind which had been activated thousands of years ago. I was given a curt report.

A number of contradictions. Rhodan is a sportsman and athlete. He must be able to differentiate between an ordinary sabre and a 2-edged Viking longsword! Besides that, you were armed. You had an impulse-beamer and a shock-gun.

Mercant approached me. "Aren't you feeling well, sir?" he inquired. His smile was almost *too* innocent.

"Everything's fine," I told him evasively. "But thanks."

Rhodan began to shout orders. "Mission briefing in 5 minutes!" he yelled at me. "Your robot fleet will form the outer defence ring. I will personally lead the attack. Colonel Claudrin...!"

The Epsalian hurried forward.

"You will please come to attention!" bellowed Rhodan. "Don't you know who is standing in front of you?"

The colonel stood stiffly at attention. For my part I became the more silent.

Hadn't Rhodan stated that he could recall every single detail? Why was it then that he had spoken of a rapier and not of a heavy blade almost 40 inches in length? And since he was a logical thinker basically, how could he also infer that I had smashed his ankle? With a light rapier? A strong bone structure like that? How great would the force of impact be per square centimetre from such a thin blade? With the most powerful thrust possible, would it be able to shatter an anklebone?

Absolutely not!—my extra-brain informed me. *At most the tissue and sinews could have been cut!*

At the time I had taken cover behind a Viking boat after Rhodan had traced me with a special device in spite of my deflector screen. He too had been invisible until he decided to cut off his screen. Didn't he remember that anymore either? Perhaps he had just not wanted to mention it. Our duel had been decisive. It had taken place under such unusual circumstances that the prelude was actually more worthy of mention than the actual sword fight.

I was very troubled by Perry's mention of a rapier. Such an error could not slip past Rhodan, even if he were ill. I observed him closely and listened carefully to the commands he was giving. When he wasn't in an outburst of rage or indulging in some ridiculous form of reprimand, he spoke as clearly and rationally as ever. He couldn't be feeble-minded! He had a magnificent command of the linear warship's complicated systems and circuits.

By a special inner command I turned off my extra-brain. It was useless to brood over long past events in the midst of preparations for a major mission. After all, Perry didn't have my kind of photographic memory. Moreover in his high state of irritability he might have considered it patronizing of me if I had pointed to his error. He had reached a stage where he would tolerate no corrections from anybody. I refrained from broaching the subject again, although I still wondered why he had even mentioned our fight in the Venusian museum—especially at the moment of our meeting again. But now there were more important things to discuss.

10 minutes later I appeared in the officers' wardroom of the *Ironduke*. The commanders of the Terran fighting units were channelled in to our meeting through a space-com conference hookup. Each of them was instructed as to what position his ship was to take in the attack formation. Over my command transceiver I issued instructions to the robot Regent, who in turn programmed the 10,000 remote-controlled warships accordingly.

2 hours after my arrival on board the *Ironduke* the Terran Fleet got underway. We required about 15 minutes of real time for all units to reach light-speed. Seconds later the most massive simultaneous transition occurred which I had ever experienced. As a precaution, all hypersensor equipment had been shut off. Almost to the exact second, 8,000 Terran warships disappeared into hyperspace. The plan provided for a surprise appearance in the double-sun system of Aptut. No one there was to be given a chance to escape.

The *Ironduke* went into its direct linear-flight mode under protection of its Kalup absorption field. At millions of times the speed of light we hurtled toward the easily recognizable double sun and it emerged

with breathtaking swiftness out of the swarm of other stars. There was no shock of transition, nor were there any noticeable physical hardships involved. I refrained from informing Rhodan that the Regent was working on the development of a similar means of propulsion. The brain was in possession of complete details based on the Akon models. It would not be long now before I also would have the new type of ships.

It only took us a few minutes to traverse the small distance of 418 light-years. At the beginning of the flight the cosmonauts had not made any complicated hyperjump calculations with all their associated chances for error. Instead, they had simply sped forward on a straight line of optical sight. Nevertheless we arrived in the Aptut System together with the transition-type ships. It was another demonstration of the immeasurable superiority of the linear spacedrive. The normal ships would not have been there yet if their commanders had not been furnished beforehand with the exact transition data.

I knew what terrible effects our mass arrival would have on the sector of space surrounding the double sun. The hyper-grav shockwaves would put a severe strain on the gravitational fields of the outer planets. In fact the first reports came in a few minutes later from the astronomical observer stations. The 3 outermost planets had been knocked out of their orbits. However, these were uninhabited ice worlds, so according to that we had not caused any appreciable damage.

But when I looked at Rhodan I gathered the impression that he would have made the same manoeuvre even if those planets had been inhabited. No matter how much I struggled against it, my friendly feelings for him were fading more and more. My reason kept telling me that sheer desperation might bring a man to such action. But when I would rationalize in this manner my incorruptible logic sector interfered. It gave me to understand that Perry Rhodan's outstanding character would never permit him to send millions or perhaps billions of living beings to their certain death, merely to gain a slight advantage in time.

After the tumult of the fleet's emergence into the Einstein universe had subsided, we flew in star formation to those planets which our mass indicators soon designated for us. The first sign of the presence of intelligent beings turned out to be a spaceship. It was stranded between the 16th and 17th planet. Apparently it had been heavily damaged by the hyper-shockwaves, because its engines were no longer functioning.

I had never once doubted the Regent's calculations but the Terrans seemed to have held some reservations in that regard. When the energy tracers reacted so strongly that the howl of warning sirens became audible in every section of the battleship, I knew that we had won. Such an energy reaction could have only *one* cause.

And in fact the 6th planet soon appeared on the screens in 3D relief. Apparently this world was surrounded by a high-intensity defence screen. Since no orbiting power stations were spotted anywhere, it cancelled all possibility of this being an Akon settlement. Accordingly, only Antis could be involved here. No other race in the galaxy was capable of building such a gigantic energy screen without the help of titanic power installations.

Rhodan's orders became a veritable torrent of shouted words. I listened carefully but he made no mistakes. His planning was swift and precise and there was not a single contradiction. I ignored the harshness of his tone as well as the insults he yelled even at the top command. Jefe Claudrin was at the end of his self-control. Bell came in and tried to distract Rhodan's attention from the *Ironduke's* commander. Major Hunts Krefenbac, the First Officer, looked at me imploringly. Mercant had told me that this officer had been severely humiliated by Rhodan.

As I came forward, Perry got up from his special flight seat. They had built an adjustable chair for him.

When he saw me he turned ponderously in my direction. His eyes seemed to glow balefully. In that moment their effect was inhuman.

"Is that it?" he shouted at me. "Is that Trakarar?"

When I did not answer immediately he staggered forward and grasped me heavily by the shoulders. "You will answer me, Buster!" he yelled, more loudly and angrily than before. "Tell me if that's Trakarar!"

I shoved my arms between his and simply spread them apart. His hands slid from my shoulders. It took little effort on my part. "Take it easy, little Barbarian! You may call me Atlan or friend but not Buster."

There was a sudden silence in the Control Central. The only sound was the roaring of the engines in their full-power braking manoeuvre. The men were holding their breaths. Thus it had come to our first test of strength.

Rhodan stared at me rigidly. To my surprise he did not say a word. There was only a slight twitching of his facial muscles.

I continued: "You should know that an ally is not to be treated in this manner. If you wish to forget our friendship then I demand the required diplomatic courtesy from you. If this is not granted by the First Administrator of the Solar Imperium, then I shall be obliged to withdraw my fleet."

"Your moronic motor-mouth!" He spoke the words in icy tones.

It hit me harder than if he had shouted at me again. This surprising self-control did not indicate a psychopathic change in personality. He had deliberately sought to insult me!

"It would be more becoming of you to improve your vocabulary."

He laughed suddenly. His eyes were treacherous and his answer was not any too diplomatic. "You are free to leave the system. You've done your duty, Arkonide."

I did not become aggressive nor did I reveal how deeply he had cut me. On the other hand, I began a psychological campaign against Perry Rhodan. Before the flight my logic sector had advised me to do so.

It was at that moment that the 2 rings of the 6th planet were sighted. They were visible on the viewscreen of the electronic telescope, which was working at its full 30,000-magnification factor. When Rhodan saw it a triumphant expression came to his face. "You can go now," he repeated.

"Thanks very much but I'll stay," I said decisively. "I have received certain information which indicates it's quite possible that your misguided son is residing on the principle world of the Antis. You must have let him go free during your operation against the Antis on Okul, didn't you? I'd be very interested to see how Thomas Cardif has turned out during these past months. This time, friend, I shall find him."

His reaction was much more alarming than expected. He charged at me while shouting to the nearby officers to shoot me down. I placed my hand flat against his chest and shoved him back. In doing so, I only had the mass of his body to contend with. He was not able to show any serious resistance.

"Arrest him!" he roared. "Arrest him at once!"

No one moved, until finally Mercant stepped forward. "Sir, I am reminded of the Emperor's diplomatic

immunity. We have no right to arrest His Highness."

Rhodan's cries subsided. Suddenly his look was rational as he stared at me. He was thinking things out. For my part I knew that mentioning Thomas Cardif's name had struck a sensitive nerve centre.

"You will not take Cardif," he said with surprising calmness. "That is my affair."

"As you will," I granted him. "Nevertheless he must be captured and questioned by the mutants. It is known to me that he not only produced the narcotic elixir, Liquitiv; he is probably also responsible for your present illness. Who conducted the psychological interrogation when you were a prisoner of the Antis? Was it Cardif?"

"That's my affair," he repeated evasively. "You take care of your own business."

He pressed past me and walked over to the tracking centre.

Mercant gave an audible sigh of relief. "Sir, you shouldn't irritate him like that."

"Do you think so? It seems to me he straightened out for a change. Don't you also think, Solar Marshall, that you let him get away with too much?"

Mercant looked at me thoughtfully for a moment and then turned away abruptly.

"That's something to think about," said Bell pensively. "Up till now we've always held back."

I wasn't able to carry out my probing any further at the moment. The first battleships of my robot fleet were dropping into the binary solar system. The Terran units had already come to a stop and had begun to encircle the ringed planet, whereas my own ships spread out into interstellar space to take up their programmed blockade positions. In the process one of the *Zuku*-class warships attacked an unknown spacecraft and crippled it. As I found out later, this was a Springer freighter.

I refrained from informing Rhodan about it. A suspicion was growing in me which I could not shake off. I waited another 2 hours until the encirclement of Trakarat was completed. On the planet itself nothing stirred. The great energy screen enclosed the beautiful world entirely.

The 2 rings consisted of cosmic dust particles which had been captured in the gravitational field of the planet. They revolved around Trakarat in a counterclockwise direction. The homeworld of the Antis was even more magnificent than Saturn. I was only indirectly interested in the rapid outputs we were receiving from the remote analysers concerning density, mass, atmospheric composition, rate of rotation and whatever else was coming in.

Perry Rhodan was all over the place now, which was strange in a situation which should have been occupying him entirely with the thinking and planning aspects. Just as I was about to withdraw for a few minutes, a violent fight broke out in the Communications Central. When I ran to investigate I saw that Rhodan had jerked the duty officer out of his seat. When I entered he was shouting at him like a madman while threatening him with a deadly ray weapon.

The Communications Chief had misinterpreted orders under the press of confusion. As a result he had signalled the planet and challenged the Antis to surrender. If Bell and Mercant had not intervened physically their raving chief might have shot the man.

The mood of the crewmen had become tense. Even highly disciplined troops could not continue to stand for such behaviour. Besides that, I knew the Terrans and their pride! Rhodan could pick on the wrong man and then there'd be a catastrophe.

After he had calmed down slightly, he shouted into the blanched face of the officer: "Nobody makes contact—is that clear?"

"Yessir."

"Then don't forget it! You will issue instructions to all commanders as follows: Subject to penalty of death it is forbidden to contact or signal the Anti planet, without special orders, or to receive any incoming radio messages from them. Only the Fleet carrier band will remain active. All information is to be pulse-beamed over channel 38 using the 'Destination' code. All right, get going! Send that out!"

Bell looked at me uncomprehendingly. Mercant cleared his throat nervously and my mind started to race again. Rhodan turned around and came toward the bulkhead door but he stopped when he saw me. A wild rage seemed to twist his features. Or was something else there that I didn't know how to read at the moment? My own face must have looked like a wooden mask.

"What are you gaping at?" he said huskily. "Out of my way, Arkonide!"

"You shouldn't overdo it," I retorted slowly. "Or are you afraid your son might send a message? Are you thinking that you might weaken again?"

"Out of my way!"

When he reached for his weapon I took several steps back. Breathing heavily and apparently struggling for air, he staggered past me, at the same time giving me a look that immediately caused my logic sector to rebel. I was forced to come to terms with my activated extra-brain. *It's fear! But fear of what?*—was its insuppressible message.

I had surmised as much! His decision to prohibit any contact or even a reception of outside signals revealed a crack in his armour. Why would he in any case avoid having others make contact with the Antis? Was he trying to circumvent a possible attempt at extortion? Could it be that he feared he might not be able to resist an appeal from his misguided son? Although I had only been using psychology on Rhodan, now I was beginning to believe, myself, that the vanished Thomas Cardif could be on this world. Actually, why not? Where could he have found a better shelter and hiding place?

It had only been due to an interplay of coincidences that I had discovered Trakarat. The Antis had no doubt considered it impossible for anyone to find their central planet. It was now known that their recent manoeuvre on Saos had been a diversionary tactic designed to conceal the position of Trakarat.

Now I decided not to go to my cabin. Since I was no longer thinking or acting as a friend, my emotional situation had cleared up considerably. I could observe things that Rhodan's men were not able to see. The matter of the 'rapier' occurred to me again and so I arrived at a definite decision.

Another hour went by before Rhodan calmed down completely. Meanwhile I had done everything I could to convince him of my loyalty. I had deliberately given my orders to the Regent in a loud tone of voice. Perry had heard me and had nodded almost pleasantly. The encirclement of the planet had been completed. Rhodan was making ready to open fire.

Now I had him where I wanted him, since he had calmed down and was in a clearer state of mind. I sauntered over closer to him and gave Claudrin a signal which he understood. Muttering some excuse, he relinquished his flight seat and I took his place. Rhodan's huge figure was close enough to touch. He looked at me uncertainly.

"We should attack soon," I said without preamble. "I think your cell degeneration can best be halted if we do something about it as fast as possible. For the time being, I'll hold my forces in reserve—alright?"

"Alright," he said. He was surprisingly calm and his voice was at normal volume.

"What are your battle details, Perry?"

"To eliminate the defence screen, employ our special weapons and land commando troops on the surface. I have to capture the rascals alive—if possible, some of their scientists."

"You should issue an ultimatum. Either they give you immediate help or they face total destruction. Has the war declaration been announced?"

"Naturally—but I'll have to think about your suggestion. Dead Antis aren't very useful."

I had said enough, although his battle plans weren't particularly complete. Perhaps he had some things in mind that he wanted to conceal from me. According to whispered information I had received from Mercant, Rhodan was probably intending to take part personally in the landing operations. That would be understandable enough but there was something else that had sharpened my alertness. Until my arrival on board the *Ironduke* it had been forbidden to speak of Thomas Cardif. But I had mentioned him several times and thus I had broken a taboo.

I had to keep remembering that. I gave Perry a few more moments to collect himself before I began to sing a little song:

"The water is clear, it's wet and it's near,

"And it's better to think of than ice-frosted beer.

"The water is cold and I am so bold.

"As to drink of it all my belly can hold."

I waited tensely for his reaction. But it was not what I had expected. He looked at me with no trace of temper or anger. In fact he laughed in genuine amusement. "Holy Jupiter! Whoever made *up that* bit of nonsense?"

I grinned at him like a mischievous lout. "The words just came to me. It was supposed to have been composed by an Arkonide spaceman when he was lying in a desert, half dead from thirst. But he was rescued and other men picked up the song. Ever since then it's been popular in the Arkonide Fleet. But it happened long ago, friend."

He laughed again and then stood up. "Battle orders in 30 minutes!" he commanded sharply to the crew. "I'll expect the officers to be punctual to the second—in my quarters!" And therewith he staggered away.

Jefe Claudrin shouted: "Ten—shun!"

The men sprang up and stood stiffly at attention. Lately the Chief of the Solar Imperium was sensitive to such little details. The metal hatch of the security bulkhead swung open before him. Robots presented arms with their energy weapons. When he had gone, I also got to my feet.

"Bell, would you be kind enough to come to my cabin for a moment? I'd like to speak with you alone."

Reginald Bell watched me with new interest. "Important?"

"It could be. I'll go ahead of you. Follow me as soon as you can without being noticed."

Again the steel hatch opened. The robots again presented arms, this time to me. When I reached the circular passage outside the Control Central I let go of my inner rigidity. No one was to be seen and so I could drop my mask. I leaned back against the curving wall with an audible groan. My pulse was racing almost painfully. Although I was horrified, nevertheless it was finally clear to me what had happened.

That ridiculous, senseless-sounding little song was known to only 2 living beings in the galaxy: to Perry and myself!

At the time I set those rhymes of doggerel together, Rhodan and I were enemies—but no one else could have seen or heard us. We had been stranded on the desert world of Hellgate, waiting for help, and each of us was threatening the other with his weapon. Our water had just about run out. We were practically dying of thirst inside our spacesuits.

For purely psychological reasons I had thought up this 'water song' in order to lure Rhodan from his cover, since he was as far gone as I was. He had never forgotten this little psycho-trap of mine, this doggerel verse which had almost driven him out of his mind. All we could think of was water. Later we had discussed our duel on Hellgate. Between us the song had remained an indelible symbol because it had marked the beginning of our friendship.

But now he didn't recall it at all! In a state of full mental clarity and in a rare moment of emotional calmness he had laughingly asked me, "Whoever made up *that* bit of nonsense?!"

He asked—he didn't know!

I subdued my excitement and rechecked my thinking. Had I been logical? No error of reasoning? Would he have had to recognize the verse—now, since this illness had come over him? Was he really thinking clearly when he inquired about it?

His head was clear!—my logic sector chimed in. Remember the rapier that he confused with a heavy, 2-edged Viking sword. Is that also a coincidental slip of memory?

2 men of the air-leak security patrol approached me. When they saw me they greeted me in the old familiar way that I treasured so much. The Terrans had never been obsequious even when they knew I was the Emperor. They had always shown me respect but never the disgusting servility that I had to put up with every day on the Arkon worlds.

"Don't run your feet off, fellows," I told them. "Here there are conveyor strips."

One of them winked at me. "Sir, when we saw you we jumped off. Actually we've been ordered not to use the belts."

I laughed, feeling a sense of ease with them. When I left them they stood at attention. I knew that they were my friends and it helped a lot.

My cabin was located one level below. In a few minutes Bell would be showing up.

* * * *

"...and you were only able to observe the removal of Cardif's unconscious body on the U-boat's viewscreen?"

Bell nodded. His features were pale and tense.

"You had no opportunity to see father and son at the same time?"

"Atlan, what are you getting at?"

I waved off his question. "Who was the first to get into the hearing room? Was it you?"

"No—Maj. Rengall, the secret service officer of the undersea commando group."

"And he found Rhodan in an unconscious state?"

"Yes. Radio contact had already been broken. The Antis had taken off in the Springer ship. They had all cleared out."

"Is Maj. Rengall on board?"

"No."

"What finally happened?"

"The commandos brought Rhodan into the submarine where I was waiting. We surfaced and the *Ironduke* landed. Just before that the Antis' undersea base had been blown up. Atlan, if you don't tell me now what you're getting at with these questions..." He broke off and watched me in some surprise as I walked to the door.

"Bell, wait for me in Control Central."

"Where are you going?"

"To ask Perry a few questions."

"You're crazy. He'll kill you!"

"He'll no more kill me than he did with a rapier that time in the museum on Venus. Go, old friend, and leave this to me."

But he didn't go. I shrugged and left the cabin. I hurried to the lift, sprang into the antigrav field and shoved downward until I reached the ring-bulge level. Here were the ship's officers' quarters and Rhodan's cabin had also been established here. I was told it was supposed to be a rather magnificent layout.

But luxury and Perry Rhodan were basically incompatible, even in a state of illness. He had never been one to attach importance to outward appearances or superficialities. Certainly luxury and splendour were no part of the Perry Rhodan I knew and cherished.

2 combat robots stood in front of the armourplate door. They had activated their defence screens and the muzzles of their energy weapons shimmered with a reddish light. Their beamers were loaded and desafetied for action. I hesitated, finally coming to a halt. It was in that moment that the hull of the *Ironduke* was heavily jolted. I lost my balance and fell to the deck. I remained there until the salvos from the ship's guns had levelled into a steady thunder. The battleship had opened fire. By now probably all 8,000 warships were firing with all weapons available. Rhodan must have issued the firing order while I was en route to his cabin.

The volley-recoil absorbers finally reduced the shuddering effect of the repeated salvos. Nevertheless occasional jolts came through from the main gun positions.

Cautiously I approached the robots again. They immediately raised their weapons, not uttering a word as they did so. Nor was it necessary.

I called to them in a loud tone of voice: "Imperator Gonozal VIII, ruler of Arkon and the stellar empire of the Arkonides, requests a brief audience with Perry Rhodan. Announce me!"

"Wait," came the mechanical response. The robot seemed to be sending a wireless signal or message.

Whereupon Rhodan's face appeared on a small observer screen outside the door. "What do you want?"

"I think I have found a way of causing all the Antis to fall unconscious. The weapon is on board my flagship, the *Teparo*. It should be to our advantage to gain control of the Baalol priests by this method. And... well, are you going to open the door? Do I have to stand here and yell my lungs out? Since when am I unable to speak to you?"

He hesitated. "Come in. I'll give you 3 minutes."

The combat robots stepped aside. The armoured hatch opened before me. I had no proofs for backing up my statement. I had a suspicion that this 'friend' was going to become a full-fledged enemy.

5/ CARDIF UNMASKED

I had not expected such pompous splendour. Rhodan was seated in a luxurious pneumo-chair. He had opened his uniform so that his chest was exposed. I was able to see the cell activator which had become a part of his flesh.

He got up with an effort and finally stood before me like a foam-rubber mountain. But his size no longer impressed me. His yellowish eyes were filled with suspicion. Apparently he was already regretting that he had allowed me to enter. But he still held on to himself, still playing his role. He did not know how far I had come with my mental deliberations. Outside, the *Ironduke's* guns were still thundering. It was a rather unreal situation.

"Well?"

I met his gaze forcefully as I kept my hand close to the butt of my weapon. "Your hypno treatment has a few holes in it, young man," I told him in what must have seemed an almost hearty confidentiality. "Apparently they neglected to transfer the seemingly unessential details of Rhodan's memory when they did the job. Now I can understand very well why you've avoided meeting me before. Have a seat, sonny. I'm thousands of years older than you, and besides—your father is my best friend. Sit down!"

He stared at me. I was still lacking the final proof although from the standpoint of logic I was completely certain now. I noted the new surge of fear in him. Suddenly he had ceased to be the almighty ruler who forced high-ranking officers to pay him such ridiculous homage. No longer the martinet, he fairly gaped at me without saying a word.

"You'd better sit down, Thomas Cardif! You've committed some crucial blunders that only I could detect. That little song is the most important link of memory between your father and myself. And we didn't fight with rapiers but with heavy Viking broadswords. And there are a few other things you wouldn't know about. But tell me now—how were you able to deceive the whole human race? I'd also like to know where Perry Rhodan can be found. Cardif—don't do it!"

His sudden bellow was more like a bleat. It was not an outcry of anger. I knew how helpless he was at this moment. His hand moved toward his weapon but he was too slow. At first I was about to draw on him but then I merely leapt forward. He tried to defend himself, having probably really believed that his size gave him the strength of a giant. My first shove sent him reeling to the deck with a glassy look in his eyes.

Throwing an armlock on him I turned him over onto his back. After jerking his weapon out of its open holster I struck him again and it was by no means a slap. He fairly shrieked in alarm and I saw naked fear in his eyes. It was then I knew definitely that this was not Perry Rhodan—it was his traitorous son. Thomas Cardif had deceived the entire galaxy and nobody had caught on!

I slapped him again and he started to beg for mercy.

Then something happened that I hadn't counted on. The hatch slid open. Simultaneously I saw a combat robot and the heavy muzzle of its gun.

"Stop! Don't shoot!" I shouted but it was already too late.

I might have been able to still get in a word of explanation if this had been a man but it was impossible with a specialized fighting machine whose sole assignment was to guard its master. I stared directly into the blinding flash that struck my midsection. A searing pain shot through me and I started to become rigid even as I crashed to the floor. I could still think, see and hear as clearly as ever but my eyes couldn't move—I could only see what lay within my angle of sight.

The false Rhodan had collected himself immediately. He put on a great show of having been through a

fight after having been attacked without cause. When the first troops came into the room with Reginald Bell in their lead I was no longer able to speak a word of explanation. Cardif was raging. Probably he would have shot me on the spot if 2 medical robots hadn't lifted him up with gentle force and taken him out of his quarters against his protests.

I could still hear his shouting after he was out of my range of vision. I breathed an inward sigh of relief. I had been paralysed by a shock-weapon. According to my experience it was a condition that would last for about 2 hours. But what could happen in the meantime? Somebody turned me over onto my back and I saw Bell's face. Close beside him I recognized Allan D. Mercant.

"Shock-gun, needless to say," said Mercant with his characteristic composure. "Atlan, I know that you can hear me. We have no choice but to protect you from Rhodan's anger until you can speak again. Then this thing will be cleared up."

"What was wrong? Pull yourself together—what happened?" asked Bell, almost beside himself. "Atlan, tell me what went wrong here! You knocked him down. His face is swollen—even more than ordinary."

However desperately I tried, I could not answer him.

"Drop it for now," advised Mercant calmly. "This is a case for Intelligence. Bring him up to Control Central. We can keep an eye on him better there. See to it that Rhodan doesn't get out of sickbay until we've heard Atlan's explanation. We can't do anything more for the time being."

How wise this little man was! He seemed to have a premonition of what had gone on between me and the impostor. Two robots lifted me up. I was taken at a run to the Control Central where they deposited me in a contour chair off to one side. I had to wait—there was no other way. Since my mishap, one hour and 46 minutes had passed.

I could only estimate the intensity of the shock-beam but I was well aware of the time. They had placed me in a position where I could see the ship's chronometer above the main control panels. The *Ironduke's* guns were still thundering. Fifteen minutes prior to this a significant event had been reported. The Antis had withdrawn their planet-wide defence screen. In spite of their uncanny' psi powers they were apparently unable to keep reinforcing the field structure with their mental charges.

Meanwhile it had been learned that there was only one city on Trakarath. No other settlement had been detected. But over this city there was such a high-density screen that it was unlikely energy beams could break through it. The 8,000 spaceships attacked en masse but in spite of this the 10-km dome of defensive energy held. It was incredible!

The heightened paranormal activity of the Antis had worked to my disadvantage, however. Pucky and John Marshall had put in an appearance shortly after I had become incapacitated. These 2 top telepaths in the Mutant Corps had tried to probe the contents of my conscious mind. I had dropped my monoblock immediately and opened my thoughts to them as much as possible. I had believed I could transmit my knowledge concerning Thomas Cardif on a telepathic level but that was just when the Anti defence screen changed location.

This enabled the Antis to concentrate their psi output and the mental intensity was immediately detectable to the sensitives among us. I myself was no telepath and I couldn't help the situation but I learned that the effect of this was a kind of mento-jamming. Pucky and John Marshall were not able to receive my thoughts under this outside influence. From their conversation I gathered that they could of course pick up isolated impulses here and there but that the pattern was insufficient for any interpretation.

So it was that I was placed in greater danger by the so-called Baalols' instinct of self-preservation which had driven them to a hectic ally—increased level of psi activity. Pucky sat next to me on the chair-couch. At times he would stroke my forehead and he would look into my paralysed eyes with such compassion and sorrow that I wondered if I could stand it. Tirelessly he repeated his questions, asking me what had actually happened.

At the moment, neither Bell nor Mercant had time to worry about me. As Rhodan's Chief Deputy Administrator, Bell had taken command of the Terran Fleet. He had just switched to a new tactic and ordered his forces to bombard the impregnable barrier with 2 kinds of weapons simultaneously. Some of the superbattleships had been armed with old-fashioned rocket launchers. We were aware of the fact that a defence screen supercharged mentally by the Baalol priests was practically impervious to energy weapons, if at all. However there were disadvantages to such a 'hardened' field structure when under attack by high-impact antimagnetic missiles.

But the Antis even had some experience in this regard and were able to use a counter-tactic. Their normal screens could stop the conventional projectiles and their mentally-charged screens could stop the energy beams so they worked out a way of alternating the field structure at such rapid intervals that it was practically impossible to choose the right moment of application for either type of weapon.

In spite of this, Bell had decided to use a simultaneous combination of attacks. The positronic calculators were put to work on the task of determining the pattern and frequency of the Antis' screen alternations. The frequency average turned out to be one millisecond! During alternate time-segments of this tight pattern a saturation blast of energy beams would be necessary and in the reverse intervals the long-range rockets would have to strike. This required a synchronization of major proportions. It was almost unfeasible but the positronics kept hammering at the problem.

Since I had been following Bell's strategies attentively it had served to pass the time quickly. It also helped me not to think of Thomas Cardif's masquerade for the moment as the frustration of not being able to say anything was almost unbearable. But my mind raced as I made calculations of my own. If the shock-gun had not been set at an intensity higher than provided for in the standard security regulations, it meant that within about 2 hours I should regain my physical control. I was well aware of the pains that would accompany that moment but considered that to be a negligible factor.

Much more important was the question as to whether or not Cardif would succeed in getting to me before that time. This was the only danger which of course he must also be aware of. It was true that Mercant had left orders to keep him in the ship's clinic until I could recover enough to talk but that was no guarantee for my safety.

Added to this consideration was the other problem: how had this criminal managed to deceive the human race so effectively and for such a period of time? Without doubt, Rhodan's closest collaborators were mostly to blame. Probably they had failed entirely to consider the possibility that the wrong man had seized the position of authority. Yet there had been so many indications of the truth, so many reasons for suspecting Cardif. Nothing more should have been necessary! If they had only suspected him just once it would not have taken long to unmask the usurper.

At the moment, where Cardif was concerned, everything depended upon his being able to get me out of the way. At this point in my deliberations, that which I feared most occurred. I could not see the security hatch open but I could not avoid hearing the resulting tumult, which was dominated by Cardif's voice.

"I declare martial law!" he shouted at them. "You will all be courtmartialled! Get out of my way! Mr.

Mercant, you are hereby relieved of your command!"

I could only see a part of the Control Central. Now I was lost! If Cardif was clever and fast enough he would surely be able to reach me—and I could not move a muscle! Bell tried to hold him back but to no avail. Discipline on board a Terran warship simply did not permit the officers and men to think in terms of resisting the Commander-in-Chief with open force. This would have been mutiny which was punishable by death. The *Ironduke* was in the midst of a military engagement, which meant that the crew was already under martial law.

All Mercant could do was to try to outsmart Cardif.

In the midst of this my extra-brain seemed to have a comment for him: *You ought to use a shock-gun, fool!*

The voices came nearer. The colossal figure loomed into my range of vision. I strove desperately to regain control of my body but my paralysed nerves did not respond.

"Sir, you must consider what Atlan represents!" persisted Mercant excitedly. "Your action can cause war with the Arkonide Imperium, I will guarantee you that with absolute certainty! The minute the Emperor is incapacitated, the robot Regent will resume control. Sir—you have to listen to me..."

Cardif shoved Mercant's slightly built figure out of the way. Then he was standing directly in front of me, his face more distorted by hate and fear than ever. Before Mercant could interfere again the traitor reached for his weapon, drawing it with surprising speed from his holster. I heard an outcry from everyone present—but then something happened that I wouldn't have believed.

At least one of those present dared to show resistance to the Administrator. It was Pucky!

The mousebeaver was still sitting on the edge of my contour chair. The deadly raygun was torn from Cardif's hand and hurled against the steel ceiling.

"I will not allow that!" exclaimed Pucky in a very hostile tone. "If you try it again I'll smash you!"

Cardif staggered back as though to avoid him. His eyes were wide with astonishment and a new fear. Two other mutants of the Corps took up a stand in front of me. One was Ivan Goratschin, the twin-head, and the other was the psychokinetic expert Tama Yokida.

The medium-sized Japanese mutant was very calm. "I think you can wait another 10 minutes, sir, can't you?" he asked.

"It's open mutiny!" yelled Cardif, out of control now. "Claudrin, kill these men! Give me my weapon—no, give me yours!"

Under the circumstances my desperation gave me unexpected strength. My stiffness began to subside. I let out, a croaking sound that immediately alerted Cardif. He acted quickly. Before the Terrans could grasp the situation he had fled from the Control Central. But he was smart enough to disguise his act of escape by making all sorts of threats as he went.

Col. Claudrin even let out an audible gasp of relief when the presumed Administrator was out of sight.

"We're lucky," said Goratschin's left head. The right head laughed. Pucky stroked my forehead with a

delicate paw.

I still wasn't able to move. The sounds that escaped my lips must have been unintelligible. Everyone was showing concern for me now but valuable time was flying without anyone doing anything about Cardif.

It wasn't until 10 minutes after that that I felt the excruciating pains. My nervous system was reviving. Several men held me until I could finally manage to speak a few words. Everyone in the room heard me because my voice wasn't lacking in volume. "Arrest him—quickly—it's Thomas Cardif—arrest him! Mercant—he is not Rhodan—quickly...!"

The Security Chief jumped as though he'd been shot.

"Atlan, are you sure?" Bell yelled in my ear. He had turned as pale as a corpse.

"Yes, it is Cardif—after him! 100% sure—full proof... Have to arrest..."

It was then that they finally awoke from their great state of confusion. The full revelation seemed to strike them all at once. Now the presumed Rhodan's abnormal actions were suddenly explained and they realized how blind they had been to allow their respect for the real Rhodan to be used to advantage by his son. They sprang to action. I had never seen men run so fast.

By now I could move my hands and soon my arms and legs began to respond. But the accompanying pain was almost unbearable. My veins seemed to be filled with molten lead, saturated with a million tiny needles. I didn't try to conceal my condition with any heroic self-containment. But while I shouted I still managed to blurt out a word of explanation here and there. It took a number of minutes before I could get up but at that moment a report came through which I had been fearing. It was the airlock control centre. A captain in charge there announced that the 'Chief' had taken off in a space-jet in order to start negotiations with the Antis. He said that Rhodan had just gone out the launch tube and that he was alone!

While Bell raged I was inwardly relieved in one sense. This gave us the final proof. There was no further need for me to convince those who had been in any doubt. I stood on my uncertain legs in front of the form-couch, still somewhat ineffective for the moment, but among the Terrans it was Mercant who first grasped the full significance of the situation. "Quiet!" he shouted, and again: "Quiet, everybody!"

I grinned at him ironically. "All you brave heroes!" I said, still stammering because of a heavy tongue. "Your minds are still in deep-freeze but they'd better thaw out quickly."

Mercant instantly controlled himself. "Your orders, sir? Do you have an idea?"

"Of course! Get another space-jet ready at once. The pilot will be Brazo Alkher. I know him. Pucky, will you go with me? Your psi capabilities will be almost useless on Trakarath but you may be able to trace Cardif's cell activator. Just before he went out of here did you hear a burst of loud laughter?"

"Yes, what was it?"

"It was a diabolical laugh. It sounded only in the subconscious. It came from the activator. You see, the synthetic entity on Wanderer knew all the time that this Rhodan was an impostor. Now do you understand what was behind Cardif's uncontrolled cell growth? Representing himself as Rhodan, he had asked for a life-prolonging activator—the same kind that was given to me long ago. And once again, It turned the whole thing into a cosmic game. It adjusted the device to Rhodan's individual frequencies, which were slightly different from Cardif's patterns—but the impostor realized it too late. Pucky, are you

coming along?"

"But you don't mean you're going to land on Trakarath?!" interposed Mercant in new alarm.

"I am. Keep up the bombardment. When I give you the signal, threaten them with the nuclear destruction of their world. Also, demand the immediate release of Perry Rhodan, who is undoubtedly being held prisoner there. Everything points to it. From the Baalols' point of view there could be no place more suitable. They'd be most likely to bring their most important prisoners to their central world. But what the devil!—I can't just stand here answering questions. Get going! You've all been asleep long enough!"

That woke them up. Within a few minutes we had agreed on the strategy. Code signals were established. I still refused to have a commando escort. Anyway, the mutants would not have been able to help. In the vicinity of the Anti city their faculties would be totally ineffective. It was astonishing enough as it was that the mousebeaver had been able to disarm Cardif. Even at our distance from the source of the Anti psi disturbances he must have had to make a supreme effort.

Tracking soon located the fugitive's space-jet but nobody fired at it. The ship's computer had beamed out the required clearance signal according to regulations. Moreover, the commanders of the other fleet units had not yet been briefed on the new situation. It was high time to take up the pursuit.

The special items of equipment I had requisitioned were brought to me in a separate flight case. Alkher, Pucky and I got into our Arkonide combat suits. And Mercant finally gave me the weapon he had mentioned on Saos. It was a combination device which had been nicknamed 'persuader'—the reason for which was obvious. It was the only practical weapon against the paramental god-priests, even when they so strengthened their individual screens to the point where they could resist a shot from a major-calibre ship's gun. It was the first time I had seen a 'persuader'.

By the time we came to the launching lock Cardif had already entered the planet's atmosphere. Actually he should have landed before this time. Why had he remained so long in outer space? The answer came to me almost too late. He had been forced to obtain permission to land. For me it was an advantage. It had served to reduce his large lead to a minimum.

The launching thrust hit me hard. I needed a little time to recover from it. But I was depending on the injections they had given me to take effect soon.

6/ THE BATTLE OF TRAKARAT

Lt. Brazo Alkher was a master of his calling. He sat in tense concentration behind the modern control column with its multiple switches for varying jet pressure and speed. These space-jets were disc-shaped, having a diameter of 150 meters, with the control cupola located on top.

We came into the atmosphere from a polar direction so that we could avoid the great rings around the equatorial region. The Terrans had already lost one pursuit squadron because its leader had inadvertently ploughed through the relatively dense material at high speed. The resulting heat of friction had been too much for the machines' light energy screens to absorb.

Pucky sat behind us in the radar operator's chair. He was 'listening' to the unmistakable impulses of the cell activator. He had told me that the mental radiations were becoming louder. From all indications the device was altering its condition in a way that no one could see or comprehend.

Outside we heard a rising whistle as our shock-screen began to repel the first molecules of the atmosphere. Alkher seemed about to convert our space-jet into a flaming comet but I had confidence in his skill. He knew what the repulsion fields could take. Finally we obtained another clear tracking contact. It meant that Cardif's ship was above the radar horizon.

"Watch out for the equatorial rings!" I called out to Alkher.

He only nodded. His course had been well calculated. Only a few thin streamers from the ring material came in contact with our shock-screen. As we plunged at a steeper angle toward the surface, Cardif's ship disappeared again beyond the planet's rim. Alkher levelled out the jet at an 80-km altitude, still heading for the capital city of the Antis, which still had to be some distance ahead. But we were already receiving the first tracking echoes from the settlement's defence screen.

I made a sign to Alkher and at the same time leaned over to press the emergency button on his combat suit. An invisible screen of protective energy built up around him. Pucky followed my example. We had agreed that he would not give us any more reports unless his paranormal tracking told him we were on the wrong course. Apparently this was not the case. It was also unlikely that Cardif would head for anyplace other than the city, which so far had remained nameless. Therefore I dubbed it Antipolis.

We were flying at 4 times the speed of sound and I noticed that Alkher had to keep compensating the jet vanes to hold us in our course. Our speed was slightly greater than the escape velocity of Trakarat. Without the constant engine corrections we would unquestionably have been carried out into space. The gravitational field couldn't quite hold us yet.

Enshrouded by a white-hot aurora of superheated gases we shot across far steppes and broad forestlands. Trakarat was a beautiful world with a blue sky, a pleasant atmosphere and an abundant water supply. One could really live very pleasantly here.

The only question was why the Baalols had refrained from completely colonizing the planet. Obviously their mentalities were of a different mould as far as colonizing in the normal sense was concerned. Our logicians had meanwhile come to the conclusion that Trakarat was being used exclusively as a central training ground for the many priests of the cult who were to be found on all worlds of the galaxy. Here seemed to be the master-coördinating centre where all events were planned and administered.

There was a shimmering of light on the horizon and we were soon flying toward the double sun which had just risen over Antipolis. It was an unusual star. I had never seen such a well-balanced binary system. The 2 suns were very close together, being hardly more than a few light-weeks apart. For this reason there was very little eccentricity in the orbits of the 16 planets encircling them. The glittering stars of the galactic core paled more and more as we penetrated the air canopy of the planet, which also brightened the light of day. The gravity had finally captured us and we were once more in the grip of an alien world but here lurked a multiplicity of perils.

For a few seconds the engines howled at full power as Alkher used 2,500 mega-units of thrust. The inertial absorbers handled the centrifugal load very well. Pucky had given us a directional signal and now we were dropping lower at only twice the speed of sound. It could have been slightly faster or slower than that since nobody had yet taken the trouble to investigate the sound-propagation properties of Trakarat's atmosphere. It was enough for us to know that the air was quite breathable.

Contrary to my agreement with Bell there was a sudden call from the *Ironduke* on the video band. Bell's face appeared on our spacecom screen.

"Be careful," he said, just as simply and calmly as if he were sitting there with us. "One of our heavy missiles has broken through the defence screen. It has exploded in the city."

"What was the size of the explosive head?" I asked in sudden concern.

"Only 50 tons. But the heatwave must be considerable. The energy dome is wavering. We're going to come through now with some beam bombardment and you'll have to watch it because the terrain will fairly boil at the impact areas. No messages yet from the Antis. Do you have any instructions? How about a mass troop landing? The city has been blasted enough to where it's ripe for storming."

"Hold off—not yet. Wait a moment, please." I turned around to Pucky, who sat with his eyes closed. "Where's Cardif now?" I asked.

"Clear signals, very strong. He's gliding down in a landing pattern."

Bell had overheard him so I said swiftly, "We'll follow him. Keep up your firing cover but stick to chemical charges or vibration heads. Are the Antis slowing down any?"

"Quite a bit. Their screen could be wiped out completely now."

"Just rip it open for me. Concentrate your fire on a couple of field projectors at the edge. I need an opening on the North side—you know our course. That's it for now, Bell."

Alkher dropped the jet in a glide. Antipolis was still 50 km away. I wondered at the lack of ground defences. The city had been surrounded by 4 anti-spacecraft fortresses which we had destroyed but they had not been able to bring down a single attacking vessel. Why had the Baalols neglected to build up the planet into a massive citadel? Perhaps they had never figured on such a large-scale attack as this. The global energy shell might have withstood an assault by 1,000 ships or more but it had been no deterrent for 8,000 Terran warships whose commanders had been capable of coördinating a simultaneous bombardment. These barbarians of Terra were not to be matched when it came to formation tactics.

The closer we came the more clearly we saw the thin fingers of light darting downward from space. It was a gossamer filigree of fine ultra-blue, greenish and rosy lines which were forming a web of death. The Terran gunnery officers fired with incredible precision. It was a very rare instance when a raybeam would miss the high-arching energy dome and strike the ground adjacent to it. In such unprotected areas the impacts created glowing craters of molten lava but they were not radioactive.

I pondered the situation as we approached. Naturally it would be foolish to assume that the enemy was going to welcome us with open arms. And certainly they had no intention of opening their defence screen to the Arkonide Imperator merely because he had gotten it into his head that he wanted to catch a criminal. So either I had to come to terms with those seas of lava below or with the energy bell itself. If it did not open it would be impossible to penetrate it in our ship.

They'd probably let Cardif pass through although my logic told me that the god-priests could not be particularly delighted with their visitor. When Cardif was still able to play the role of Rhodan he had been useful to the Baalols. Now he would only be an increased danger for them as well as a surviving witness of their own misdeeds, provided the Antis had found out by now that we had discovered Cardif's

deception.

Problems loomed on top of problems. As a teleporter Pucky had been rendered useless here. It was strain enough on him to be able to pick up the paranormal impulses of the cell activator. In this close proximity to so many Antis he became in reality what he had only appeared to be on the surface before: a small, lovable creature with a fragile frame and negligible physical strength. Without his psi capacities he was of less value in a military sense than a Terran schoolboy.

I was still working out the final details of my plan of operation when something happened that confirmed an uneasy premonition I had been trying to ignore. It turned out that the Antis were a little more prepared than we had assumed.

"Look out!" yelled Alkher. He pulled his control column full back and thumbed the red emergency button on its top end. The engines reacted with a howl but it was too late.

At the same time I saw 2 things simultaneously on the ground-surveillance screen. Down below were 3 tiny metallic shapes and they seemed to be pointing fiery fingers of energy toward us. In this dense portion of the atmosphere they were probably only half as swift as light, which enabled me to note their flashes just a fraction of a second before they reached us. In fact before my brain could fully register the optical impression our defence screen was ruptured. Two of the discharges had bolted past us harmlessly but the third shot from the mobile defence battery hit us directly.

The space-jet was knocked from its climbing course and whirled about so violently that the automatic inertial absorbers could hardly respond in time. A series of tremendous jolts threw us against our safety belts and simultaneously the deck under my feet seemed to explode. After another explosion that buckled the molecularly densified steel floor plates and made them glow white hot, the engines quit. The space-jet plunged downward.

We were not directly exposed to the thickly rising fumes and smoke because our individual screens were hermetically sealed spacesuits in themselves yet we could no longer stay on board the ship. Alkher had been wounded. A flame of superheated reactor-plasma gas had partly gotten through his screen and caused severe burns. I saw his pain-twisted face but not a sound escaped his lips. Outside the shriek of the wind increased with our rate of descent. We had been hit at an altitude of about 10-km.

Without wasting any words I struck my fist against the canopy release switch. It still worked. With a dull 'crack!' the pressure cabin was kicked out of its braces. Darting free of the plunging spacecraft it hurtled away in a sweeping curve. At the moment we were still 3,000 meters or so above the ground. We waited for emergency power to come on automatically so that the antigravs would be activated but when nothing happened we understood.

At 1,000 meters altitude, Alkher shot the explosive bolts which released the roof, which still left us with our automatic catapult seats. They sprang free and again we separated from the falling wreck. But this time there was no inertial absorber to take up the shock of acceleration. I was compressed into my seat so violently that the air whooshed out of my lungs.

Even as I flew I looked around me. Pucky and Alkher had made it safely out of the cockpit capsule. In the distance we saw the space-jet crash. It went out in an atomic explosion which seemed to skitter the mobile defence units across the terrain. I released my safety belt and activated the flight system of my combat suit and everything was automatic after that. The suit's antigrav unit braked my fall. The jump seat swept away somewhere out of my sight.

Pucky and Alkher were close behind me. Our flight units were neutralizing the planet's pull, which in the equatorial region was measured at 1.08 gravs. I made hand signals to them. No doubt our helmet radios would have been jammed by the local interference. We were not very far from the dome-shaped screen over Antipolis, which was breaking down under the ceaseless bombardment. We glided downward and my feet finally touched ground in the midst of a thick forest. Alkher and the mousebeaver followed.

I went over to take a look at the young officer. After he turned off his screen I examined his wounds. His left hip didn't look good. The burns were worse than I had thought. He was moaning in pain.

Meanwhile Pucky was trying in vain to detect the thought impulses of any approaching intelligences. "The Antis are jamming everything," he complained. "I can't be much help to you anymore. Without my special feelers what can I do? I'm just a little guy tagging along..."

"But you're a good little guy and a friend. Keep trying to locate that activator."

"Oh I'm onto that! Cardif is going to the city. His ship must be here somewhere close by."

I opened Alkher's first-aid kit, which was attached to his backpack. From the assortment of medicines I selected a pain reliever. The automatic hypodermic hissed as I released its contents into Alkher's arm.

"Alright, lad, in 3 minutes you won't feel anything but you'll be very groggy. You stay here and wait."

"Nonsense, sir."

"Not at all. I can't be responsible for taking you along in this condition. You wait here until help arrives."

His brown eyes pleaded. "Sir, I'll be alright. I don't feel any pain now. I can at least go along to cover your back."

"You stay! That's an order, Lieutenant!"

Pucky had risen on his flight unit to take a look around and now he landed again. He hurried over to me on his little short legs. "I've spotted Cardif's ship! It's about 2 km west of us in a basin. There's a river there."

Without a word I turned on Alkher's flight unit. By now he was so groggy that he hardly knew what was happening. We made a swift low flight and in a few minutes reached the other space-jet. It was undamaged and deserted. It was with a sigh of relief that I finally placed Alkher on a collapsible contour couch.

"You are forbidden to take off, is that clear? Just don't try to fly anywhere. You are underestimating the effects of that pain drug. It has reduced your reaction timing to a minimum."

"I can feel what you mean, sir," he stammered with a heavy tongue.

I touched his face. He was going to need medical attention as quickly as possible.

A few moments later I turned on the small spaceship's powerful radio and called to the Fleet. The *Ironduke* answered immediately. Bell appeared on my spacecom screen.

"Well, at last!" he shouted in relief. "We saw the crash. Where are you?"

"In Cardif's ship. He is probably in the city already. We weren't able to catch him in time. Pucky and I are going after him."

"Are you crazy?!" he yelled. "They'll hunt you down like a couple of rabbits. It's bad enough that those characters already have *one* hostage on their hands."

"How is that? Do you know for sure that Rhodan is here?"

"I got an answer to my ultimatum 5 minutes ago. The Antis are angling for a truce. They want to think things over. Yes, Perry is in the city—unharmd!"

He said the last word while beaming with joy. I myself felt a sudden surge of gratitude. Now all was well.

"Go on, Bell."

"Well—so you know they'll be demanding all sorts of things in exchange for Perry's release. We haven't let one word leak out as yet—about Cardif's deception. What do you suggest?"

"Set down a space-landing division at once. Surround the city. Alkher needs help. Take care of him."

"OK—what else?"

"What's the status of their defence screen?"

"Shattered open in 7 places. The northern sector is wide open. Where their projectors are knocked out the Antis can't build up the energy field again. So huffy it up—what else? I'm afraid they may be cooking up something we haven't figured out yet."

"Land your troops. I presume the Antis will make contact with Cardif first. At least they may hope to get some useful information from him if possible. Advise me immediately if anything unusual starts to happen. And one thing more: inform all crewmembers of the Fleet at once! Tell them the truth of the situation. It's possible that Cardif may try some more of his masquerading. If he gets support from the Antis he can make use of their transmitter and make himself heard on every ship! Don't think he's not capable of accusing you, me and the top command. If the troops get the idea that we've started a mutiny I wouldn't like to fall into their hands. Watch out for him, Bell! Don't underestimate Cardif *for* the Antis. They're not asking for a truce for nothing. When I give you the signal we agreed on, open fire on the southern hemisphere of what's left of the screen—but don't rake the northern section. That's where Pucky and I are going in. Have you got that?"

I heard him grumble but I cut the connection. Alkher was still conscious.

"Alkher, do you think you could be a relay station for me—for any incoming messages? I don't think my wrist transceiver will be enough."

"OK, sir. You can count on me." He raised himself up. The expression on his hard, lean face was determined.

Ah, these were men! Once more I wished that I had a few millions of them under my command. But there was no time now for such reflections. Pucky and I prepared ourselves.

We had lost our new combination ‘persuaders’ in the crash of our ship so we were back to normal weapons. That is, unless Pucky would still be able to use some of his own. I had no impulse-beamer in my holster. It was something else. Before leaving the *Ironduke*, Mercant had given me a handgun that had been considered the ultimate in Terran engineering prior to the advent of the energy weapons.

It consisted of a Russian automatic pistol with a 7.63-mm calibre barrel. The ‘Topeff’ fired little rocket missiles which were capable of generating an impact of 836 m/kg. The double magazine held 18 armour-piercing projectiles.

There was an optional adjustment for either explosive heads or normal firing.

7/ THE RETURN OF PERRY RHODAN

3 minutes before, the *Ironduke* had started an effective bombardment again, along with the superbattleships *Barbarossa* and *Drusus*. It was the most precise planned position firing I had ever seen. Even in the days when I had been an admiral and task force chief of the Arkonide battle fleets I had considered such an exact concentration of fire to be impossible.

The 2 super-class ships attacking the southern half of the energy dome restricted themselves to the use of thermal impulse-guns. The *Ironduke* employed ultrasonic cannons whose cell-shaking high frequencies were getting through the Anti-field here and there and causing many of the Baalols to fall into a deep state of unconsciousness.

Prior to the surprise attack from the depths of the outer void, new information had reached me. Apparently the chief of the Trakarot god-priests had no name. He called himself the Supreme Baalol. He had tried to use delaying tactics with the Terran fleet’s top command. Actually something was probably being plotted that would be damaging to us in the final outcome. Rhodan really seemed to be here on the homeworld of the Antis, which wasn’t at all surprising to me. In fact the Baalols had acted so logically in this respect that no other conclusion had been worth considering.

Now there was an open state of war again. An inevitable result of the concentrated fire was that Perry Rhodan’s position would be much more perilous. It was time to move in!

Pucky and I were hovering 500 meters above the northern defence perimeter. The subterranean screen projectors here had been so completely destroyed that any rapid repairs were out of the question. But in spite of this, large sections of the screen were still in operation.

We hadn’t been able to approach the surface any closer since the terrain at the outskirts was still red hot from the previous attacks. Here and there we could still see bubbling craters of molten lava which were throwing up poisonous vapours and dangerous heatwaves. A storm had come up and it was only with an effort that we could remain aloft. Just before Bell’s latest attack the city had been relatively calm. We had been able to observe a number of intelligences who seemed to be Arkonide or at least human types, to judge by outward appearances. But when the first impacts of the new bombardment were felt we could make out signs of a rising panic.

Now only a few minutes later many thousands of Antis were running in utter confusion through the wide streets of the magnificently planned city. A number of the typical pyramid buildings had collapsed and a surface fire was still burning where the first attack missile had exploded. Under such conditions it was not surprising that the Antis' paramental influence had begun to wane. Apparently most of them had more things to do than to stand motionlessly in one spot and link their mental powers with those of other Baalols. But it had not been possible to reinforce the energy dome with such powerful paranormal forces otherwise.

I still waited awhile before I called to Pucky. In spite of our special optical equipment it was not likely he could have seen me, since I had turned on my deflector screen. To normal eyes we were both invisible now. I did not suspect that the Baalol priests' faculties could also affect purely physical phenomena but actually we were not observed. For the moment I had no instrumental means of determining the situation with regard to the ground-tracking stations, which were certainly present in the area. But they apparently hadn't detected us or we wouldn't be alive. And there was no more reliable proof than that.

We flew swiftly through a wide rift in the field-structure of the energy dome. To the right and the left of us were blinding flashes of discharge lightning emanating from the crumbling field. We landed on the flat top of a building and saw nothing but chaos below. Some Antis were shouting at each other while others were trying to leave the city in surface vehicles.

"They're fighting!" exclaimed Pucky. "Nothing could be better for us."

He was right. Signs of serious disagreement were in evidence. Occasionally I could make out groups that seemed to be in combat with each other. Even the Antis were creatures endowed with an instinct of self-preservation. It would have been strange indeed if they had not been opposed to this fate that was crashing down upon them from the skies.

Probably for hours now the top leaders of Trakarat had been far below ground in their security bunkers. But that was only incidental to my main concern, which was Thomas Cardif. So far Pucky had been able to keep track of him successfully. Even though his psi faculties had been restricted here he could still pick up the hyper-plane impulses from the cell activator. He told me he sensed them as though they were a distant song which now and again would be drowned in peals of laughter.

I suspected that the last stage of developments was at hand. Cardif would no doubt be desperate by now, especially since the Antis must surely know that his role as Perry Rhodan had been played out. Of how much use would he still be to them now? What would they be willing to risk for him?

Nothing more!—said my logic sector. *They'll probably try to do something with him. If the experiment fails they will drop him.*

I was of the same opinion. But what would they try to achieve with Cardif? So far nothing had happened. Pucky was following his movements. He was somewhere in the centre of the city.

We flew onward. The little one had taken hold of my hand so that he could guide my course. Our antigrav units functioned well except that we got into difficulties whenever a shockwave hit us. Overhead was a continuous thundering as we flew along over the burning buildings. Far to the south, perhaps 9 or 10 km distant, the mighty ray bombardments of the superbattleships were hammering at the screen. Even where we were we sensed some of the effects of the ultrasonics from the other guns.

The mousebeaver spoke very little, being intent upon his quarry. He came to a stop over a broad plaza which was surrounded by magnificent buildings and parks. This time we landed on the curved roof of an

exceptionally large dome structure.

"He is directly below us," shouted Pucky. "Maybe he's being received by the Antis but I can't say for sure. I can only pick up the radiations from his activator."

That was quite enough for me. I looked down below and saw practically no one in the large plaza or square. Apparently the Antis had finally taken cover. There were no new announcements from Bell. Were the leading god-priests still relying on their crumbling energy screen? Were they expecting to work some miracle through Perry Rhodan—or with Thomas Cardif?

I was becoming restless.

"We could catch him now!" called Pucky impatiently. His deflector screen was so excellent that I could only see a faint outline of his form.

"No, that's of secondary importance now. We'll only attack when he is with Rhodan."

"Will they bring him to Perry?"

"It's highly probable."

"What do you have in mind?"

I explained it to him in a few words. The main thing now was to remain undetected and to be able to follow Cardif's tracks. Suddenly we saw a line of vehicles coming across the plaza carrying uniformed figures. So they had soldiers after all, these high lords of the Baalol cult! Or maybe they were only policemen. I couldn't make an exact distinction from where I was. Much more important was another discovery: those armed men were not wearing individual defence screens! It left me bewildered for a moment until I thought it over.

The answer was simple and enlightening: Trakarath was the homeworld of the Antis. Here they had not been exposed to dangers or other such inconveniences until we had emerged out of hyperspace over their heads. Because of this they had apparently refrained from equipping the regular inhabitants with the special screen projectors. It would have been not only superfluous but expensive. Of course their most important citizens could be wearing such devices so it was necessary to be careful just the same.

We checked the systems of our cumbersome combat suits. By the gravitational standards of Terra they weighed more than 100 kilos. The built-in antigrav units had to be so adjusted that we could move about with relative freedom from the load we were carrying. If the units were to fail we would be helpless.

"OK!" Pucky yelled at me.

He was now forced to shout because the thunder of the penetrating beam bombardment had increased in volume. It was hardly possible to communicate. A nuclear storm broke out over the southern portion of the wavering energy dome. It was one place I wouldn't have cared to be at the moment. Dark masses began to flow into the avenues coming from the south. They were fugitives who were trying to find asylum in another part of the city.

Fast troop carriers were speeding to the North, which proved that the Antis could think logically. The concentrated fire in the South permitted certain conclusions to be drawn. Apparently a landing operation was about to take place in the opposite direction.

I put through a call to Brazo Alkher. With all the strong interference the communication was difficult. "Alkher, advise the Fleet flagship—manoeuvres can begin. Continue the bombardment."

"Understood."

I cut off the connection. Everything had been done that could be done. The Antis did not seem to have discovered me and Pucky as yet. Apparently it had not occurred to them that 2 aliens could have dared to penetrate this far without any military coverage.

"Cardif is moving again," called Pucky.

It was time. We drifted carefully along the curvature of the roof, flew around several towering antenna masts and then glided down to the ground. Pucky was hanging onto my left foot as I drifted about looking for an entrance. The masonry here had been partially cracked open and at the ground level it was easy to find a suitable opening. We gained access to a splendidly furnished hall from which a number of antigrav shafts led upward. The thundering of the bombardment outside was diminished here, which was a relief to the ears. I went behind a hexagonal pillar made of fluorescent material and pulled Pucky into hiding with me.

"Fly ahead of me," I said softly. "There are people over there so be careful! Can you still trace the activator?"

"Much better than ever. Cardif is going below."

"What do you mean? Down into underground rooms? Is there much of a subterranean area?"

"All I know is, he's going down there—you can believe me."

The situation was becoming more problematical. If there were bunkers below it would hardly be possible to gain access to them without being noticed. Even deflector screens had their limitations. We were still unseen but how much longer would we remain so?

Pucky led the way to an antigravitor which we dared to enter. As we descended into the depths we only encountered one Anti who had come in from a side shaft. He was also on his way below. We got behind the man as he came to a lock entrance of some kind. He was wearing a uniform and although he carried an energy weapon he was not equipped with an individual defence screen.

Pucky held onto my arm. We waited until the armoured gates opened and then slipped through with the stranger. Here we beheld a very strange sight. Thousands of Antis in flowing robes were huddled closely together on the floor and were staring at the walls with a fixed gaze. Beyond was a second large chamber where there were more of the yellow-robed masses of priests. It was obvious that these were the so-called 'psi' troops of the Baalols. It was their assignment to reinforce the outer defence screen with their combined mentalities.

They were still trying to hold firm. I carefully moved close to one of them and looked at his face. His features were tense, the corners of his mouth were tightly drawn and he was streaming with sweat. It told me enough. These uncanny mentalists had reached the end of their paranormal capabilities. Not even they could be expected to hold off thousands of nuclear impacts for hours at a time. Sooner or later there had to be a limit.

"Huffy!" said Pucky. "Cardif is going deeper. It's starting to hurt!"

"Hurt? How is that?"

"The activator vibrations are getting too strong. And there's always that laughter. That's the way *It* used to laugh on Wanderer. But it isn't funny—it hurts."

The uniformed Anti was already at the other end of the chamber. We hastened after him and soon another armourplated portal came into view. The doors opened and closed slowly so that we had enough time to pass through. This second lift-shaft contained a mechanically operated elevator cage, which meant that we were getting close to the subterranean control centre. All known races of the galaxy avoided installing equipment in especially critical locations which were either complicated or subject to interference. If the power stations failed, antigrav shafts would be useless. A lift cage suspended by cables or raised on gear tracks could always be operated with devices using emergency power. Electric motors only required a fraction of the energy that was consumed by antigrav equipment.

The cage door slid upward. Our inadvertent guide was apparently an officer and he was in a hurry. I made it safely inside but Pucky happened to bump against the Anti. And with that our hide-and-seek game was finished. I took charge immediately. The Anti was startled but by the time he tried to look around, my arm was already around his throat. I jerked the tall figure back and his hands flailed about helplessly. The muzzle of my pistol pressed against his back. I had turned off my screen to be able to handle him. I spoke to him in ancient Arkonide, which was the language of Akon and had always been used on Trakarat.

"How would you feel about dying?" I said in his ear while the elevator continued to descend.

When his struggles suddenly ceased I knew that he had understood. Apparently he had also quickly realized that something invisible was not necessarily a ghost. He was probably familiar with the, Arkonide deflector screen. I loosened my grip and he gasped for air.

"You will act sensibly now," I told him. "I am not interested in you."

I let him have more breathing room and he straightened up. Pucky took the beamer from his belt but I wasn't happy about it. In the present situation an unarmed officer could attract attention.

"What do you want?" he inquired with surprising composure, and he finally looked around.

"A Terran named Thomas Cardif is here. I want to find him. That is all. You will go ahead of us and open the doors."

"I don't know where he is located."

"Also not necessary. Just keep your mind on my weapon. I won't hesitate to use it!"

"I suppose not," he answered calmly.

The man could think. He knew that 2 invisible opponents had the advantage of him, even if they should be discovered later.

When the elevator came to a stop I nudged the Anti again with my gun muzzle. "This weapon works silently," I lied to him. "And also keep in mind that there are 8,000 spaceships hovering over Trakarat."

Do you see how nice it is to have an overall view of the situation? Pretty soon you won't have to be bowing and scraping to the Supreme Baalol."

This time I had robbed him of his composure. He looked around swiftly, seeming to be very disturbed. Apparently he was grasping the total picture now for the first time

When the cage opened, he led the way. We entered a technical control room of some kind. About 50 uniformed operators were present. Pucky had hung onto my belt so that he could keep up with me on his short legs. "To the right," he whispered. "I have a good fix on him."

I passed this instruction on to the Anti. He hesitated briefly but then continued toward the opposite archway. Somebody called to him but he made a vague excuse and kept going. I gripped his right arm and held it in such a position that his hand concealed his empty weapon holster. Thus we progressed through the control room without being molested although I heard Pucky let out a moan of pain occasionally. Cardif must have been somewhere in our immediate vicinity.

An arched hallway opened before us. Somewhere we could hear the thrumming of machinery. Farther ahead a curved stairway led to lower levels. On the first landing I saw a guard station and 2 uniformed figures.

"Can you get through that checkpoint? Answer me!"

"No."

Nevertheless I decided to try. At the Anti's approach a guard stepped out of the control cubicle. When he hailed our guide we came to a stop.

"Cardif is close," whispered Pucky. "There are people with him—I can sense it now."

I reached into my belt pocket and pulled out a small pressure capsule containing a fast-working knockout gas. The situation was becoming dangerous. The second guard also appeared. Our guide stood there as though petrified. He could still feel the pressure of my gun in his back.

"Where are you headed?" called the second guard sharply. Obviously he had become suspicious.

I pressed the release valve and threw the capsule in front of us. Three seconds later I shoved the Anti away from me while Pucky and I turned on our defence screens. The gas worked swiftly. In 2 jumps I was beside Pucky and was pulling him along with me. Our involuntary helper never got to make a reply to the sentinel's question, for all 3 men sank to the floor.

We ran down the stairway and did not encounter any other guards. Then we were suddenly aware of voices Cardif's husky tones were easily recognized. He was shouting something that I couldn't understand. When we made the last turn of the stairs we came upon a round, dome-shaped room and saw a number of yellow-robed Antis standing before Cardif's monstrous figure. They were looking at him in pitiless silence.

"...and I'll be able to prove it to you," was the tail-end of the criminal's appeal. Both of his hands were at his throat, as it seemed he was struggling to get his breath.

I withdrew into a corner under the stairs, taking Pucky with me. It was still necessary to wait.

"You have failed," retorted a tall but ancient Anti. He wore a violet robe which displayed cryptic symbols in various colours. "We consider it to be out of the question that your father would accede to any more of your demands. What chance do you still have of being able to influence the crews of the Terran warships?"

"You haven't given me access to the transmitter station!" Cardif complained. "I still would have been able to handle them!"

"You are wrong. We have intercepted a general communiqué to all commanders and crews. It is fully known now that you are not Perry Rhodan. You'll have to suggest something else. We have no time to lose. The screen is collapsing."

I counted 5 Antis who probably were part of the government of this world. Three others were uniformed and armed. I sought to make a sober assessment of the situation.

The 5 influential men were wearing individual projectors which had not yet been turned on. The soldiers or policemen—I had not yet determined how they were to be classified—had already activated their own screens. But since at the moment they did not feel threatened they had not reinforced their fields mentally. Which meant that under present conditions my own weapon would not be able to harm them. Pucky's thermo-beamer was a small special model. Other weapons were too big and heavy for him to tote around with him. I felt it would be impossible for him to get through those defence screens with his needle beam.

So if it came to a matter of life and death I would have to cause the Antis to use their paramental screens. Then they would be vulnerable to my non-magnetic projectiles. But it hadn't yet come to such a crisis although I expected an alarm. The 3 unconscious men would have to be discovered soon. There was no other possibility.

Cardif began to plead almost tearfully. I noted that he seemed to stagger back a step or so in the process. His eyes were wide as though he were seeing something terrifying. Pucky whispered to me that just now the mental laughter was crashing through in waves. *It* seemed to be following the events as an interested spectator.

Another cult priest spoke up. "The ultimatum will be at an end in 20 minutes, standard time."

"I'll speak to him!" shouted Cardif in desperation "Take me to him! I'll bring him to the nearest telecom. The Terran officers will obey his commands. His life is at stake, don't forget that!"

"And ours as well," observed the Supreme Baalol in an icy tone.

I guessed that this old man must be the chief of the local government.

"We can make a deal. I'll convince Rhodan how senseless it is to destroy Trakarath. We can even trick him again."

"How?"

Cardif finally came to the speech he had no doubt prepared during his escape flight to the planet. He was thinking only of his own life and his own state of health. "You have to try to remove the activator from my chest. Attach another activator to Rhodan—one of the 20 stolen ones. It will begin to react the same as mine did because all these activators have been shifted by paranormal means. After mine has

been removed I'll become normal. On the other hand, Rhodan will feel changes and start to become deformed—or some such reaction. All you need is to gain a little time yet. I have to get well again and he must start doing suspicious things. In that case it will be easy for me to take the part of Perry Rhodan again. Who would believe in his identity if he suddenly showed up in some abnormal form and if I were normal?"

The plan was simple and therefore ingenious. I shuddered at the fathomless depravity of this man who had never once said "my father" but always "Perry Rhodan". Cardif's idea was as good as done, depending upon 3 conditions. First, the Baalols would have to succeed in removing the activator from him. Then Rhodan had to react as expected. And the third point was myself, which Cardif wasn't counting on. But that would all change as soon as the 3 unconscious Antis were discovered.

I had no sooner gotten this far with my thoughts than the alarm finally sounded. To me it was a form of relief. It had been a painful experience to keep waiting for it second by second.

Pucky and I remained calm. The Anti leaders excitedly asked each other for an explanation. One of the uniformed men ran up the stairs when he heard shouts coming from above. But he came back at once, apparently informed of the situation.

"Activate your screens!" he shouted. "Someone has penetrated here without being seen."

I noted the quick movements of the god-priests. Suddenly they were all shielded but I still didn't know where Rhodan was. On the stairs 2 men appeared carrying an ominous-looking device between them.

"Deflector tracer!" said Pucky. "They suspect the truth! What now?"

It was Cardif who answered that question by his action. I saw him stagger toward the far end of the room and yank open a door. The 5 Antis followed him while the uniformed men stood back against the walls with drawn weapons. We couldn't see Cardif now. I heard a hectic exchange of words but he seemed to be getting his way with them.

"Fly over there—fast!" I whispered.

Pucky acknowledged. I activated the flight unit and glided across the floor toward the door. We reached it without incident because it happened while the men were setting up their tracer device. The staircase was crowded with other soldiers. I could delay no longer, even if they should detect us.

Pucky was ready to move when I pulled the door open. We were through into the other chamber in 2 jumps but the warning cries we had expected rang out behind us. I shoved the door shut with my foot, looked around me and raised my weapon.

At the back of this room stood a tall, lean man with grey eyes and an ironic smile on his lips. Cardif reeled toward him, ready to shoot him down. The Baalols evidently had not suspected what the miscreant had in mind because they raised a cry of alarm. I fired a fraction of a second before he could pull the trigger. My special automatic produced a sharp report, followed by a tongue of flame.

In the fiery flare that issued revealingly from my deflector screen I saw Cardif's Titan figure fall. His outcry was drowned in the echoing shriek of the projectile's exhaust gases. His right arm had been hit at the shoulder level. He flailed about on the floor, groaning loudly with his eyes staring wide and his mouth contorted in a wild grimace of pain and fear.

4 of the Baalols had retreated to the walls of the room. Only the purple-robed priest still stood in the middle of the chamber, tall and expressionless as he looked about him. Outside was a clamour of shouts and calls. They didn't dare to either enter or shoot through the door. Cardif kept on shouting and groaning in his evident pain.

"Who is here?"

When I heard that voice I came near to sobbing with relief. Perry was exactly as calm and collected as he always had been in other moments of peril. There was only a slight tension in his facial muscles. Pucky cried out uncontrollably.

Out of the corner of an eye I caught a movement of one of the other 4 priests who had drawn a small weapon from under his cape. I fired without hesitation. He had mentally reinforced his defence shield but before he realized what kind of fiery micro-missiles were coming through his screen he was already dead. He dropped limply to the floor. The Supreme Baalol did not betray a single emotion. He observed the fallen man with apparent indifference.

I spoke to him. "As the Supreme Baalol, you seem to mistake an open state of war for some kind of game. I urgently advise you to instruct your men outside to put away their weapons. If this is a game you've lost it. Terran troops are landing. An additional 10,000 robotships are just now taking up their attack positions. They are under orders of the Regent of Arkon. I cannot absolutely guarantee that the commands I have given will be followed. If you don't make up your mind swiftly, this world will be destroyed. You should have noticed that so far only your energy screen has been under bombardment."

The ancient one hesitated but then walked past me with dignified bearing and opened the door. In a few hover-jumps I reached Rhodan's side. Meanwhile he had picked up Cardif's beamer. "Thanks," he said simply.

It only took the old priest a few moments to reestablish order. He came back but the door remained open. Outside in the other chamber they had even set up a portable impulse-cannon. No one paid any attention to Cardif. He had crawled across the room until he could lean against a wall. There he straightened up to a sitting position. I turned off my deflector screen since it had become senseless to remain invisible.

Pucky was with Perry. The little one was crying. I had never believed that mousebeavers were capable of tears.

The Supreme Baalol seemed to have arrived at a decision. "I presume that in you I see His Highness, Gonozal VIII," he began. He appeared to have no interest now in the dead man or the wounded one.

"So it is."

"You handle negotiations," Perry whispered to me, hardly moving his lips. He was obviously avoiding the sight of his whimpering son.

The Anti smiled courteously. He seemed not to have a nerve in his frame. "May I remind Your Eminence that if your fleet makes an annihilating attack it will also endanger your own life?"

"I was aware of that when I infiltrated this building," I retorted coldly. My weapon still threatened him. He gazed without expression at the strangely shaped muzzle.

"You do not place much value on your health, Your Highness."

"If I am held here longer than 2 hours of standard time, my standing orders will become irrevocable. You must be informed concerning the apathetic logic of the robot Regent."

"Do you have any specific recommendations?"

"A few, yes—and they're brief. Effective immediately, the Baalol cult is forbidden in any part of the sovereign territory of the Greater Imperium. Any violations will be punishable by death. Thomas Cardif is to be handed over to Terran jurisdiction. The Administrator and I are to be set free."

"And in return, Your Highness?"

"Withdrawal of the united fleets. All damages chargeable to your own treasury. You have 30 minutes to decide."

An officer came in with every indication of panic. Even as he whispered swiftly to the ancient one I knew that the space-troop division had landed. Before the old man could reply I added some words of my own. "You will have to give up the idea of removing Cardif's activator. His plan is unfeasible now. I have already informed the Fleet Command of the true situation."

Cardif shouted hateful invectives at me. I ignored him. The Supreme Baalol considered, finally asking for 10 minutes in which to deliberate.

"Granted. But withdraw your soldiers."

When he was about to leave, something happened that no one expected. Suddenly, Cardif went into a raving fit again but this was the wildest exhibition he had ever given. On a mental level we sensed a thunderous peal of laughter. It swelled so powerfully that I thought my skull would burst. Although it was not perceivable by the normal senses, the Antis also heard it. Cardif pushed himself up painfully from the floor, only to fall again to its hard surface, thrashing about on the polished tiles like a man in the grip of a major epileptic fit. His outcries of anguish and pain were a torture to the ear.

"No—not that!" I heard Perry murmur, as his eyes widened at an unprecedented sight.

In the area of his chest, Cardif's special uniform began to rip. As the material frayed and tore, he screamed ever more loudly.

His naked chest stood exposed. We saw a fiery red bulge the size of an egg.

Explosion incredible: out of his bulging *breastburst* an egg-shaped object!

The alien thing gleamed crimson. It hovered motionless in the air for an interminable moment. Then, like a sentient magnet, it glided slowly toward a transfixed Perry, blood dripping from its ovoid form.

Blood of Cardif... blood of Thora... blood of Rhodan.

Perry grasped my arm but I could offer him no help, I could only stare in horrified fascination at the hideous finale.

The paranormal laughter died. In its place we heard a mental message: *Cardif should not have made*

the mistake of ordering the activator adjusted to the personal frequencies of his father. After which the maniacal laughter surged again for the last time... and subsided into silence.

The airborne activator struck Rhodan's chest, attaching itself like a suckerfish. The great man's face twisted in reaction for a moment then he regained his composure and looked calmly about him.

Cardif's screams were stilled: he was dead. The son of 2 worlds, the son of 2 races, was dead. Though Thora's untimely demise was mourned by billions, there was cosmic consolation, at least, that this extraordinary Arkonide mother had been spared the death scene of her ill-starred son. Poor rebel-blooded Cardif would rail no longer against his unkind fate.

The Supreme Baalol had paled noticeably.

At last I broke the silence. "It will no longer be necessary to hand Thomas over to Terran custody."

"Your allies are mighty," said the old one. "I agree to your conditions but I wish to preserve the cult on those worlds which are not in your sphere of influence."

"It is also banned in the Solar Imperium," added Perry, entering into the negotiations for the first time

The Anti nodded. There was nothing more to say. It was only then that I had time to greet Rhodan properly. Although his words of gratitude were few, their sincerity moved me more than would have been possible with a well-prepared speech.

Pucky felt of him all over. "Good!" said the little fellow with evident satisfaction. "This time it's you. How were you captured on Okul?"

His face became expressionless and he still avoided looking at his dead son. "I acted like a fool. The stone platform fell into the depths and I was lost. The contents of my memory were transferred to Cardif. That's how he was able to take my place. During the time of his exile he had matured more. Physically he matched me in every detail. With that and my own knowledge he could dare to play the role."

"He didn't know everything," I interjected. "Do you remember our duel on Hellgate?"

He smiled. "Naturally. In fact I thought of it in their undersea base just as they crammed the hypno-hood on my head. During the transference I was able to conceal a few things. Of course Cardif knew about the duel itself but not about seemingly unessential details which would be tremendously important to other people."

I understood. This had been typical of Rhodan. At the moment of his greatest crisis and danger he had been able to make plans and act upon them. "Did you think of our 'water verse?'"

"Precisely that. And I also erased certain details of our encounter in the Venus museum. I thought of rapiers instead of heavy battle swords. I wasn't able to camouflage the really important things that Cardif would need for his masquerade. Whenever I did, the Antis were right there to force me. So I had to take care to limit myself to what they thought were very minor details. That's why I picked out a few items that only the two of us knew about."

"Were you counting on my questioning Cardif later?"

"Yes, more or less. His character was extremely negative. I suspected that he would succeed in fooling

Bell, Mercant and all my other friends but in your case he would not. I also assumed that certain of his actions or various events resulting from them would tend to make you suspicious."

"That's just what happened."

"I figured as much. So you caught him on little details?"

"Actually he simply betrayed himself. He even went out of his way to talk about the museum when it wasn't at all necessary. As I look at it now I can see that it was a sort of panic move on his part. He had avoided any direct contact with me for months but when we finally did meet he seemed to sense the danger I represented to him. Right away he sought to convince me of his identity by mentioning an experience that was related to the beginning of our acquaintance. And he mentioned rapiers. Finally I sang our little water song to him and he didn't recognize it. That told me enough. These things, coupled together with his other actions, provided me with a complete chain of evidence."

We discussed Rhodan's imprisonment for 15 minutes or so. He had been taken from Okul immediately and brought to Trakarat where he had been treated very humanely. He said nothing of his inner emotional turmoil during that time but I could well imagine what this great man must have suffered.

"What do things look like in the Sol System?"

"It's high time you were returning. Cardif has caused a great deal of havoc."

"I thought so. We'll have to repair a lot of damage."

The Supreme Baalol returned to the room. Behind him came a number of Terran troops from the landing forces. Then came Bell. When he saw Perry he struggled visibly to control his emotions.

One hour later we took off in a space-jet. Rhodan was given a reception that was even beyond my expectations. The enthusiasm of the men was boundless. I sent the robot fleet home. After all the excitement subsided, Rhodan completed his negotiations with the Baalols.

The southern section of Antipolis had been nearly annihilated. Trakarat was the planet where the ancestors of the present-day Antis had landed 20,000 years ago. After their descendants recognized their new faculties which had been acquired as a result of environmental influences, they had discarded the idea of a general colonization here. They concocted a very long-term plan which embraced the next 10,000 years! Temples of their cult were built on most of the civilized worlds of the galaxy in order to entice the masses. More primitive cultures were confused and misled by paranormal trickery.

Meanwhile the Baalols' commercial power had become considerable and finally they had taken part in the larger game of galactic politics, which was to have reached its crucial point with Cardif. But this part of the plan had failed. To my way of thinking it had all resulted in weakening these god-priests to where they were no longer dangerous. We knew their goals and their methods. We had developed special weapons for combating them—a fact which had been impressed upon their leaders by now.

Rhodan informed us that there were only about 150,000 Antis on Trakarat. The planet served as a training base. After passing their examinations the young Antis were then sent out to other bases of operation to fulfil their missions. Marriages could only be consummated on Trakarat and only between the Baalols themselves.

When so much is known about an enemy he ceases to be dangerous.

* * * *

We had taken Thomas Cardif with us and after services his body was surrendered to the vast reaches of interstellar space. It had been depressing for me. Rhodan had given the salute as Fleet Commander and head of state but what his private thoughts were as a father I could only guess. We did not speak of it.

He took me back to the Arkon System in the *Ironduke* and there the robot fleet squadrons were just arriving. When we parted we knew it was not going to be easy to repair the damages wrought by Cardif. When he shook hands with me I glanced at the chest area of his simple uniform. I knew the life-prolonging cell activator was there. It had always been meant for him and now he had finally received it.

"One of these days I'll have to give you a call," he said, somewhat dejectedly. "So don't go far from your hypercom. The galaxy still has need of you. The Arkonide Imperium needs help."

He looked at me gravely for a moment and seemed to understand what I was thinking. "You name the time, Emperor. If you need assistance—we'll be there."

When the *Ironduke* thundered off into the sky, I was alone again. Rhodan had much to do. My role was to wait.

ORDER OF THE ACTION

[1/ CROSSROAD OF EMPIRES](#)

[2/ THE TWISTED TYRANT](#)

[3/ OPERATION: "DESTINATION"](#)

[4/ THE EMPEROR PLAYS DETECTIVE](#)

[5/ CARDIF UNMASKED](#)

[6/ THE BATTLE OF TRAKARAT](#)

[7/ THE RETURN OF PERRY RHODAN](#)

[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

DUEL UNDER THE DOUBLE SUN

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

AURIS OF LAS-TOOR... Perry sensed that his hostess unintentionally revealed more warmth in her stereotyped words than she cared to. Although her manner and gestures were constrained her eyes fairly radiated. It was only with an effort that he suppressed his desire to hold her hand any longer than was absolutely necessary. In spite of everything she was his adversary.

Yet he had to admit to himself that he had never fenced with an enemy so reluctantly before.

But the danger was too great. Auris never made decisions independently. Behind her was the Ruling Council, a group of determined and mentally capable men who were sternly dedicated to the welfare of their race.

The Akon beauty accompanied her distinguished Terran guest as far as the boarding hatch. As she gave him her hand once more, Rhodan felt that the pressure of her grip was more than what was required by protocol alone.

"Until tomorrow, Perry Rhodan."

For the Solar Administrator it would mean a sleepless night for he must decide what's fair in both love and war.

After Thora, will Auris become the second love of Rhodan's life?

Can Perry afford to steal time for love? For he is faced with the problem, in the next entry in his 'diary'—which he shares with Atlan and Pucky—the problem of—

THE STOLEN SPACEFLEET

by

Clark Darlton