

RHODAN has come home again—to face the galactic disorders caused by the just-ended Cardiff crisis. Ironically, peace in the galaxy cannot be secured until the theft of an entire cosmic armada has been effected! The tale of—

THE STOLEN SPACEFLEET

1/ DISTANT DRUMS

"And for me a glass of milk," said Pucky, adding to the order. "Luke cold, please." He grinned happily at the white-jacketed waiter, making a gleaming display of his incisor tooth.

In spite of the fact that this was the Goshun Yacht Club the waiter was not at all disturbed by having to serve one of the guests a glass of milk. He was acquainted with Pucky and his ways. With a polite "As you wish, sir," the man withdrew and headed for the bar. Pucky fairly beamed as he looked about him triumphantly.

"The fellow has class," he commented as he pulled a partially nibbled carrot from his uniform trousers pocket.

"But not you," said Perry Rhodan in mild reproach. "You're not supposed to bring your own food into the club. How could this establishment exist if just anybody did that?"

Pucky took a hearty bite of the carrot. "Am I 'just anybody'?" he inquired, mildly affronted, and then he gazed musingly at the white sails on the brilliant blue surface of the nearby lake.

The hotel club had been built on an elevation and afforded a splendid view for its patrons. This broad salt lake or inland sea in the former Gobi Desert was no longer the lonely waste of water that it had been in previous centuries. The close proximity of Terrania, the world metropolis and capital had turned the remote salt sea into a top-ranking resort centre. The shores here were dotted with the weekend cottages of the nature-loving city dwellers. In the evenings and in the afternoons like today, people met together in the club.

These few hours of relaxation had been good for Perry Rhodan. The past 3 weeks had been anything but restful or enjoyable. The turmoil left behind by his son Thomas Cardif had required setting many things in order—and now it was done. He had been in daily conferences in order to straighten out the many mistakes his traitorous son had committed while holding his office. The incipient revolt in the spacefleet was nipped in the bud as soon as it became known that it had been Cardif the impostor who had issued so many insane commands and threatened the very structure of the Solar Imperium.

The imprisoned government officials were released and the great staff of Terran workers who had been

recalled from Arkon had all been reestablished in their posts. Through a general space hypercom broadcast Rhodan had informed all intelligences of the galaxy concerning the tragic course of past events and he had announced his son's death. However he also did not conceal the fact that the fleet mobilization and rearmament initiated by Cardif would be continued at the same rate. Likewise he had retained the state of emergency which had then empowered Cardif and today empowered Rhodan to make direct decisions of a top priority nature when the general situation required it.

The most important things had been ironed out. This weekend was dedicated to recuperation because in the past 3 weeks Rhodan had hardly had any rest and had often only slept a few hours before other new decisions had demanded his presence. There was no better place to relax than Goshun Lake because it was only a few kilometres from the administrative centre of the Solar Imperium. In just a few minutes an aircar could bring him to Terrania.

Reginald Bell stretched his legs out comfortably. He was enjoying these few hours that he could have alone with his friend Rhodan. It was very seldom that the Solar Administrator, Chief Executive of the Earth, had time for either himself or his oldest friend. Of course it was unavoidable that Pucky should also be along on the little outing. After all, his weekend cottage was right next to Bell's and besides that he considered himself to be at least Rhodan's 'second best' friend. Even if he was not a human but only a mousebeaver.

Bell watched Pucky finish off the carrot before making a patronizing comment. "You know, you should switch to a more elegant type of vegetable," he said. "I'd say asparagus tips would be more proper for the most accomplished mutant in the Corps."

Pucky responded with a bored yawn. "Humans are curious creatures. They eat artichokes and oysters because it's supposed to be high class. Not that they taste so good—oh no! OK, so I also like asparagus but it makes a mess if you stuff it in your pockets. Besides, I like carrots best. So I eat them. Well, Fatso, you want to give me an argument on that?"

Bell felt too lazy for any debates. He only wanted to sit there in the sun. Moreover, the waiter was just arriving with the drinks they had ordered. Pucky reached for his glass and tasted the milk. He nodded gratefully to the waiter. "It's luke cold," he confirmed, and then sprawled out on his seat with a complete lack of elegance.

Rhodan enjoyed the peace and quiet to its fullest. Out here at the club it was true that everybody knew him but they didn't make a commotion about it. Here he was a man like any other and his wish for relaxation was respected.

The sun was moving westward but it was still warm, almost too warm. Along the shore the bathing enthusiasts were romping and exercising. The salt water here provided an amazing buoyancy so that even the non-swimmers could venture into deep water without danger. It would have taken a special feat to drown at all and the sport of diving was only possible with the help of heavy-weighted belts.

"I'm glad it's all over with," said Bell, leaning back in contented weariness. "It'll all come together again and be like it was before. Nothing has been lost."

Rhodan gazed beyond him. "No, you might say nothing's been lost. I just have to act as though I never had a son—and actually that isn't far from the truth. Or can anyone say that Cardif was my son? It's true that he looked like me but we were too far apart otherwise. He didn't even take after his mother."

Two young officers in the ground-leave dress of the Solar Fleet passed by and saluted respectfully.

Rhodan gave them a friendly salute back.

"I guess Atlan is pretty relieved he can count on us again," said Bell. "What would become of the Arkonide Imperium without help from Earth?"

Rhodan reflected on this. He closed his eyes for a moment, then looked up at the cloudless sky. "When I think of Atlan I'm troubled with a feeling that I may have forgotten something. It seems to have something to do with Atlan and Cardif but no matter how hard I try I can't remember what it was. Perhaps it was not too important."

Nevertheless it was surprising that Rhodan could forget anything with his almost photographic memory. Bell was certain that it must be something unheeded rather than 'forgotten'.

"If it's anything important, Perry, Atlan will remind you of it. How about doing a bit of sailing? My boat is all set to go."

"Oh great!" cried Pucky happily and quickly finished his milk. "Bell, since you're so hospitable why don't you pay the check?"

Rhodan noted his friend's nonplussed expression as he smiled and beckoned to the waiter. A few minutes later they all got up and went down to the harbour where the small sailing yacht was berthed. There wasn't much wind but that suited the men and Pucky just fine. They were sailing for relaxation and were not in the mood to be buffeted about in a full regatta breeze.

The small boat moved away from the shore at a lazy pace. Rhodan went forward on the deck and stretched out on his back to enjoy the peacefulness of the excursion. Bell took charge of the sail and the rudder. Pucky rummaged through the small cabin in search of anything edible. No one could have imagined a more peaceful scene.

Pucky came grumbling out of the cabin. "I couldn't find anything except canned food and soft drinks."

Rhodan looked up at the sky and sighed. Probably no one could guess what a healing balm it was to him to have nothing more to do than to counteract the light swaying of the boat or to close his eyes when the sun came into his line of vision.

"Take a swim, little one," Bell invited as he fixed the rudder in place. "I'll just strip down and go in with you!"

5 minutes later the 2 friends were splashing around in the water. Rhodan had turned onto his stomach so that he could watch them. Pucky wore a diving belt and whenever he dove into the clear depths Perry could see him plainly. Bell preferred to float on the surface and get a suntan.

In the midst of this small idyll the low sound of a buzzer was heard. Rhodan sat up and raised his arm. He pressed a button on his wrist transceiver. "This is Rhodan—who's calling?"

"Interstellar Com Central, Terrania, sir. We have a hypercom call for you. Arkon requesting a direct connection. Shall I channel it to you there or would you rather come here?"

Rhodan took a few seconds to think about it. It would take him too long to get to Terrania. He would have to do without the video portion of the transmission and content himself with voice communication. "Switch it to me here."

Meanwhile Bell had become alerted. He swam up closer to the boat. Pucky popped up from below the surface. Since he was a telepath he had even caught Rhodan's thoughts under water and so was already aware of what was happening. Rhodan turned up his speaker volume and waited.

"Do you think it's Atlan?" asked Bell as he climbed aboard.

The water ran off him so that he was soon standing in a puddle on the deck. Pucky remained in the water and allowed himself to be towed along. He did not have to depend upon the spoken word to follow the conversation. But the wind had almost completely died down and all around them it was calm and peaceful.

"Who else?" said Rhodan. "I wonder what he wants. Let's hope it's nothing serious."

"This is Arkon!" A strange voice suddenly sounded from the microspeaker on Rhodan's wrist. "Galactic Com Central, Arkon. His Highness, Gonozal VIII, wishes to speak to Perry Rhodan, Administrator of the Solar Imperium!"

Since Atlan had become the Emperor of Arkon, Gonozal VIII had been his official name. The immortal Arkonide who had lived incognito on Earth for almost 10,000 years had finally returned to his native stellar empire to take up the heritage of his ancestors. The Earth could not wish for a better ally and friend.

"This is Rhodan. Connect me."

When one realized that the hyperspace transmission was spanning an abyss of 34,000 light-years in the fraction of a second and the Arkonide's voice was being amplified through interstellar relay stations to be heard in Rhodan's wrist receiver, it was possible to appreciate the tremendous scope of developments in recent years.

"Can you hear me, Perry? This is Atlan. Why don't I see you on my screen?"

"I'm not at the station, Atlan. We have to settle for voice communication. What's happening?"

"Actually nothing," came the answer, and Bell sighed in relief. He went back to the tiller and gave the boat a new direction. With the present lack of wind it would require an hour to return to the boat harbour. The disc of the sun was already touching the distant mountain peaks.

"It's nice to hear your voice," replied Rhodan. He too was relieved and he began to relax again. It was a rare occasion indeed when such a costly interstellar communication proved to be of an inconsequential nature. "You are no doubt aware of what's been happening here on Earth since I saw you?"

"Your returned Terran staff has given me a report. You were lucky that I could rescue you and that Cardif was eliminated. Anyway, you can thank him for your cell activator. Now you're as immortal as I am."

"Thanks are due to the entity on Wanderer," Rhodan corrected him pointedly, "even though its existence almost cost me my life. But let's drop the past now and think again of building the future. The problems caused by Cardif no longer exist. The dangers are past. We are going to—"

"Just a moment," Atlan interrupted him, and it seemed as if his voice carried a note of trouble. "Not all

the problems have been erased, my friend. Don't forget the Akons!"

Rhodan did not understand at first what Atlan was getting at. "The Akons aren't any problem, Atlan. We have a treaty with them and also a firm commercial base on their main planet, Sphynx. They wouldn't dare cause either one of us any trouble because they only have matter transmitters but no spacefleet to speak of. Even though they are the mother race of the Arkonides, that's a long way from saying that—"

Once more he was interrupted by Atlan. "That's just it, Rhodan—you say they have no spacefleet to speak of! I'm speaking of it now and I'm talking about exactly 1,000 modern warships! I had to hand them over to the Akons because Cardif's actions forced me to."

Bell overheard this. His stocky figure became rigid as he regarded Rhodan. He thought he could see a deathly pallor creep into the healthy tan of his face.

"1,000 ships—my God!"

There were a few seconds of silence on the specially scrambled carrier frequency that bridged the vast abyss of distance. Then Atlan spoke: "Yes, and that includes 20 giant ships of the Imperium class. It's not a striking force to be sneezed at—in fact it's the worst of our scars leftover from Cardif."

"And I had all but forgotten it!" Rhodan reproached himself while feeling relieved at the same time. At least now he would not have to be digging in his memory for the forgotten item. At last he knew what had been bothering him during recent days. "What do we have to do, Atlan?"

"You mean, *what should* we do? In no event should we attempt to break our treaties with them nor should we think of taking back that fleet by force of arms. Nobody in the galaxy would trust us anymore. No, there has to be some other way of putting the Akon Fleet out of business."

"We'll meet somewhere at a rendezvous point, Atlan. Bring all the data concerning the ships you furnished them. I'm sure we can work out a plan to get them back without breaking treaties. We'll send you the rendezvous coordinates in 5 hours. Let's say we'll meet on November 10th, Terra time..."

"All right, Perry. I'll be there with the data—and you bring along a good idea..."

"I'll do my best, Atlan. Good luck until then."

The contact was disconnected. Rhodan shut off his microceiver and looked at Bell. "I'm afraid our furlough is getting cut short again. We have to make some preparations." He looked up at the slack sail. "But I suppose we can't do anything about *that* for the moment."

"Thank goodness you can't!" exclaimed Pucky in malicious glee. He dove under the boat and popped up on the other side. "I can make it faster to shore than you can!"

But he made no impression on Bell, who tied the tiller and went forward to join Rhodan. "Do you really think the Akons can be any threat to us with just a thousand ships?"

Rhodan nodded. "Together with their superior technology, of course they can—if we leave them alone. But that we're not going to do."

During the rest of the slow trip to shore he remained thoughtfully silent.

* * * *

On the 10th of November of 2103, Atlan and Rhodan met on an almost unknown planet between Terra and Arkon. They were happy to escape the pompous ceremonies they would have had to submit to in accordance with tradition had they met on Arkon. Here they were practically alone. Atlan's stronghold here was almost exclusively run by robots and the local inhabitants paid no attention to their alien visitors. The 2 spaceships lay next to each other on the provisional spaceport. Inasmuch as the atmosphere was equivalent to that of Arkon or Terra, the 2 men left their ships escorted by only 2 combat robots and met together under the open sky. They walked a slight distance to a nearby river and sat down on a grassy knoll. The reddish sun was almost directly overhead but the day wasn't hot. A cool breeze came from the East. Only a few clouds drifted across the rose-coloured sky.

Atlan sighed. "You don't know how much I've longed for such a comforting solitude as this. A stream, a stretch of meadow and nobody around! There could never be such a thing on Arkon. The security guards never leave me out of their sight or sound. I'm always running into courtiers and have to listen to their drivel. But here..."

He fell silent, watching the riverbank. The water flowed gently along the shore. It was clear and pure, completely uncontaminated by any industrial impurities. On this planet there were no factories at all.

"It's not quite so bad with me at home," said Rhodan, thinking of the Goshun Lake near Terrania. "But if we have to meet it should be in a place like this—far away from ceremony and red tape. This is the only place where we can be ourselves—intelligent beings in harmony with Nature. I'm grateful to you, Atlan, for having chosen this planet for our talk."

"Yes, well—I've brought along the data you wanted. My robot has the file. In the meantime have you given any thought to how we can inspire the Akons to return the ships?"

"Of course I've given it a lot of thought but I haven't come to any conclusion yet. What plausible reason could we give the Akons for making such a demand? We can't just tell them that they're making us lose some sleep over that fleet of theirs."

"Let's use Cardif as our excuse. The agreement was made on completely false premises."

Atlan motioned to the robot who had accompanied him. The metal automaton came over and handed Atlan a briefcase. Then it returned to its post and continued to observe the area. It was its sole assignment and Atlan and Rhodan could not have imagined any better bodyguards than their 2 robots.

"Here's a listing of the ships I handed over to them," said Atlan. He extracted a thick document from the case and gave it to Rhodan. "It includes all the technical data. Any other information you may need you can get from me when you want it. I'm very familiar with this affair because it caused me so much grief."

Rhodan opened the document file and soon realized that he was familiar with the technical details they contained so they weren't going to do him much good. Nevertheless he studied the long list while Atlan lay on the soft grass and closed his eyes. It was obvious how desperately he needed even this meagre respite.

After 10 minutes Rhodan closed the file. "May I keep this?" he asked.

Atlan remained where he was. "Yes, of course—but why?"

Rhodan lay back on the grass beside him. The two most powerful men in the known universe lay there on a green knoll beside a stream on an almost unknown planet. It was such an unusual situation that Rhodan had to smile—but it was a happy and contented smile.

"Because a thought has come to me. Do you remember when the Akons made their time-shift attack? They deactivated the robot Brain and came close to destroying Arkon because all the robot-controlled facilities failed. Even the robot fleets."

"Yes, I remember—but what has that to do with this?"

"What if the shoe were on the other foot, Atlan?"

Atlan opened his eyes. He turned on his side to look at Rhodan. "I don't understand, Perry."

"Well, it's quite simple. Your list tells me that every one of the ships you sent to the Akons was designed for a robot crew. In other words, they originally were remote-controlled by the robot Brain on Arkon. Isn't that right?"

"If that's what the list says—yes."

"Excellent. I presume the Akons know that?"

"Of course they know it. They even began to convert them immediately."

Rhodan sat up abruptly. "They're converting them? How do you mean that?"

"Quite simply. They intend to man them with their own people so they have to deactivate certain robot circuits. That in itself isn't really a conversion, you might say, but merely a bypassing of certain connections. The key microcircuit elements are about the size of a finger. When they're removed from the remote-control sectors, the ships' positronic brains are just computers again—they can't control the vessels or respond to the robot Regent. The only way to reverse the process is to re-install the remote micro-circuit elements."

"So that's all—I see. . ." Rhodan thought awhile and then asked: "Are you sure the Akons don't have any other conversions in mind?"

"Well, only to improve comforts. You know the robotships haven't any crew quarters or officers' cabins and other such luxuries. Naturally the Akons will provide those things because certainly there is enough room for them."

"And those micro-elements? I mean, have they returned them to you?"

Atlan shook his head. "Naturally not. What do we want with them? I don't know what they've done with them. Why do you ask? Are you coming up with an idea?"

"Yes, I am," I said. "What if the shoe were on the other foot? There's a certain event of the past we can turn around in the other direction. At that time the Akons crippled us by cutting out the robot Brain. This

time we'll surprise them by reactivating the robot sectors of their ships. Do you get the picture now?"

Now Atlan also sat up and he suddenly began to smile. "Not a bad idea. And later nobody would know how it could have happened. The Akons couldn't do much with a purely robot fleet. At any rate we couldn't be blamed if they lost the fleet just because something went wrong with the automatic circuits. But on the other hand the Akons shouldn't be underestimated. Besides—how are you going to rework an entire fleet on their own planet? Don't forget that we can't move around on Akon with the kind of freedom that would be necessary for such an operation. We'd be under observation every minute. You have to install a microelement in each of the ships' remote activation section. And that takes a specialist—not one of your teleporters, if that's what you have in mind."

"But the teleporters can transport such specialists anywhere—even into the ships. We'll get away with it. In any case we'll have to map out a precise program of action. Everything has to be timed to the minute. And the Akons must not get suspicious. They have to believe that their fleet went wild and later destroyed itself. Anyway, that's much better than simply demanding to have the ships back again. On the contrary, we should carry on as though it made no difference to us that they have a fleet. We don't want any political complications and there must be no war with the Akons."

They discussed a few more details, after which they got up and returned to their respective ships. Each of them would now go back to his home planet—Atlan to Arkon and Rhodan to Terra. The plan had been blueprinted. It was now but a matter of time till it would be executed.

But time was on the Akons' side.

* * * *

Almost at the centre of the galaxy burned the giant blue sun of Akon, the great star of the so-called Blue System, home of the Akons from whom the Arkonides had descended.

Akon possessed 18 planets, of which the 5th was known as Sphynx, that mysterious world where Terrans and Akons had first made contact. Here was the centre of the empire which was not controlled by means of spaceships but by a system of matter transmitters. On all planets of the system were matter receivers and senders. By merely stepping through an arch of light a person could go from one planet to another.

Their once-vaunted blue energy screen was now a thing of the past. Rhodan's ships had destroyed their power station satellites. It was only possible for a ship with linear spacedrive to get through the system-wide defence screen which had isolated the Akon Empire for thousands of years from the rest of the galaxy. But now that isolation had been terminated and Terra as well as Arkon maintained commercial bases on Akon 5. Thus the contact had been made permanent and was backed up by treaties.

Rhodan's base on Sphynx was relatively small. The spaceport was only 5 km in diameter. At the edge of it were a few administration buildings and the dwelling of the permanent representative of the Earth in the Akon System.

Stanislaus Jakobowski had not been too happy about his assignment to this post which exiled him to a

world that was many tens of thousands of light-years removed from his native planet. His only consolation was that they had not sent him here alone. His assistant, Axel Wiener, shared an isolation with him that was almost complete in a civilization that in many respects was superior to their own. Each man had furnished his house according to his personal taste because it was the only place he had. The area surrounding the base was off limits to them. They were not allowed to ever leave the spaceport premises.

All attempts to ease the general situation were shattered against the wall of almost sullen stubbornness on the part of the Akons. They always pointed to the agreements of the treaty in which it was specifically stated that Perry Rhodan had only demanded a base on Sphynx. There was nothing in the treaty that said anything about going into the Akon cities.

As a civilian official of the Terran world government, Stanislaus Jakobowski would be entitled to a pension if he did not quit the service before his retirement age. Thus it was that he had accepted the orders of his superiors without protest when they had assigned him to Akon, where he was to represent the interests of the Earth. By means of a small hyper-transceiver he was regularly in touch with Terrania and through the same channel received his instructions. Almost daily the merchant ships came in from either Terra or the colonial planets. They brought trade goods for the Akons as well as mail and food supplies for Jakobowski and Wiener.

The latter stepped back from the window, which afforded a wide view of the spaceport area. He was not particularly tall and he wore a full beard in the manner of the Galactic Traders. He had been looking through the contacts of the mail sack they had received that day.

"They sent us movies, Chief—all about the babes of Terra! And here we sit on Akon 5!"

Of course Jakobowski wasn't contented with the situation either but he did not make a habit of revealing it. "Where the movies are concerned—at least they're a sign that we haven't been forgotten. They don't want us to get rock happy out here. If we don't want to look at the films we don't have to."

"What do you mean, not look at them?" countered Wiener almost indignantly. "When they're free? Oh no, I'm running the movies alright!" He shook his head and rummaged through the mail sack which had been brought in this morning by a merchant ship. There were magazines, newspapers, books, private mail for the crews of ships regularly calling at Akon 5, rolls of film, music tapes, plus the usual fistful of official envelopes and instructions.

Wiener drew a long envelope out of the sack and looked at it in some wonderment. The hand-written address indicated that it was for Jakobowski but there was no return address. He held the envelope up to his nose and sniffed.

"Hm... no trace of perfume," he grinned, and then he waved it about in the air. "I'm all excited—who could have written to you? Maybe your babe?"

"Don't have one," Jakobowski advised him, and he grasped the envelope. He studied the handwriting for a moment. "I don't recognize it either."

He opened it up and when he unfolded the letter he was amazed to see a large sheet which was fully written on from top to bottom but which he could not decipher at all. True, the letters were all in even rows, separated by proper spaces and with sentence punctuation—but the words remained incomprehensible. They didn't make sense.

"Well?" said Wiener impatiently. "What does she want from you? Does she miss you...?"

"Knock it off!" retorted Jakobowski sternly. He handed the sheet to him. "See what you can make of that mess!"

Wiener made the attempt, naturally without success. He stared at the letter, completely stumped. "Somebody must be playing some kind of a joke on you, Chief," he theorized. "But which of your friends know that you're located here on Akon?" He looked at the high-priced interstellar postage on the envelope. "A pretty expensive joke, I might say."

Jakobowski took back the letter. "Naturally I'll have to report this," he said, business-like. "It isn't right to overload the mail traffic when it's already overloaded—and with such tomfoolery..."

A buzzer on the ceiling sounded. Somebody was hailing them on the hypercom. Probably a ship trying to announce its landing.

"You take care of it," ordered Jakobowski, and he continued to study the letter. He shook his head and thrust the puzzling message into his pocket, whereupon he left the room.

Whenever he wished to ponder something he was in the habit of taking a walk. Of course here on Akon he was limited strictly to the landing field—but fresh air was fresh air. Even when it was warmed by a blue sun.

Blue sun...?

Jakobowski had walked a few hundred meters when he suddenly came to a stop and looked up. The sky was almost always blue here but it had seldom appeared to be of such an intense and brilliant blue as it was today. There were no clouds to be seen. Only the splendid blue and the almost violet glare of the giant sun.

Hm...

Jakobowski was thinking that the sky hadn't been this blue yesterday. Also there were a few other items that suddenly occurred to him as strange. For example the unusual policing of restricted areas during the past few days. The Akons had stationed armed guards all around the spaceport. Formerly they had not appeared to consider this necessary. So why now all of a sudden?

As he continued his walk his thoughts returned to the curious letter. Who could have tried to play such a joke with him? It would have to be one of his old acquaintances.

It seemed that someone was calling him. He turned about slowly and saw Wiener standing by the house and waving his arms. He appeared to be very excited. Jakobowski chided himself for not having brought along his micro-transceiver.

When he hurried back within speaking distance of his assistant he called to him harshly. "What in the world is the matter? Stop yelling—I can't understand a word!"

"It's a call from Terrania!" yelled Wiener, exactly as loud as before. "Interstellar Com Central!"

"What?!" Jakobowski gasped and began to run. "Why didn't you say so at once?"

He went past his dumbfounded companion in a big hurry. Moments later he reached the radio room and dashed to the receiver. Perry Rhodan's face looked down at him from the viewscreen. Jakobowski naturally recognized Rhodan even though it had never happened that the Chief had made a direct contact with a mere trading post. The event was so extraordinary that Jakobowski almost lost his self-composure for a few seconds. But he was a capable official and quickly controlled his surprise. Even as he sat down where Rhodan could see him, he answered the call.

"Akon Base—Stanislaus Jakobowski, sir!"

"Have you received my letter, Jakobowski?"

"Letter, sir?" Jakobowski racked his memory but could recall no letter. Certainly no letter from Perry Rhodan. "No, sir, I have not received any communication from you."

Rhodan smiled knowingly. "The letter carried no return address and I'm afraid that its contents may have caused you some head-scratching. I considered it to be the best method to use for sending a few instructions to you. You know in spite of coding in hypercom transmissions there's always the possibility of messages being intercepted. So listen, Jakobowski. As soon as you receive a letter with no return address and containing a nonsensical string of words..."

"Sir!" interrupted Jakobowski. "*That* letter I just received a half hour ago. Please excuse me..."

"Excellent!" said Rhodan. "Read the letter through at your convenience but give me an answer in 3 days. Be very careful. In 3 days write down your answers and observations—following the outline of my letter and using the same method. Just handle it like an ordinary letter. A merchant captain by the name of Samuel Graybound will report to you and inquire about mail for Terra. You will give the letter to him."

"Sir!" called Jakobowski before the connection could be cut off. "The letter—how shall I read it? It must be coded!"

Rhodan laughed. "Quite simple. Use commercial code 20-a to decipher it. So—in 3 days. I'm counting on you!"

The screen darkened. Jakobowski was alone again but only for about 2 seconds because Wiener came into the radio room.

"Well—anything new, Chief? We getting our rotation relief pretty soon?"

Jakobowski shook his head. He got up and slowly took the ominous letter out of his pocket. He regarded it with a mixture of antipathy and awe. Then he took the sheet out of the envelope and began to unravel the tangle of words according to Rhodan's instructions.

In clear text the letter read as follows:

To Stanislaus Jakobowski:

I need answers to the following questions:

1. *Where have the Akons stationed the 1,000 ships which they received from Arkon? What work is being done on them? What kind of security is being used to guard them?*

2.Has the attitude of the Akons changed toward Terrans during the past 3 weeks?

3.What noticeable measures have been taken to restrict Terrans specifically to the base?

4.What has come to your attention other than this?

5.Are you able to house about 10 people without having to make any structural changes or additions to the present facilities?

Also take note: With this same mail delivery an Arkonide combat suit has been sent to you. It may be found in the crate marked 'Canned Goods'. Every effort should be made to answer the 5 questions. Signed: Rhodan.

* * * *

Wiener looked questioningly at Jakobowski as he handed the letter back to him. "That's a strange assignment if I may say so. Are we Trade Commission representatives here or are we secret agents of the Solar Imperium? If the Akons catch us at any spying business they'll wring our necks."

"Not necessarily—but it wouldn't be pleasant. But after all, Rhodan has sent us a combat suit. If I remember correctly, those things can make you invisible. So one of us should be able to get into the restricted areas without any danger and that way we can find the answers to the 5 questions. You'd be good for that, Wiener—or should I say that with the Arkonide gear you'd be well 'suited' for the job? I'd say you're the natural-born spy..."

"Thanks—but *no* thanks!" retorted Wiener. "Those Akons are weirdix and I have no desire to fall into their clutches. Invisible or not, there's always the possibility. Those kookers are capable of anything!"

Jakobowski sighed. "So I guess I'll have to go, myself. Perhaps it's better that way."

It was true that the Arkonide combat suits were capable of making one practically invisible. They were equipped with antigrav generators which made it possible to adapt the wearer to almost any gravitational environment, and by this means flight was also possible. The principle of invisibility was based on a reflecting field or screen which passed light around it. Furthermore each suit contained a device which built up a bell-shaped energy-field around the wearer, thus providing a defence screen that could ward off any weapons fire that was not too massive. In its packaged condition this type of suit appeared to be quite harmless and simple nor was it any heavier than the lighter types of spacesuits designed for short excursions in a vacuum. All equipment and controls were encased in the wide belt where they could easily be reached with the hands.

It was with mixed feelings that Jakobowski inspected the suit and read the accompanying description. He also read the instructions thoroughly. Then he put the suit on and prepared to accomplish the assignment Rhodan had given to him.

He turned on the deflector and saw by Wiener's confused expression that he had become invisible. He was taken by a new compulsion to experiment. Cautiously he took a few steps past his assistant to see what would happen. Wiener's gaze was still fixed on the spot where he had first disappeared.

"I'm over here, Alex! All right—don't jump out of your skin! As you can see, this thing works like a charm. Now the Akons won't be able to discover me. I'm going to give it a trial run."

Wiener groped toward him with outstretched arms. "Wait—take a weapon with you!" he pleaded.

"What for? Even if they detect me I have to avoid any use of force. It would only make a diplomatic mess and that Rhodan can do without! Besides—I won't let myself get caught. OK—see you later!"

He went out of the house with a sense of unusual lightness and walked toward the nearby border of the base. With a few adjustments he regulated the antigrav so that he only weighed about 10 pounds. Now it would be no problem for him to make jumps of 50 meters or more. This way he could get past any barrier.

A practical challenge was not far away.

At intervals of 50 meters the Akons had set up some 10-foot poles around the perimeter of the commercial spaceport and they were connected by a single strand of wire. The wire stretched between the poles at a height of about 8 feet. When Jakobowski arrived near this seemingly harmless demarcation line he came to a stop disconcertedly. Some 500 meters to his left stood an Akon but he didn't give the impression of being an exceptionally alert sentinel. Yet he would have to be because this wire 'fence' did not look as though it could hinder anyone from leaving the non-restricted area of the base.

Jakobowski reminded himself that the Akons were intelligent—in fact very intelligent. He didn't budge from the spot. They would never make the mistake of underestimating the Terrans. So he soon recognized the wire for what it was—a trap. He remained where he was and considered the situation. Why was the wire stretched at a height that was just right for comfortably passing beneath it rather than jumping over it? The real danger—and therefore the barrier—lay *beneath* the wire and not above it.

It was pure chance at this moment that Jakobowski looked up at the sky and was again curious about its intense blue colour. As he lowered his gaze to where the taut wire made a line across the heavens he noticed that *beneath* the wire the blue was different—paler, as though partly obscured. Something was there like an almost invisible veil.

A veil between the wire and the ground.

Now he understood. The wire emitted some kind of radiation but only toward the ground. It was generating a radiation field that hung around the spaceport area like an invisible curtain. Undoubtedly it was a more effective barrier than a solid wall. The treacherousness of this prohibitive measure angered Jakobowski. If he had been less suspicious and had simply continued on his way, his next step might have cost him his life. Perhaps the bolt of energy was only enough to stun a person but it could just as well be deadly.

Before he decided to jump over the barrier he wanted to convince himself of the effectiveness of the radiation curtain. He was looking about him for a suitable stone when chance came to his aid again. A fat Berol-beetle as big as a sparrow came flying straight across the landing field, close above the pavement, and headed straight for the barrier. It flew slowly as was the nature of these insects native to Akon, changed its course several times and then flew under the wire within 10 meters of where Jakobowski was standing.

The expected discharge of energy did not occur. Jakobowski had at least expected a flash of light. But

something of a much more uncanny nature occurred. The beetle simply disappeared. Then Jakobowski realized that the curtain of force was not a mere energy trap but instead a simplified kind of matter transmitter. Any object coming within its range would dematerialise and be converted back again in some other location. It could happen close by or maybe hundreds of kilometres distant,

The Akon sentinel had not moved. He appeared to be too far away to have noticed what happened. Or perhaps the beetle had been too small to touch off any possible alarm system. While Jakobowski was thinking this over, a second beetle came flying his way. He followed its erratic course with new interest until it also struck the barrier screen and disappeared, this time to his right. He also clearly noticed that the insect was slightly injured in one of its wings, which explained its wandering course.

He had just decided to venture a jump over the wire when a third beetle came thrumming from behind him. Jakobowski could hardly believe his eyes. What he saw couldn't be possible! It was the same beetle as before! One of its wings was cut short and thus its flight was uncertain and erratic. With a blind stubbornness that was typical of these insects it veered toward the obstacle once more and again disappeared from view.

Now an instinct made Jakobowski turn swiftly to look in the direction that the beetles—or the beetle—had been coming from. He was in luck. Not 50 meters behind him a dark point emerged out of nothingness—hardly 3 meters above the pavement. It was the beetle! It fell 3 feet before it started to fly again. This time, purely by chance, it happened to fly over the wire instead of under it. Although it cleared it by only 20 cm or so, nothing happened to it. It was a final proof for Jakobowski that the energy transmission was only active *below* the wire.

So evidently the Akons had dispensed with using a death-dealing barrier screen. Any Terran trying to walk under the wire would simply be transferred back about 50 meters. Nothing more. Harmless but extremely effective.

He made a hefty jump into the air, rising with relative slowness to a height of 20 meters or so, after which he settled to the ground beyond the wire. While going over the barrier he had felt nothing. He merely landed softly on the sparse grass within the forbidden zone. Ignoring the unsuspecting Akon, he adjusted his antigrav to zero. Aided by a small propulsion unit he had enough thrust to fly along invisibly over the surface of the ground.

He flew for about a half-hour along the wide highway where any and all traffic between the Terra base and the Akons was forced to travel. When ships were in port this route was used for transporting both outgoing trade goods and materials incoming from Terra. At present the highway was empty and deserted.

On the horizon to his right the city began to loom up but it was less interesting to Jakobowski than the view to the left, where the great spaceport of Akon 5 became visible. The most remarkable thing about the spaceport was that it had only been put into operation a few months ago. In a certain sense the Akons had advanced to where space travel was outmoded. Their material transmitters provided a much better and faster means of getting from planet to planet. But then the Terrans and Arkonides had come and given them forceful proof of the fact that the attainment of the perfect future didn't always mean leaving the less perfect past behind. After their system-wide defence screen had been destroyed, the Akons found themselves in need of a well-armed spacefleet in order to hold their own against the space-faring races of the galaxy. For this reason they had refurbished and reactivated their old spaceport.

And on this spaceport stood the 1,000 ships.

When Jakobowski saw them outlined against the bright horizon he suddenly began to realize how dangerous they could become if the Akons again learned how to make proper use of them. Now he could understand why Rhodan had asked him the questions that he was supposed to answer.

He reduced his speed but flew a little higher. There was only a minimal danger of being detected by tracking beams because the Akons would be relying upon their transmitter barrier screen. Moreover it was not even certain whether or not they were familiar with the Arkonide type of combat suit or that they might think in terms of an invisible infiltration at all.

The fleet couldn't be missed because of its size. Just the 20 battleships of the Imperium class occupied more space than that of a normal metropolis. These gigantic spacespheres comprised as much mass as the rest of the fleet. Jakobowski recognized light and heavy cruisers and battle cruisers. Apparently the Akons had been furnished only with the spherical ships because there were no Gazelles or destroyers to be seen.

Jakobowski flew twice over the entire complex before he decided to land on top of one of the light cruisers. It was located in a fairly centralized position and its 100-meter huff wasn't too high off the ground. Even as he approached he was aware of the feverish industry surrounding the ships. Whole armies of technicians were busy unloading waiting freight trains and bringing packing crates of material into the cargo locks. Grav-cranes were handling an incessant stream of installation equipment and machinery and delivering it all into the ships, where other work crews took over.

The first of Rhodan's questions was answered. The ships were still there where they had originally been stationed and they were being newly outfitted and readapted because previously they had not offered the necessary comforts for human crews. Security here wasn't very strong because the Akons didn't expect anybody to get through the barrier screen around the Terran commercial base.

Also, Jakobowski decided that the second question could be answered with an emphatic "yes". The Akons had in fact altered their attitude considerably toward the Terrans. After the defeat they had suffered they had again become self-assured and overbearing. They had made demands and had gone so far as to place special emphasis upon them.

Also the third question was answered. The Akons had worked out a new method of preventing Terrans from leaving their territory. And Jakobowski had even been able to discover the nature of the barrier.

For the time being the fourth question was still open whereas the fifth one could also be answered "yes". Naturally it would be possible to provide quarters for 10 people in the main house without making any structural changes or additions.

So now the fourth question! What had come to his attention that was unusual, other than these items? In order to find that out he would probably still need the remaining 2 days. Of course he couldn't imagine what Rhodan had in mind specifically but he resolved to note and report every extraordinary instance of Akon behaviour.

Jakobowski decided that he would have a closer look at the work being done inside the ships. He looked about him cautiously. Farther down on the curved surface of the small spacesphere a cargo lock was standing open. At the moment no Akons could be seen nearby. Here it should be relatively safe to enter the ship and if he wanted to determine what was being altered inside he didn't have any other choice.

He worked his way carefully down toward the lock. Even though a fall from this height would not be

dangerous for him he wanted to avoid any possibility of it. Also he had to hope that no chance-tracking beam would happen to be aimed in his direction.

He came into an empty corridor where pure functionalism took the place of anything intended for humans. The cabins to his right and left were also bare of any furnishings. Since all ships were fabricated on assembly lines, the designers had made no distinction between normal and robot-controlled units. This made it easier to convert from the one mode of operation to the other as far as final installations were concerned.

Jakobowski stopped and waited as he heard footsteps approaching. Two Akons came around a turn in the passage ahead of him. They were carrying an oblong crate between them which was apparently much lighter inside the ship than it was outside, because the vessel's antigrav field was operating. They missed Jakobowski by only a few inches as they passed. He had stood there, rigidly tense and not daring to breathe but finally sighed with relief when they failed to notice his presence. They shoved the crate into one of the cabins and began to unpack it. Apparently it contained plastic parts for a bed.

Therefore the ships were definitely being converted to accommodate Akon crews.

Jakobowski took courage and pressed forward. In the control room he was able to determine that the purely robotic consoles and switching sections were still on hand. They had been covered with plastic protectors but otherwise they had been left unchanged. This meant that the ships could still be switched over to robot control.

Jakobowski had no technician so he had to be satisfied with at least this much that he was able to observe. Apparently it would also be enough for Rhodan—otherwise he would have asked for more detailed information or sent along a technician.

Three Akons were in the process of inspecting the controls. They were talking over the intercom to a colleague in the machine and power section of the ship. Jakobowski could understand them well enough even though the Akon version of Arkonide was more inflected and not as succinct or concise as the modem tongue. The basic elements of both languages came from the same source so that there was much similarity. He could gather from the conversation that all robot-circuits had been deactivated. The key microelements had been taken out and stored in an arsenal where they would be available at any time in case they were needed.

By now Jakobowski felt that he had learned enough for today. His self-confidence increased when he found that he could walk right through a group of technicians without being noticed. Of course he had to avoid any direct contact because he was by no means a disembodied wraith. Although they might not be able to see him they would certainly be able to feel him.

Nothing went wrong until he returned to the area of the Terran base. He landed on the soft grass within 20 meters of the Akon guard. The man was of medium height, wearing a uniform and carrying a light hand beamer. In that moment it seemed that he was looking right at him but Jakobowski told himself that was a foolish notion. The Akon couldn't possibly see him. It was merely a coincidence that he happened to be looking in his direction.

But Jakobowski felt very uneasy when he saw that the sentinel held his gaze fixed upon him and even began to raise his weapon. His trigger finger began to tighten. There was a menacing glare in the man's pale eyes as the muzzle of the weapon took aim. It seemed in that moment that the alien was staring directly into his own 2 eyes. Was it possible that something had gone wrong with his suit? Could it be that he was becoming visible? He looked down at himself but could not notice anything abnormal in the

functioning of his equipment. With an almost instinctive movement he switched on his defence screen, nor was it a moment too soon.

"I know where you are even though you've made yourself invisible," said the Akon. His voice sounded a bit uncertain but there was nothing uncertain about the whitening of his knuckles as he tensely aimed the weapon. "Remain where you are. If I see one blade of grass move, I'll fire!"

So that was it! Jakobowski realized that he had grossly underestimated the Akon. He must have glanced in his direction purely by chance and noticed his footprints in the grass. Moreover, he could now determine Jakobowski's exact location because if he took another step it would cause more grass blades to bend under his foot. Even though he was protected from any harm at the moment, nevertheless his secret had been discovered. Any further investigations would now be next to impossible if he didn't want to run the certain risk of being caught.

He cursed his rash indiscretion. In spite of the answers he had come up with, Rhodan was going to be very unhappy with him.

With another quick hand movement he turned on his flight unit and rose swiftly upward. The blades of grass straightened up slowly, at least much too slowly for the Akon. Jakobowski was already 20 meters in the air before the guard fired. His energy beam cut through emptiness and was immediately dissipated. But now the Akons would also know that the enemy could fly, as well, and it would soon occur to them that an Arkonide spacesuit must be involved. Provided, of course, that this mother race of the Arkonides knew of such suits.

Jakobowski flew over the barrier wire and landed in front of his house. He waited until he was inside before he shut all units down and dared to become visible again. Wiener emerged from the radio room.

"Back so soon, Chief? Two ships just sent us their approach signals. They'll be getting here today about sundown. I've already notified the Akon Space Administration, according to the rulebook, and they issued the landing permits."

Meanwhile, Jakobowski had gotten out of his suit, carefully folded it and stowed it back into its packing case. He still felt the after-effects of his near discovery in every limb. It had been a harrowing experience.

"2 ships? What's their cargo?"

"Same as usual. Technical equipment and agricultural machinery. The Akons have announced they have some return cargo. If I may be permitted to make an observation—it almost seems to me that this whole exchange of trade goods is merely a gesture. It's like putting up a false front to keep this base here at all."

Jakobowski nodded. "You could very well be right, Wiener. And maybe we'll soon find out. I have a feeling about it—a premonition, you might say."

But he did not realize how soon this premonition would be confirmed.

The *Odin* was a battlecruiser with a 500-meter diameter hull. Since it was a transition-type vessel it could not fly faster than the speed of light on a straight line of sight but had to traverse vast distances by the usual means of the hyperjump. Major Scott, the commander, almost had heart failure when he was notified that the Administrator wanted to make a personal inspection of his ship. Then everything happened at once.

5 mutants and several officers of Solar Intelligence had come on board together with Rhodan. Several boxes of equipment followed. It was only while flying out of the Sol System that Rhodan revealed to Maj. Scott what his mission was. After the transition coordinates had been calculated the *Odin* began its long journey through 5th-dimensional hyperspace. In 24 hours they would arrive in the Blue System.

Before the sleep period, Rhodan held a last briefing in his cabin. Even Pucky was present. He sat in a large chair and sharpened his ears although with his telepathic faculties that really wasn't necessary. Next to him sat John Marshall, the leader of the Mutant Corps. In addition to Wuriu Sengu the tele-spy there were also the 2 teleporters Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta. Also present were Lt. Groder from Intelligence and Lt. Jenner, the specialist in positronics and cybernetics.

"So you know what's involved," Rhodan concluded, and he tapped his jacket pocket. "The report from our representative, Jakobowski, clearly indicates that the robot-control installations have not been removed from the ships. So it shouldn't be difficult to install those microcircuit modules. We have 3 teleporters and a specialist teammate for each one of them. Lt. Jenner, are you sure your 2 men are reliable?"

"Absolutely," confirmed the young dark-haired officer. "We were trained together in Terrania and received additional hypno-schooling on the kind of circuitry we're going to be dealing with."

"Good," replied Rhodan. "Tomorrow we'll land on Akon and wait 2 days. By then the microcircuit elements will be there. We could have delayed our arrival until then but this way it will arouse less suspicion if I visit Akon in only one ship. The following transport ships will be regarded by the Akons as the routine type of freighter traffic that comes in to Akon. Besides, we'll have the 2 days in which we can familiarize ourselves with the situation. According to Jakobowski's report, the security forces have been strengthened after he was almost caught. It will be my task to minimize the occurrence and explain it away as a trifling matter."

Rhodan looked around him. "Are there any more questions? Good, then it would seem that everything is ready, to this point. Our success not only depends upon the ability of the specialists and the teleporters but even more on luck. If the Akons even so much as suspect the purpose of our visit, later events will not only confirm their suspicions but will also serve to confirm them. And that we cannot and must not allow to happen."

When Rhodan was alone again he screened off his thoughts from the telepaths and opened Jakobowski's letter. A certain small detail of it had caught his attention but perhaps it was a bit too early to be concerned about it as yet.

* * * *

The *Odin*'s hyper-compensator buffers had not been activated and its transitions could be measured and traced by any hypersensor station in the galaxy. Thus the ship's arrival did not come as a surprise to the Akons. But as it turned out, a surprise was waiting for the *Odin* .

As the cruiser emerged from its final transition and made its approach toward the Blue System, everything seemed to be as expected. The blue-shimmering energy screen which had formerly enclosed the entire system of the giant blue sun was missing. The vast defence curtain had served to keep out unwanted intruders for thousands of years until Rhodan's warships had destroyed their satellite power stations. Today the ingoing and outgoing space traffic was free and unhindered.

Some of the system's 18 planets came into view and swung past the *Odin* as it reduced its velocity. Rhodan was sitting next to Maj. Scott in the Control Central when the 5th planet, Sphynx, came into visible range on the viewscreen. What he saw made him tense in surprise and he was reminded of that certain small detail he had mentally questioned in reading Jakobowski's report. Could there be some connection between Jakobowski's observation and what he was seeing now with his own eyes?

The atmosphere of Sphynx had an intensive blue sheen to it that could not possibly be due to any natural causes. Its combined characteristics of transparency and light refraction or reflectivity were all too reminiscent of the larger energy screen that had once surrounded and protected the entire system. This time, however, it was only around the home planet of the Akons but it was so close to the surface that any attempt to rupture it with a linear-drive ship would be disastrous. And since the screen generators were on Sphynx itself it would be impossible to destroy them.

The Akons had made good use of their time. They had succeeded perfectly with the element of surprise. Under a tight cloak of secrecy they had built themselves a new defensive weapon and were now in the position to prohibit any alien ships from landing on their central world.

Rhodan turned to the commander. "Take an orbit around it, Major. We'll have to try getting in touch with the Akons and ask them what all this nonsense is about. They must know that a ship is approaching them."

Lt. Groder, the Intelligence officer, pointed to an adjacent screen. "There's a ship, sir. An Akon..."

Almost at the same time a call came through from Communications. "We're being hailed over spacecom, sir! They're challenging us for identification. What shall I answer?"

Rhodan hurried into the Corn Room. There the haughty face of an Akon officer looked down at him from the videoscreen. Nor did the man's expression change when Rhodan stepped in front of the pickup camera.

Rhodan looked directly into the cold eyes of the Akon. "Terra ship *Odin* ," he announced. "We request permission to land."

"Your cargo?"

Rhodan smiled. "The Administrator of the Solar Imperium—your humble servant."

There was a hint of a twitch at the corners of the Akon's mouth but it could have been an illusion. At least his tone of voice remained unchanged when he answered: "Landing permission granted. The Terran commercial port is open to you. Wait there for further instructions. That is all."

The screen went dark before Rhodan could answer. He hesitated a moment and then returned to the Control Central. Major Scott looked at him questioningly.

"Your orders, sir?"

"We land according to plan. I presume they'll be cutting off their screen in a moment to let us through. It looks as if the biggest virtue of that screen for them is that it builds up their self-confidence. Perhaps we should tell them from our side that we're not concerned about it—that should shake them up." He pointed to the lateral screen. "The Akon ship is receding again. I imagine the commander will be informing the Ruling Council as to who their visitor is. It will be good to let them play with their puzzle pieces."

Lt. Groder spoke up. "The blue energy screen is an unpleasant surprise." He stretched his power figure as if to lend emphasis to his words. "But there's another side to the coin—it may have an advantage."

"Is that so?" asked Rhodan, and he waited to hear what logical conclusion his officer had arrived at.

"Yessir, quite definitely. The Akons are bound to assume that we've come here *because* of their screen and they'll probably act accordingly. We can let them think so, which should allow the mutants and specialists to robotize their fleet without interference."

Rhodan nodded and smiled approvingly. "Not bad, Lieutenant. What you're saying is, the Akons may fall into their own trap. Well, we'll certainly find out." He looked at Maj. Scott again. "You can start your entry manoeuvre, Major. Drop down farther and wait until the defence screens opens. Then go in for a landing at once." Then he had a final word for Groder as he got up. "Come along, Lieutenant. You know, the Akons aren't any better than the Arkonides. To them the biggest thing is tradition and window-dressing. They love to put on a show and play games. So why don't we do them a favour and play along with them?"

Events took place as Rhodan expected. As the *Odin* dropped down toward the small spaceport, the blue energy screen vanished, thus allowing the more than 1500-foot Colossus to land. Stanislaus Jakobowski came out to them in the limousine aircar in order to receive his guests. During their first discussions it was revealed that the energy screen had only been established around the planet since the day before. Apparently Jakobowski's observations of it, which he had reported in his letter to Rhodan, had happened during some test runs. At any rate the Akons were going to be wondering about how the Terrans had been informed so quickly. It would strengthen their suspicions that the Terra base here was more than just an ordinary commercial operation.

Alex Wiener had prepared everything for quartering the guests. The *Odin* was to take off soon so that it could wait on the rim of the system and get in touch with Bell, who would very quickly be stationed in the vicinity.

They had hardly gotten settled before a large Akon air glider landed without any warning. Rhodan was a bit piqued over the undeniable fact that they had forced him to request permission to land, whereas the Akons themselves didn't seem to bother about such formalities. But then Sphynx was their homeworld, after all, and the Terrans were only tolerated as visitors here. At least that must have been the viewpoint of the Akons.

Three high-ranking officers came out of the vehicle and marched toward the house. They ignored the presence of the *Odin* as if it did not exist. Rhodan came out and walked a few meters toward them before he came to a stop. He waited until the delegation had come close enough.

"Are we addressing the Administrator of Terra?" asked their spokesman.

Rhodan regarded the man for at least 10 seconds in silence before he corrected him: "Administrator of the Solar Imperium, to be exact. Do you have a message for me?"

"The Ruling Council of Akon requests that you accompany us. A state reception has been prepared. The Council assumes you have come here on a specific mission and is prepared to give you some clarification in regard to this matter."

Rhodan nodded. "Please wait a moment. I shall come with you right away." He left the officers standing there and went back into the house.

"And you're going?" inquired Groder with misgivings. "Completely alone and without protection?"

"Don't worry," said Rhodan reassuringly. "Nothing's going to happen to me. The Akons may be very impressed with themselves but they're not stupid by any means. They learn by experience. Besides, they want to find out what I think of their new defence screen. Relax, Lieutenant. I'll be back in a few hours."

Pucky came waddling up to him. "I could go with you, Perry. Nobody would pay any attention to me..."

Rhodan interrupted him. "They'll pay more attention to you than anybody. You stay here but you can keep in telepathic contact with me. Of course, if something unforeseen should happen, you can jump into the action."

"You can depend on that!" promised Pucky, and he was satisfied. He didn't like to be left out of things and now this made him a part of the operation.

Rhodan had put on his sleek, pastel-green uniform, which was the type worn by every officer of the Fleet. The handbeamer on his belt was no decoration but the real thing. As he joined the three Akon officers he acted as though he might be a sparrow among higher birds of plumage. It did nothing to reduce his own self-assurance but it served to puff up the Akons like so many parrots.

Lt. Groder and Maj. Scott watched the big glider take off with Rhodan and head swiftly toward the nearby capital. Jakobowski had joined them.

"That all happened in a hurry," he remarked doubtfully. "Do you think they're luring Rhodan into a trap?"

"No—never!" Groder answered. "That would be too clumsy. We can rest assured and go ahead according to Rhodan's instructions. The *Odin* takes off in 10 minutes. The Akons have already given permission and they're leaving the screen open. Pucky will go with Wuriu Sengu on the first scouting foray. They'll find out how far the work has progressed on the ships. Since you were careless, Jakobowski, they won't be able to use Arkonide spacesuits anymore. Pucky will have to rely on his teleportation. The Akons won't be expecting that.

"It wasn't really my fault, and besides..."

"No one is blaming you," said Groder, and he changed the subject. "Maj. Scott, you keep in constant radio contact with us. Be sure to let us know in time when that freighter shows up because we're anxiously waiting for it. I guess you're briefed on everything else."

"I'm with you," Scott confirmed, and then he said his good-byes and was soon off to the *Odin*. From here on he would be nothing more than a connection between the individual links of a chain that was once more going to shackle the Blue System.

"When do I jump?" asked Pucky.

"In one hour. It will be twilight by then."

* * * *

Rhodan was delighted when the formalities of his reception had ended and he was seated alone in a private chamber of the palace with Auris of Las-Toor. It was in this building that the Ruling Council was accustomed to holding its daily sessions.

Rhodan took in a full impression of the unusually beautiful woman. For him this Akon female was a perfect representative of her race and he had to admit that her personality was very impressive. Her coppery red hair went well with the velvety brown colouration of her soft skin while her full red lips were an alluring contrast to her bright clear eyes. Beneath a broad, violet shoulder cape she wore a formfitting uniform.

"You are not only very charming," said Rhodan amiably, "but also very clever. You did not even make an attempt to conceal the creation of the new energy screen. By the way, was it your idea?"

She returned his smile. Between these 2 humans who were so different from one another there existed a sort of secret attraction which neither one of them would admit. Each was a representative of his or her own race and they were determined to place the interests of their respective peoples above their own yet at the same time neither was inclined to deceive or inflict any harm on the other. Thus each was in a dilemma from which there seemed to be no escape.

"The Ruling Council ordered its construction," she explained. "And we considered it best not to surround its existence with secretiveness which might only arouse suspicion. The fact is that it's there but any time a Terran ship requests permission to land it will be turned off."

"I knew it was no cause for concern," Rhodan told her as he looked casually toward the window. Outside it was getting dark and by now he knew that Pucky and Wuriu Sengu would be on their way. "And it has nothing to do with my coming here, as you have probably surmised."

"We hadn't thought about it one way or another," she answered evasively.

Rhodan leaned forward slightly to look directly at her. She met his gaze with quiet self-assurance. She was no easy adversary.

"I've come to explain a few things to the Akons with regard to certain events which have stirred up the galaxy in the past few months. I know that you haven't concerned yourselves much about what's happened but this occurrence has not left Akon entirely unaffected." Briefly and objectively he described to her how Thomas Cardif had taken over his position as Administrator and had fairly messed things up. In conclusion he said: "So I was rescued and I have put things back in order again as they were. It has

been a difficult task but if Akon is able to understand the situation then I believe it may be regarded as accomplished."

Auris smiled with no sign of embarrassment. "We have you to thank for the clarification of those matters, Administrator. Actually many developments in that connection were a bit obscure to us but they aren't anymore. After all, we have such complexities to thank for the new spacefleet which Arkon has furnished us. So in a way we are doubly in your debt."

"Oh that's nothing much to thank me for," he replied indifferently, and he didn't say another word about the spacefleet. Instead he turned to another subject which he pretended to be much more interested in. "Our trade relations are developing quite satisfactorily, Auris of Las-Toor. May we take this opportunity to discuss the possibility of extending our protectorate area? I must say I'm not too happy about your security measures there. Are you afraid of spies?"

She smiled charmingly and without constraint. "The Ruling Council would have to consider any territorial extensions. However, the security measures remain in effect. The purpose of such controls has little to do with counteracting any threat of espionage. You might say the perimeter screen is there as a reminder to Terrans that Akon is not a colony but a sovereign stellar empire. So it's purely a psychological measure, nothing else."

"Thanks very much," Rhodan acknowledged with an ironic smile. "We should not have overlooked the fact of your sovereignty in any case."

They discussed a few other problems and then agreed that Auris would visit the commercial base on the following day. Much to Rhodan's surprise she did not mention a word about any mysterious invisible intruders. But then what good would it have done for her to complain about a phantom who left no clues behind? All she had to go on was the questionable testimony of a security guard.

The leave-taking was cordial. Rhodan 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 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 the race.

In front of the palace was the personnel glider which was to bring him back to the Terran spaceport. An honour guard had appeared and a robot commander saluted him. Auris accompanied her guest as far as the boarding hatch. As she gave 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. I shall arrive there some time before noon."

"We will be expecting you," replied Rhodan somewhat reservedly as he entered the small craft. He waved back at her once and then the hatch door closed. Seconds later the palace and forecourt dropped away into the darkness of the night.

The night passed quietly and without incident. Pucky had come back with Sengu around midnight and made his report. No one had detected them or become suspicious. They had calmly made a number of spot-checks and had confirmed that the robot circuit sections were still intact—except for the micro-link elements.

As was expected, Auris of Las-Toor arrived in a glider close to mid-day. She was accompanied by 2 older Akons who impressed Rhodan very favourably. The reception was short and simple and thus more cordial than was normally the custom in such affairs of state. They sat together on the small veranda of the house in the warm sunshine and carried on a conversation that was free of the usual constraint. The blue energy screen had not appeared again, which led Rhodan to inquire whether or not they were going to keep it permanently activated.

"That is not our intention at all," replied Auris. "It's quite sufficient for us to know that it's there when we need it. The energy screen should not place any burden on our relations, Perry Rhodan."

He breathed a secret sigh of relief because this assurance struck one serious problem off of his list. If the screen were to have been a permanent fixture it would have endangered his plans. "By no means, Auris," he agreed. "Even among friends, certain security measures are customary. May I ask what the Ruling Council's reaction is concerning my proposal to expand the free-trade zone?"

Auris indicated her 2 companions. "I have brought the experts with me. They have no objections to negotiating the matter. Of course in that regard I wish to point out that the transmitter screen must remain—in fact it would have to be extended proportionately."

"That's not objectionable. I regard your barrier fence as a hindrance to any possible smugglers or thieves. Hopefully you have the same idea about it."

"Precisely," she smiled.

The ensuing discussions revolved around the proposed extension and ended in a written agreement which was signed by Rhodan, Auris and the 2 council members. Rhodan was satisfied with the meeting but could not suppress a certain feeling of bad conscience. The Akons had dealt with him in the greatest frankness and candour and were in complete agreement with his proposals. He on the other hand was planning outright treachery and betrayal; he was out to take their spacefleet from them. Was this the right thing to be doing? Could he be over-reacting in his fears that the Akons might attack the Earth as they had done several times in the past?

Of course he had not known Auris as well then as he did today but he must not make the mistake of considering Auris to be Akon. She only represented the Ruling Council and was subject to their instructions. Even if those instructions should be aimed against him, Rhodan, she would still carry them out because the welfare of her people took precedence.

All of which failed to salve his conscience.

As the delegation prepared to leave, Rhodan promised to attend a Council session the next day and personally give an address in which he would make certain proposals for the expansion of trade and commercial relations. The two Akon officers had already boarded their commuter craft and Rhodan and Auris were still standing on the landing pad.

She gave him her hand once more. "In the future," she said with a slight fluctuation in her voice, "our relations should become better and more secure. It often seems to me that the Akons have more in common with your race than with our colonists the Arkonides. In any case there are stronger ties between Akon and Terra than between Arkon and Terra—from a general standpoint, that is."

"The Emperor of Arkon and I are friends—and that's also binding," retorted Rhodan, well aware of the inference involved. "But of course in a general sense I'll admit you're right. The Akons are more active and mentally healthier than the majority of Arkonides, who are in what you might call a decadent state—and the same is true of their mighty empire. Your people, Auris, have never had the lust for power that creates such stellar empires—that places you high in my esteem. The thirst for conquest is alien to nobler dispositions."

It was only then that she finally withdrew her hand from his. She nodded. "Whether you think of us as good or bad, Perry Rhodan, always try to differentiate between me as a representative of my people and me as—" When she hesitated, Rhodan smiled at her reassuringly. "Yes, and me as a woman," she concluded boldly.

Rhodan did not avoid her questioning gaze as he answered: "Personal friendships between the representatives of alien peoples help to improve the relations, Auris. If it were not for Atlan, Arkon would be a matter of indifference to me, believe me. It would be a good thing if Akon took a better liking to me, through you—and Terra to you, through me."

She gazed at him for some time and then nodded. "Thank you; Perry Rhodan. We shall see each other tomorrow."

She turned abruptly and climbed into the glider. She waved at him one more time before the entrance hatch closed. Rhodan watched the craft slowly ascend and fly away toward the city. A storm of emotions arose within him and threatened to turn to chaos. But then he marched back to the house in firm resolution.

When it came to the future of humanity he must not be governed by his personal feelings. Once before he had strayed into perilous waters by falling in love with a woman of another world and race. Was this same thing to happen again?

* * * *

It wasn't until 2 days later that the urgently awaited freighter arrived. It received the routine permission to land after its skipper had declared his cargo to Akon authorities. Naturally he made no mention of the micro-link circuits that were packed in one of the crates.

To Jakobowski's great surprise he got to see an old acquaintance of his twice in one week—namely, the same man who had picked up and delivered his letter to Rhodan. Space captain Samuel Graybound, co-owner of a private trading company, had received from Rhodan—the delicate assignment to bring the micro-modules to Akon—a welcome opportunity for the old swashbuckler to put his know-how and the capabilities of his old tramp ship to the test.

Graybound was somewhat short and stocky and had the makings of a considerable ‘bay window’ in spite of his 53 years. As he walked straight across the landing field there was some colourful object on his shoulder which under closer scrutiny turned out to be a parrot. It seemed to be nibbling away happily at its master’s red beard as if searching for something. Now and then it would screech and flutter its wings. Graybound’s somewhat bulbous nose sat between a pair of heavy cheek pouches and appeared to have a bluish red glow of its own.

Pucky stared first at the parrot and then at Graybound. "Did you have to go this route?" he asked of Rhodan in an undertone. "Of all people, did it have to be that old smuggler with his yakking buzzard?"

Rhodan observed the approach of the freighter captain with a faint smile on his lips. He also replied in an undertone. "There was no one more suitable for the job. Don’t forget that Graybound once saved our lives when we crashed on that planet of protoplasm. He may be an odd-ball but he’s an honest old coot—and that’s what counts, Pucky."

The mousebeaver held his tongue, somewhat embarrassed, but after all he hadn’t meant any harm. One thing he did know, however, was that if he didn’t watch out he’d get a peck on the tail from Torero, the parrot, at its first opportunity.

Graybound beamed good-naturedly as he came to a stop in front of Rhodan and touched the peak of his spaceman’s cap in a very unmilitary salute. "Freight delivered to Akon as ordered, sir," he announced in a hoarse tone of voice, and he winked confidentially at Pucky. "You want me to get the unloading started?"

Rhodan shook his hand. "Thanks, Graybound. You’ll never know how anxiously we’ve been waiting for you."

"For me—or the cargo?" inquired Graybound, and he winked again. He turned to Pucky. "Still keeping on your toes, little one? Haven’t seen you around for quite awhile."

"Glad to see you, too," Pucky managed to dredge up while he glanced furtively at Torero. He seemed to have a tremendous respect for the creature. "How’s your bird getting along?"

"Torero?" Graybound laughed heartily. "He’s getting smarter all the time! Yesterday he even wanted to correct the course of my ship after the nav-computer had finished calculating it. What can I tell you—you know, the parrot was right?"

Rhodan stared away gravely as though at a loss for something to do. Somebody laughed. Pucky was flabbergasted for a moment when he read in Graybound’s thoughts that he was being made the butt of a joke.

"Wise guy!" he protested in a shrill voice, and he waddled away without bothering any more about the reception. He even ignored the appropriate comment of Torero, which was typical of the bird in moments like this. He had to get away for his peace of mind. There would be opportunity enough later to plug that fresh buzzard’s little beak.

Within another half-hour the cargo crates were stacking up high alongside the *Lizard*. The first transport carriers of the Akons arrived to pick up the shipments. Only a large packing case labelled ‘provisions’ had disappeared beforehand. It was now in the basement of the house where Rhodan had established his living quarters.

When the secret crate’s lid was opened, Capt. Graybound was present with the parrot perched on his

left shoulder. Lieutenant Groder was removing the protective layer of padding. The shiny new microcircuit elements lay in straight, neat rows encased in padded containers. Each of them was no longer than a finger. These harmless-looking micro-modules were the key to whether or not Akon would still be in possession of its spacefleet for very long.

Graybound pointed to the capsules. "What the devil did I smuggle in now?" he asked. "They look like..." He hesitated. "Well, like charge clips for energy pistols."

"You're way off, old friend. If I were you I wouldn't concern myself about these gadgets," Rhodan advised him. "You'd never guess what they're for. Why worry about it? You brought them here and you've earned yourself a nice piece of change in the process. In fact the money is the one thing you haven't asked about."

Graybound mumbled something into his red beard, scratched his head and finally nodded. "I get the point, sir. Do you have any further orders for me?"

"Yes, you will take off as soon as you have taken your return freight on board. In Terrania report to the Interstellar Trade Exchange and give them a copy of the new treaty I've made with Akon. Mr. Marshall will give it to you before you leave. In Terrania you will receive a new assignment. That's about all I can think of for the moment."

Graybound shook hands with Rhodan, waved affably to the other men. He turned to leave the room, which he had only happened into while looking for Rhodan. But before he reached the door, Torero gave out a screech and fluttered off of his shoulder. With outspread wings he sailed over to the crate and grasped one of the priceless micro-mods in his claws. With another shrill cry and much flapping, he went past Graybound into the corridor which led to freedom through a wide-open door.

"He has a circuit element!" shouted Lt. Groder, who was visibly shaken and momentarily confused. "After him!"

Rhodan followed Groder as both men ran past Graybound. Ras Tschubai simply teleported outside and was ahead of the 2 men out on the field when they got there. They looked around for the parrot in vain. If the bird had flown away with the capsule and happened to fall into the hands of the Akons, the whole plan would be revealed.

Graybound panted up the cellar stairs and finally reached Rhodan, all out of breath. "I'm sorry, sir," he wheezed, embarrassed. "Usually Torero always behaves and never causes any trouble. I don't know, myself, what's gotten into him."

Rhodan made no reply. He had caught a movement on the flat roof of the house. Taking a few steps back he espied Torero, who had let go of the capsule and was playing with it. Almost at the same time Pucky came out of the house and looked somewhat indifferently at the excited men. "What's up?" he inquired almost in a tone of boredom.

"Don't ask silly questions," snapped Rhodan. "You know what's up—and it's there on the roof, Pucky. Go catch that parrot!"

Pucky gasped. "Catch him? You mean—I'm not only supposed to go after him but *Imay* actually—?"

"Yes! Yes! But be careful so that you won't have to chase after him again. Of course if he lets go of that micro-mod he can sail into the next galaxy as far as I'm concerned."

Pucky waddled forward another step and turned to look at Torero. Since the parrot knew nothing of the mousebeaver's marvellous abilities it apparently felt quite safe on the roof of the house. The bird was pushing the glistening capsule about with its claws as if not sure of what it should do with it. It paid no attention to its master's calls. When it became aware of Pucky's concentrated stare it screeched somewhat arrogantly: "Who wants something...?"

"I do!" growled Pucky, and he teleported.

While Torero was still flapping his wings and looking at the spot where Pucky had been standing, the mousebeaver materialized within 3 inches of him. Pucky grasped him with both hands and Torero let out a series of scornful shrieks which ended in a discord.

"I'll teach *you* to steal eggs from strange nests!" muttered the mousebeaver threateningly. He looked down below where the men were watching him expectantly. "Should I wring its neck, Perry? Of course I don't know how you'd like parrot *cacciatore* or maybe with just some ketchup but to me he'd be pretty tough and stringy." He picked up the circuit module and shoved it into the pocket of his uniform trousers. "Alright, you Technicolor woodpecker, what do you say now?"

Torero drooped his wings as though his life were forfeited. He blinked at Pucky with half-closed eyes and croaked: "It's a raid! Where's the bouncer? Let's merk!"

Graybound yelled up at Pucky: "He spent a few years in a spaceport dive so you have to excuse his language! Let him go little one! You've got back what he stole!"

"Should I?" Pucky looked at Perry and saw him nod.

Torero suddenly regained his dignity and acted as though he had gotten the upper hand of the situation. He sat a few moments on Pucky's arm and preened his feathers with his beak. Then he fluttered into the air with a nerve-shattering shriek and dove like an arrow toward Graybound's shoulder.

Pucky followed with a short teleport jump. He took the circuit module from his pocket and gave it to Rhodan, who studied the small device thoughtfully. He was thinking what a marvel this innocuous-looking little gadget was. It was capable of activating the total robot-controlled complex of a gigantic battleship. Yet a bird could fly away with it.

Graybound walked away and the others heard him having a serious talk with his parrot. Once the bird was heard to screech out quite clearly: "It's a raid! Let's scam!"

As Rhodan watched the space captain go he smiled understandingly. Torero meant to Graybound what Pucky meant to him.

* * * *

The 3 teleporters and their special teammates prepared themselves for their mission. Sengu had briefed them again on the relative positions of the ships. Nothing more was necessary because the technicians knew exactly what they had to do. Each of them carried a work kit containing 50 of the microelements

and they would consider it a good night's work if they could install them all.

Rhodan gave the final instructions. "Pucky, you and Lt. Jenner take on the heavy warships of the Imperium class first. Then the others will follow. Kakuta and Tschubai will worry about the heavy cruisers. There can be no duplication of effort because time is at a premium. If the Akons notice the micro-mods they've removed have suddenly been replaced, they'll get suspicious. We can't give them a chance for that, so you've got to complete the job in 2 or 3 nights. Here's wishing you lots of luck!"

The first teleport jump was made as a group. So that there would be no danger of striking the transmitter barrier their first target was a low mountaintop which rose above the wire in their direct line of sight. From that vantagepoint the fleet could be seen. The gleaming hulls were lined up side by side in the violet glare of the lowering sun. In their metallic splendour they seemed to radiate the tremendous power they represented.

"That was real fast," observed Dr. Ranault, who had just experienced his first teleport jump. He regarded his partner, Tako Kakuta, with great respect. "I had heard a lot about it but I never would have believed that it was—if you'll excuse the expression—so easy."

The Japanese smiled thoughtfully. "It looks easy, Doctor, but aside from the mutant faculty there's a lot of concentration involved. But even that you get used to. At first I used to miss my targets or I'd simply fail to jump. But today it's all routine."

"From here on," interrupted Pucky, "we'll work as separate teams. And nobody forget to come back to this hill first when you're through. It might be a little unpleasant to hit that transmitter field in the middle of a jump."

"Roger!" said Ras Tschubai. Without wasting words he took Dr. Sorowski by the hand, grinned at him encouragingly—and vanished before the eyes of the others. After Kakuta and Dr. Ranault had also jumped, Pucky concentrated on his destination, grasped Jenner's hand and teleported.

Once more the mountaintop was empty and deserted as though no one had ever set foot on its peak. But in that same moment the 3 teams rematerialised many kilometres away on the spaceport of Akon. The vastness of the area was greater than one might have imagined. Most of the security guards were patrolling the perimeter of the region. They were in contact with robot-controlled defence guns which would fire at any approaching aircraft or spaceship. The cordon of sentinels was so tight that it would have been next to impossible for anyone to get through on foot without being noticed. But for the teleporters, of course, the peripheral cordon was not an obstacle.

Pucky and Jenner materialized at almost a 1-mile altitude on top of a battleship of the Imperium class. The view from the polar section was minimal although the raised polar domes of other similar ships all around them could be seen quite clearly. The blue sun had gone down and night fell swiftly.

Jenner checked his kit containing the microcircuits. "How do we get into the ship?"

Pucky looked about him. "The first step is always tricky. Later we can teleport from control room to control room or you might say from robot central to robot central. But first I have to kind of get my bearings. Stay close behind me, Jenner. If anything happens, grab my hand so that we can have contact. OK?"

Jenner nodded. They did not find any open hatches so they finally had to chance a teleport jump into the ship's interior. They encountered no one. Evidently no guards were posted here. They were able to reach

the Control Central without hindrance and Jenner fell to work immediately on the robotic sections.

The activation circuits were all of the same design regardless of whether they were installed on the heaviest class battleship or the lightest cruiser. Basically it was easy to install the switching modules but it required the practiced hands of a specialist to snap them into the right slot and make sure that the contacts on either end were secured. Also it was important to provide that the sector remained inactive and would still appear to be disconnected. Upon reception of a certain command signal a tiny robot receiver circuit would transmit the necessary impulse through the connector module and the giant robotic installation would take over. Then it would be too late for any counter-commands.

Jenner took a step back. "That's about it, Pucky. The first patch-mod is in!"

The mousebeaver chuckled contentedly. "Let's hope the rest of them are as easy. You'll probably want to go get some more of those gadgets if you get through ahead of schedule."

"That was arranged for, little friend—but let's not lose any time. We should get on to the next job."

By close to 2 a.m. Pucky and Jenner had already taken care of the 20 super warships and 30 other units of the fleet. By way of the mountain they teleported back to the base, only to learn that Kakuta and Dr. Ranault had already been there to replenish their supply of circuit elements. The Japanese mutant had expressed confidence that he and his partner could cover a total of 100 ships by sunrise.

Jenner refilled his travel kit and as he was about to take off with Pucky again, Ras Tschubai and Dr. Sorowski put in an appearance. It seemed that by dawn perhaps a third of the fleet would have been activated. Everything was going better than had been anticipated.

For 3 days and 3 nights, all went smoothly. It was on the 4th night that the fatal incident occurred.

4/ THE IMPOSSIBLE INTRUDER

It had been a strenuous day.

Perry Rhodan had received permission to leave Akon in one of the freighters. Although he announced no destination he emphasized the fact that he would return that same night. No one asked any questions so he was able to proceed without hindrance to the outer rim of the system where he transferred on board the waiting *Odin* in order to make a secret hypercom contact with Atlan.

Maj. Scott was happy to see Rhodan again and reported at once and succinctly, which was characteristic of him. "We have set up a permanent contact with Reginald Bell, sir. He is with the fleet task force in the assigned space sector, 10 light-years from here."

"Excellent!" said Rhodan. "He is all cued in?"

"We have only to beam out the prearranged signal, sir."

Rhodan nodded and went into the Com Central, where Atlan's face could already be seen on the

hypercom screen. The scrambler system was turned on so that no one would be able to understand a single word of their conversation in case of any chance interception. Nevertheless Rhodan made the contact as brief as possible.

"Have you been filled in, Atlan?"

"Everything is ready, Perry."

"Our 'station' on Akon is ready for reception. So far everything has gone well but as soon as I send you the code word you'll know what you have to do. However, if nothing happens I'll contact you from the *Odin* again. Until then, keep your fingers crossed for me."

They discussed their forthcoming action for another 15 minutes and then cut off their connection. Rhodan was certain that even the Akons couldn't be aware of this conversation because they did not have enough spaceships for setting up any permanent system of interception. And these hypercom frequencies could not have been picked up on the surface of the planet itself.

Rhodan waited another 5 hours before returning to the Terran commercial base. Major Scott had received special instructions and continued as a vital communications link between Rhodan, Bell and Atlan. He knew exactly what he had to do even if he lost contact with Rhodan. Such would be the case if the Akons were to turn on their blue energy screen, which was impervious to both matter and normal radio waves.

Pucky, Ras Tschubai, Jenner and Dr. Sorowski had returned long since to the house by the spaceport, since all of their microcircuit units had been installed. Only Tako Kakuta and Dr. Ranault were still out. In view of the fact that they had only taken 20 more capsules with them it was assumed that they would soon finish their work and come back.

There could always be delays of some kind; this was to be expected. Perhaps a tension clamp had jammed in the activation sector of one of the robotic brains and Dr. Ranault might have had to make repairs. That could take anywhere from 10 minutes to even an hour.

But when Tako Kakuta materialized alone, at close to midnight, among his anxiously waiting colleagues, it became obvious that something had gone wrong. Swiftly, the Japanese teleporter told them his story.

* * * *

They had made a last run, taking 20 micro-mods with them. Ranault knew what he was doing, to the extent that it might not have been difficult for him to install the switching elements blindfolded. So it was not this part that had made Ranault feel uneasy. He was nervous because of the simple fact that he had already installed more than 300 capsules without any interference or hitches. It seemed to him that everything was going along too smoothly.

His fingers were a bit unsteady when he came to install the 12th circuit capsule. It slipped from his hand and fell to the floor.

Kakuta had jumped to catch it but missed. "Is it broken?" he asked anxiously.

"Can't say for sure." Renault picked it up and examined it. "And you can't tell by looking at it. We'll have to try it." He looked up suddenly as though listening. "Did you hear something, Kakuta?"

The Japanese mutant went back a few steps and pressed his ear to the closed door. He thought he could hear a distant shuffling and scraping sound but it was hard to identify. "Somebody else must be in the ship besides ourselves, Renault. Let's get out!"

"Not before I've hooked in this patch-mod," the technician retorted, and he opened the activating panel.

Kakuta remained by the door. He looked about him at the heavy generators and switching equipment, the maze of conduits and circuit panels of the robotic control section and the power banks of the positronic computers. It was all contained in a room that was almost 100 feet long and perhaps equally as wide.

Then the sound outside was suddenly at the door. He only had time to step aside before the door was thrust open and two Akons in police uniforms came into the room.

"It must be here," said one of them, pointing ahead.

The man failed to see Kakuta as he had teleported out into the corridor. It had been too late for him to take Renault with him. But he reasoned that the technician would hide behind the machinery until the two Akons went away.

"Yes, the alarm signal came from here," confirmed the other police guard. He looked around at the gleaming metallic maze of equipment, which was totally unfamiliar to him. "This is station 310, isn't it?"

Renault had ducked down instinctively when the door opened. He still held the module in his hand because he had not yet had time to install it. The activating section panel was open. If the Akons happened to notice that—!

Fortunately, however, these Akons were not technicians. Their sole task was to make sure that nobody entered the ship. And the only reason they had come here was because an alarm signal had been touched off somewhere. Kakuta vaguely remembered having seen sentinels patrolling the area outside between the ships. Since they had detected none of their activity until now, what had caused the sudden discovery?

He didn't have a chance to find the answer because one of the Akons came into the corridor again. Kakuta had no choice but to vanish. It was less by intention than by instinct that he jumped to the hill and then to the Terran base, where he materialized without Renault.

His story worried Rhodan. "How could you come back without Renault, Kakuta? Without you he's completely helpless."

"It wasn't intentional, sir. I'll go back at once and..."

"You don't know what may have happened in the meantime—you stay!" Rhodan was immediately sorry that he had snapped like that at his mutant. He could imagine the mental anguish this must be costing the Japanese. "There's nothing you can do, Kakuta. Just relax. Pucky is small and can conceal himself better. He'll go and pick up Renault."

Pucky came up and patted Kakuta good-naturedly on the back. "Don't worry, shorty, I'll get him out of there alright!" It was true that Pucky was smaller than Kakuta but the Oriental was in fact very short and slight of build. "It's something that could happen to any of us. To tell you the truth, a thing like that would have hit me just as hard. But all we have left is just 8 ships. We'll still be able to finish them." And with that he vanished.

Meanwhile, Renault had drawn back deeper into the maze of equipment. He didn't let the one remaining Akon out of his sight. The other one had disappeared somewhere like Kakuta. This one guard was threat enough because he was standing right next to the activating section of the robot brain. The panel cover over the micro-mod slot was still wide open. If the Akon knew only the slightest bit about what he was looking at...

In any case that panel cover would have to be closed and the 9 remaining patch-modules would have to be concealed. After that, as far as he was concerned, they could catch him. But perhaps he might still find a way of plugging in this one capsule.

The second Akon came back. "I'd like to know what set off that alarm." Renault had learned this archaic form of Arkonide through his hypno-schooling and so he understood every word. The 2 men weren't more than about 15 feet from him and their heavy hand-beamers were none too reassuring to him. "Did you see anything?"

The other man said no. He was looking about and now his searching gaze was turned directly in Renault's direction. The technician ducked down still more. He prayed they would not discover him because he was unarmed. On just this final run he had decided to leave his weapon at the base because everything had been going so well and the energy gun had been cumbersome to carry.

"Somebody must have cut in front of the camera beam or the alarm wouldn't have gone off. The code panel points to this room!"

"Where are we, anyway?"

"Search me. Some kind of switching centre, I guess, but it isn't the main Control Central." He thought a moment. "Let's take a good look around and maybe we'll find a clue."

Cautiously, Renault crept back farther to find better concealment. It was entirely possible that they might overlook him but if not he'd just have to handle the situation somehow. But where the devil was Kakuta? Had the teleporter lost his nerve and left him holding the bag? Maybe it couldn't be held against him because these past few nights had been rough on all of them.

He found a small crawlway that he could creep into. After making one turn he lay still and listened. Although he could no longer see the two Akons he could hear every movement they made. He reasoned that the narrow tunnel he was in could not even be for maintenance but probably was just poorly used space between the circuit cabinets and other robot equipment. Then he remembered the micro-modules. They must not be found on him if he was caught.

He shoved his little workbag into a niche until he could barely reach it. Even if the ship were to remain in the hands of the Akons it might take years or even decades before someone would happen to find it. And that would probably be only in case of a major overhaul of the ship.

He had kept the one microelement in his pocket. If only for the sake of the hidden kit containing the 8 others he had to try his best to install the one he had held out for that purpose so that the ship could be

part of the planned secret manoeuvre. If he couldn't manage to do it, at least he would have done everything humanly possible to keep the plan from being discovered prematurely.

He turned around and crept back a short distance. That was when he saw the feet of one of the Akon police guards. The man wasn't 6 feet away. He was standing directly in front of the crawl hole, bending down to have a look.

* * * *

Pucky made a quite understandable mistake by landing in the robot control centre of the wrong ship. Of course Kakuta had described the location of the light cruiser as well as he could but after all there were hundreds of them.

When the mousebeaver materialized he hid immediately behind a huge group of cabinets which housed some kind of machinery. He listened carefully but could hear nothing. He reasoned that if Ranault was still here he must be very well hidden. At any rate the Akons were certainly not around because they would have been making plenty of noise. At first Pucky did not suspect that he might be in the wrong ship.

But when he was sure that he was alone in the switching centre he had an idea. If he had understood Kakuta correctly there was a total of 9 cruisers in which the microelements had not yet been installed. And this ship he was in must belong to that group. Of course he wouldn't have dared to patch in one of the sensitive capsules himself but he had often stood by and watched Jenner do the job. So he knew where the micro-mod compartment was located.

When he pattered over to the activation section he found that the panel cover was closed. Apparently the capsule had not yet been placed here. Nevertheless he opened the compartment and was shocked to see that the microcircuit was sitting properly in its slot. Could it be that Ranault had found a chance to install it before the Akons discovered him and took him away? He wouldn't have put it past the wily Frenchman.

Or was there another possibility?

It gradually dawned on him that something else could have happened and finally the solution came to him as highly probable. He had blundered into the wrong ship—maybe one he had visited himself on a previous foray.

Pucky teleported to the polar dome of the light cruiser and looked about him carefully. Surrounded protectively by the larger fleet units the light cruisers stood there in a long row. Two patrolling Akon sentinels were traversing the broad space between the ships but the curved hulls almost obscured them. The 2 security men disappeared from sight and Pucky stood there in confusion, not realizing how precious every second was at the moment.

Maybe the next ship was the one?

He gazed along the row of light cruisers and discovered that this was the last section of them. It made sense because they had started working the fleet from the other end of the complex and had come this far. There was no possibility of error in that regard.

Pucky counted. He found that he was standing on the 10th ship from the end.

He scolded himself angrily: "I'm even dumber than Bell always said I was!" He decided not to tell anybody about his mix-up or he'd never hear the end of it—at least not from Bell.

Right next to him was the 9th ship. He teleported directly inside the vessel and materialized in front of the door of the switching centre. This time he knew he had made no mistake because he heard voices. When he came closer to the door, which was standing ajar, he could even hear every word.

"I hear somebody breathing."

"Where?"

"Here—this gap between the cabinets. Somebody's in there!"

Pucky pushed forward enough to be able to peer into the room. He spotted the two Akons off to one side where they were standing in an aisle. One of them was just bending down to have a closer look at something that Pucky couldn't quite see. At the same moment he was aware of a more definite impulse in the continuous blur of thought-waves he was receiving. Thus far he had paid too little attention to his telepathic faculty. Without concentration he would not have been able to specifically crystallize Ranault's individual thought-train. But now chance came to his aid.

He suddenly knew that Ranault was looking directly in front of him at the Akon's feet. His mental reaction to this crisis produced a recognizable thought-burst which struck Pucky's sensitive 'receiver' with full force. The contact was made, even though one-sided.

Now the mousebeaver was faced with the problem of how to put the two Akons out of action without them seeing him. He would not and must not kill them. But if they remained alive they'd be able to report on him later and thus betray what was going on.

"Let me have your flashlight," said one of the Akons.

Now Pucky realized that Ranault was lying in the narrow crawlway and that he was aware of the danger that faced him. He was thinking that the Akons were bound to discover him and that he was helpless to prevent it.

So Pucky sneaked in and concealed himself behind a gleaming, silvery cabinet. "Are you looking for me?" he chirped in a shrill voice, and then he instantly changed his location.

The two Akons jerked out their weapons and forgot completely about the crawl-hole and Ranault.

"He must be over there! You take that side and I'll go along here. Take him alive if possible!"

The 2 men separated, which was precisely what Pucky had been waiting for. It would be easier to handle them one at a time. He remained in his hiding place until he saw one of the guards. Then he made use of his psychokinetic powers.

Even in the previous century the parapsychological faculties of the human brain had belonged to the questionable field of the so-called borderland sciences. No one had the courage to recognize their existence and many a scientist had placed his reputation on the line when making experiments in this

regard. Then had come the mutants, those who had been positively affected by radiation fallout and whose brains had suddenly developed these slumbering capabilities. Since they had thus made a quantum jump into the future of humanity, in this sense they were a species of 'freaks'.

But Pucky wasn't human. His origin was a planet known as Vagabond. Among his own race telekinesis was naturally known from birth. In his youth his greatest delight had been to 'play' with distant objects at will, using nothing but his mental powers, moving things to other locations.

The Akon suddenly became as stiff as a board when Pucky's mental currents reached him and held him fast. He couldn't even move his mouth. Then his feet left the floor. Pucky was at his favourite game again but this time the stakes were very serious. The Akon must not see him. Making sure that the other guard was not aware of this astounding phenomenon, he brought the helpless captive close to the ceiling. Then he sent him flying against the nearest wall, instantly knocking him unconscious. The mousebeaver lowered him gently and moved him telekinetically to the farthest corner of the room. He was sure that it would be hours before the victim regained his senses and would be able to talk. And of course it was an open question as to whether or not anyone would believe what he, would have to say.

And now for the second one!

Meanwhile, Ranault had realized that the immediate danger was past. Pucky's voice had been unmistakable. Cautiously he crept out of his concealment and stood up. No Akon was in sight but even Pucky was nowhere to be seen.

Here was his chance. He took the remaining capsule from his pocket and hurried to the activation station. The cover was still standing open but no one had noticed it. Swiftly yet carefully he clipped the microelement into its tension fasteners, checked its contacts and switched on the robot signal-receiver. Then he closed the panel and breathed a sigh of relief.

He remembered the 8 other patch-mods he had left in the hiding place. Should he still try to get them? He didn't get to make the decision.

"Ranault? Where are you?"

It was Pucky! Had he been able to take care of the two Akons?

"Here!" he answered and looked about the room. Where was the furry rascal? "I'm over here!"

"Run to the corridor! I'll be there!" Pucky had spoken English instead of Arkonide.

Ranault abandoned the other 8 capsules and raced to the corridor but Pucky was held up. And for a very good reason.

The affair with the first Akon had gone so well that he had become incautious. Let the fellow blab out all he wanted to later, he thought. He hadn't seen anybody so there was nobody he could describe. Maybe they would believe his story and maybe not.

It was at this point that Pucky had called to Ranault and advised him to get out of the room.

He reasoned that the technician must be out in the passage already and so he could not be seen by the remaining Akon. But even while Pucky was thinking of this with satisfaction, an energy beam hissed past him so closely that it singed the fur on his back. He sensed the heat and instinctively teleported to the

other corner of the room.

The Akon had discovered him and seen him clearly. He had shot at the strange intruder and missed. Then in the same second his target had disappeared. The Akon stood there dumbfounded and looked about him. The heavy weapon was poised in his hand, ready for action. Where had the alien creature gone? He couldn't have just vanished in thin air.

There was a noise behind him in the corner. He ducked down and hurried in that direction as swiftly as possible. He had no fear whatsoever, to which his bitterest enemy could testify. Yet he was alone in the ship with some unknown entity that must be gifted with astonishing capabilities.

He almost stumbled over his comrade who lay unconscious on the floor. At first he thought he was dead but he soon realized he was wrong. The other must have struck the wall with his head. The Akon chanced to look upward and he discovered a few blood spots just below the ceiling on the wall. The conclusion to be drawn from this observation defied all laws of logic. In order for his companion to strike his head against the wall at that level, 4 meters above the deck, he would have to fly horizontally through the air. And he knew that Akons couldn't fly, at least not without technical assistance.

He jumped behind the nearest generator because he heard footsteps somewhere. Somebody was approaching him.

And of course this was Pucky, who had seen the Akon and read his thoughts. Too bad the man had seen him. He would know that the intruder here could not be an Akon or a Terran, that he was a strange being with telekinetic abilities.

Cautiously, Pucky came around the corner of the huge generator casing and then he faced the Akon. The mousebeaver acted at once but he could not help the fact that the man stared at him for what seemed to be the longest second in history. The beam weapon appeared to have a mind of its own as it flew away and landed somewhere between the consoles. Then the Akon was gripped by an invisible force and began to whirl around, faster and faster and with increasing force until everything in the room was a blur to his vision. The centrifugal force was too much for him and he lost consciousness.

Pucky took the Akon by the hand and teleported to the top of the nearest battleship. When he stretched the unconscious man out on top of the great hull he was very certain that no explanation for this would ever be found. The man's claim that he had encountered some strange creature in another ship and then wound up here would be met with nothing but disbelief. It was at least a poor consolation, Pucky had to admit to himself, but what else could he have done?

He teleported back and relieved Ranault of his uncertainty. The technician completely forgot about the remaining 8 micro-mods in his relief at seeing the mousebeaver. "So there you are, Pucky! What happened?"

"You mean with the Akons? They're taking a little sneeze. Come on—let's get out of here!" (*Snooze*, Ranault thought to himself, inwardly smiling at Pucky's wrong word.)

They jumped back to the hilltop and then to the base, where everybody was waiting for them in worried impatience. Pucky reported and didn't try to varnish over anything. He left open the possibility that the guard had seen him clearly even though he only had a brief second to observe him. But it was also probable that nobody would believe the man's story because actually it would sound too fantastic.

"And I had to leave the bag with 8 of the patch-mods in it," Ranault confessed. "But I hid it so well that

nobody will be able to find it."

Rhodan pondered for a moment. "The ship is hooked up, so we'll get those modules back again," he said. "It would be too dangerous now to try finishing the installations."

"There are only 8 light cruisers to go," Marshall reminded him.

"It would be better for the Akons to keep them than it would for them to catch us now," Rhodan decided. "There are still a few hours before sunrise. Let's get to bed. Who knows what's ahead of us tomorrow?"

But Pucky was still uneasy. "Why don't we simply pull out of here? Are we going to just wait around here until they get suspicious?"

"And you think they wouldn't do that if we were to disappear in the middle of the night? You forget that I've arranged to make an inspection tour of the agricultural industry with Auris tomorrow. Nobody can prove that we're doing anything suspicious. I have to stay with my diplomatic itinerary."

"Oh yes, Auris!" said Pucky knowingly. And he waddled out of the room.

5/ THE LONG-SHOT BLUFF

At dawn Rhodan was rudely awakened.

Without warning, Stanislaus Jakobowski burst into the room where the Administrator was sleeping. "Sir—the blue energy screen!" he cried out. "They've turned it on! Our radio traffic with the *Odin* has been cut off!"

Rhodan remained where he was. "I figured as much. So they've found the 2 guards. They don't take long to react—you have to give them that." He nodded to Jakobowski. "Alright, wake up the others. We'll meet in 10 minutes in the front room."

He waited until he was alone before he got up and dressed. He washed up, carefully combed his hair and noted that his next shave wouldn't be due for weeks yet. Actually what was involved was not shaving but a treatment with hair-stultifier.

Lt. Groder and Marshall were conversing as Rhodan came into the room. Both men expressed their concern to him but he smiled.

"Nothing's happened that we hadn't planned on," he said as he sat down. "Obviously the Akons have noticed something but I'll lay you any odds that they haven't the slightest idea what's really going on."

"But the blue screen!" Groder reminded him. "We're cut off from any contact with the *Odin*."

"Maj. Scott will proceed according to instructions. He will report it to Atlan and Bell. Time is on our side—not in favour of the Akons. At least this time."

Alex Wiener came in and announced the results of his first investigation. "The blue screen lies at an altitude of 10 kilometres. No linear-drive ship could come through without crashing."

Rhodan nodded. "Ten kilometres, is it?" he said thoughtfully. "That means the air traffic over Akon isn't restricted. In which case we can be expecting a visit soon."

The glider landed 20 minutes later.

Auris of Las-Toor came out of it in the company of 3 officers. Rhodan approached her casually and extended his hand, which she grasped involuntarily. But then she withdrew it almost too quickly.

"I want an explanation for what happened last night," she said coldly. "The Council has authorized me to advise you that for the time being you may not leave this planet. We can only discuss your return to Terra when the guilty ones are found."

Rhodan was obviously surprised. "What do you mean, Auris of Las-Toor? What happened?"

She looked at him sharply. The expressions of her companions were threatening and determined. Their hands rested conspicuously on the butts of their energy weapons.

"You know very well what I'm referring to, Perry Rhodan. Last night somebody penetrated the fleet base and almost killed two of our security men—under very unusual circumstances."

"How would I know anything about that?" asked Rhodan in amazement.

"You really don't know? Then I'll tell you!" She described how the 2 police guards were found. "This is something that could only have been accomplished by a mutant—in fact by that small hairy creature who is often seen in your company. We know that it possesses very astonishing powers."

"Oh—you mean Pucky?" Rhodan laughed as though he were relieved. "I'm afraid I have to disappoint you. Pucky is back on Earth. Surely you don't believe that he could get here without a spaceship and without my knowing it!"

She looked at him searchingly. "The little creature isn't here?" Her gaze went past him and lingered on the residence building where several figures were to be seen. "Would you permit me and my officers to search the station?"

"If you absolutely insist on it and if it will rest your mind—please do," he answered. "But when you're through I ask that you turn off your screen. It interferes with our communications."

"We shall turn off the screen when we are ready to," she said impertinently. "You are suspected of a very serious crime and we do not intend to stand idly by without getting to the bottom of the matter. The Council has suspended all action on the extension of your base until this affair has been cleared up."

Take off Merk!—Rhodan thought intensively, hoping that Pucky was in telepathic contact with him. He himself was too weak in his telepathy to concentrate on Pucky's thought impulses without being obvious about it.

Auris and the officers dedicated themselves thoroughly to the task of searching every room in the house. Rhodan assisted them in the process and even led them into the basement. There was no direct evidence

of the 'small, hairy creature' but one of the officers stepped on a half-eaten carrot which caused him to slip and almost fall. None of the Akons recognized this as a clue to Pucky's presence although to those who knew him it was like a signed confession.

A half-hour later Rhodan accompanied his guests to the glider. "When will you expect me for the inspection tour we agreed upon?" he asked Auris.

"I shall *not* expect you, Rhodan. And our defence screen will remain in operation. You will hear from me again."

Rhodan checked his watch casually. In 2 hours the countdown he had arranged with Maj. Scott would be completed. The time would be up.

"You're making a mistake, Auris," he told her in a tone of deep concern. "This interruption of my contact with Terra will precipitate certain actions which you will come to regret. Your fleet is by no means ready. What will you do when my ships attack?"

She looked at him sadly. It was obvious that she was acting against both her will and her own convictions. "The blue screen will protect us."

"No way!" he retorted. "You know that we can get through the screen with linear drive."

This time she smiled. "Such ships would be shattered and the crews would die."

He returned her smile. "You're absolutely correct—except that they will be unmanned ships with a very dangerous payload. Upon impact those Arkon bombs will detonate, you know. Your blue screen will collapse, we will be picked up and you will be left to your fate."

Auris stared at him while the velvety-brown colouration of her skin seemed to pale. There was a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes as she prepared to leave. "I shall give my report to the Ruling Council. You will be notified."

This time she did not give him her hand but Rhodan sensed that it was only because of the officers who had silently taken in this conversation. The hatch closed and the glider lifted into the air finally turning swiftly away toward the city.

Rhodan watched it until it had disappeared beyond the mountaintop. Then he walked slowly back to the house. His friends were outside waiting for him. Behind them stood Pucky, who had just returned. He had teleported to the same hilltop that had served him before as an intermediate jumping point. There he had concentrated on the conversation between Rhodan and Auris and thus he knew when the glider departed.

"What now?" asked John Marshall.

"First of all, Atlan will play his part. As you all know, the blue energy screen isn't able to jam or block out hypercom frequencies entirely. With a sufficiently powerful transmitter it can be penetrated but not by normal radio waves. So Atlan will 'just happen' to get in touch with me and he'll learn what's going on. That's when I'll ask him for help. The Akons will also be able to listen in on our conversation and they will be witnesses to the fact that my plea for help..."

He was interrupted before he could tell them the rest of it. Axel Wiener had been on duty at the receiver

and now he came out to them. "Hypercom call, sir! Arkon Central!"

Rhodan waved a hand as though to confirm his explanation. "This is it! Let's hope the Akons are at their receivers. They will have a pleasant surprise which should make the following shock more effective."

The others followed him curiously. Rhodan entered the Com Room and saw the face of his friend Atlan on the viewscreen. The features of the Imperator were very blurred, however. It was obvious that the blue energy screen was seriously affecting the reception.

Atlan began the conversation. "You are on the world of my ancestors. I can barely see you, Perry. Actually there was no special reason for my call but if you can spare any time on your way back to Terra I'd like to ask you to fly to the Proxyta System. On the second planet..."

At this point Rhodan interrupted him. "It's a good thing you called me, Atlan. My equipment here would have been too weak to get through the screen without using your own directional beam. I'm in a ticklish situation. The Akons are making things difficult. You have to help me."

According to their prearranged plan, Atlan pretended to be surprised. "Help you? Tell me what's happened?"

And Rhodan gave him his report. He reproached the Akons bitterly but repeatedly emphasized the fact that he had no inclination to get into diplomatic entanglements with them. Yet if they gave him no other choice he would have to defend himself.

"How are you going to do that without a fleet?" inquired Atlan. There was a certain scornful undertone in his voice which was intended to make the Akons take notice. "I myself must avoid getting involved in helping you. After all, the Akons are the mother race of my people. We are descended from them and even though there were conflicts between us these have been resolved. There is friendship now between Arkon and Akon."

Rhodan appeared to be undecided. "I'm asking for your help, Atlan. You can't simply refuse to do anything. Think of our treaty!"

"I also have a treaty with Akon and that takes precedence. In this case, Perry, I can't help you without running the risk of a war with Akon. Is the issue worth that?"

"No, I guess not," admitted Rhodan with an anguished effort. "Actually this is all a bag of feathers anyway. Pucky is back on Earth but the guard who was attacked claims to have seen him in one of the Akon ships. Nobody can prove such a thing and yet they..."

"Try to get their permission to take off, and get away from Akon! That's the only advice I can give you. I'm sorry but I have to stand on the side of my ancestors. They are in the right because Akon is their home planet. Terrans have no business there."

Rhodan glared at him in a furious rage. "Do what you please, Atlan. I'll not forget your lack of cooperation!"

He snapped off the transmitter. Moments later Atlan's image faded from the receiver screen as the hyper-beam was extinguished on Arkon.

Groder and the others stared at him disconcertedly.

But Rhodan smiled. "That was something, wasn't it? Don't you think Atlan and I missed our calling? We should have been actors!"

Marshall had perceived the pattern of Rhodan's thoughts and he only grinned.

Not so Lt. Groder. "Sir, you don't mean to say..."

"Of course! What else? My argument with Atlan was all a part of it. And within an hour Bell will bring in the second act! It will be easier for the Akons to accede to my demands if they know they have Atlan on their side. Sounds like a paradox, doesn't it?" He smiled ironically. "But it isn't. The Akons will be glad to get rid of me if they get Atlan as an ally in the bargain. We'll soon see. Besides that, Atlan's declarations will appear more credible to them later—and that's just what everything depends on."

Everyone turned around as someone cleared his throat in the background. Pucky was standing there rather pensively stroking the fur on his chest. "I must say it's very involved and complicated. That's putting on an act alright—and I guess show business is illusion, if that's what you want to call a flat-out lie!" He whistled disapprovingly. "So in civilized circles this whole thing is what you simply refer to as—*diplomacy!*" He waddled away disdainfully.

* * * *

Naturally the Akon stations had picked up the hypervideo conversation between Rhodan and Atlan. The Ruling Council was convened to consider the new set of circumstances. In this particular session Auris of Las-Toor was very restrained and seemed to give the impression of being disappointed or disillusioned. At first her attitude was a bit baffling but when the first reports began to come in from the Akon cruisers patrolling the outer fringes of the system, many of the Council members believed they knew what was behind the restraint and disappointment of their female representative.

For the reports were very disturbing indeed. An incessant series of hyper shockwaves registered in the near vicinity of the Blue System indicated that a tremendous fleet was gradually materializing. It was emerging from hyperspace and was deploying into a pattern that was systematically encircling Akon. Intercepted spacecom traffic revealed that it was a fleet from Terra which had come to rescue Rhodan.

The Akon councilmen were seized by panic. Their own Fleet High Command informed them that their converted ships were not yet ready for battle missions and also the Terran forces were 5 times superior to theirs. Somewhere around 5000 warships had been counted.

A hypercom message they had sent to the Emperor of Arkon had gone unanswered for unaccountable reasons.

It was a very baffled Council that finally commissioned Auris of Las-Toor to start negotiations with Rhodan.

* * * *

"You can see, Auris," said Rhodan, "that the situation has changed considerably in the past few hours. Have you come to inform me that I am free to leave Akon?"

Auris gazed searchingly into Rhodan's grey eyes. "Atlan is not on your side, Rhodan."

Rhodan waved a hand in rejection. "I can help myself even without Atlan, Auris. The Arkonide Empire won't take any action in this—even on your side. So that's all I need."

"What are your demands?"

John Marshall stood nearby. He was there to monitor the Akon woman's thoughts and to signal Rhodan immediately in case of any sign of deception. But so far he had not given any such indication.

"Freedom to leave and fulfilment of our agreement regarding the base expansion. A number of merchant freighters are already standing by in the Akon System. You must give them permission to land."

"What about your war fleet? Won't they attack if the energy screen is opened?"

This alerted Rhodan to the possibility of a new strategy he had not considered. "Are you able to keep the screen up while opening a small gap in it locally?" he asked. When she nodded hesitantly he continued. "Very well—in that case I have to make another condition. In the future you can operate your blue screen whenever you feel like it as long as you leave a permanent window open over our base. Do you want to submit that to the Council?"

"Our generating stations are spaced in such a way that an open window would mean leaving a much larger area than just your base unprotected."

"I still make it a condition, Auris," replied Rhodan. But his tone of voice suddenly became more affable and less harsh. "Surely you can understand, Auris, that I have to secure my position. At least *you* try to understand me if the Council members can't or won't. Give it a try."

She watched him cautiously. "I'll do that, Rhodan, as long as we understand *each other*. That's not always so easy. Your actions are understandable but they do not run parallel to the interests of the Akons. Although I can understand them I don't have to appreciate them."

He sighed. "You make it difficult to negotiate, Auris, because I wish neither to disappoint you nor to hurt you. You are fulfilling your duty as an Akon just as I do as a Terran. Our personal feelings, whatever they may be, should be kept out of this. Nevertheless they play a part as I mentioned to you once before. Return to the city and ask the Council to send another representative to me—in case my proposals are denied. With somebody else I can dispense with certain considerations whereas with you I can't."

This time she gave him her hand before climbing back into the glider. "You will be hearing from us, Perry Rhodan," she promised, and she looked at him directly. "In any case—I shall be the one to come back here."

"She was speaking the truth, sir," said Marshall as Rhodan watched the aircraft take off. "There is no falsehood or deception in her. She was honest and frank about everything."

"I know," said Rhodan thoughtfully. "That's just why my task is so difficult. If all Akons were false and deceptive I would find our present intentions to be more justifiable. As it is, however, I consider our plan to be treacherous, even though there is no other way to protect the Earth. Because if the Akons aren't planning any deceptions today they will do it sooner or later. That is, just as soon as they feel strong enough. Which would be the case if they had their fleet ready. So from that standpoint we're doing what's right."

Lt. Groder had come up in time to hear this last part. "Of course we're doing what's right," he agreed. "Their energy screen isn't exactly a friendly gesture toward us."

Pucky had followed Groder in a disgruntled mood. "I'm getting pretty tired," he grumbled, "of having to hide in the cellar or jump to a mountaintop every time an Akon shows up. I'm sick of always squatting in some hiding place instead of being a part of things..."

"That's a precaution we have to take," said Rhodan, trying to soothe his feelings. "If anybody sees you the whole game is over. So far the Akons don't know who knocked out their 2 guards. They have a suspicion—in fact they suspect you. But they can't prove it."

"Oh, I understand everything alright but I'd rather see us get out of here soon. Of course we're not in danger but that's just what's so boring about this whole thing."

"Not in danger?" Rhodan raised a brow at him. "I'm afraid that's an understatement. If the Akons don't fall for my bluff about the Arkon space-bombs, we'll be sitting under the energy screen until our faces are blue as well. Bell can't do a thing without endangering us."

Pucky muttered something to himself but decided to disappear again without any further rejoinders.

Rhodan looked at his watch. "Until the next stage of the action we still have 3 hours. I hope that by that time we'll have an answer from the Akons. In the meantime we'll get busy on that pulse-wave receiver. Groder, you and Wiener give me a hand with it." He beckoned to Jenner and Ranault, who were nearby. "And you, too, of course."

They went down into the basement, where Pucky was huddled in a corner nursing a certain sense of outrage but he tried to let on that he was indifferent to the whole operation.

6/ THE BIG COUNTDOWN

10 minutes before the allotted time expired, a call came through from Auris. She asked to speak to Rhodan. When he entered the Com Room he was outwardly calm but inwardly tense. He waved to Auris and took a seat at the communications console. "Well, what decision has the Ruling Council arrived at?"

Auris closed her eyes for a second before she spoke. "Your propositions have been accepted. The blue screen will be opened permanently over the Terra base. We will have to relocate our energy generators

eventually because of that arrangement."

"Thank you." Rhodan smiled amiably as though there had never been a difference of opinion between himself and Auris. "And what about the expansion of our spaceport?"

"It has been approved—although... She paused abruptly.

Even over this considerable distance John Marshall had been monitoring Auris' thoughts. He looked at Rhodan with a troubled expression.

"Yes... you were saying...?"

"Nothing, Perry. I can only warn you that you have obtained these concessions under threat. The Council did not consent willingly."

"They had no other choice."

"That is the point! Friendship by extortion is not very lasting!"

Rhodan looked at her forcefully. "The friendship between you and me, Auris, has nothing to do with extortion. It was a spontaneous thing. It has nothing to do with what we both consider to be our duty within our respective offices. We agreed not to forget that, no matter what might happen." He pointed upward. "Now you'd better see to it that the energy screen is opened up. My fleet has orders to begin the attack against Akon within 5 minutes."

Auris tensed visibly. She appeared to look about her, helplessly for a moment. "How can I manage that in such a short time? The Council would have to be convened again because their latest resolution calls for opening the screen no sooner than sundown today and..."

"Handle it on your own, Auris! You give the order—otherwise it will be too late for Akon."

She continued to hesitate but when she looked closely at Rhodan again and saw the gravity of the situation reflected in his eyes she finally nodded bravely. "Alright—I'll have them turn the screen off in the local area."

"For a minimum of 5 hours so that my merchant ships can land and take off without any trouble. They've been stacking up in the outer system, waiting to get in. I'll guarantee that not one ship from the battlefleet will land here.

"Thank you," Auris replied and then cut off.

Rhodan checked his watch and turned to Groder. "Two minutes to go. Set up a contact with Bell and call me. I think we may see the screen open up at any moment now." He stood up. "I'll be waiting out in front."

Outside the house, Jakobowski and Jenner were staring upward at the intense blue radiation in the sky. They were relieved at the sight of Rhodan.

"There'll be a cutoff any minute now," he told them. "I don't believe the Akons want to risk an attack. They'll leave an opening for us for at least 5 hours. That should be plenty of time to lift off the entire robot fleet. From what could gather from Auris' information, the gap in the screen should also extend over the

Akon spaceport. If the operation goes off according to plan, they won't have time to shut the door on us."

Jakobowski pointed skyward. "The screen, sir! They've turned it off!"

The deep blue above had suddenly paled. Only close above the horizon could they see the dark blue layer which spread over the mountains like the surface of an ocean.

In the same moment, Wiener came rushing out of the house. "Sir! Lt. Groder has Bell on the spacecom!"

"Excellent!" Rhodan hurried with him to the Com Room.

Bell was on one viewscreen and Maj. Scott was on another. Rhodan could talk to both of them at once. "All is in order, Bell," he announced, and again he hoped that the Akons were listening in. "The Fleet remains on standby. Do not attack! The waiting freighters can land now. Major Scott, you can also make a landing and pick us up. I believe that any further negotiations here can be handled by Jakobowski as my representative."

"In the meantime, sir," interjected Scott, "we've collected 7 freighters out here. Including me you'll have to ask for 8 landing permits."

"Permission granted—compliments of Akon," Rhodan answered, deliberately assuming the authority of the Ruling Council. "I believe that from now on such permission will not have to be obtained. Any other questions, Major?"

"No, sir. In that case I'll come in with the merchant ships."

Rhodan nodded to him and Bell. "Keep this spacecom channel open, Bell. If the screen turns on again, launch the attack with the robot bombs."

"Roger!" returned Bell with a grin.

Rhodan signed off with a warning look and then he went outside to watch the landing manoeuvres. But before the first Terran ship touched down, Auris arrived in her glider. Rhodan saw her coming toward him without an escort and realized that for today and many weeks to come this would be the last time he would see her. At least their next meeting would entail some very unpleasant questions but he already had the answers for them.

He greeted her affably. "I want to thank you for your cooperation, Auris. Have you notified your materiel people? Seven merchant ships are coming in with commercial cargoes."

She gazed at him with her searching look but ignored his question. "It was too difficult to go through the Council on such short notice so I took it upon myself to have the energy barrier opened. I'm praying that they won't countermand my order. But if it happens, it won't be my fault. However, they will not permit you to leave here until the affair of last night has been explained."

"Why is that?"

She looked at him steadily. "The intruder incapacitated two of our guards who were policing that particular ship. The Ruling Council wants to know what he was doing there. It is feared that he was operating under your instructions and that he was there to sabotage our ships."

"One single intruder? But that's ridiculous! What could one agent do that could sabotage a fleet?"

She answered frankly: "That is exactly the question that faces us and for which we have no answer." They were still standing between the glider and the house, where no one could hear them other than Marshall and Pucky—who were inside and out of sight. "At any rate I am asking you not to leave Akon until experts have inspected the ships."

"I'm sorry, Auris, but I've already made all arrangements for leaving Akon within the next hour. I can't cancel my schedule without a very good reason."

"And if I beg you to do so?"

Rhodan remained adamant. "Even that cannot alter the situation, however much I regret not being able to see you again—at least not in the foreseeable future."

There was a sudden glitter of sorrow in her eyes. The light of the morning sun gave a violet sheen to her coppery hair, causing it to almost match the colour of the shoulder cape she always wore. "I'm going to be in trouble," she said.

"Why? Because you acted without authority?" He shook his head. "Not when you explain to the Council that you were motivated by the immediate facts of the case. Nobody will be able to criticize you, Auris. You were acting in the interests of Akon."

"Strange that you of all people should be the one to make me aware of Akon's interests. It would be more understandable if you had your own interests in mind."

Rhodan smiled. "Well, it often happens, Auris, that the interests of 2 parties can parallel each other."

Their conversation lasted another 10 minutes before they were interrupted by the landing of the *Odin*.

"That's my ship captain," said Rhodan, pointing to Maj. Scott, who was floating out of the groundlock on the antigrav and gently settling to the pavement. "I must introduce you to Maj. Scott." He waited until Scott came up and the two had shaken hands. "Maj. Scott, take my people on board. We take off in 30 minutes."

Shortly thereafter he said goodbye to Auris, who was obviously uneasy. She evidently sensed that something was about to happen which she might have prevented. Yet she had no proof whatsoever that Rhodan might be deceiving her.

When, Marshall reported these thoughts of Auris to Rhodan, he sighed with relief. "That's just what I want her to think—she and the Akons. Let them think of what happens as a freak of circumstances—one of those unexplained things that are not improbable in the world of positronics. A little mistake in the switching setup, something nobody noticed. A small cause and a titanic result."

One after another the freighters came in. Jakobowski was swamped with work. He forgot his misgivings, which Rhodan had sought to dispel.

"Don't worry about the Akons," Rhodan had told him. "When the thing happens they will at first try to arrest you, of course, and throw the blame on you and me. But you can always offer the argument that you certainly wouldn't have stayed behind at the base if there had been a plot on foot to steal the Akon

fleet. Nobody digs his own grave and sits in it."

After that, the *Odin* took off.

From a great altitude the gap in the screen could be seen quite clearly. It actually opened up over a considerable area. Within the neutral zone the massive Akon spacefleet lay helplessly exposed. No doubt they were intending to move the ships to another location—but by that time it would be too late.

Rhodan stood with Jenner in the Control Central. He checked his watch. "It is now 03:10, Terra time. Exactly at 05:00—or in about 2 hours—the pulse transmitter will send out the activating signal. Are you sure everything is set to work, lieutenant?"

"Absolutely, sir. All activating sections of the ships we worked are adjusted to the same frequency. As soon as that pulse signal goes out, the robot controls will take over the ships on schedule. The course has also been programmed. The engines will open to full power within 5 seconds. As soon as the ships are on course and on their own, the pulse transmitter will self-destruct. The little demolition charge will go off in Jakobowski's basement at exactly 05:03. The acid gas will dissolve the equipment without a trace. Nobody will be able to find any evidence that it was ever there."

Rhodan nodded with satisfaction. "If everything clicks, in 2 hours all Akon will have left out of 1,000 ships is 8 small cruisers. Too bad we can't see their faces when the fleet takes off."

Akon fell farther away and they finally joined Bell's fleet. In open transition, all the ships made a hyperjump in the direction of Terra. It must have been very easy for the Akons to register their passage on their hypersensors. Even the 2nd and 3rd transitions were easy to trace because Rhodan had taken no security measures to conceal either the direction or intensity of the jumps.

After that, they held their breaths.

The hands of all chronometers were clicking toward 05:00, Terra time.

7/ ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE & WAR

Auris of Las-Toor had called for a special session of the Ruling Council in order to defend her position. It was no easy task but the Akons finally realized that under the circumstances she described to them there was no other possible solution. So it was that they later voted an approval of the measures she had already taken.

The technicians had made their spot checks but had not discovered any alterations on board the ships. Of course this wasn't a 100% guarantee that the unknown intruder had been interrupted in his mission but it was at least reassuring. One hour after Perry Rhodan's departure the technical teams left the ships and declared themselves ready to continue with the fleet conversion work. But the Ruling Council decided that narrowing the gap in the energy screen was of top priority. The generator stations had to be relocated and for that all available work forces would be needed.

Auris had returned to her own home and now she finally had time to reflect upon everything that had

happened. From her window she had a good lateral view of the city. To her left she could see the shimmering hulls of the 1,000 spaceships. They extended into the distance and finally blended into the blue of the horizon.

Once again she reviewed the testimony of the second guard who had been attacked. There was no possibility of an error. The only thing the man could have seen was the little mousebeaver creature who was almost always with Rhodan. Only this time the creature had not been seen in his company. Which in itself seemed a suspicious circumstance.

Why had Rhodan sent the mousebeaver into the ship? They didn't know much about the animal except that it was rumoured that it possessed supernatural faculties. Most probably a mutant, judging by the way both the security guards had been handled. Auris recalled the other situation concerning the invisible person who had been 'seen' making footprints in the grass near the transmitter barrier. Was there some connection between these 2 events?

The longer she thought about it the more uneasy she became. Was it possible she had made a mistake in not having blocked Rhodan's departure? She turned away from the window and sat down in a comfortable contour chair nearby—which was fortunate for her.

A sudden storm blast came from nowhere and struck the house. The window shattered under the pressure of the shockwave. Broken glass and dust swirled into the room where Auris sat. A wind pressure held her in her chair so that she could hardly move but she could turn just enough to look outside.

Then she saw it—*the fleet!*

In groups of 50 or 100 ships at a time it hurtled into the sky of Akon with the full-throated thunder of countless engines. The air blast from the first formation had just reached Auris' house but half the entire fleet was already aloft and now the remaining ships followed with uncanny precision.

Auris would have been held to her chair without the pressure of the air blast, so great was her mental shock. Her sense of guilt was mixed with fear of what she alone must now be held accountable for. Perry Rhodan had deceived her, for no one but he could have caused the robot fleet to escape. This would explain the invisible spy and the attack on the security guards.

But even while the last of the ships departed and the shockwaves gradually began to subside, she recalled something the grey-eyed Terran had said once during a lengthy philosophical discussion. He had quoted a proverb of his race, to the effect that all was fair "in love and war."

It gave Auris further food for thought. If Rhodan had acted according to such moral precepts of his race, perhaps he could not be blamed in a certain sense. He had done what he had to do—if he was actually involved in the first place. So far it was still an open question whether he was behind the flight of the ships or some unknown technical failure had been the cause.

She got up slowly and left the house. She would have to call for cleanup crews and repairmen but perhaps she'd have to wait awhile until the crisis died down. Certainly her house wasn't the only one that had been hit by the takeoff blasts.

She sighed and got into her small aircar, which brought her swiftly into the city.

* * * *

The automatic tracking network of the Akons functioned perfectly. The combination energy-sensors and tracking scanners were activated when the first engine of the first ship started up. From all indications the fleet was under control of the robot electronics systems. Its course was followed until it entered hyperspace.

Later the positronic data revealed the following sequence of events: the ships took off in formation waves at intervals of only seconds. They opened up to full power immediately and headed en masse toward a common destination in outer space where they later embarked on a course which led toward another blue sun that was 5 light years distant. Then, as if by a single command, the entire fleet made a collective transition jump through hyperspace.

In that same moment something happened that was totally unexpected, Although it was not observable with the naked eye until 5 years later. Patrol cruiser *Akon 7* submitted a report one hour after the fleet took off. The crewmembers were eyewitnesses to the event, inasmuch as the cruiser was making a surveillance flight in the vicinity of the other blue sun.

The report stated:

*From Comdr. Kondoore,
Akon 7... The planetless sun has turned into a nova. Some unexplained surface phenomenon precipitated a chain reaction which apparently affected the core and caused the star to explode. This happened during our approach flight and we were able to change course in time. Our photo observations clearly reveal that a number of unidentified objects emerged from hyperspace at this time and were captured by the stellar gravitational field. Their crashing into the surface was accompanied by further nuclear explosions which apparently completed the disruptive cycle. Standing by for further instructions.*

After the Ruling Council had absorbed the import of this message they had their first doubts concerning Rhodan's involvement in the affair. What purpose could the Terran have in stealing the fleet from them only to let it crash into a sun? There was increasing support for Auris' theory, to the effect that a spontaneous activation of the robotic controls could have occurred. But neither the one hypothesis nor the other could be proved.

Auris was commissioned to contact the Emperor of Arkon over the hypercom. After receiving her instructions she went directly to the transmitter station which was located on the edge of the now almost empty spaceport.

Atlan listened to her report without once interrupting her. His face remained indifferent although there was a occasional glimmer of sympathy in his eyes when he met Auris' gaze.

When she finished he asked: "Why does Akon advise me concerning a malfunction of the fleet's robotic system? Is it my fault that your technicians are such bunglers? Although the ships were all in order they happened to crash into a sun and were destroyed. Naturally the unexpected flight could have been caused by faulty circuit arrangements in the command consoles."

"We are still searching for an explanation, which will be found sooner or later. The Ruling Council wishes

to know whether or not a new fleet of 1,000 ships might be placed at our disposal. We are quite prepared to pay the full price."

Atlan stared at her in astonishment. "1,000 ships? You're joking, Auris of Las-Toor. Where shall I obtain a spare 1,000 ships when the Greater Imperium is threatened by enemies on every side? I'll be happy to grant you my assistance in any emergency but 1,000 ships—no. I'm sorry."

"And if we can prove that Perry Rhodan of Terra stole our fleet?" she asked tensely.

Atlan appeared to be startled. "Prove? Rhodan?" He laughed heartily. "Why should Rhodan do such a thing? His own spacefleet is big enough so that it would not be necessary for him to add to his forces by means of theft or piracy. No, the idea is illogical, Auris."

"But he has acted suspiciously," she persisted. "He was on Akon during a series of strange occurrences."

"Fine, but that could be mere coincidence. I'm sure that if Rhodan had stolen the fleet he would have thought of a safer haven for them than in the heart of a nova. Wouldn't you say so, Auris?"

Auris nodded. "I am only repeating what the Council thinks. I myself do not blame Rhodan in this affair. But I repeat my request that you supply us with a new fleet. Without warships we are exposed to any attack."

"And I repeat that it's impossible. But I also repeat my guarantee that I will not withhold any assistance to Akon in case of such an attack. I'm sure that Rhodan will also give you such guarantees as soon as he hears of this occurrence. One moment, Auris—another message is just coming in."

He turned to one side and received a plastic foil which had been stamped with letters. This meant that it was a hypercom dispatch from a robot receiver station. He read it through and then looked at Auris again. "I'll read you the information I've just received although you know about it already. But in case you are still harbouring any doubts this may help to dispel them. This message is from a powered observation station and refers to the blue nova that became active within 5 light years of Akon. Listen carefully, Auris... At intervals approximately 1,000 spacespheres crashed into the surface of the blue sun. After disappearing beneath the thick gas envelope they caused a chain reaction in the stellar core. The blue sun became a nova. The observations clearly indicated that the ships were unguided and that they materialized out of hyperspace too deeply within the gravitational field of this star. It could not be determined whether the ships were manned by living crews or were robot-controlled." He looked at Auris again. "You can see that independent observations lead to the same conclusions. So now I ask you: do you really think Rhodan could be stupid enough to simply destroy a fleet after having stolen it at a very great risk?"

Auris met Atlan's gaze firmly. "No," she said apathetically. "No, that I do not." She forced a faint smile. "I thank you, Atlan. I shall inform the Ruling Council accordingly. Goodbye."

"Good luck, Auris of Las-Toor," replied Atlan before the screen darkened and left Auris alone once more.

She was alone with herself, her doubts and her increasing uncertainty.

* * * *

When one hand washes the other, finally both are clean. This was exactly the principle which had been put into practice by Atlan and Rhodan. From a purely moral standpoint they had not even been guilty of piracy or theft since they were only retrieving what the Akons had obtained, however innocently, under circumstances that were not actually valid. Now the Akons were once more without a spacefleet but there was no doubt that within a few decades they'd be able to create one. Until then however a considerable period of time would be involved. It was time which Rhodan and Atlan would know how to make use of.

Turning the planetless blue sun into a nova had been a diversionary manoeuvre. Rhodan had not intended to sacrifice even a single one of the 992 ships. They had hardly left the atmosphere of Akon 5 before they were taken over and brought into fleet formation by the giant robot Brain on Arkon 3, thousands of light years away. Then they had gone into transition but instead of materializing near the blue sun in question they had actually emerged 2,000 light-years beyond it, where they took up a new course and shortly thereafter went into a new hypertransition. From that point they virtually disappeared but in time Atlan would bring them out of concealment and remove every trace of evidence from them so that no one could ever prove they had once been in the hands of the Akons.

Another event was timed to occur simultaneously with the first transition of the stolen fleet. According to plan the robot bombs placed in orbit around the blue sun began to decelerate, which at once brought them into the gravitational grip of the giant star. The bombs crashed into it and as expected their nuclear detonations were observed. The blue star burst into a flaming nova. Thus it appeared that the escaping fleet had been lost.

All of this happened while Rhodan was already en route back to Earth. Atlan gave him a running account of the succeeding series of events which served to eliminate the last element of danger left over from the brief regime of one Thomas Cardif. The old state of affairs was finally reestablished. The danger of renewed attacks against the Earth by the Akons no longer existed, at least for now. Rhodan could calmly go about the task of regaining the partially damaged confidence of other intelligent races of the galaxy, and since he was operating together with Atlan and the two of them represented an invincible power, this phase of the reconstruction would not be too difficult for him.

He was startled from his thoughts when Capt. Burkow called him into the Com Central of the *Odin*.
"Hypercom message from Akon, sir! It's Jakobowski.

Rhodan went over to the tape decoder and waited until the message strip dropped into the output basket. The dispatch was not very long or detailed. Jakobowski appeared to have been in a hurry.

Shockwaves resulting from mass takeoff of fleet damaged living quarters and administrative building at Terra base on Akon 5. Two Akon guards at zone fence plus 3 of our own personnel wounded. One freighter damaged due to a falling gravo-crane. A commission from the Ruling Council started an investigation. We were suspected of being involved in the disappearance of the fleet but the charges have been dropped. Signed—Jakobowski.

"Short and to the point," said Rhodan approvingly. "Our own damages should have convinced the Akons that we had nothing to do with the incident. Thank you, Capt. Burkow. Still nothing from Atlan?"

"I'll notify you immediately, sir."

While the nav-computer was calculating coordinates for the next jump and the next transition point was being approached, Pucky came into the Command Central. Since their takeoff he had remained out of sight.

Rhodan regarded him in mock surprise. "Well, so you're still among the living? You know, little one, you've been acting pretty down in the mouth—as though someone had offended you."

"At least you're not calling me Lt. Puck," retorted the mousebeaver in a disgruntled mood. But then he seemed to brighten somewhat. "Anyway, everybody makes mistakes. Or are you an exception to the rule?"

Rhodan thought of the red-tinted eyes of Thora, his long-dead wife. Then he thought of the penetrating gaze of Auris of Las-Toor and he regarded Pucky pensively. "No. Pucky, I've also made my mistakes but I've managed to bear up under the consequences. In your case you're moping more than is warranted by the circumstances."

"I guess it wasn't all that bad," Pucky hesitantly admitted, and then added something as though letting the cat out of the bag: "I just don't want Bell to find out. He mustn't ever know that I always had to hide in the cellar whenever your beautiful Auris showed up. Otherwise he'll still think I'm afraid of women."

Rhodan placed a hand on Pucky's shoulder. "Man to man, little buddy-I won't tell Bell a thing about it." He raised a finger and warned him jokingly, "But you will also keep your mouth shut, won't you? About Auris, I mean. I'll bet you've been poking around in my thoughts again, so if you happened to run across a few personal ideas—just keep them between us! Otherwise Bell will know the whole truth. But of course I may be exaggerating slightly."

"I promise!" said Pucky. "But I haven't done any peeking." He gave Rhodan a secret wink and waddled back out into the corridor.

In so doing, however, he caused a partially nibbled carrot to fall from his pocket. It rolled across the deck and came to rest at the feet of the commander. Major Scott regarded it with disapproval.

"That mousebeaver can sure mess up a place," he grumbled. He was about to pick it up when the carrot suddenly appeared to be gripped by ghostly hands. It floated silently through the open door.

"Ah, there you are!" came Pucky's high-pitched voice in a tone of satisfaction.

Maj. Scott let out a loud grunt of despair and then turned back to his flight controls. The positronics clicked away incessantly. The *Odin* unerringly sped toward the transition point. Bell's fleet had already disappeared into hyperspace. Finally the *Odin* also made its jump.

During the ensuing pause, Atlan contacted Rhodan and reported his conversation with Auris. "The operation has been completed," he concluded. "If anybody was still suspicious of you I think my additional information helped to clean up the last traces. On the other hand I was never suspected from the very beginning. If you ever get in a pinch, Perry, you can make use of the Akon fleet any time you wish to."

"Thanks very much but this action has helped us both so that we can avoid the 'pinches'. And our conscience is clear." Rhodan paused briefly. "What else did Auris say?"

Atlan began to smile. His expression revealed a mixture of curiosity and personal interest with just the

touch of a smirk. "Auris of Las-Toor, the beautiful young Akon councilwoman? A very charming representative of her race my own mother race. I believe she was very pleased when I removed all traces of suspicion from you. The nova business was the clincher. She didn't want to think that you were capable of such a thing, Perry."

"Hm-m... and so?"

"So? Nothing else... Goodbye, Perry. We'll touch base again on matters of a much more routine nature, I'm sure..."

"Goodbye, Atlan—and thanks for everything."

* * * *

2 days passed.

In the name of the Solar Imperium Rhodan had called Auris of Las-Toor to express sympathy for the unexplained loss of their robot fleet and he had emphasized that he was prepared at any time to stand behind the Akon Empire with his own ships in case of any attack against them. He further thanked her for Akon assistance given to the personnel of the Terra base in the wake of the damages suffered there.

Auris formally confirmed reception of the hypercom message and answered that the Arkonide Imperium had also offered its military support. She said that Akon was pleased with this assurance of having friends again.

When Rhodan boarded the aircar that was to take him to Lake Goshun once more, he had no premonition of the surprise that was in store for him. It was an unexpected development resulting from an unknown circumstance something that had happened almost 3 days before.

* * * *

Prior to the disappearance of the fleet from Akon, technician Morkat finished his inspection of the 10 cruisers assigned to him, having found no evidence of attempts at sabotage or any hidden bombs. In his opinion the 2 security guards must have been suffering from hallucinations when they thought they saw an alien intruder. But of course Morkat himself could find no explanation for the attack the men had obviously experienced.

Then again, he thought, he was only making random spot-checks like the other 7 technicians. And spot-checks had a way of covering only those spots where nothing had happened. Therefore he decided that he would have a look at 5 more ships. It was not according to plan and perhaps for that very reason it would be successful.

Thus it happened that technician Morkat was still in light cruiser #85 when the pulse transmitter's signal

unleashed the furies of Hell.

He was fortunate that the inertial system turned on automatically for otherwise the terrible pressure would have crushed him. All he could see on the suddenly active viewscreens was the Akon spaceport falling away swiftly below. It became smaller and smaller until it was lost from sight on the curved surface of the dwindling planet. And he could see that the other ships had also taken off.

In that first moment he was frightened by the thought that he might have caused the mass flight by inadvertently touching one of the many circuits in the robot-control section. But just as quickly he realized it was a silly idea. Yet fear of the event itself remained.

At any rate he was a technician and understood a little bit about space propulsion systems. Also he just happened by accident to be in the Control Central of the cruiser. He knew positively that he himself had not activated the engines. They must have turned on by themselves—either in response to a radio signal or a transmitter installed in the equipment.

Which would be the work of the unknown intruder!

Morkat gradually came to realize that a sheer stroke of fate had enabled him to be witness to an incredible event. In one swift moment of revelation he knew whom the Akons had to thank for the unexpected takeoff of the fleet. He knew but did the Akons know it also?

Throwing all caution to the winds he rushed into the communications room. Although he was not an expert in this particular area he believed he was capable of operating a transmitter. But when he finally succeeded it was already too late. He felt the pulling pains of the hytrans and realized that even if his radio signal had left the antenna in time it might not reach Akon for years yet or even centuries.

The transition in itself gave him no indication of what distance was being traversed. He attempted to use the hypercom but apparently he didn't know enough about it because nothing happened. And shortly thereafter, another transition occurred. Altogether he counted 7 such jumps but he didn't know that in each case it was in another direction and that the hyper-compensators were operating. Therefore no one was able to track the fleet's course.

When the cruiser rematerialised after making its final transition, Morkat saw strange constellations on the viewscreens. Little by little the other ships also materialized until the entire Akon fleet was back in one formation. From the instruments he could determine that the velocity had dropped to half the speed of light and that the journey was being continued toward a nearby sun. It was obvious from their first manoeuvre that the ships were under some kind of guidance. There was no one beside himself in the Control Central and yet the cruiser was being navigated on course. With sure precision and straight toward its goal. Just as certainly as the entire fleet was being controlled.

The sun was circled by 2 planets. The fleet's destination appeared to be the outer planet, which was a large world of deserts and lonely steppes. The velocity lessened considerably as the stolen ships went into their landing patterns and lowered toward the apparently uninhabited planet. Ten minutes later the light cruiser settled gently to the ground.

Morkat waited a few moments uncertainly in the Control Central and then hurried to the main airlock. He was relieved when he read the atmospheric analysis from the meters there. The air was breathable and even the gravity was similar to that of Akon 5. He would not have known where to obtain a spacesuit because the ships of the fleet had not yet been so equipped.

He opened the lock and stopped on the threshold as though entranced. What he saw was fantastic although he could hardly have expected anything else. The fleet was still in the process of coming in to a landing. One ship after another descended from the sky and touched down lightly and expertly on the desert sands of the alien planet. They even aligned themselves in the same formation in which they had stood on the spaceport of Akon 5. It was as if the entire fleet had been transplanted from one world to the other.

Which was effectively the truth.

Morkat waited until the last ship had descended before he turned on the grav-lift and allowed himself to be carried gently to the ground. A small yellow sun stood almost directly above at the zenith, giving out very little warmth. Undoubtedly the nights here would be very cold.

While he walked through the cool sand from ship to ship in the wild hope that some of the other technicians had shared the same mishap as he, he realized that he would never be able to fly one of the cruisers without outside help. His own training had not prepared him for that. He was familiar with a number of the controls and knew how to work them—but as for an actual takeoff? Not to mention his unknown position. It was completely out of the question.

But whatever political power had been responsible for the fleet's abduction would be coming for the spoils. Had it really been Perry Rhodan? His first doubts began to assail him although they were nothing more than suspicions.

Then a horrible thought struck him: what if they discovered him!

What then? He had become aware of a deadly secret. They would not permit him to live with such knowledge. If they came, therefore, he must not let them find him.

Again he became aware of the hopelessness of his situation. Where should he conceal himself? In one of the ships? That would be foolish because it would be the easiest place for them to discover him. And as for somewhere on the planet? He looked around him and laughed bitterly. Nothing but deserts and low plateaus, not even mountains or any other natural formations that might offer shelter. No, that would be senseless also. Besides that he would die of starvation if they were to pick up the fleet and leave him here.

Finally, however, the course of events relieved him of the burden of having to decide.

2 days passed in anxious waiting while nothing happened. The ships stood there motionlessly, waiting in the terrible desolation of the uninhabited world. During the nights, Morkat was forced to return to 'his' cruiser in order to keep from freezing. At the first light of dawn he would go outside again and scan the pale green sky from which the thieves would have to appear.

And then they came.

It was a spherical ship of the Imperium class which landed not far from the perfect fleet formation and immediately detected him. Out of the ground locks came a stream of robots along with several human figures which turned out to be Arkonides as they drew nearer. Morkat had expected to see Terrans and so was proportionately surprised. They dealt with him politely but answered none of his questions. Most of the Arkonides went with the robots and busied themselves with the stolen ships. Morkat didn't know specifically what they were doing but he at least suspected that they would be removing all traces of the Akons.

However, one trace was left which could not be erased. He, Morkat, the Akon!

The commander of the big ship assigned him to a cabin and took off. Morkat noted that only one transition occurred, and then the vessel landed again.

A half-hour later he stood facing Gonozal VIII, the Emperor of Arkon.

* * * *

They were lying on the deck of the sailboat as they had done only the week before. Again there was hardly a breeze and the sun shone hotly down from a cloudless sky.

But this time Bell wasn't swimming. He was lying next to Rhodan while listening to a report from Atlan whose voice sounded loud and clear in the micro-receiver. Nor was Pucky doing any diving. He squatted silently on the gunwale and sought in vain to reach the water with his feet for his legs were too short.

When Atlan finished, Rhodan asked him: "So what now, Atlan? You certainly can't just put this Akon fellow, Morkat, in prison. And you can't execute him either, so what can be done?"

"I've given it some thought, Perry, and I think I have an idea. If you go along with it I'll give Morkat a new memory. When he returns to Akon he will no longer know anything about the theft of the fleet."

"A hypnoblock with a new memory?" Rhodan nodded thoughtfully. "Not a bad idea. But do you think they'll buy it? And how will you get him back to Akon?"

They heard Atlan chuckle softly. "I can run you through the scenario if you'd like. It's not very long."

"Let's hear it, Atlan. Bell and Pucky are as curious to know as I am."

"You have them both there with you? Excellent. By the way... on the planet Xorbaty, when my people took over the fleet and checked it out, they found the remains of a carot. It happened to be in the very cruiser that Morkat was in and which will be used in my plan. Would anybody know how it got there?"

"Hm-m-m... Pucky looked askance at Rhodan. "I wonder now..."

"Yes, I wonder," repeated Rhodan. "But let's hear that scenario."

"All right, it goes something like this: The scene opens with the Akons still trying to recover from the loss of their fleet. The puzzle hasn't been solved and the guilty party—if there is any—is still unknown. Then one day their patrolships report the arrival of an unidentified light cruiser. It appears to be unmanned but it lands on the spaceport of Akon 5. Of course it doesn't come down perfectly—it wobbles and bungles a bit and it's slightly damaged."

"The airlock opens and a man comes out—it's Morkat. Morkat the missing technician has come back! The Ruling Council convenes at once to hear his report. So he tells how he was still on board the cruiser

when the fleet took off. He was able to activate the viewscreens but nothing more because the flight controls wouldn't respond to him. Same with the radio."

"On the screens he observed a giant blue sun which rushed toward him and then disappeared. But only for seconds because by some surprising fluke he went through a second brief transition and then saw it again behind him. He saw all the other ships fall toward the sun and plunge into it. He did not know why his cruiser made that extra jump and thus escaped the terrible destruction. Upon trying the controls again he discovered that they suddenly responded. After days of wandering flight and mistaken transitions he finally succeeded in finding the Akon System. From that point onward he was able to navigate home by direct visual reference."

"So in listening to Morkat's report the Ruling Council realizes that this is a final proof of the fact that a technical failure really was behind the activation of the robotic systems and that the fleet could not have been lost due to the intervention of certain political powers."

"Auris of Las-Toor breathes a great sigh of relief as a stone is lifted from her heart. Nevertheless, technician Morkat must repeat his story under a lie detector. The instruments reveal that he is telling the truth. And finally the Akons are able to face the Terrans and Arkonides again without any lingering bias of suspicion."

"Well, my friends, what do you think of the scenario?"

"Great!" said Rhodan. "Let's hope it works out that way."

"I'm sure it will."

"In that case Morkat will have performed a service for us." Rhodan sighed with relief. "Which goes to show you that the unexpected can often be turned to advantage."

"That's for sure!" chirped Pucky happily.

Rhodan said goodbye to Atlan and turned off his micro-transceiver. He stretched out pleasantly in the warm sun and listened to the rippling of water against the hull of the boat. Everything had worked out, after all, and within a few days Auris would have dropped her vague doubts concerning him.

"And that's probably the most important of all," said Pucky aloud. But when he caught Bell's questioning look he casually added: "I mean—that this time our short little furlough won't be interrupted again. What else?"

"My sentiments exactly," said Bell as he let himself splash into the water.

Thus relieved of a considerable weight the boat righted itself so abruptly that Pucky lost his balance on the other side. He joined Bell Although not intentionally.

Rhodan remained undisturbed. Being in the centre of the deck he had not been affected by the gyrations. He smiled and watched while Pucky dove to the bottom and brought up a flat stone and placed it on Bell's stomach.

Bell only laughed.

It was just too wonderful to simply lie here under the sun with nothing to do but watch the water.

Vacations were always wonderful.

ORDER OF THE ACTION

[1/ DISTANT DRUMS](#)

[2/ DELILAH AND THE DIPLOMAT](#)

[3/ THE GREAT TURN-ON CAPER](#)

[4/ THE IMPOSSIBLE INTRUDER](#)

[5/ THE LONG-SHOT BLUFF](#)

[6/ THE BIG COUNTDOWN](#)

[7/ ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE & WAR](#)

[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

THE STOLEN SPACEFLEET

Copyright © 1977 Ace Books

An Ace Book by arrangement with
Arthur Moewig Verlag

All Rights Reserved.



Original German Title:
"Die gestohlene Raumflotte"

First Ace Printing: March 1977
Printed in U.S.A

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

HERE are the chapters comprising next issue's adventure. You won't want to miss a one of them.

MISSION UNKNOWN

THE SILENT CITY

ATTACK FROM NOWHERE

THE PLAGUE OF "PLENTY"

VENGEANCE OF GARATHON

DOOM-DUST MERCHANTS

AYE, ROBOT!

A GAME OF MADNESS

HEAVY GAINS

10 thrilling chapters involving Meech Hannigan, Ron Landry, Larry Randall, Lofty Patterson and lots of Springers and Spaceships.

It all comes together in—

SGT. ROBOT

By

Kurt Mahr