

Will the year 2105 be the last year of Emperor Atlan's reign? Will it see the last of the Arkonide Imperium? Once again the old enemies of both the Solar and Arkonide Empires spin their plans of conquest, and the only thing that stands between them and total success is a dead Admiral... and a Terran trick—

DEATH'S DEMAND

1/ UNKNOWN ASSASSIN

AN OMINOUS SILENCE

The gay sounds of the huge celebration suddenly cut off. There was only the small chamber with its few but elegant furnishings, plus a brilliant demarcation between light and darkness—and of course the door behind him.

The open door behind Admiral Thekus.

In order to reach it, Thekus would have had to turn around. He knew he wouldn't make it. The single lamp in the room was set up so that it practically blinded him. He could make out what lay within its brilliant cone of light but that which lay beyond it was thrown into impenetrable darkness.

However, the man who stood in that well of darkness could watch his every move. "We will tolerate no treason, Admiral!" hissed the unseen assailant.

Thekus was not a man who would disavow his intentions. The stranger sounded as though he were well-informed. So now there wasn't much purpose in attempting any evasion. "*You* are the traitor," Thekus replied calmly. "*You* and the men behind you. *I* only want the best for the Empire."

He sensed that his words were spoken almost virtually into a void. He would not be able to convince the man behind that sharp borderline of shadow. He had come here with a fixed purpose in mind and he would no doubt carry it out. No more words were spoken. Admiral Thekus waited. He had often tried to imagine how he would feel when this moment came. He had no fear. Actually it was a tremendously simple matter.

Suddenly there was a dim reflection somewhere in the darkness. Thekus kept his eyes on it until it emerged partially into the light—the long, thin barrel of a weapon that raised up until it was pointed straight at him.

The hissing voice was heard from no more. Thekus saw a needle-sharp beam of energy emerge from the muzzle. As if it were a separate phenomenon that did not concern him, he watched with fascination as the deadly ray neatly penetrated his chest. There was no pain. It all happened too quickly.

And when he fell, his body was out of view of anyone in the outer great hall. No one could have noticed

the incident.

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Marshal Julian Tifflor, the top representative of the Solar Imperium in the Arkonide Empire, was of the opinion that it was a very successful celebration.

That is, until he noticed the door along one wall of the great hall, which happened to be standing open for some unknown reason. Being close by he went to the doorway and looked inside. There he found everything in the small chamber just as Admiral Thekus had seen it 1½ hours before. The bright lamp was still stationed there so that it divided the room sharply between light and impenetrable shadow. The single exception was that when Thekus had entered here there wasn't a dead body lying on the floor.

Marshal Tifflor recognized the Admiral at once. He had been one of the most important men in the Arkonide Imperium as well as a guest of honour at this evening's festival. Tifflor took a step back. Even when wearing his full-dress uniform for gala occasions he always carried a weapon on him. The small, blunt instrument was in his hand in a flash. His narrowed gaze sought to penetrate the darkness beyond the blinding light. It was an instinctive reaction since he had noted the wound on Thekus' chest and wondered if the murderer might still be in the room.

Then he began to think logically. No one knew how long Thekus had been lying here. Julian recalled that the last time he had spoken to him had been about 2 hours ago. And even after he had noticed the open door it had taken him another 3 minutes before he could break away from a conversation with several of the guests. The murderer obviously wouldn't still be here. He had cleared out after delivering the assassin's blow.

Dozens of thoughts raced simultaneously through his head. Only invited guests had appeared for the state function in the chambers of the Terran Embassy. Nobody could take part in the festivities without having first presented their invitations to the orderlies at the entrance, not even the murderer. Therefore he was one of the guests—or a member of the servant staff.

For a brief moment Julian considered whether he should secure the building and have the guests searched for weapons but almost as quickly he rejected the idea. For 2 main reasons it was absurd: first of all the assassin could have gotten rid of his weapon long since—and if he had any brains he surely must have done so—and secondly, such a stringent measure would have angered the guests and caused diplomatic difficulties between Arkon and Terra.

It wasn't worth it. A Terran ambassador had to protect the interests of his homeworld and not try to ease the task of the Arkonide police. But something had to be done. Admiral Thekus had been murdered in the Terran Embassy—a fact which could not be kept secret. Such apparent negligence would also do little for diplomatic relationships.

Tifflor was standing next to Thekus' body. From that position he turned to look through the open doorway. All he could see was the blank south wall of the large hall beyond. No one had moved into that area since the banquet. Therefore, Thekus hadn't been discovered. He went back and closed the door. The festivities had reached a stage where the host's absence wouldn't be noticed for at least a few minutes.

Julian's next act was to move the lamp so that the rest of the chamber was illuminated. Then he kneeled down and examined Thekus' wound. There was a 2-cm circular spot on his chest where the expensive material of the uniform had been burned. The shot had gone directly into the heart, no doubt causing instant death. The weapon must have been a needle-ray gun, an electromagnetic generator device which was capable of concentrating its beam in a frequency range of 5 to 20 microns and with such intensity that it could slice through a steel plate 1 meter thick from a distance of 100 meters. It must have been a very brief shot—just a tip of the finger on the trigger—for otherwise the beam would have gone right through the victim and left its mark on the wall.

Julian got up and walked over to the intercom on the wall opposite the door. When he turned it on, the alert face of an orderly appeared on the screen. The man stiffened visibly when he recognized the Marshal. Since Tiffloor had the advantage of a good memory he knew by name every one of more than 1000 orderlies in the Terran diplomatic service on Arkon.

"Brent, I have a fairly tough assignment for you," he began. As Brent only stared at him attentively, he continued. "How you carry it out I'll leave to your own imagination. Just now I'm located in room 237. Until further notice, nobody is to come in here—so pass that along."

Brent appeared to be slightly confused. "Of course, sir," he said, confirming the order. "But that doesn't seem to be so very 'tough', as you say..."

Julian interrupted him with a wave of his hand. "Naturally not. And of course this room won't be closed to our most distinguished guest. On the contrary: I'd like to have the Emperor here in this room as fast as possible. Bring him here, whatever you have to do!"

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His Highness, Gonozal VIII, Emperor of the Arkonide Stellar Imperium, appeared to be bewildered as he looked down at the dead man. Behind him the orderly Brent leaned against the closed door, waiting. Julian Tiffloor watched the Emperor unobtrusively. He considered Gonozal VIII, formerly known as Atlan, to be his friend and patron here on Arkon. However that did not mean that the great man always advised him of his actions. Tiffloor wanted to know if His Eminence might have had anything to do with the assassination of his highest-ranking admiral.

But the horrified reaction of Gonozal VIII was genuine. For a few moments he couldn't utter a sound although his lips seemed to tremble in his effort to speak. Finally he kneeled down beside Thekus.

"Who!" he finally cried out in anguish. "Who could have done this?"

"We don't know, Your Eminence," Tiffloor answered without hesitation. "When I noticed that the door was open I came and found him lying here. So far I haven't taken any steps, other than to call Your Highness. I'd like to leave all further decisions to you, sir."

The Emperor nodded absently as he got to his feet with a sigh. "We need a doctor here to determine the time of death," he decided.

Julian had anticipated this. "Under the circumstances," he countered, "I wonder if I might make another suggestion."

Gonzal VIII glanced at him in some surprise. "Yes...?"

"A medical robot would be able to determine that better and faster than a regular physician."

The Emperor thought for a few moments. He seemed to see the reasons hidden behind the argument and finally he brought his palms together in a sign of agreement. "You're right, Julian," he answered. "You have carte blanche. Please call in a medical robot!"

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By the time the robot arrived, His Highness the Emperor had long since returned to the other guests. They had no doubt noticed his brief absence but in view of the good relationship existing between the Emperor and the Terran ambassador no one seemed to attribute anything unusual to the incident.

The party proceeded as planned. More than 3000 guests were entertaining themselves immensely while the medirobot sought to determine the exact time of Admiral Thekus' death. He gave the time as being between 24:00 and 25:00 hours, which was much more exact than any organic physician would have been. Because it was now past midnight and Thekus had been dead for at least 4 hours. But this didn't help much because the question of the assassin and his motive still remained.

The party ended 8 hours after midnight. It was then that the last guest departed. Either this last one or one of those who left before him was the murderer of Admiral Thekus, Lord Admiral of the Arkonide spacefleet.

2/ ENTER DIVISION 3

The briefing was the usual kind.

Maj. Ron Landry, Capt. Larry Randall, Sgt. Meech Hannigan and their civilian collaborator Lofty Patterson had been called into a meeting by Col. Nike Quinto to be informed about their next assignment. Actually there was no discussion. In his typically thorough manner he had been so detailed about the preparations that even the positronic computer centre of Terrania could not have found a flaw in them.

Of course there was a reason for it. The positronic centre had actually worked out the plans by itself. In cases of emergency, Col. Nike Quinto had his priorities. As chief of Division 3 of Intercosmic Social Welfare & Development, he could get unlimited machine time with the greatest positronic brain on Earth

where 1 single hour of work time cost 2.5 million Solars.

But everything went along as usual. Ron, Larry and Lofty went through their hypno-training session, which planted all necessary information in their brains. Meech ran through a number of magnetic tapes, which made him equally prepared.

There was only one difference—but quite an important one. At the conclusion of the meeting, Nike Quinto made a short announcement: "Gentlemen, this mission has such wide-ranging galacto-political significance that I myself will take part in it."

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The news of Admiral Thekus' death was released on the following day. Around noontime those of Julian Tiffloor's 5 guests who had gotten up from their hygro-somatic beds found out that they had come within a hair of being eye-witnesses to a horrible murder. The official media of the government indulged in expressions of contempt and scorn for the assassin and his motives. In fact the language was so candid and strong that when Julian Tiffloor heard the news broadcasts he suspected that the Arkonide Government was attempting to conceal something.

As far as any judgment of the deed from a moral standpoint was concerned, the private news organs were notably conservative. On the other hand they developed several interesting theories which seemed to divide them into 2 major groups of opinion. According to one group of publications, Thekus had been a conspirator against the present government and had been put out of the way by one of its agents. But the opposing group contented that he had merely been in some sort of loose contact with revolutionaries and that they themselves must have killed him when he was finally identified as a loyal officer of the regime.

All these reports kept Arkon in suspense during that day—but then came a new announcement. Terran scientists had found the secret of life! These were the precise words the news agencies employed in order to advise their listeners and readers of what was going on. It amounted to no more and no less than the fact that Terran doctors had declared themselves ready and able to bring Admiral Thekus back to life.

But Arkonides were a sceptical audience by nature. The news agencies were accused of playing a hoax but they sought to vindicate themselves by bringing in direct reports from Terra, including an interview with responsible scientists and a series of pictures of the equipment that would be used for reviving the murdered admiral.

It wasn't completely convincing. There was still a small element of doubt. But people were actually beginning to consider the possibility of reviving the Admiral. And particularly one group was concerned about it because the very idea of the Admiral's return from the dead was enough to give them a case of migraine.

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Nike Quinto proved himself to be a clever tactician. After landing his heavy spherical ship on the largest spaceport of Arkon 1, which was the residential planet of the Arkon triple worlds, he began quite leisurely to unload the equipment he had brought along.

A large crowd of reporters was present at the landing and during the ensuing activity of the unloading, most of them robots. Although the equipment had been carefully packed it required little imagination to recognize these devices as the same apparatus which had been viewed and discussed in the interviews with the Terran physicians.

Finally a heavy transporter picked up the entire cargo and brought it to the government building, which was 800 km distant. Colonel Quinto and his men had long since driven away from the site. One got the impression that they weren't too much concerned about their obviously very expensive shipment of equipment.

The so-called "government building" was actually an extensive complex of structures of all shapes and sizes. This centre of government covered an area of about 2000 square km. However imposing this might seem to be, the wonder of it all was that the governmental core of an empire embracing millions of cubic light-years could be concentrated on such a relatively small piece of land.

Thousands of years ago the Arkonide Imperators had lived and ruled inside this complex without having to worry too much about security measures. Who would have even entertained the thought in those days of ambushing the ruler of the Imperium! Since then, however, the situation had changed quite fundamentally. The centuries of decadence in which the Empire had continued to crumble, and the ensuing period of dominance by the robot Regent, who had stirred up such hatred among colonial races because of his soulless cruelty—all this had contributed to the fact that the rulership Gonozal VIII had assumed after deposing the Regent had become the most dangerous position the Imperium had to offer.

So the security measures had also changed accordingly. Colonel Quinto and his companions passed through 5 visible control points and probably more than a dozen more that could not be seen, before they arrived at the heart of the government's capital. Meech Hannigan was equipped with special sensors which were sensitive to such detectors. Twice he registered X-ray sweeps of an intensity that would have been illegal on Terra.

The glider car came to a stop in front of a massive stone building. A gleaming conveyor ramp led up to the wide portal, which seemed to be the sole entrance to the mighty structure. The car had stopped at the foot of the ramp and Nike Quinto had opened the door and gotten out before the automatic chauffeur announced that they had arrived at their destination.

This wasn't Quinto's firsttime on Arkon. However, he seemed to be a typical tourist because of the way he stood in front of the car and let his gaze wander from the impressive façade of the great building and across the trees and bushes of the well-planned grounds to the alien-looking buildings in the distance.

Col. Quinto was a small man but what he lacked in height he made up for with corpulence. His perennially flushed face was topped by sparse yellow-brown hair that served inadequately to cover his head. Nike Quinto looked ill and disagreeable—an impression which he took pains to emphasize wherever possible.

He wiped his forehead and sighed. "If it stays this hot around here," he complained in his peculiarly high-pitched voice, "my blood pressure's going to go up until I collapse from sheer heart failure."

In the meantime Ron Landry had gotten out of the car, followed closely by Larry Randall, Lofty Patterson and Meech Hannigan.

Ron made a secret face at the others when he heard Nike Quinto's remark. "It's fairly cool at night, sir," he commented. "Perhaps we should change our work habits."

Quinto looked at him as though taking him seriously. "You mean—work nights and rest in the daytime...?"

Ron nodded innocently.

"What kind of job do you think this is, Major?" Quinto snapped at him, apparently enraged. "We have a task to perform here, in fact an extremely important one. We're going to work *day and* night...until we've finished it!"

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In many strange ways the vast building was much more impressive inside than out. The hallways and lift shafts were empty, just as if nobody worked here. Nike Quinto led the way and apparently knew exactly where he was going but as the Terrans glided soundlessly along on the floor conveyors they were amazed at the number and complexity of curves and turns and multiple-branching intersections. It seemed as if the Arkonides had planned this as one last measure of security. That is, any assassin intent upon taking the life of the Emperor or endangering the safety of the Empire had a good chance of becoming hopelessly lost.

Ron Landry struggled to keep things in a rational perspective. He knew that there were few living, organically-constituted officials left in the Arkonide Empire, and most of them served in the regional ministries or other less important administrations. The inner core of the imperial government itself consisted mostly of robots. Nor were they the 2-legged type designed to imitate their creators in appearance. For the most part the aesthetic considerations had been subordinated to the need for greater capacity and efficiency. Behind the doors on either side of the transport-belted passages there was nobody who reported here to work every morning to accomplish their more or less responsible duties and then go home again at night. In their places were positronic robot brains which worked unceasingly, both day and night.

For this reason the corridors were empty. It was why the whole vast complex gave the impression of being a haunted house.

Nike Quinto swung into an antigrav shaft and floated upward. The others followed him. Ron Landry estimated that they must have ascended at least 50 meters before a shaft exit appeared overhead. Quinto shoved himself toward it, still leading the way. They were in a circular chamber which gave access to many branching passages which led off in all directions. However, Quinto went straight across to a door in the opposite wall and activated its automatic release.

The door glided to one side and gave access to a medium-sized, moderately furnished room. Ron saw a large desk that was surrounded by a few comfortable chairs. Against the walls were a number of

automated file cabinets for auto-retrieval of records. Behind the desk were 2 men: Julian Tiffloor, Solar Marshal and Ambassador to Arkon; and His Eminence Gonozal VIII, Emperor of the Arkonide Empire.

Ron bowed to the Emperor, after which he snapped to attention and saluted the Marshal according to regulations.

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"I have to disappoint you, gentlemen," explained the Emperor after the first introductory remarks had been exchanged. "You no doubt assume that I have information to give you regarding this event." As he looked at Nike Quinto and each of his men, one after another, dejection was reflected in his eyes. "But such is not the case."

Quinto waited diplomatically. Before him sat an Emperor and a Solar Marshal. There would be no purpose in opening his mouth as long as either one of them had something to say. It was only after a few moments of silence that the colonel ventured to speak.

"We had not expected, Your Highness, that in the few days since the Admiral's assassination the crime and its motivation would be all cleared up. We are prepared to start right from the beginning."

The Emperor nodded. "Colonel, if you have a plan which you wish to inform me about, please let me hear it."

Nike Quinto began without preamble. He presented his idea to his listeners and included all necessary particulars.

"Are you aware of the risks involved?" asked Marshal Tiffloor after he had heard it all.

"Yessir," answered Quinto. "But of all plans we've examined which might lead to success in the shortest possible time, this one is considered to be the most feasible."

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Admiral Thekus' body had been brought to the central government building. Immediately after their conference with the Emperor, Quinto and his men went directly to the place where Thekus was lying in state. The equipment from the spaceport had been transported here in the meantime. Nike Quinto made sure that the general area had been hermetically sealed off by robot guards and additional unseen security devices, and then he got to work at once.

Arkon would not have to wait much longer for the Admiral's return.

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The first thing he was aware of was a sense of impatience.

It was an unusual kind of impatience. He searched his mind. Probing here and there mentally, he discovered that for the most part his general awareness still lay in shadow. In other words, the life force had not yet penetrated everywhere. He had a definite impression that he would be capable of much more important perceptions, once he had fully awakened. This was the basis of his impatience.

He possessed a memory. He searched through it in an attempt to find out who he was and why he was in this situation. But memory itself had not yet fully awakened. That was why he was only picking up fragments of recollection which he laboriously tried to piece together.

He had a name: Thekus.

He had a rank: Admiral of the Arkonide spacefleet and adviser to Emperor Gonozal VIII.

Gonozal VIII was *not* his friend.

He had been—assassinated.

By whom?

He was still searching for an answer to this as he came fully back to life. And then he realized that there was no answer. Although no part of his memory now lay in darkness he had no recollections which could satisfy the question concerning the motive for his murder. Which he found to be very strange.

Somewhere deep within his memory he encountered certain presentiments which were related to revolutionary intrigue, insurrection and high treason. There were no clear details, merely an outflow of various combined observations—apparently the result of logical processes.

When he opened his eyes he found that his sense of sight was completely in working order. Before him he saw 2 men whom he had never met before, according to his memory references. One of them was small and fat with a very red face. The other was tall, broad-shouldered and blond.

Thekus found that he was lying on a stretcher. He felt strong enough to stand up. He wanted to get up as quickly as he thought about it but he had no sooner begun to do so than he realized that thinking and moving were 2 different things. He was probably faster than the two who stood before him and observed him but he was nevertheless 1000 times slower than his thoughts.

This was his first new experience. He registered it carefully in his memory. Thoughts are immaterial things, he told himself, and move swiftly. Limbs of the body are material things and are subject to a high amount of inertia. He learned fast. Even as he stood up and returned the gaze of the 2 men he absorbed at least 10 new phases of experience.

"How are you, Admiral?" asked one of these two suddenly.

At first Thekus was only aware of the sound of the words alone. Then in

the back of his consciousness an amazingly rapid process took place—and he

understood

the question. More than that, he could even answer it. In fact he spoke clearly in perfect Arkonide.

"Thank you. Considering the circumstances, I am well."

He looked down at himself to find that he was naked. This failed to disturb him but in the middle of his chest he saw a lump under his skin and it came to his consciousness that this little detail of his body was unnatural.

"What's this here?" he asked, and he stared questioningly at the little fat man.

The latter turned to look meaningfully at the big blond man beside him. "Don't you know, Admiral?" he countered.

Thekus turned his left hand in a gesture of uncertainty. "No, I don't think so," he answered hesitantly.

The fat one spoke to his companion. "We have to make a note of that, Landry. Something is wrong there.

The big man named Landry was more optimistic. "Nothing that we can't correct in a hurry, sir."

"Then please do so, Major!"

For a moment Thekus was confused. Was the man's name Landry or Major? And what kind of language was this that they were speaking now? He understood it but it was different than the tongue he had first made use of. Then he realized that he was proficient in 2 different languages. He was bilingual. He understood that "Major" was a military rank, so Landry must be a name. He was satisfied with his progress.

Now Landry came to stand in front of him. After studying him for a few moments he opened his mouth and spoke quite slowly "*Read #100!*"

Thekus understood the command at once and read. Under address 100 he found certain constants he was supposed to read and with it the next command. This command ordered him to differentiate between 2 variable conditions. First: INPUT = 0. The meaning of this was: nobody is near me. This was tied to address 213, which ordered him to remain silent. Secondly: INPUT = less than 0. This meant: an enemy is near me. The related address here was 1000, and under 1001 Thekus found one explanation: *The apparatus on my chest is a temporary aid to my circulation. I am not completely well yet .*

There was a 3d variation: INPUT = greater than 0. This meant: a friend is near me. This was tied to address 1125, which gave the final meaning to Thekus: *The apparatus on my chest is a magnetic-field generator and generates the fields which turn on or turn off the bit registers in my central memory bank.*

He sensed something like surprise that he had not arrived at this conclusion by himself. Now he wasn't quite so confident of his progress. But without being asked he reported to the man named Landry what he had found.

Landry seemed to be satisfied as he smiled at the smaller man. "Do you see, sir?"

The fat one nodded. "Amazing," he commented. "But we'll still have to make a series of tests to be sure of ourselves."

Thekus suddenly understood that he had been created for a special purpose. He realized that he must be at the disposal of these two but it didn't bother him. He knew no such feelings.

After all, he was only a robot, even if a fairly complicated model.

3/ THE SUPER DECOY

Meech Hannigan regarded his new colleague with unconcealed interest while they prepared for the reception that Thekus himself was going to give on the occasion of his "resuscitation".

For Meech this was a new experience. He had been involved with other robots but they had all been recognizable as such at first glance. They had performed useful tasks without having to be disguised as men of flesh and blood. However with himself and the robot named Thekus it was another matter.

For the purposes of Division 3 it had proven useful to have a member in the active service who could not be influenced psychologically and whose reaction time was much faster than others. A robot was capable of filling both requirements. Yet any enemy would immediately change his tactics if he knew that the one he was dealing with was a robot. So this was why Meech had been disguised. No one who spoke with him or observed him would ever have a suspicion that he was anything but a man of flesh and blood.

Thekus' task and purpose were simpler and more direct than his. No one knew who had killed the real Admiral. It was obvious, however, that some revolutionary movement must be going on under cover of various illegal actions and that this had been behind Thekus' death. What role Thekus himself had played in connection with this movement was the more difficult question.

The robot Thekus was supposed to find the answers. When he had made the trip from Terra to Arkon in a coffin-like case he had only been a framework containing the necessary positronic equipment. Now, 12 days after his arrival on Arkon, there was nothing about him that would have enabled anyone to tell that he was not the genuine Thekus. That is, unless they were to cut through the shell of living cellular substance that covered his plastic-metal body in order to take a look at what was down inside.

For Meech Hannigan the odd situation had developed wherein he would have to show special respect to Thekus in spite of their equality of origin. Because after all he was only a sergeant while Thekus was an admiral.

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The reception proceeded without the slightest untoward incident. If the enemy had shown up at all by now he must have decided to lie low for the time being. Thekus talked to a whole lineup of news reporters. He told them how he had felt during his revivification and described how he still had to carry supporting devices with him which gave his weakened body the strength to continue and would aid him to reach the highest possible level of health again. He handled all this in such a natural conversational tone and with such a good voice simulation that there was not the slightest suspicion that this could be a perfect stranger to the people who had been substituted in the role of the Admiral.

The entire ceremony lasted only an hour. In the opinion of the Terran physicians, no more could be expected of the patient at this time. The reception terminated with the appearance of His Eminence the Emperor, who embraced the Admiral and congratulated his "dear friend" on such a wonderful resuscitation. The reporters departed in great haste to report the sensation to their papers and stations. Arkon had its topic of conversation for the day. As Nike Quinto expressed it, Admiral Thekus was back in circulation.

After the colonel had returned with his team to the house they had rented, he made a more private comment: "We've thrown out the bait. All we can do now is wait and keep our eyes open."

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Unobtrusively they had so arranged Admiral Thekus' daily activities so that they could always keep an eye on him. It was revealed to the public that Thekus' state of health was still not good enough for him to be released to go home. This was why a house had been rented for him that was near the residence of his Terran "physicians". Both buildings were no more than 20 km from the border of the governmental district. It was understandable that for the present the Terran doctors would want to still keep their patient under close surveillance. It did not escape anyone's notice that one of the Terrans always accompanied Thekus each day when he took his short walks.

What was of course much less obvious was the fact that Thekus' house had been wired with many kinds of listening and monitoring devices. Nike Quinto himself had selected the location and on the very first day had commissioned Meech Hannigan to provide the necessary installations. Although Thekus was a perfect robot as far as the role he had to play was concerned, for that very reason there had been no room to spare in his interior to include the required amount of warning and sensing devices. So Meech had carefully concealed them in the walls, ceilings and floors of the house that had been chosen for the Admiral.

In their own house, 500 meters distant, the five Terrans took turns at the job of monitoring their indicators. Usually it was Ron Landry who accompanied Thekus on his little outings. Being tall, stately and intelligent-looking, he came closest to the Arkonide concept of a Terran scientist. Larry Randall was practically the only other team member who could take his place in this regard.

On this particular day Ron Landry came to Thekus' house as usual just before noon and pressed the buzzer. Almost at once the wide door opened in the "stem" section of the inverted funnel structure. There was no one to be seen in the antechamber, which was in keeping with the recommendation of Thekus' doctors, who said that until he had fully recovered he should have as few personnel around him as possible. All he was permitted to have was 3 all-purpose robots. Of course the reason was obvious: organic personnel could be bribed and even robots could be re-programmed. If the dwelling of a top

statesman like this were to be staffed with the usual complement of aides and servants it would have been easy for an enemy to kidnap the Admiral—or to kill him—depending upon the objectives of the opposition.

Ron launched himself into one of the 7 antigrav shafts that branched upward from the antechamber. As usual he got out at the 5th level of the conical building, just above the upper terraces of the garden, and there he found Thekus on one of the verandas which gave one a view of the inner open court.

Ron gave him a military salute. "Sir, I have come to take you for your walk, if I may."

Thekus gave him a friendly nod. "Let's go," he answered. "But do you think that today I could take a drive instead of going for a walk?"

Landry appeared to consider this for a moment. "I believe we could try it, sir," he finally decided. "I'll call a car."

At his present residence Thekus had no personal vehicles. Ron left the veranda and went into one of the rooms beyond it so that he could use one of the intercoms which were everywhere. He selected the address code of a car-rental station but didn't have to speak. At the station the selector impulse was received and the time and origin were registered. He knew that a robot car would be dispatched and that it would arrive within 5 minutes at the latest.

Ron descended to the ground floor with his ward. Meanwhile, Thekus had left word with one of his mechanical domestics as to where he was going. The car was already there when Ron and the Admiral came out of the house. Thekus made himself comfortable in one of the adjustable rear seats and sighed as though in pleasurable anticipation of the drive.

"I'd like to visit the eastern shopping centre," he said. "I recall that my niece is having a party tomorrow or day after tomorrow and I'd like very much to send her a present.

Ron nodded in agreement. "Good. I don't have any idea where the eastern shopping centre is—but help yourself..."

He waved a hand invitingly to the address-selector panel that was installed between the 2 seats. Thekus leaned over it and fed a series of numbers and code-letters into the auto-pilot. The car responded and started off in the indicated direction.

Ron took a few moments to enthuse over the excellent response of Thekus' programming. He actually knew very well where the eastern shopping centre was located. He himself had adjusted Thekus' program so that on a certain day and time—meaning now—the Admiral would request this drive to the large shopping area. The purpose of the operation was to bring Thekus among the people for a longer time than usual. It was necessary to give the enemy a chance to make the first move. Ron was sure that no one would find it peculiar that the robot car had been prepared with listening devices. That would be regarded as a very normal precaution.

Since all such vehicles were capable of flight, the aircar rose up over the park-like landscape that covered all the areas between the typical Arkonide cone structures. The gigantic buildings of the government zone fell swiftly away toward the southwest. Within a matter of seconds the cluster of buildings known in this region as the "eastern shopping centre came into view."

Ron Landry had been here before, so the confusion of round, square and straight or out-flanging

structures was familiar to him. He had walked through these streets, which were lined on the right and left with the show windows of the various stores and he was used to the throngs of people who swarmed through the avenues and filled the arcades and grav-lifts and shopping emporiums. This was the place where the Arkonides openly admitted that their vaunted civilization couldn't quite satisfy all their needs. In their private homes all they had to do was press a button to have everything they desired delivered to them immediately—but that still omitted something. The Arkonides still had to seek things out on their own. They had to personally feel or smell or hear the product they planned to buy. They wanted to discuss the price with somebody and where possible they liked to haggle a bit. It was a sort of micro-adventure for them and although they were usually so apathetic and weary that they could seldom do more than watch their fictive recitals, in this regard they would sometimes make the effort to drive a few miles to indulge in the last remnants of an instinctive pleasure.

Of course without exception the owners of the stores were non-Arkonides. No self-respecting Arkonide would stoop to the level of being a common tradesman.

Within the marketing zone both air and surface traffic was forbidden, so Admiral Thekus' aircar lowered itself obediently into a parking area on the edge of the shopping centre. Ron was the first to get out. Thekus waited until the auto-pilot went through the routine of asking for instructions: whether to wait here or to return. Thekus pressed the "wait" button on the front panel and got out. From there on he led the way, since Ron wasn't all that familiar with the district. As he followed Thekus he managed to keep a hand inconspicuously in one of his pockets. The small, blunt micro-beamer was activated and ready for firing. He could feel it vibrating in his hand.

A few steps beyond the parking area the press of the shopping throngs was immediately noticeable. Ron found it difficult to stay close to Thekus. On the other hand he didn't think that the enemy would try anything with the Admiral in a place like this. Thekus moved confidently through the crowd and finally turned into a side street where the pedestrian traffic wasn't as dense. This particular street was laid out on a peculiar pattern of curves. The buildings on both sides looked like giant eggs standing on end. Usually the lower half of each "egg" consisted of a single giant window from which emanated a strange red glow. Upon closer scrutiny it could be seen that there was a fluid substance behind the windows instead of air, and it was this alien liquid that was producing the light. From time to time grotesque creatures appeared to move sluggishly through this fluidic element. They would seem to hover near the windowpanes for awhile and then would recede into murky depths in the background.

This was the street of the Laurelians. It was here that the Arkonides obtained the most cherished type of house pets—creatures from Laurel, whose grotesque form was matched by their unusually amusing capabilities.

Thekus stopped at one of the arching windows. "My niece loves Laurelian animals," he said to Ron. "I think I'll send her a Mokoki."

Ron smiled. Such a decision was worthy of an Arkonide admiral. A major in the Terran spacefleet would have to work 2 years to even save up the price for one such creature. A Mokoki was the most exclusive animal that one could imagine for a house pet. Actually, among Arkonides it was the highest type of status symbol to possess a Mokoki.

There was a side entrance to the egg-structure. The door opened automatically as soon as anyone came within less than a meter of it. Upon entering they found themselves in a dimly-lit passage that was filled with a musty cellar smell. The fluid containing the Laurelian creatures consisted of sulphur-dioxide, chlorine and cyanogen compounds suspended in a solution. The passage widened out after a short distance and ended in a kind of dome which was glass-enclosed on all sides. It was in fact a large

aquarium. Behind the glass flowed the red-glowing liquid in which a great variety of creatures were moving about. There was no light inside the dome other than the reddish glow of the liquid.

Thekus and Ron did not have long to wait. A dark, unwieldy shape emerged from the red gloom and swam forward to the glass. Four tentacles shot out of the apparently amorphous mass. When they touched the glass they widened into suction cups.

A 5th tentacle reached upward toward the top of the dome and then a mechanical voice spoke from a concealed loudspeaker. "This is a very special honour for me," said the voice in Arkonide, "to see His Excellence the Admiral here. How may I serve you, gentlemen?"

Ron was fascinated as he looked at the creature behind the glass wall. This was the store's proprietor, himself a Laurelian. He had come to Arkon from his homeworld in a fluid-filled spaceship in order to carry on a profitable trade with the animals he had brought from Laurel. He was the oldest of the Laurelians on Arkon and his example had set a precedent. Other intelligences from Laurel had come here and now they occupied an entire street in the eastern shopping district.

"I'd like to buy a Mokoki," replied Thekus.

There was a gurgling sound from the loudspeaker, which sounded like moist gulping. "Excellent, Your Eminence! You know that this is where you may always find the smartest and most beautiful Mokokis. I'll show you a few of them—naturally, the very finest!"

The merchant did not leave his position. Apparently he had his own way of calling his animals to him. Suddenly 10 or 12 small creatures appeared. They were perfectly round, each of them being about the size of a child's head. They rushed forward and attached themselves to the glass wall with graceful, delicate tentacles.

Ron watched them with interest. Seemingly devoid of muscles, they appeared to be composed of soft flesh which was continuously in motion. Their skin surface was a yellowish white, brighter in shade than that of the Laurelian proprietor. With a Mokoki one couldn't be sure of identifying any particular feature. A small feeler or horn-like protuberance in the centre of the spherical body could have been an eye or an ear, until the horn disappeared. Then its function would be taken over by another part of its body.

It was not long before one of the Mokokis began to change in a very peculiar manner. At first it appeared to elongate vertically so that it was more like an egg. But then came angular contours and in the upper portion a series of horizontal lines, like furrows, became visible. Under these formed 2 depressions which were symmetrically aligned with the vertical axis. Between these holes a kind of horny ridge built up and lengthened itself downward. Finally a horizontal cleft formed beneath this ridge and then the lower end of the strange shape pushed forward to take on the form of a firm and prominent chin.

All of this had not required more than a few seconds but the Mokoki's little feat was now complete and perfect. Ron was prepared to be surprised by the marvellous capabilities of the little creature but for a moment or two he was dumbfounded when he beheld his own face before him. Everything was there, each individual line and characteristic. If it hadn't been for the missing hair and the hollow eye sockets he might have been looking at his reflection in a mirror.

In the meantime another Mokoki had assumed the likeness of the Admiral. But of course Thekus was fully aware of what a Mokoki could do and he didn't seem to be quite as flabbergasted. However he smiled in amusement when the creature had completed his little performance. Mokokis were galactic parrots. They didn't imitate words but faces.

"Marvellous!" Thekus exclaimed. "I'll take this one here."

"As Your Excellence wishes," came the voice simulation from the loudspeaker. "I shall prepare the shipment at once."

Thekus waved a hand. "No, don't do that," he called out. "I'll take the Mokoki with me now."

Ron glanced at him in surprise. This wish was not a part of Thekus' program. He had evolved this desire all by himself, which of course lay within the range of his tremendous capabilities. The Terrans were basing many of their hopes on Thekus' ability to adjust to difficult situations by correctly making his own decisions.

But why should he do so in this case?

The Laurelian trader confirmed that he understood his wish. He politely requested his 2 customers to wait until he had "packed" the selected animal and prepared it for carrying. Then he released his suction grip on the glass and disappeared into the red-glowing depths of his element.

Thekus turned around suddenly. "Watch out!" he whispered warningly. "Somebody is coming!"

At that moment the door opened at the end of the passage and for a few seconds there was a bright glare of daylight. Quite clearly, Ron could make out the figures of the 4 men who quickly entered. Their arms were raised in front of them and there were weapons in their hands.

* * * *

Ron didn't even hesitate half a second. He pulled out the micro-beamer and aimed it at the shadowy figures in the passage. A needle-fine spray of white-hot energy leapt from the muzzle and he heard someone cry out.

Thekus moved to one side and pressed against the glass wall. Ron sprang to the other side. Thekus himself had no weapon and Ron doubted whether he could drive back the assailants alone with his small beamer. This place was practically tailor-made for the purposes of a swift attack. They shouldn't have lingered here so long.

A widely fanned-out beam shot from the dimly-lit passage. It was aimed in such a way that it wounded neither Thekus nor Ron but it struck the glass wall behind which the costly creatures from Laurel were swimming. However it did not quite cause the barrier to melt because the energy burst had been too short in duration. But the next one could penetrate the glass and then there'd be the devil to pay. In that reddish brew with its poisonous components a man wouldn't live long enough to even be swept out the door in the resulting flood.

Ron answered the fan-shot with his weapon and another cry rang out. Then the enemy attacked in earnest. A shadow-shape suddenly charged Ron out of the half darkness but he turned in time to break the impact with his shoulder. The stranger was thrown back and he fell. Ron jumped him instantly and landed a heavy blow but at the same time something struck him over the head. For a few seconds it

dazed him. He felt himself going to the floor while the loud noises around him faded to a distant murmur.

By the time he could think clearly again it was all over with. When he sat up he saw that a transparent cube-shaped container with red fluid was directly in front of him on the glass floor. The Mokoki that Thekus had purchased was swimming inside it. Apparently the Laurelian merchant hadn't been too much concerned about the incident.

Thekus was standing nearby, leaning against the wall. Nothing seemed to have happened to him.

Ron looked at him closely. "What happened?" he asked.

"Apparently they wanted to capture me," replied Thekus. "You must have wounded one of them pretty badly because only three of them came in here. When you overpowered one of them, another man struck you down from behind. The third assailant was about to charge me but at that moment the floor opened up and a servo-mechanism brought up the container with the Mokoki in it. Apparently this made the third man apprehensive. He called to the other two and they ran out. They took their wounded companion with them."

Ron thought this over and shook his head. It all sounded so senseless. If the 3 assailants were intent upon kidnapping the Admiral, why should they be frightened by a little Mokoki?

"They really didn't want to kill you, sir?" he inquired.

"No, I didn't get that impression. The man who meant to take me put his weapon away beforehand."

Ron realized that he had made a mistake. To let the Admiral be kidnapped was right in line with Nike Quinto's plan. Thekus was supposed to get captured because he was equipped with little intercom elements which could be activated from Quinto's desk. By this means Quinto would be able to find out who the kidnappers were and what their object was. If Ron had been certain that only an abduction was intended here in the establishment of the Laurelian, he would have only pretended to resist. But the men had come in with readied weapons. He was forced to think that they were attempting to assassinate the Admiral a second time. And of course the death of this Thekus would have scrapped all of Nike Quinto's plans.

The Laurelian clamped himself to the glass again. "I see that everything turned out alright," said the mechanical voice. "I'm glad that my aquarium wasn't damaged in the process. Excellence, your Mokoki is there on the floor. May I ask..."

Thekus nodded and went over to the container on which the price was marked. He drew a chequebook from his pocket and wrote a draft for the same amount. He tore out the piece of foil and placed it on the floor near the container. A square section of the floor dropped away, leaving a dark hole. After awhile the glass plate came back into place and it was empty.

Simultaneously the Laurelian's voice came from the loudspeaker. "I am much obliged to you, Your Excellence. Please honour me with a visit soon again."

Thekus waved goodbye. Ron picked up the Mokoki container and they went out.

* * * *

As soon as he could, Ron called Col. Quinto from the car. Nike Quinto listened to the entire story before he made a decision. "Drive back to Thekus' house. Meech and I will be there."

When Ron transmitted this instruction to Thekus, the latter fed his own address into the auto-pilot. The car took off, and a few minutes later it landed in front of Thekus' conical house. Thekus paid the rental fee. They got out and watched the aircar as it lifted over the treetops and disappeared in a westerly direction.

Thekus opened the door with a coded key. He allowed Ron to go in first with the heavy container in his arms.

"Shaft 3, please!"

Ron started. That had been Nike Quinto's voice, slightly disguised yet recognizable. What was Quinto trying to do?

He swung into the indicated shaft and was followed by Thekus. At the 5th level they got out. After crossing the veranda they entered the room where Ron had ordered the rental car some 2 hours before. Or rather, they started to enter the room.

Somebody had turned off the lights and had darkened the windows that faced the veranda. The room was pitch dark. Ron hesitated. Then something took hold of him mightily and threw him to one side. Ron clutched the container to him instinctively to preserve the costly animal but it kept him from breaking his fall. When he crashed to the floor it still cost him precious seconds to carefully shove the container to one side and place it out of harm's way.

When he sprang to his feet again there was a brilliant flash of light from the back of the room. He tensed his muscles, expecting to feel the cutting pain of the shot, but nothing hit him. Instead something else flamed brightly in an opposite direction. Within the brief glare Ron recognized the outlines of the robot who was playing the role of Thekus. He could see his priceless outer covering take fire and he also saw that the metal plastic which formed the frame of the synthetic body was melting.

Ron was filled with a terrible rage. He pulled out his own weapon and aimed it at the spot where he had seen the bright flash before Thekus was hit. But he didn't come to the point of firing because a voice called to him sharply. "Don't, sir! Put your weapon away!"

Ron froze. It was Meech Hannigan's voice. Meech was here somewhere in the darkness. But why ... ?

Near the entrance all that was left of Thekus was a glowing, smoking pile of melted metal-plastic parts. The heat and smell of the remains filled the room. Why had Meech permitted Thekus to be destroyed?

The lights came on. At the far end of the room was Nike Quinto, still standing there with the heavy raygun in his hand. Behind Ron, near the door, Meech Hannigan was waiting. Ron looked from one to the other and finally lowered his weapon arm.

"Now I—I'm completely lost!" he stammered.

4/ A STUDY IN SCARLET

Nike Quinto came up to him. "It's all quite simple," he said in his high-pitched voice. "The enemy has played our own trick on us." When he saw that Ron still didn't understand, he continued. "While you were gone with Thekus we didn't monitor the instruments. Why should we? You had the Admiral under your eye all the time. But we became suspicious after we got your call from the shopping centre and you told us about that peculiar incident. So we tried to put ourselves in contact with Thekus. We contacted him alright. He was already on board a spaceship...on his way to Arkon 2."

Even when Ron took another look at the smoking remains on the floor he still didn't quite comprehend. "And...this here?" he asked uncertainly.

"That's a second robot that the enemy substituted for Admiral Thekus to fool you."

Quinto watched Ron's reaction for a few moments and then he began to laugh uproariously. He was still laughing by the time they had left Thekus' house and returned to their own. At first Ron didn't feel at all amused. He thought that he had played a rather miserable role in the whole affair. But in time he began to appreciate what Nike Quinto found to be so funny about it.

In place of Admiral Thekus they had used a robot as a decoy for the enemy. But the enemy had kidnapped their false Admiral and in order to gain time they had fooled his bodyguard by substituting a robot of their own. The exchange had taken place in the Laurelian aquarium. Ron recalled that he had lost consciousness for a few moments. The assailants had used this time to capture the first Thekus-robot and leave a false one on its place.

That much was clear. But now the question remained: did the enemy know that they had kidnapped a robot?

Ron decided that if this were the case then their whole project had failed. The opposition would know that the real Admiral Thekus was dead and that the Terran "physicians" hadn't been able to bring him back to life. But it had been their object to get Thekus out of the way. The enemy wouldn't make a move, once he knew that the new Thekus was a robot. It meant that no further clues would be left behind. In that case Nike Quinto and his crew might as well pack their bags and leave. They wouldn't find out anything more.

Ron argued this point with Quinto.

"Use your head!" said Quinto. "Nothing has happened to definitely prove to them that Thekus is actually a robot. Just the fact alone that they've gone to all this trouble to capture him shows that he hasn't made them suspicious."

"But they'll interrogate Thekus and probably examine him, won't they?" said Ron. "Our object with his resuscitation was to make a situation where the enemy wouldn't try a second time to just simply shoot him down. We wanted the opposition to become curious about the medical miracle involved so that Thekus would only be kidnapped instead of being killed. The abduction was supposed to lead us onto the enemy's trail. That was the whole idea."

"Alright—and so...?" retorted Quinto.

"Well, now we've come to that. Thekus has been captured and taken away. The first thing they're going to do with him is have a couple of sharp medical men look him over. They'll want to know how it's possible to bring a deadman back to life. Aside from all political considerations, that's a secret that anybody would give a lot to know. And when they start to X-ray Thekus or to dissect him and take him apart for a regular autopsy, they'll darn soon find out what's fake about him."

Nike Quinto nodded thoughtfully. Then he got up suddenly. "Come with me," he said.

Ron followed him straight across the room to an adjacent chamber where the instruments had been installed that provided a linkup between this house and Thekus' house as well as to some extent with the robot itself. The room had been darkened so that the only illumination came from the lighted meters on the instrument panels. Ron caught a movement of Meech Hannigan in the semi-darkness.

Nike came to a stop behind Meech. "What's happening now?" he asked.

Meech answered dutifully but with seeming indifference. "He's slowly getting out of range of our instruments, sir. His ship is close to Arkon 2 and is apparently getting ready to land."

"Any signs of special activity?"

"None to speak of, sir. Ever since he was captured they've left him alone."

Quinto nodded, satisfied. Then he turned and went out, Ron at his heels. "You see," he said, "so far they've left him alone. The landing will take at least an hour. They'll want to bring him to a safe place before they start working on him."

Ron couldn't see what he was driving at but he waited in silence.

"We should figure that they won't start questioning him for several hours yet—or certainly they won't start any medical examination before that. By that time, however, I hope to be close enough to their location to be able to influence the course of the action."

"You're flying to Arkon 2?" asked Ron, surprised.

"I?" Nike Quinto shook his head and looked at Ron as though indignant. "*We* are flying to Arkon 2!"

* * * *

The small ship was en route from one of the three Arkon central worlds to another. It held a course within the unbroken chain of robotships which were also on course between the 2 worlds. In this way the small ship avoided the danger of being hailed by other vessels manned by regular crews. Flying along among the larger robotships the smaller craft was thus so inconspicuous that there was little likelihood of being noticed—not even by the spacewatch stations on Arkon 1 and 2, which were responsible for the safety of the robotship traffic.

There were 5 men on board the small ship. One was a captive, two were wounded men—one seriously and one with only minor injuries—in addition to two others who were pleased with both their freedom and their state of health. One of the latter two was in charge of the flight. The other was in a small chamber adjacent to the control room and was busy monitoring a number of special instruments. Next to him was the man who had been only slightly injured.

They had turned out the ceiling lights and were observing a small view screen. A park-like terrain swept past their field of vision at a rapid rate. At the edges of the picture a plastic-metal framework could be seen. It was obvious that the camera pickup was transpiring inside the cabin of an aircar. Often the camera-eye would turn and reveal the inside of the vehicle. Here a blond, broad-shouldered man could be seen, who sat comfortably in the upholstered seat and was apparently immersed in thought.

The man at the viewscreen nodded to his slightly-wounded companion. "He doesn't suspect anything," he said softly in Arkonide.

"No, he's fallen for the trick," said the other.

The picture suddenly changed radically. Apparently the aircar was lowering toward its destination. A high, wide-flanged funnel house appeared. The blond man got out. The picture held for a few more seconds on the interior of the vehicle and then the outer contours of the passenger cupola came into view as the camera-carrier also got out. He seemed to stand motionlessly for a moment in one spot and then the video pickup caught the automatic aircar as it glided away over the trees.

The blond man entered the house, carrying a container that was filled with a reddish liquid. Both observers saw the wide entrance door coming toward them and shortly thereafter they caught sight of the antechamber. They heard a strange, high-pitched voice but could not understand what it said because the language was alien.

The first observer became uneasy. "We'll have to listen to that again," he said. "I'd like to know what was said there."

Next there was a view of an antigrav shaft while the blond man and the camera-carrier glided upward. Then came a terrace beyond which the plants of the garden could be seen. At the far end of the terrace was a door. The blond opened the door and stepped inside.

After that, things began to happen all at once. The 2 observers saw the blond man stagger to one side but they couldn't make out what had caused him to do so because beyond the door was darkness. However, this seemed to make little difference to the camera-carrier, who continued forward.

"Stand still, you fool!" shouted one of the observers angrily.

But he had no influence on the course of events. The pickup eye seemed to pass the doorway and enter the darkness. At least the view screen went dark for a few seconds—then there was a brilliant flash of light. For a few moments the screen went wild with spraying and hissing fireworks. Then it was over with. Trembling streamers of colour danced across the raster, indicating that at the other end there was no longer anything left that could receive the video and transmit it.

The man in front of the receiver jumped up. "Damn!" he exclaimed in sudden rage. "They*did* catch on...!"

He turned, shoved his chair back, and took 3 steps to the bulkhead door leading to the control room.

The hatch reacted to his presence and automatically rolled aside.

"Arfar!" he cried out. "They've seen through our trick!"

A tall, lean Arkonide sat before the main flight console. In contrast to the alarming tone of the announcement he turned with a slow deliberation. "How?" he asked succinctly.

"I haven't any idea! They've simply shot the robot to pieces!"

Arfar took another look at his instruments. The way the coloured lines danced across the bright-green scopes, alternately thickening and thinning out in a steady cadence, was apparently satisfying to him. He stood up. "The auto-pilot takes a few moments to get its bearings," he said. "I want to see that video."

He went with the other man into the adjacent chamber. Their wounded companion was still sitting by the receiver which was still displaying a colourful pattern of jittery lines. Arfar watched the screen for awhile. Then he turned it off and depressed a series of buttons on a nearby panel, after which he waited expectantly. The receiver began to work again but this time with a replay from a video tape recording of what had transpired before. Thus Arfar was able to observe the same scenes as the other two had witnessed them only several minutes previously.

When the antechamber of Thekus' house was shown and the strange voice was heard, Arfar stopped the tape. He ran it back a short way and then listened once more to the words. "As I thought," he said, "it's Terran. Somebody said: 'Shaft 3, please!'"

"Terran?" repeated one of the other two. "Who could it have been?"

Arfar stared thoughtfully into space. "Terra has agents everywhere," he said softly. "It's quite possible we've seen them before. They may be members of the Terran Embassy staff, who knows?" He seemed to take the matter lightly.

"You don't seem to be very worried about it," commented the unwounded man in some surprise.

Arfar shrugged. "No. The important thing is that we have Thekus in our hands—and also, of course, that they don't know where we're taking him." He nodded with satisfaction and went back to his flight controls.

* * * *

At the last moment Nike Quinto had changed his plans. A new point of suspicion had turned up. As a result, Ron Landry did not accompany Quinto and the rest of the team to Arkon 2. Instead, he found himself on his way under shadow of night toward the big dispatch centre where the automatic aircars for this district were kept.

It was the first time Quinto had been somewhat nebulous about his instructions. He had been in a hurry.

"I know I'm not much help to you, Larry," he had said at the last moment. "All I have is a couple of guesses. But do me a favour for my poor blood pressure: keep it down for me by acting intelligent!"

This was typically Nike Quinto. Supplied with such advice, Ron was supposed to find out which employee of the dispatch centre had installed a listening device in the vehicle which he himself and the robot Thekus had used this afternoon for their outing. After a little thought it had become obvious that such a device had been in operation. The attack in the Laurelian's aquarium store had taken place about an hour after the car had left Thekus' house. The trip from the house to the shopping centre had lasted about a quarter of an hour. Then Ron and Thekus had taken half an hour to push through the throngs of shoppers. After that they had turned into the side street and gone into the Laurelian's establishment. If there had been no listening device, the enemy would only have known at that moment where he should strike. But the attack had come 10 minutes later. If one were not to assume that the enemy had people stationed everywhere on Arkon in readiness for an attack, then it could only mean that the conversation between Thekus and Ron before the start of their trip had been overheard or somebody had been able to pick up a transmission of the code address that Thekus had selected.

It was a fairly obvious clue. Somebody in the dispatch centre must have wired the car. Who was he? And what might one be able to learn from him concerning the opposition forces?

Ron had set down his own vehicle within ½ km of the station. Without being observed he hoped to learn something about the car rental's operation before deciding his next step. It was still a few hours before midnight and business was at a peak at the distribution centre. Customers were calling for cars from all directions. Ron could see the automatic vehicles emerging continuously from the long row of garages, where they would rise from the ground and disappear into the night.

Each garage was a black box, just large enough to contain an aircar. There were no doors. The boxes were arranged in double rows facing each other, with about 100 entrances on a side. Ron counted 50 such double-row installations. They were laid out on an asphalted area that was as smooth as a landingfield. It wasn't exactly the best kind of territory for anybody who wanted to sneak around and not be seen.

Ron kept up his observations for half an hour. From his location at the edge of the area he could see the eastern end of 5 double rows of garages. Only twice during this time did he notice any special activity. Each time a robot came along the alleyway between 2 facing rows. It drove a car out of a shelter in both cases, worked on it for a few minutes and then guided it back in again. No doubt some small defect had been involved that had to be corrected in a hurry.

This was the way the aircar of the previous afternoon could have been prepared. It only required one willing robot—and all of them were willing—plus one quick manoeuvre.

Ron discovered that there were individual I.D. legends on each garage. The ones he could see carried the inscriptions A-82, A-84, A-86, or B-91, B-93, and similar series with C, D and E. He suddenly recalled that the vehicle he and Thekus had used bore the identification G-1. The garages in the low number series appeared to be at the other end of the compound. Ron had to assume that somewhere there must be some kind of administration building. The station could not be taken care of exclusively by robots. Back of such operations there always had to be an organic head man. Perhaps this building lay on the other side—for example in the area where the low-numbered garages were.

Ron had an idea. He drew back from his observation spot, went to his car and drove in a wide loop around the centre. Then he approached it from the western side. He had not yet reached the edge of the asphalted area before he saw that he was right. Lying at an oblique angle to the symmetrical rows of garages was a long, low building with brightly-lit windows. Ron recognized the cabinet consoles of small positronic computers and the hurrying figures of men inside. Everybody was still at work—and one of them

in there probably knew what had happened this afternoon to rental unit G-1.

Ron tried to figure his next move. At 1 hour after midnight the ship would take off that was to bring him behind Nike Quinto to Arkon 2! He didn't have another minute to lose.

When he rose up from his concealment and started toward the barracks-like building, he heard a noise in front of him. He ducked back quickly and waited. Almost at the edge of the asphalt strip to his left was a mass of undergrowth and shrubbery. The sound had come from there. It sounded as if a large animal were trying to free itself from the thorns and branches. Ron waited tensely.

Then he saw a dark shadow emerge from the bushes. It was some kind of vehicle, of that there could be no doubt. Ron watched it in fascination as it began to move along the ground and rapidly picked up speed, finally disappearing into the night. Just at the last moment, under the field lights he saw a long, narrow view-slot in the car light up. Behind it was a blood-red glow.

Ron stood rooted to the spot for a moment, struck by a strange idea. He rejected the thought quickly but it returned. Nor could he get rid of it.

He began to run, convinced at last. He sprinted across toward the west wall of the low building. Then he dropped down and crept along under the long row of windows. From time to time he would rise up to take a quick look into some of the windows. The rooms he saw did not interest him at the moment because all they contained was desks, calculators, registers and similar equipment. What was unusual was that he didn't see any people anywhere—yet only 10 minutes ago he had seen the whole building filled with activity.

He knew that something had happened. He hurried farther along under the windows and finally found what he was looking for. The room he furtively looked into was small. The door was open and a crowd of people was trying to push their way in. A medium-sized but powerful man stood at the door and held his arms out, blocking the rest from entering. Apparently nobody was to come in except for the three who were already there. That included the man at the door and a thin, white-haired Arkonide who was kneeling on the floor in the middle of the room over the prone body of the third man.

The prone figure lay there motionlessly with a distorted face and fear-widened eyes. The man was dead. There could be little doubt of it. His head lay in a pool of reddish liquid but it wasn't blood. It was a red-glowing something that contained sulphur-dioxide, chlorine and cyanide salts.

* * * *

In some stupefaction, Ron went back to where he had left his car and drove home.

The planet Laurel was 40,000 light-years from Arkon and 60,000 from Terra yet there was a greater abyss between Laurelians, Arkonides and Terrans in their way of thinking. What had motivated the Laurelian to kill the man at the dispatch centre? Did he know something about what was behind Thekus' assassination? Did he know the masterminds who pulled the strings? Had the dead man at the rental station been one of them?

Ron knew very little about the Laurelians but basically that was just as much as anybody else knew.

They were known to be loyal to the Imperium and they had never been involved in activities which were in any way hostile to the government.

So where did that get him?

Ron shook his head and gave up trying to figure it out. He still had 50 minutes before the departure of the spaceship but he had to be on board at least 10 minutes before takeoff. Which left him 40 minutes. He went back to the rented house by a roundabout way because he wanted to take the Mokoki with him. A Mokoki was far too valuable an animal to just leave it somewhere to die.

He left his motor running in front of the cone-shaped dwelling and went up to the terrace level again. The fluid container was still there on the floor where he had left it. The Mokoki was still swimming about contentedly in the red-glowing liquid inside.

Just as he grasped the carrying handle he heard the intercom buzz. For a second or so he wondered if he should take the call. Finally he released his grip on the container and went over to the desk, where he turned on the receiver.

He stood there nonplussed when he saw that no picture, came through on the small screen. The raster merely glowed with a steady dark red light. Before he could figure out what this might mean, an impersonal voice came from the speaker. "I've saved you a little work, Terran. I hope that I can do more for you."

Ron started when he recognized the voice. It was being generated mechanically from a speech transformer. This particular device was either old or of poor quality but that was why he recognized the voice. He had heard it before—in the establishment of the merchant from Laurel!

"Keep talking," Ron answered. "I hear you."

"Tonight you were a few moments too late," the voice continued. "I got there ahead of you and it was just as well. I don't think you could have accomplished much anyway. How were you expecting to locate the right man among all the others there?"

Ron answered with a counter-question. "How did *you* find him?"

"We who are from Laurel possess certain special faculties. When the man entered my store he was thinking how relieved he felt that the listening device installed in your rental car was finally producing some results. It wasn't difficult for me to pick that up from him. And if you know anything about the structure of thought impulses you'll no doubt understand how easily I could perceive that it was he, himself, who had installed the device."

This was also startling to Ron. "You mean—the man at the dispatch station also took part in the attack?"

"Of course! How else would I have been able to recognize him again?"

Ron paused in momentary puzzlement. "Wait a minute!" he said finally. "I don't understand. How would you have been able...?"

"I wasn't present, myself, at the moment of the attack," the voice interrupted. "But my Mokokis were swimming back and forth at the window. They saw the intruders and all I needed afterwards was to look at the faces they simulated for me in order to get a clear picture of each one of the attackers. Naturally

there were 4 faces involved. I didn't know which of them belonged to the right man. So I drove to the station and watched for a while. I have a very good memory. The rest wasn't difficult."

As Ron remained thoughtfully silent, the voice continued. "Anyway, that's what I wanted to tell you. But your Mokoki also saw the attackers. In one of the drawers of his container you will find a packet of food marked *Aa-ki*. Give him some of that once every 15 minutes if you want him to perform. He will begin to mimic all of the faces he has seen in the last 10 days. Perhaps that may help you further in your search."

"Thank you," answered Ron distractedly. "That's really a good thing to know. By the way..."

"Yes?"

"I still don't understand why you killed the man?"

"Wouldn't it be enough for you to know that he was responsible for kidnapping an admiral and that he made an attempt on *your* life?"

"If you mean me personally, yes," Ron admitted. "But whose life are you referring to—yours?"

"Yes, so that was another reason for my action. He was the one who took a blind shot at the aquarium glass. He didn't care in the least what danger he was exposing me to."

Abruptly the red glow of the viewscreen vanished. Ron had another question on the tip of his tongue but it was too late. Evidently the Laurelian didn't care to reveal any more of his secrets.

5/ THE "FACE" OF THE ENEMY

Corvette K-3605 was equipped with every device necessary for Nike Quinto's pursuit of the robot Thekus. In fact Thekus was heard from again within a half hour of their takeoff when they were 200,000 km out from Arkon 2

The situation seemed unchanged, other than the fact that Thekus' location was now stationary. His abductors had taken him from the spaceport to a place of safety. Quinto had ordered a preliminary trace on him and found out that the hiding place was somewhere in the northern hemisphere of the planet, in fact in sector 01-01110. To start with, this narrowed down the search area to less than 5 million square km, which wasn't more than a 128th part of the planetary surface. Moreover, Quinto could set his tracking equipment in operation as often as he pleased and narrow down the circle.

In the meantime Nike Quinto had changed his plans slightly. Shortly after his takeoff from Arkon 1 he had given the corvette's positronic computer a few problems to work on and meanwhile the results had been delivered. The computer had combined the enemy ship's course and velocity with various other observational data and had concluded that the enemy must be very restricted in its movements.

At first glance this information seemed trivial. The people who had murdered the real Thekus and kidnapped the false one were obviously members of an underground movement. But it was only proper, one might say, for an underground movement to be restricted in its movements. However, not so trivial at

all was the fact that the positronicon had revealed that the assailants had next to no support at all on Arkon 2. The computer had reached this conclusion because of the cautious manner in which the other ship had approached the planet. Apparently there was no one on Arkon 2 with sufficient revolutionary inclinations to "overlook" an incriminating blip on a tracking screen. The opposition's ship had been moving along in the stream of robot vessels and had peeled off when it was within 1000km of the great robot landingfield of Tourhathon. The enemy had gambled everything on the chance of not being spotted by any tracker.

On the basis of this information it had been easy to figure out what the enemy would probably be doing in the next few hours. He wouldn't remain at the spot where he had first landed. That would have been too dangerous for him. He would leave his ship and hide out nearby for awhile. If nothing happened after a certain length of time, he would continue his journey, this time by land, in some sort of simple vehicle. Probably he would interrupt his progress repeatedly to make sure that nobody was on his trail. Only then would he go directly to his own hideout and start interrogating or examining the prisoner.

Nike Quinto was convinced that until then quite a few hours would pass. He himself would have operated in the same way and he knew that Arkonide logic followed the same rules as Terran logic. In his calculations there was actually only one uncertainty factor: that was the possibility of one of the assailants being non-Arkonide—and therefore one who might make decisions on the basis of an alien logic.

The K-3605 landed at an alternate field which was auxiliary to the main spaceport of Tourhathon. In fact it was 50 km distant from the vast takeoff and landing centre for the robot freight ships, yet when they disembarked and even during their ride in the glide car, Quinto and his men could hear the incessant roaring and thundering of the ships' engines. The night sky was as bright as day from the fiery display of the ionic propulsion systems.

The auxiliary port known as Tourhathon-North had its own administration area. It consisted of a series of long, rambling buildings in which offices had been installed. The people who worked in these offices had the task of keeping records on all shipping traffic in and out of Tourhathon-North. This was important because Tourhathon-North was a port for the Arkonide warfleet—even though hardly anyone knew this.

The automatic glider car seemed to know its destination exactly. It set down its passengers before one of the buildings under the glaring lights of the solar lamps out in front and Nike Quinto had hardly swung out of his seat before the wide portal of the barracks-like structure opened and a tall man in the uniform of an Arkonide rear-admiral stepped out and came in his direction. Colonel Quinto gave him a military salute but the Arkonide reached out his hand in the Terran manner and smiled at him.

"Forget that, my friend," he said. "I am not your superior and you are not my subordinate."

Quinto took the proffered hand and shook it. Meanwhile his companions had gotten out behind him. With a quiet hum the glider rose into the air and disappeared into the darkness. The admiral invited his guests into his office and received a report from Nike Quinto concerning what had occurred on Arkon 1. During the account his red Arkonide eyes often revealed a gleam of interest.

"It all sounds so fantastic," he finally confessed, "that it's almost too much to believe. To think that a Lord Admiral could be murdered at the heart and centre of the Arkonide Imperium!" He waved his hands in a helpless gesture. "Here on Arkon 2 we first learned about it through rumours... and we've seen no signs whatsoever of any underground activity."

Quinto leaned forward. "Are you speaking of Arkon 2 in general, Excellence...?"

"Of course." The rear-admiral smiled. "I myself have long since received my instructions. Your intervention resulted in my having been honoured by a personal call from the Emperor himself. I was given the task of keeping a tight surveillance of all space traffic over the entire planet.

"And...?" said Quinto pointedly.

The admiral clapped his hands together in a gesture of finality. "Nothing! Absolutely nothing. The traffic is completely normal. Not a single unannounced flight has been reported."

Quinto leaned slowly back in his chair. He tried not to show his great disappointment. "The conspirators are extremely cautious about their movements," he admitted. "Probably they can't be detected at all with regulation equipment."

The Arkonide gratefully took note of the mitigating remark. Then Quinto tried to explain why he had appeared with only 3 companions instead of 4, as he had announced. He requested that after Ron Landry had arrived and properly identified himself he should be provided with a suitable ship and given further instructions.

"I don't know yet where we'll be by then," he added with a slightly helpless smile. "But in any case, Excellence, we'll keep you informed."

"Please do," answered the admiral.

Quinto still had a few questions he wanted to ask but he didn't get that far. Among other things he had wanted to inquire about sector 01-01110 to which Thekus had been traced. However the unexpected intervened.

A strange, high-pitched humming sound filled the air. Nike Quinto jumped up and stared at Meech Hannigan. At the same time, Larry Randall and Lofty Patterson also leapt out of their chairs. The Arkonide looked at them in amazement. "What was that?" he asked.

"We have to get underway, Excellence," answered Quinto, while avoiding the question. "If we could have an aircar..."

"Why of course," interrupted the admiral, very willing to be of help. He leaned over and pressed a button on the edge of his desk. "The car will be ready for you when you get out there."

Nike Quinto hastily spoke a few polite words while his men left the room. Before the admiral knew what was happening, he finally turned himself, and went out. The car was there as the admiral had promised. Larry Randall, Meech Hannigan and Lofty Patterson were already seated inside when Quinto swung into the front seat. He had hardly closed the door before the vehicle started out. One of the team had already given the address of the K-3605 before he arrived.

"Damn!" cried the colonel, furiously. "I didn't think they'd start working on Thekus so soon!"

* * * *

11 minutes before takeoff, Ron Landry and the Mokoki were on board the ship that was to take him to Arkon 2. So far Landry hadn't had any call from Nike Quinto. It meant that the situation on Arkon 2 hadn't become dangerous—at least not yet.

The ship Ron was using was a government courier vessel. It was being piloted by a robot. Ron assumed that the robot wouldn't have any objections to his spending the time of the flight in the control room. Until now he had not had much opportunity to observe a robot pilot at work. Outside of experimental craft, there were no robotships in the Terran spacefleet. Ron was fascinated by the soft clicking of relays, the mysterious humming and buzzing of instruments and the ghostly racing and dancing of the coloured indicator lamps. The flight console and the control room in general were so arranged that a human or humanoid crew could take over. The switchover from automatic to manual control was made remotely from the ground station. Only in case of a ground station failure could an actual crew attempt a manual override.

The ship took off and accelerated swiftly. Ron made himself comfortable in one of the seats. For awhile he observed the mysterious operations of the roboti-controls; then he turned his attention to the Mokoki. As if the creature were aware of being noticed by somebody, it swam close to the glass wall of its container. When it saw Ron it transformed its shape into a simulation of his face. Ron waited patiently while the Mokoki maintained this configuration for several minutes. Then the face dissolved and the animal resumed its ball shape once more. It revealed no inclination to imitate any other faces.

Ron checked the 7 little drawers on one side of the container until he found the one marked *Aa-ki*. The drawer contained a grey, odourless powder. According to instructions he filled a small measuring cup with the powder and placed it in the feeding slot on the cover of the container. A few seconds after he closed the outer slot lock an inner one opened and the powder sank down into the glowing red liquid.

The Mokoki became active at once. It swam back and forth a few times through the falling powder shower. It was hard to determine if it had a mouth or anything similar with which to assimilate its food but when it finally retired to a bottom corner of the aquarium there was no more of the powder to be seen.

Ron checked his watch. In 15 minutes he would give the Mokoki his 2d ration. It occurred to him that the Laurelian had not said anything about the total quantity to feed the animal. Perhaps until it started to form faces? That seemed to him the most reasonable procedure.

During the flight to Arkon 2 he gave the Mokoki seven more feedings but with no results. The animal seemed to become more sluggish as a consequence of taking in so much nourishment. The only apparent reaction was that it was satiated.

Then there was an interruption of Ron's attention to the Mokoki because of the landing and the trip to the administration buildings at Tourhathon-North and his preliminary conversations with the Arkonide rear-admiral. He forgot to feed it again. Instead he had to concentrate on a replay of a tape of the meeting between Nike Quinto and the Arkonide.

He knew that he could trust this admiral. Gonozal VIII himself had directed Quinto to him. Moreover, he had no time to lose. He had to get in contact with the colonel right there on the spot. There was no time to wait until he was alone and undisturbed.

So he excused himself for a moment while still in the company of the Arkonide in his office. By depressing a button he activated the micro-transceiver on his arm, which operated on the hypercom

principle. Both receiver and transmitter were set to the frequency that Nike Quinto had reserved for rapid voice-com with his men. Therefore it was not surprising that Quinto's high-pitched voice was heard as soon as Ron removed his finger from the activator button.

"Red hen to chick one," squeaked the receiver. "Come in, chick one."

"Chick one here," Ron answered. "Requesting instructions."

"Make a note: zero one, zero one one one zero; one dash one dash zero dash one dash zero. I repeat..."

"Thanks, I have it," Ron interrupted. "Confirmed as..." He read off the numbers from a note pad and Quinto found no errors in the repetition.

"I'll expect you as soon as possible," the colonel concluded. "Over and out."

Ron regarded what he had noted down: 01 011101-1-0-1-0. According to what he knew of the system of dividing up the surface of Arkon 2 into squares, the first 2 number groups combined with 4 numbers of the dash-linked group designated a region of about 500,000 square km. The final 0 meant that the area he sought was in the northern half of the square sector. It was still a stretch of 250,000 square km. Nike Quinto couldn't expect him to trace him down in an area as large as the former Great Britain.

He puzzled over the figures. "Excellence, I have a request. Can I find out in a hurry where this area..."

He did not finish the sentence because the Arkonide uttered a choking sound. Ron glanced at him quickly and was startled to see his eyes staring in fear at something. He was looking at the container that held the Mokoki.

The animal had begun to make faces.

* * * *

"But—but that isn't possible!" cried the admiral, horrified. "Such a perfect likeness! Where did it ever see him before?"

Ron turned to look at the Mokoki. The face it was simulating was that of a typical Arkonide—lean and with a high, intelligent forehead. He couldn't recall ever having seen this face before.

"Who is it?" he asked the admiral.

The latter took a while to compose himself. "Carba!" he finally stammered. "Carba, of the House of Minterol!"

A half hour later the Mokoki was dead. Carba's face was the only one it had reproduced. Ron reproached himself very much for this. Apparently he had misfed the animal for otherwise it might have furnished many valuable clues. Of course there was also the possibility that the Laurelian hadn't wanted to get too much involved in Arkonide politics. For whatever reason, he had done Ron a favour, but that was the end of it. He had arranged to have the Mokoki die before it could reveal too much.

For Ron the question emerged as to whether or not this Carba of the family of Minterol had really taken part in the attack at the Laurelian's aquarium. It seemed incredible that a member of one of the most respected families of the Imperium could lend himself to such a thing.

In spite of Nike Quinto's urging that he should hurry, Ron didn't leave before taking the opportunity to pick up some information about Carba. The most fertile source of such data was the admiral himself. Although he knew nothing of Carba's whereabouts, it was a simple matter for him to put in a call to Arkon 1 and to casually inquire of one of his acquaintances if he had recently heard any news about Carba. The answer was quite informative. It proved that the Mokoki must have seen Carba at the Laurelian establishment. For it was generally known on Arkon 1 that Carba, the scion of the wealthy family Minterol, had been on a round trip for some weeks now in far depths of the galaxy.

* * * *

01 01110 1-1-0-1-0 turned out to be a rectangular area that was 360 km wide by 720 km long. By far the greater part of the rectangle was taken up by the largest spaceport on Arkon 2, embracing the takeoff and landing fields of Farthor. All that was left was merely a tip of the region, which was occupied by one storage shed on top of another.

The K-3605 lay at the northern edge of the port, not more than 40 km from the storage shed area. The choice of such a location for the ship was disconcerting to Ron. It was close enough to be more or less a skip and a hop from the Corvette to the sheds yet it was just far enough away so that if their quarry happened to be in that area they wouldn't be alerted.

Ron was convinced that Nike Quinto's attention was presently being focussed on the storage shed complex. Had the opposition set up a hideout here? It wouldn't have been a bad idea on his part. If he assumed that somebody was on his trail he could expect his pursuers to look for him in remoter regions, although on Arkon 2 of all places there was hardly an area that could be called remote. So in this case it would be a smart chess move to take refuge in the heart of the busiest location of all.

Even if this were so, the enemy still hadn't realized that in capturing Thekus he had really caught a robot. Otherwise he would know that the robot was in constant contact with the pursuers and that actually there was no safe place to hide.

These thoughts ran through Ron's head as the aircar swept along the edge of the brilliantly lit landingfield. Either in the air or on the ground the vehicle was not allowed to penetrate the spaceport area itself. He landed in front of a string of administration buildings which were larger and more imposing than those at Tourhathon-North, because at Farthor passenger traffic was also handled. He let his car turn back to

Tourhathon and entered the main reception lobby. At one of the counter booths he applied for a permit for entering the landing area. They asked him what ship he wanted to visit. When he told them the simple truth, a call to the K-3605 confirmed that Nike Quinto was on board and that the visitor was welcome.

A robot clerk at the counter made out a pass for him which authorized him to visit the designated ship. Ron took an air bus that serviced the runway area he wanted and asked to be let out within 200 meters of the K-3605. According to field regulations the ship was night-lighted. A quarter of an hour after Ron had sent his aircar back to Tourhathon, he stepped onto the conveyor ramp that led up to the entrance lock of the Corvette.

No one received him. He went through passages on moving floor belts and reached the control room where Nike Quinto was waiting for him, together with Larry Randall and Lofty Patterson. Meech Hannigan was missing.

"Finally!" cried Quinto when he saw him. "Where's your Mokoki—or whatever that thing is called?"

Ron sat down first and then gave his report. Quinto didn't make any open show of being impressed but those who knew him could tell by the increasing ruddiness of his face that he was excited by the information.

"Carba," he half-whispered finally. "The House of Minterol—who would have thought of that!" He turned suddenly and beckoned to Ron. "Follow me."

As Ron complied, Quinto opened a bulkhead hatch at one side of the control room to reveal a scene that was similar to what he had seen a few hours before in the cone-shaped dwelling on Arkon 1. Meech Hannigan sat before a row of instrument consoles and was watching them intently. His main interest was focused on a medium-sized video receiver.

To say the least the scene on the screen was impressive. It revealed a wide, hall-sized room which was partially obscured by darkness in the background. However there was a type of arc lamp which brightly illuminated the foreground. Three chairs were arranged around a table. In two of the chairs were men whom Ron had never seen before—one of them Arkonide, the other from some indeterminate race.

In the third chair was the robot, Thekus.

* * * *

"It's in one of those storage sheds across the way," Quinto whispered in order not to distract Meech from his work. "We know exactly where but so far there's been no reason to move in. We may be able to learn something. They've just now started their conversation. So far, nothing of interest."

Sitting diagonally across from Thekus to his right, the Arkonide leaned forward. Ron heard his irritated voice in the speaker.

"This isn't getting us anywhere, Admiral. We've worked together for 3 whole years. You can't just sit there and deny that you know me."

The robot turned his head toward the other with a slow dignity that was becoming of a Lord Admiral. As Ron caught his profile he saw a trace of boredom and disgust in his expression. "I don't know what purpose it serves to doubt my words," answered Thekus. "I do not know you—neither you nor that other bandit over there!"

Nike Quinto clapped Ron enthusiastically on the shoulder and Ron heard him snort as though in glee. He could understand his excitement. Thekus was handling himself splendidly although he was in a dangerous situation. The people he was dealing with now had all been known to the true Admiral Thekus but Thekus had taken his memory of them with him in death. Therefore the robot was lacking the necessary information to meet the situation without special help.

"Perhaps they damaged his brain during the operation," interjected the other man. He spoke perfect Arkonide. There was no trace of an accent that might have indicated where he came from. "He should be put under examination, Arfar."

The Arkonide called Arfar made a deprecating gesture. "We have that more or less in mind but there's no time for it now. Anyway, this is nonsense. He knows everything else; why should he forget just us?"

Ron had been startled. Arfar—the name was familiar. A high military official in the Arkonide space fleet went by that name. Unfortunately neither Ron nor Nike Quinto had ever seen a picture of him. Could this man who was questioning Thekus now be that same official?

Ron called out a command to Meech. "Test parens A parens 2-2-8 comma 2-2-8 comma 3-0-0."

Ron had extensive parts of Thekus' program in his memory. Giving the instruction to Meech in positronic language saved him at least half a second in translation time—and half a second could be strategic during an interrogation like this.

On the viewscreen Thekus tilted his head slightly as though he were listening, and in a sense that was what he was actually doing. Meech transmitted the command and Thekus activated a new part of his program.

It was a blunt ruse. "You don't mean to tell me," said Thekus, "that you are the same Arfar who manages billions of sums of money for the Arkonide Fleet in the service of His Highness?"

Arfar seemed to lose his patience. He sprang to his feet. For an Arkonide he was surprisingly capable of emotion. "This is too much!" he shouted angrily. "You know me well enough to know which Arfar I am!"

A-0, decided the positronic logic. The test showed no result. But the program was on a loop that brought Thekus back to the original command. The index number had advanced one bit, which called for another ruse.

Thekus smiled. "I knew you couldn't be the top official I was alluding to. Unfortunately I've never seen him, but that Arfar is not the kind of man who would get into such dirty dealings."

Now Arfar was close to Thekus' chair. He banged his fist down on the armrest and shouted at him. "Don't you worry about *my* morality—you worry about *your own*!"

A is greater than 0, decided the positronicon. The test had succeeded. "My morality" had been the key words.

The rest proceeded automatically. In the course of the next 10 minutes everything concerning the director-general, Arfar, that was available from the K-3605 was dumped into Thekus' memory units. It was more than the actual Thekus had ever known about his colleague. On the other hand, of course, certain details were missing, such as Arfar's underground activities which had never been observed or recorded.

Nike Quinto again clapped Ron on the shoulder appreciatively. "Well done!" he whispered. Which was surprising because Quinto was not in the habit of singing praises.

The conversation revealed by the viewscreen continued. With the exception of a few inserted remarks the non-Arkonide remained silent. The exchange of words was between Arfar and Thekus. But enough was said that the other man's name was revealed to be Melaal. Even that, however, provided no indication of his origin.

Now that Thekus knew the person he was dealing with, he dropped some of his reserve. He did it slowly and skilfully enough to keep Arfar on edge continuously, as the latter wanted to come swiftly to the core of the matter. The Arkonide had gone back to his seat again and he kept interrupting Thekus' long-winded but finely-turned phrases. Merely from what Ron could immediately grasp, without making a tedious backplay of the recordings, it became clear that Arfar and Thekus were both members of a revolutionary movement—or at least *had* been. The goal of the movement was to reform the Arkonide Imperium. The first step of the reformation was to depose Emperor Gonozal VIII but what was to develop after that was not made clear by the conversation.

Something else came to the surface instead. Lord Admiral Thekus had suddenly refused to be associated with the activity. He didn't seem to be in agreement with the objectives any longer, much less the methods employed, and as Arfar crudely expressed it, he had bailed out. But for the conspirators it had become too dangerous to let Thekus continue, considering his inside knowledge of the situation. So they had "taken care" of him.

"You still have one foot in the grave," warned Arfar, using a Terran expression that had become popular on Arkon. "Our plans have been changed where you are concerned. But not enough to where we wouldn't get rid of you again, right here and now, if you cross us. So get used to the idea that from here on you're only playing a minor role in our little production."

Thekus nodded pleasantly as though he'd been paid a compliment.

Arfar continued angrily. "Now tell me once and for all, what made you so skittish all of a sudden?"

At this point Thekus made a mistake. As a robot he was programmed to always relate to the last-mentioned point of a conversation where the objective wasn't definite. Also, this made him grasp the general meaning of a sentence whereas he might not clearly judge certain specific words. For Thekus the word "skittish" referred to his attitude during the present interrogation. He was thinking that Arfar wanted to know why he had been reluctant to recognize him.

So he answered: "It's entirely my own business whom I choose to recognize. In your case I had at first decided against it. Am I responsible to you for that?"

Ron held his breath. Arfar obviously wanted to know why Thekus had suddenly become unfaithful to the reform movement. Thekus had misunderstood! But the danger-point passed. Arfar apparently considered the answer as another evasion and paid little heed.

"I don't mean that!" he exclaimed, making an impatient gesture with his hands. "I want to know why you suddenly turned your back on us.

Ron also noted that the man named Melaal had not reacted to Thekus' mistake.

In a perfectly simulated gesture, Thekus scratched his chin. "Well," he said hesitantly, "I've already given you my statements concerning that. Why should I explain it all again?"

Arfar waved both arms in the air. For an Arkonide he was unusually active and quick. "You are to tell me the truth!" he shouted. "I don't want to hear that you don't happen to like the new setup of the Finance Committee or that you see a danger for the revolution if we don't have the right man in the finance posts. I want to know why you've really bailed out!"

Thekus did not answer. Naturally he didn't know why the real Lord Admiral had turned his back on the conspirators. But his hesitation led to an unexpected development.

"Don't our *alien* accomplices suit you?" asked Arfar, obviously trying to give the prisoner an opening.

Ron almost jumped. Aliens! Who were the alien accomplices? Were non-Arkonides taking strategic positions in this revolution? He waited tensely for the robot's answer—forgetting that Thekus had no answer to give because he didn't know what the real Thekus had had on his mind.

The observers on board the K-3605 momentarily forgot the true situation. For just a few seconds they regarded their robot decoy as the Lord Admiral of the Imperial Fleet who was about to make a sensational revelation. And it almost cost the machine entity its semi-bionic existence.

It came as a complete surprise that the second interrogator Melaal suddenly asked a question. It was an oblique question, actually. He leaned forward and shot it directly at Thekus. "What do you know about Belubal?"

Thekus' head jerked around to stare at the man. Ron caught the mask-like rigidity of his expressionless face. Here was the dreaded trap!

Who was Belubal?

Ron had never heard the name. Thekus couldn't use the same old routine that he didn't know. It would have been a giveaway. The conspiracy hadn't chosen dummies to cross-examine the Lord Admiral.

Who was Belubal? A kingdom for the right answer!

Nike Quinto's shrill voice shouted next to Ron's ear. "Out! Cut him off! Make him pass out!"

Meech Hannigan followed the order with robotic swiftness. He pressed a button-switch. Ron could hear its click.

On the viewscreen, Thekus was seen to slump. He had become "unconscious".

* * * *

When they left the observation room, Nike Quinto wiped the sweat from his brow. "We almost lost the whole ballgame there," he groaned. "Glord—my blood pressure! I think my heart has hit the ceiling!" He pressed a hand to his skull. "Now who in the devil is Belubal?" he wailed.

Larry and Lofty looked up from their work. In front of Larry were some sheets of paper on which he had been working out a block diagram for a new robot program. Lofty had been watching over his shoulder in order to learn the technique. Although they asked no questions it was obvious by their expressions that they wanted to know what had happened.

"I don't know," said Ron. "We ought to make some inquiries on Arkon 1."

Quinto nodded in agreement as he turned to Larry. "Randall, find out if there's anything in the records of His Eminence referring to a certain Belubal. Make it a priority call. We need the data in a couple of minutes."

Ron looked back toward the door of the observation room, which he had closed behind him. "Is Meech going to keep monitoring?" he asked. "They could get the idea of calling a doctor."

Quinto waved a hand in rejection. "Don't worry, Meech is staying with it. Probably all a doctor would do would be to feel his pulse, and his pulse works perfectly. I don't think that a doctor looking for the cause of fainting would find out that Thekus is a robot. And besides, an empty warehouse isn't exactly the place to find a doctor handy."

Ron searched his memory for any clue that might cast light on the mystery of Belubal. Belubal was not an Arkonide name. Where did the man come from? And what had the actual Thekus had to do with him?

"You know," said Quinto, interrupting his train of thought, "this Melaal character doesn't especially appeal to me. He's sneaky. I wouldn't be surprised if he's seen through Thekus by now."

Ron was only listening with half an ear because he was still preoccupied with thoughts concerning Belubal. He didn't look up when the bulkhead hatch hummed and slid to one side. He was only alerted to the fact when he heard Quinto's shrill voice.

"Sergeant, why have you left your post?"

Meech Hannigan stood in the open doorway of the observation room. He gave a regulation salute. "Excuse me, sir," he answered calmly. "At the moment there's nothing to observe. The 2 men have left the storehouse and Thekus is still unconscious. But sir—would you permit me to make a remark?"

Quinto signalled him to speak. "OK, Meech, let's have it!"

"As you know, sir, I am conversant with a number of languages and dialects. I have heard the name Belubal and I think I know what dialect it belongs to."

"Dialect?" asked Quinto, amazed. "First tell me what Language!"

Unperturbedly, Meech continued. "Actually, dialect isn't quite the right term for it, sir. We call high-spoken Arkonide a language and consider anything related to it as dialect. Our science of philology should give us some better terminology in such cases."

Ron thought impatiently that Meech could often be stuffy and long-winded. But in the next second it came to him what Meech was getting at. It filled him with a searing shock of sudden fright.

"In reality there is an older language than Arkonide," the robot concluded. "And that's where the name Belubal comes from. The language is Akonide. . .

7/ THE ADMIRAL DIES TWICE

For one long moment they were all flabbergasted.

The Akons!

The mysterious inhabitants of the Blue System, the Arkonide mother race and the secret enemies of the Solar Imperium! If Akons had taken part in the conspiracy on Arkon 1, then the danger was very critical—a red alert!

However, Nike Quinto did not want to jump the gun before he learned more. Terra had to be notified at once but he didn't want to set off a false alarm. He questioned Meech Hannigan closely to find out how he had caught the significance of the name Belubal. Meech had a thorough knowledge of the Akon language and with what Quinto himself knew about it he was able to follow him sufficiently in his explanation to realize that he had not made a mistake. And of course it would have been very unusual for a robot to be mistaken.

So Belubal was an Akon, and he was involved in the conspiracy. Quinto sent Meech back to his post while he prepared a coded dispatch for directional beam transmission to Earth. Within a few minutes the message went out. Practically in the same instant it would be received on Earth without giving anybody time to intercept or decipher it.

Nike Quinto gave a sigh of relief. At least *that* was off his chest.

Meech Hannigan announced over the intercom that Thekus had "come to" again and that the 2 conspirators had come back. Ron Landry and Nike Quinto went in and resumed their places in the observation room.

* * * *

Melaal's face was impenetrable as he looked at Thekus. The robot played his part perfectly. His eyes appeared to be dazed as he opened them. He looked about him in confusion while his lips parted to barely whisper.

"Where . . . where am I?"

Arfar grasped him roughly by the shoulder and straightened him up. "You are here!" he fairly snarled at him. "In front of *me!*" As Thekus looked at him unflinchingly he demanded: "What about Belubal?"

There was the question again. So far all Thekus knew was that Belubal was an Akon name. Larry Randall's investigation hadn't uncovered anything more. Was it possible to get somewhere with the mere knowledge of the origin of a name? Ron bent forward and gave Meech an instruction in positronic program language. Meech responded at once.

On the viewscreen, Thekus laughed quietly. "Belubal the Akon," he said thoughtfully as though just now remembering the name. "*That* person!" he added scornfully.

"He is one of our most important men!" shouted Arfar angrily. "If we didn't have *him* ..."

Nobody found out what would happen if the plotters did not have the Akon, Belubal. There was an interruption. In the rear of the big room there was a sound of hasty footsteps. At first all that could be seen on the viewscreen was a vague shadow which quickly took form however. The man who approached came directly into the picture-generating hyper-field that Thekus was radiating. Then he stepped into the light of the arc lamp and Ron recognized him.

It was Carba of Minterol!

Ron had only seen his face once—when the Mokoki had simulated it—but it was a face one seldom forgot, even if only seen in imitation. The features were ascetically fine-chiselled with an unusually high forehead and a hard, forceful-looking chin. He was altogether an Arkonide yet something one wouldn't quite expect in this age of decadence and lassitude.

Arfar was already standing but Melaal also got to his feet when he recognized Carba.

"We have to get out of here," said Carba in alarm. "I have a suspicion that the Terrans are on our heels. For a number of hours now, Thekus' doctors have not been seen at their residence. Perhaps they are agents, after all. We can't take any chances. Anyhow, we have to go to Kusma."

"What ship do we use?" asked Arfar, perplexed.

"That's right, you've left yours at Tourhathon," said Carba. "We'll take mine. Takeoff in 15 minutes, no delays. Bring the prisoner on board—and Minthor, too, if he's still not ambulatory. Pass the word to Palor—and hurry!"

Turning with stiff precision he disappeared back into the darkness. Almost at the same time, Nike Quinto moved also. Bright light fell into the observation chamber as the hatch slid open and he shouted into the control room. "Stand by to take off!"

Hardly any preparations were necessary since the K-3605 had not shut down its engines. Larry Randall came in with the report that nobody on Arkon 1 knew anything about a man called Belubal. Quinto sent him right back to the telecom and told him to run a check on a world named Kusma.

While Larry was busy with that task, time passed with agonizing slowness. Meech Hannigan was the only one who had something to do. He followed the route taken by Thekus and his captors. He discovered that there was a direct and therefore illegal passage from the storage shed to the spaceport. Thekus was shoved on board an aircar and within a few moments it was flying across the landingfield.

Meech soon found out that the craft's destination was a single ship which stood alone in an empty area of the port.

He called the colonel. In response to a program command, Thekus had extended his picture-generating hyper-field so that it surrounded the aircar with a minimum of distortion from the fuselage. In the glare of the night lights the large spaceport area was clearly visible. The coloured position lights of a ship appeared in the distance. Nike Quinto tried to estimate its size.

"Spherical hull," he said, nothing more.

10 minutes after receiving his latest assignment, Larry Randall came back from the telecom. "Not a thing, sir," he reported. "The world called Kusma is unknown."

Quinto glared at him in some surprise. "Unknown, you say? Who did you talk to?"

"With the Emperor himself. He seems to be very interested in our operation. Over his private direct line to the former robot Regent, he asked for a readout from the big positronic memory banks. Even there he found no registration of the name Kusma. There's a planet called Korzama but that was the only..."

Nike Quinto waved a hand. "No, I need Kusma, not any other," he declared. In a few moments he got over his impatience. "Well, it doesn't matter. After all, we have Carba and his cohorts right under our noses. All we have to do is chase after them."

Ron knew that this was an understatement. The Arkonide ship was only equipped with the usual type of transition propulsion, which meant that it would have to make "jumps" through hyperspace to reach its destination. On the other hand the K-3605 operated on the basis of the modern linear spacedrive system which enabled it to move faster than light through a metastable semispace zone without losing sight of the target destination in the Einstein continuum. There were 2 different kinds of motion. If the K-3605 were to pursue the Arkonide ship it would be like a man on foot chasing another man who was swimming under water. Undoubtedly the man on dry land would be able to move much faster than the swimmer—but the problem would be to figure out what direction the underwater quarry was taking.

Of course the actual situation wasn't quite that bad. Upon entering and emerging from hyperspace the Arkonide would leave signs of his passage. Just as a jet aircraft produced disturbances when breaking through the sound barrier, this kind of flight caused a warp shock in the normal time-space structure which could be detected with suitable instruments. That is, not only could the warp shocks alone be traced but also their distance and direction.

So that wasn't the most difficult part. A little more problematical was the fact that the K-3605 had been deprived of certain equipment in order to make room for the modern propulsion system. The ship's positronics no longer needed to calculate complex hypertransition coördinates so the nav-computer section was going to run into difficulties with the conversion of the tracking data into usable linear-drive calculations—or at least the process might not be fast enough.

Ron was still immersed in such worries when the intercom speaker crackled suddenly and Meech Hannigan's calm voice announced: "Enemy ship has taken off at high speed."

* * * *

The K-3605 followed a half hour later.

This was not just a matter of course calculations. Carba could have left a spy behind him in order to see how closely the Terrans might be following on his heels. But there was heavy traffic at the Farthor spaceport and quite a number of vessels had taken off after the Arkonide's departure. However they had taken off prior to the K-3605 so that if there were actually a spy in the area he wouldn't have much of a basis for any suspicion.

Nor was any great show of acceleration permissible. The K-3605's propulsion system was superior to that of the Arkonides but there was not much sense in making it a tight race through space at the outset when it was necessary to wait anyway for the first transition signal so that a directional clue could be picked up.

The signal came 25 minutes after the enemy had taken off. It took the K-3605's computer another 5 minutes to process the registered data in terms of location and direction. It was then that Nike Quinto had given the order to start. As a precaution he had parked the K-3605 outside the regular line of main traffic so that no special takeoff permission would be necessary. The Corvette took off into the night sky at a modest rate of acceleration in order not to startle the traffic-control personnel at Farthor. Minutes later Arkon's brilliant sun rose above the horizon.

Nike Quinto gave a command to the ship's positronicon to put them on course. The warp shock given out by the Arkonide ship at the start of its transition indicated the route to be followed. The fact that the second transition had not yet been registered meant that the hyperjump was in excess of 10,000 light-years.

Using its conventional spacedrive, the K-3605 had already put 100,000 km between itself and Arkon 2 when the 2d signal was received. It was fainter because of the greater distance. The nav-computer required 15 minutes to process it this time, which was not surprising considering the circumstances. The location fix was fairly in line with the course the Corvette had taken after the first warp shock reception. After making a final course correction, Nike Quinto switched over to the Kalup generator. The small Terran ship was enveloped in a 6th-dimensional field which built a "bubble" of metastable semispace around its hull. The K-3605 raced along within this "hole in space". After only a few seconds their speed away from Arkon was defying all laws of the 4th-dimensional continuum.

Nevertheless Quinto was concerned. Linear spacedrive compressed vast galactic distances into mere cat jumps but even that required finite time. And Nike didn't know how much time he had.

As it was, this particular "kitty jump" was almost 45000 light-years in extent.

* * * *

In little more than 11 hours the K-3605 covered the tremendous distance. When Quinto finally shut off the Kalup and the semispace bubble around the ship collapsed, the part of space they found themselves in was devoid of stars and eerie in its unusual darkness.

During the flight the positronics had worked out the exact location of this sector of the void. The K-3605 was out on the edge of the galaxy, almost the whole diameter of the Milky Way removed from Terra. The region that Carba and his followers had chosen for their destination lay between 2 arms of the galactic spiral. Here the material density was only slightly greater than that of the yawning gulf between the island universes.

Meanwhile no new signals had been picked up, so they knew the Arkonides must be relatively close by. Quinto put the tracking sensors to work but the first object that was detected on the screen was not a spaceship. It was an energy source of the first magnitude.

A sun!

It was 15 light-hours distant from the K-3605. Although its radiations were tremendously obvious to the sensor equipment, the human eye would still not have been able to see it unless one knew in what direction to look.

The detectors registered another large body. Ten minutes later it was determined that it revolved around the sun at a constant distance.

A planet! Probably it was Kusma.

There was nothing to be seen of the Arkonide ship. The overriding presence of the sun and its planet made it impossible to discover such a relatively tiny object at this distance. Quinto decided to reduce the distance between the K-3605 and this peculiar solar system without delay.

* * * *

Ron Landry felt a cold shudder run through him. He was not accustomed to seeing what was revealed to him now on the large panob screen. On opposite sides of the viewscreen 2 dimly-glowing nebulous veils seemed to reach out into endless distances. They were spiral arms of the Milky Way, stretching away into depths of the outer vastness. They were almost lost to sight where they appeared to join each other in the western sector of the screen. The small nebulous object there that looked like a little knot was so dim that it might have been an illusion yet he knew it was the tremendous mass of the galaxy.

How standards changed, he thought. One day men would travel as freely back and forth between the galaxies as they did now between the stars of their home universe. And they would think no more of the aspect of the starless void out there than they did now of normal space while travelling between various solar systems.

He was jarred out of his speculations by the appearance of an orange-red eye in the north sector of the panob screen—the sun of Kusma. It was still just a barely discernible disc that one could look at directly without discomfort. The K-3605 was still 1 light-hour away from it.

On the green-glowing tracking screen a small blip had appeared. The indicator had automatically blocked out the sun and its planet, so the blip was not caused by either one of them. It had to be the Arkonide ship. Ron followed its course attentively. If there had been any doubt before that this god forsaken system between the spiral arms was Carba's destination, that doubt was eliminated now. The

little positronic computer had not erred. The Arkonide ship had already landed on Kusma and was now heading home.

Ron made calculations which projected the present course of the enemy ship and then compared the trajectory with that of the K-3605. At the point of nearest approach the 2 vessels would not be more than 800,000 km apart. If Thekus were still on board the other ship, the instruments would be able to detect him.

Ron glanced briefly toward the door behind which Meech Hannigan was still wearily tracing numbers across the scales of his indicators. Nike, Larry and Lofty were in their bunks asleep. The blip on the green raster became brighter and neared the centre of the scanning screen.

The Corvette was moving under protection of an anti-tracking screen. If the Arkonides were equipped with normal detector devices they would not be able to spot the Terran ship. Ron wasn't too concerned about such a possibility at present. As long as they were still out here in free space and were remotely situated from any ground stations, they were fairly safe from detection. Only when they began to descend toward Kusma itself would there be any danger. No anti-tracking screen could conceal a spaceship from the powerful modern sensors of a stationary tracking centre on the ground.

Ron made contact with Meech on the intercom. "The Arkonide ship is on its way back from Kusma, Meech," he said. "Keep your eyes open. Our 'friends' may still be on board."

"So far no sign of it, sir," Meech answered immediately.

Ron checked the distance. It was now 1.5 million km or about double the minimum trajectory point. If Thekus were still on board the Arkonide ship they should be able to detect him by now. A few minutes later he was sure that Thekus wasn't there. The 2 ships had passed the minimum point but Meech had received no signals. Of course Ron couldn't tell what might have happened to Carba, Melaal and Arfar but it seemed to him an improbability that they would have only flown clear out to Kusma to deposit Thekus and then take off again.

They *must* be on Kusma. They had sent their ship back because they no longer needed it.

Ron waited impatiently until the Arkonide vessel had vanished beyond the edge of the scanning screen. Then he did what Nike Quinto had ordered him to do: he sent out a coded hypercom signal that would alert the designated units of the Terran Fleet. The Arkonide ship was not to escape. No source of information must be lost. The Terran warships would intercept the enemy vessel at a safe distance from Kusma and place the crew under arrest.

Meanwhile the K-3605 continued to hold its course for Kusma. Slowly, almost in freefall, it approached the orange-coloured sun and its single companion.

* * * *

It seemed unbelievable when the K-3605 came within a million km of Kusma—slightly over 3 light-seconds—without being detected by a ground tracking system. Whoever was down there on Kusma must be asleep.

For some time now Thekus' signals had been coming through perfectly. The picture's the robot transmitted gave a good indication of what a strange world the planet Kusma appeared to be.

Built into his complex body, Thekus carried a special circuit which enabled him to project his picture-generating hyper-field as far away from him as he pleased. He could even transmit a picture of something which was beyond his own optical range and which he was not aware of himself. Thekus served as a focussing point or a lens for the picture-forming field, so to speak, if one were to simplify the operation with a comparison to geometric optics. From the control console on board the K-3605 one could instruct him to virtually send his "visi-field" on excursions and thus bring large areas of Kusma's surface under observation.

After the contact with Thekus had become firmly established, Nike Quinto had done this with him. The pictures he received after that were anything but inspiring. Kusma was not even spherical in shape. It was simply a giant chunk of rock which the sun had captured at some distant past time—a super meteor that had wandered for millions of years through the lonely galactic gulfs until finally it encountered a superior gravitic field and accommodated itself to a stabilized orbit.

Kusma was not massive enough to be able to hold an atmosphere. And its sun was not big enough to warm it adequately. Vapours exuded from the rocky surface precipitated immediately as frost. Anything that remained in a gaseous state was swept away into the void. Even at temperatures close to Absolute zero the thermodynamics between solids and gases would have slowly dissipated the frost but new gas continued to exude from the rocks, to sublime, vaporize and be replaced again. There were wide stretches on the surface of Kusma that reflected the orange-red light of the sun in full brilliance.

Kusma was bleak and desolate, a world on which no one would have believed that any intelligent beings had ever landed—that is, if it hadn't been for the gleaming dome in one of the wide crater basins. It rose impressively above the inhospitable ground as a hemisphere that was almost 100 meters high and 200 meters in diameter.

After Thekus had satisfied Nike Quinto's curiosity concerning the surface of the planet, the robot transmitted pictures from the interior of the dome. Nike Quinto had always thought that all intelligent beings, regardless of race or origin, based their technologies on the same universal principles and that anyone with some technical experience would be able to make sense out of the most alien science—but in this case he began to doubt his reason.

The interior of the dome was one tremendous chamber in which just the form and shape of things was confusing in itself. There stood a square box-like structure with a long snout sticking out that looked like the head of a tapir, being slender and slightly curved. There were some other things that looked like conical pillars or towers, with smooth sides that gave not the slightest indication of their purpose. There were serpent-like twisted shapes on the floor and arches spread their legs out in various directions. Fragile, knife-sharp metal sheets rose upward to form precarious-looking spirals 10 meters above the floor.

Thekus was still in the company of Arfar, Melaal—the man of unknown origin—and Carba. Otherwise the dome seemed to be empty. The interior of the dome wasn't furnished for accommodating visitors for any length of time. Ron Landry made a careful note of this. There were no sleeping or cabin arrangements, not even tables or chairs. That is, there were some chair-like objects visible but they seemed to be a part of the bewildering apparatus and apparently nobody cared to take the chance of sitting in them.

Thekus transmitted the conversation that was going on between the 3 conspirators. Carba wanted the opinions of the other two regarding the situation. Arfar felt that they should continue to cross-examine Thekus. Melaal thought they should get under way as soon as possible because in his view Kusma was anything but a safe hideout. When Carba asked him why he had this idea, Melaal merely made a vague gesture with his hands and said that he had an uneasy feeling about the whole thing.

Carba finally agreed with Arfar's suggestion and his vote carried the most weight. The 3 men squatted in a huddle on the floor. They called Thekus to them and then the questioning started again. Landry and Quinto followed it all on the view screen and the speaker. Meech Hannigan still monitored his controls.

Carba maintained his usual reserve and Melaal assumed his previous attitude—disinterested and apparently bored. Arfar asked the questions. "We were talking about Belubal," he began. "What has become of him?"

Thekus gave a slight shrug. "I don't even know who he is.

It was obvious that Arfar struggled to control himself only in deference to the presence of Carba. "Don't hand me that!" he retorted. "On Arkon you stated you knew he was an Akon. So what has happened to Belubal?"

"He's gone," said Thekus.

"We know that—but where?"

Thekus pointed upward. "Up there."

"You mean you—!"

Thekus confessed. "Yes, I did... I didn't like him and he was too dangerous for me."

Ron couldn't help marvelling at the robot. Thekus had given this answer of and by myself. Quinto had not been able to give him any additional information about the Akon, Belubal. Thekus had gone over his own program in the meantime and after searching through his memory bank he had come up with a new tactic. He was playing the role magnificently.

"That's hard to believe," said Arfar in poorly concealed anger. "You kill off a man like Belubal? Before you could have formed the first thought of doing such a thing, Belubal would have known how he stood with you. When did this happen? When we sent Belubal to you to negotiate concerning this station?"

Thekus calmly confirmed this.

"Speak!" shouted Arfar. "How did you do it?"

Thekus was still very casual. "Oh, when he entered my house I shot him."

Arfar stared at him in amazement. "But you didn't even know him at all! You couldn't know who was coming to visit you!"

Thekus gave him a lofty smile. "One has his agents, right? The same as you."

Ron took a deep breath. The situation was getting tricky. As Arfar looked helplessly at his colleagues,

Carba encouraged him with a nod to continue the interrogation. Melaal stood up. He was seen to walk slowly away among the rows of nightmarish machines and disappear into the background. Ron tensed. Melaal was the reticent one who had nevertheless almost trapped Thekus with a key question. What was going on in his mind? Why didn't he want to continue being a participant in the hearing?

* * * *

Melaal had come to a stop in the shadow of one of the large machines. With a confident movement of his hand he found the place on the smooth surface where a small access door had been installed almost invisible. A light pressure of his fingers caused the little hatch cover to open and a dim light came on. Inside the niche was a video intercom. Melaal took up the microphone and waited until the viewscreen brightened. He seemed to be on familiar terms with the man whose face appeared there.

"Is the ship ready for takeoff, Laaseph?" he asked.

"Of course!" replied the other wonderingly.

"Then everybody get on board. We'll probably have to make a mad dash out of here—and very soon.

Laaseph's eyes widened. "Why is that?" he asked curiously.

Melaal waved a hand impatiently. "I haven't got much time, Laaseph. The Terrans are after us. Unfortunately we aren't equipped with top-flight tracking equipment. That's because we always felt too sure of ourselves on Kusma. The Terrans could arrive at any moment. Before they can make a landing we've got to disappear."

"Then why not now?"

"I'll explain it later. Right now I need somebody to activate the security circuits of the dome. I can't take care of it myself because my absence would be noticed."

"What security circuits in particular?"

"Carba and his aide are sitting on the cover hatch of the antigrav shaft. I'm afraid that when trouble hits they'll be too slow to react. I can't wait around until they get the idea of what's going on. The shaft has to be opened on some kind of simple signal. Let's say for example...when I yell 'Terra' the cover will slide open."

Laaseph grimaced. "That's a dirty word around here but it can be so arranged."

"Good—hurry it up. I'm signing off."

He replaced the microphone and the picture faded. He closed the little door and slowly returned to Carba and Arfar. No one could tell from his poker-faced expression what he was thinking.

Which was that now he was sure. The man they were questioning here was not the Lord Admiral Thekus.

He was a robot.

He had been led to this conclusion by a chance observation. While he had been squatting on the floor with the others it had occurred to him that Thekus looked unusually tall. Ordinarily this would not have been too surprising an impression, considering their relative positions, with Thekus standing over them, but in this case there was something too definite about it Melaal had begun to study the admiral carefully and unobtrusively.

The first thing that had attracted his attention was his shoes. Their soles seemed to be unusually thick. It was odd that a man like Thekus who was naturally tall should have to wear thick-soled shoes as if to emphasize his height. It was then that Thekus had shifted his weight from one foot to the other and Melaal noticed that the strong soles bent as though they were made out of thin plastic. In attempting to estimate Thekus' weight he realized he'd have to weigh at least 500 pounds to bend those soles so easily.

Earlier, too, he had become suspicious on Arkon when Thekus slowly began to admit that he knew Arfar. This had been followed by his strange remarks concerning the honour or character of a director-general. Wasn't this the typical minus-zero-plus test used in positronic programming? Of course it was camouflaged but nevertheless still recognizable. And why had Thekus fainted over his question concerning Belubal? What was so terrible about the question that it would make a man lose consciousness? Nothing. Thekus was being controlled remotely. The men behind him didn't know anything about Belubal and they couldn't think of any other way of getting Thekus out of the trap.

This Thekus was a robot.

But Melaal hadn't relied on mere presumptions. It had turned out to be an extra advantage now that he had positioned Carba and Arfar on the deck-plate of the anti-grav shaft. Basically it had been because of his second nature to always have an escape route available. But with Thekus also standing on it the situation took on a new significance. Since the deckplate had a load-factor limit there was a built-in scale for it. This was a safety feature because beneath the plate the shaft fell away into considerable depths. The scale meter was ensconced in a machine cowling just like the intercom that Melaal used later. While he had walked along the row of machines he had secretly opened the scale cover and read the instrument inside. It had registered about 1700 lbs. Allowing about 380 lbs at the most for Carba and Arfar, the remaining 1620 lbs had to be accounted for by the third member.

Thekus.

This had been the proof. *Thekushad* to be a robot.

At first Melaal was frightened although he had already begun to suspect as much. A Terran robot—there could be no doubt that Terrans had built it. It was here inside the control dome on Kusma! The Terrans would have been fools if they had not equipped their creation with instruments which could keep them in continuous contact with it. Probably the Terrans could see and hear at this very moment what was transpiring on Kusma.

They would attack. Of that Melaal was certain. And if he didn't want to endanger their whole operation he must not try to put up any resistance against them. They had to flee!

Melaal's first impulse had been what Laaseph suggested: to leave at once! Fortunately it occurred to him just in time that a hasty flight would alert the Terrans all the more. They would know then that they had been discovered. Perhaps the robot was rigged for detonating and the Terrans would trigger the

explosion if they saw that their plans had gone awry.

No, he could not take such a risk. He had to hold off until such time that the Terrans would be sufficiently distracted by their own actions to not pay too much attention to the robot. That would be the moment of their landing, at the time when they would be trying to get into the dome. In an attack mode they wouldn't be carrying the robot's complete remote-control equipment with them.

So he had to compose himself and be patient.

But at the last moment he wanted to play a trick on them that they would remember for the rest of their lives. Provided, of course, that Carba and Arfar were quick enough to react.

* * * *

Melaal had returned to the two Arkonides. So far their situation hadn't changed. Thekus was still trying to wangle his way through the questions with his tricks. For the second time, Arfar was coming close to losing his patience.

It was at this moment that Meech Hannigan noticed something. No human could have caught the shadowy movement that was visible for the fraction of a second in the background. But a robot's eyes could detect it. A man had moved back there. Therefore the dome station was occupied by more than just the two Arkonides, Melaal and the prisoner. At least there was a 5th man present.

Meech turned and reported his observation in a few terse words. Quinto was alerted. He knew he could rely on Meech's report although neither he nor Ron Landry had seen the movement.

"Activate the *gate* , Sergeant!" he ordered.

Meech depressed a large control key. With an audible snap the last phase of the operation was introduced.

* * * *

From a human standpoint it is difficult to say whether or not a robot can know fear. What series of positronic impulses could be defined as such? And how could one determine the robot's reaction?

One thing, however, was clear: from the moment Meech Hannigan pressed that certain key, Thekus knew that he did not have long to live". A part of his body which had lain dormant until now had been activated. Thekus' memory registers told him that this section of his body had a limited capacity of only a few minutes at full power before it would damage the rest of him. It would go on functioning after that but 5½ minutes was the upper limit of survival for himself as a complete mechanism. After that, Thekus himself would cease to exist.

He noted in one of his memory sectors that it would soon be over with for him.

* * * *

"You won't be able to tell us any more of your lies," said Melaal, mixing into the hearing. "And you won't be able to delay out plans. The day is near when Arkon will be only a wreckage of helpless worlds and when people will be only too happy when we make the offer to bring order out of chaos. We are the new rulers. Because there will no longer be this horrible monster that usurps the rights of Imperators."

Carba and Arfar looked at him in astonishment. Melaal turned his face away from the robot and managed to wink at the other two. He was lucky. The signal caught on.

Carba sighed. "It's really too bad, Admiral," he said, "that you are no longer with us."

* * * *

Nike Quinto had been startled by what he heard.

...this horrible monster that usurps the rights of Imperators."

He didn't take long to realize what this threat meant. "Ye gods!" he exclaimed. "He's talking about destroying the robot Regent!"

Immediately he was silent again. Melaal had been moved to make an incredible revelation. There might be still more.

But there wasn't any. Melaal's interjection had brought the hearing to an end. Carba did ask a few more inconsequential questions, however, which Thekus had no difficulty in answering.

Then Arfar finally turned to Melaal. "What are we still waiting for?" he wanted to know.

Melaal decided on one quick chess move. "We should be hearing from our fleet at any moment," he answered.

* * * *

This was Nike Quinto's cue. They were waiting on Kusma for the arrival of a spacefleet. He deliberated for only a few seconds as to whether he should call in some units of the Terran fleet in order to equalize the forces at least to some extent. But then he quickly decided against it.

Aside from what Thekus had transmitted to him and what had been video-sound recorded of it, he didn't have any proofs against these revolutionaries on Kusma—nothing real red-handed. Calling in a fleet to take them prisoner might create a political incident.

He decided to go it alone. And he didn't want to end his operation without achieving at least one definite result, after having only collected fragments and inferences up until now. *Hehad* to get into that dome, even if a thousand ships tried to stop him! If he hurried he might even get there ahead of the fleet.

He handed over the command of the K-3605 to Larry Randall. Larry was commissioned to keep the ship on instant standby for action, to keep an eye out for the enemy fleet, to observe the activity inside the dome and to keep the "gate" open. Quinto planned to penetrate the dome with Ron, Meech and Lofty. He swiftly sorted out their tasks.

"Landry and Patterson, you will join me in the capture of the 3 conspirators and we'll bring them back on board with us. Meech, you go through the dome and photograph everything you see. Understood?"

The order was confirmed. Quinto handed out the weapons. They were compact but powerful shock-guns which could incapacitate the enemy by paralysing them and rendering them unconscious.

Since Randall had already taken over Meech's position at the controls, he then ordered him to open the gate.

This was the final order that sealed the fate of Thekus.

* * * *

Thekus sensed the rising surge of mighty energies. In a few fractions of a second his plastic-metal body became red hot. The living skin tissue which had given him such an amazingly human appearance could not withstand the temperature and it caught fire. Thekus lost his robotic consciousness. Only the part of his body was working that had previously been inert. It was receiving the tremendous energies being beamed into it from the K-3605, which it converted into the "gate". This formed the exit end of a n invisible channel that led through semispace from the Terran ship into the interior of the dome.

The only functional part left of the once proud robot was that which was technically known as a transmitter.

* * * *

Melaal had been expecting something to happen to the robot but he had not counted on the Terrans using a transmitter. For one precious second he stared at the robot as it started to vaporize. Then he saw the shimmer of the energy arc that marked the presence of the transport field. He knew then that the danger was much greater than he had believed it to be.

He sprang to his feet and with all the strength of his stocky physique he threw himself against the glowing hot frame of the robot. The impact caused the machine thing to stagger. On legs no longer controlled by a brain it stumbled back a few feet and left the deckplate of the antigrav shaft.

This is what Melaal had wanted to accomplish. "*Terra...!*" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

Laaseph was well prepared. Melaal had hardly closed his mouth again before the shaft cover began to move under him. Carba and Arfar still sat there as if paralysed and didn't know what was going on around them. The cover plate lowered a few inches and then started to slide to one side. Melaal jumped to Carba and gave him a powerful shove. Carba let out a cry of fright as he fell into the darkness below. But he didn't actually fall. Supported by an artificial gravity field he merely drifted slowly downward into the depths.

Arfar didn't need any further invitation. He sprang voluntarily. Melaal was the last to leave the dome. Even as he jumped he looked back at the glowing arc of the energy gate and caught a shadowy movement. The phantom shape of a small fat man with a compact weapon in his hand emerged from the circle of light within a few meters of the lift shaft and became a reality. He looked around in confusion, then turned back as though giving instructions.

It was all that Melaal could see because the hatch closed over him and the brilliant illumination of the antigrav shaft was turned on.

8/ KISMET FOR KUSMA!

Nike Quinto realized that something had gone wrong.

In the place where he had seen in the viewscreen that the 3 conspirators had been only a few seconds before there was now nothing but smooth, empty floor. What remained of the robot was surrounded by the glowing light of the transport field but it had been moved back somewhat from its previous position. Nike thought that when he had come through the gate he had seen a square black hole in the floor but it must have been an illusion. The hyper-fields that made the transport possible produced all sorts of weird effects.

He turned and shouted to the others. "Watch out-this may be a trap!"

He moved into one of the aisles, taking cover next to the looming machinery. Behind him the others moved out into other aisles and they all began to search through the dome. After 15 minutes of hurried searching they knew that the enemy was no longer in the station. Meech Hannigan had also taken part in the search but mainly for another reason. His optical system took pictures of the strange machinery which were registered on film that was pooling through his complex innards.

Quinto came back to the remains of the robot. "So they've thumbed their noses at us," he said bitterly. "Anybody have any idea where they might have gone?"

Ron and Lofty dejectedly shook their heads. Meech remained very quiet while staring at the floor. He looked up after a few seconds.

"Sir, we're standing on some kind of hatch cover," he said. "Underneath is a shaft—about 70 meters deep. Maybe that's the way they went."

Quinto glared at him. "A shaft? Why didn't you say so sooner?"

"Because I was on another assignment, sir."

But nobody was listening to Meech's apology. They were down on their hands and knees and were tapping the floor with the butts of their weapons. Meech was right. When they tapped in an area that was about 4 meters long and wide, the sound was hollow in comparison to the floor surrounding it.

Quinto jumped up. "Hannigan! Shoot this thing apart! Patterson and Landry—stand back!"

Ron and Lofty moved to one side and so did Meech. When he was sure he wasn't standing on the cover he simply pointed at it and fired. A white needle beam sprang from his right index finger and the concentrated energy sliced through the solid material of the hatch. He slowly described a circle with the beam and finally a section 2 meters in diameter broke away and disappeared. With a swiftness they wouldn't have given him credit for, Quinto kneeled down next to the hole and saw the cut-out section fall away slowly into the depths.

"An antigrav shaft!" he announced. "That's where they went!"

When he looked up again his gaze rested a few seconds on Meech. Ron knew what he was thinking. In dangerous situations it was customary to send a robot ahead, in case there was one available. However valuable a robot might be he was still a machine. If he were destroyed, a new one could be built. This was the first rule that was taught to troops who would have robots in their command.

This time, however, Quinto decided against Rule #1 and Ron knew why. Meech had photographed the local installation. He carried within him a photo record of all these unusual machines. It was true that Nike, Ron and Lofty had also made an inspection of the place but they could never describe it as precisely as Meech was able to do. He had become a vital information bank so his life couldn't be gambled with.

"Now listen, men," said Quinto. "I'll be the first to go down there. I'm setting my beamer on fan-out phase so unless they send robots against us they won't be able to jump us so quickly. You three follow me—and try to keep together as much as you can while we are descending."

There was complete silence as Nike swung himself over the edge of the hole.

* * * *

Within a few minutes after Melaal had shouted the word *Terra* in order to open the shaft, he found himself safely on board the spaceship along with the other two Arkonides.

He breathed a sigh of relief. The situation during the past few hours had been much more dangerous than he had previously pictured it to be. But they had made it. Carba, who was at the moment the most important man they had, was now in a place of safety. The crew of the ship greeted him with all the great respect and show of subservience that a member of one of the oldest Arkonide families might expect. This was not surprising because the subordinate officers and crew members knew nothing of the role that Carba intended to play. Even among the staff officers there were few who had an inkling of where Carba was to fit in the great plans which the leaders of the revolution had devised.

Of course Melaal knew. The master plan was a powerful machine. Carba was a part of it. And not just any part. He was like a priceless key element of platinum-plastic material—one without which the machine could not operate. But a part nevertheless. On the other hand those responsible for the revolution stood on the outside and controlled the machine.

So much for Carba. And now, as for the Terrans?

Melaal smiled disdainfully when he thought how well they would be "taken care of". In half an hour, outside of those who had to know, there would be no one to even recall the existence of Kusma and its very unusual station dome. It was too bad that the station had to go, thought Melaal, but there was no other way.

Although no one on board could sense it, the ship set itself in motion. With swiftly increasing speed it glided through a long tunnel, hundreds of km in length, and left the surface of Kusma at a place which could not be observed by the Terran ship.

It was X minus 27 minutes.

* * * *

The shaft ended in a rectangular area from which passages branched out in 8 different directions. Nike Quinto ordered Meech to keep his sensors open for any signs of energy sources. Meech was equipped with "organs" which enabled him to detect radiations emanating from any energy generators using isotopes.

He only needed a few seconds to detect the engines of the ship, which was about 3 km away from their position. Of course he didn't know that the radiation field had to do with a ship specifically. He only sensed the field itself and reported to Quinto accordingly.

"In this direction, you say?" asked Nike. "Let's go!" But as he turned energetically to enter the passage indicated, the robot called after him.

"Please—one moment, sir!"

Quinto halted impatiently. "Alright—what now?"

"Gamma radiations, sir," said Meech curtly.

"So? There are gamma radiations everywhere, Hannigan. Why hold up the show for a thing like that?"

"They come from there, sir," answered Meech, and he pointed to the rock wall to his right. "It's coming through many meters of solid rock but I can still pick it up clearly. It must be a very powerful source."

Quinto became wary. "Can you define it at all?"

Meech was silent for several moments. "Only within certain parameters, sir," he finally answered. "Radioactive material is involved that has a fast rate of decay. The decay constant ranges between 1 and 2 times 10 to the minus 5 per second."

"Convert that—but in your head!" ordered Quinto impatiently.

"Well sir, I'd give it a half-time between 10 and 20 hours."

Quinto returned to the group immediately. "Out of here!" he shouted. "Back to the ship on the double! That's a time bomb!"

* * * *

Melaal had not calculated that one of the Terrans would be a robot. Otherwise he would have connected the bomb to another type of timing device. Normal men were not able to sense the presence of gamma rays from Sodium-24 but a robot could. More than that, he could determine the half-life decay rate and get a pretty good idea of even the actual isotope that was being used.

The technique of using rapidly-deteriorating radioactive elements as triggers for time bombs was well known in the galaxy. There were many methods of using this approach but the simplest one was to use a metallic substance that would turn into another element in the course of its decay. The 2 metals had different specific conductivities and the basic material would thus change its resistance over a time period that could be long or short, according to the half-life rate of the material used.

Sodium-24 had long been the preferred trigger in such setups. It was easily procurable and it was cheap. But the "trigger window" was rather broad and hard to predict. The bomb that Meech had discovered might detonate in 4 days—or in the next few seconds.

As fast as they could go, Nike Quinto and his companions ascended the shaft again. Meech Hannigan was the first to reach the edge of the opening in the hatch cover. He climbed out and turned to help Nike Quinto up. The shimmering circle of the gate still illuminated the burned remains of Thekus. Quinto prepared to cross the threshold into the transmitter. He was almost back to safety now. Just one more step and he would be on board the K-3605, almost 1000,000km distant from Kusma where the fury of the bomb could not reach him.

But that was when Ron Landry suddenly cried out: "Hold it! Lofty Patterson isn't here!"

* * * *

Again it was astonishing how quickly Nike Quinto could react. He had already turned on his wrist transceiver. "Patterson!" he called sharply. "You get up here immediately! That's an order! I forbid you to try any foolishness down there!"

There was a moment of silence, after which Lofty's voice finally came through on the micro-speaker. "You'll have to forgive me, sir, but at the moment I've got some plans of my own. If anybody can find that damn bomb it'll be me. I think Kusma is important enough to us to justify the risk. If I blow it—what have we lost? One old man. Just go to Passa and you'll be able to pick up lots of old coots like me. I can be replaced. However..."

"Knock it off!" yelled Quinto. "You get up here on the double!"

"No, sir—I'm not coming," Lofty answered. "I think I've already found the route to go.

Ron knew that Quinto wouldn't be able to talk him out of it.

"I'm coming down there to grab you by the pants if I have to, Patterson!" yelled Quinto.

But it was Lofty who was angry now. "Forget it, you fool! Just let an old man go about his business. I know what has to be done!"

Quinto's face turned a beet red. He turned about abruptly and stepped to the gate. He spoke once more into his transceiver. "OK, you blockhead—we'll leave the gate open! If you can still make it, come on board as fast as you can!"

With one big step he went across the energy threshold and disappeared before Ron Landry's eyes. Ron followed him reluctantly. He was too much afraid for old Lofty Patterson to be able to reason things out at the moment.

Meech Hannigan the robot brought up the rear.

* * * *

What Lofty had referred to as "the route to go" turned out to be a passage that led approximately in the direction that Meech had indicated as the source-point of the radiation.

Lofty's thought process was simple and logical. He knew that nobody was going to take all the pains to bury a bomb under tons of rock without having easy access to it. This was the only passage that led in the right direction. Thus it was most probable that it would take him to where the bomb was concealed.

The corridor was dark but Lofty had turned on his pocket lamp to see where he was going. At the moment he was not yet conscious of the danger that lurked ahead of him. The concept of Kusma turning into a bursting sun somewhere in the next few hours—and himself along with it if he didn't succeed—was something that had not yet penetrated his consciousness.

He was looking for something. That was all he was thinking of at the moment.

The passage made a slight turn. Lofty rounded the curve and proceeded a few more steps before coming suddenly to a halt. His echoing footsteps had started to sound different. He raised the beam of his lamp upward. Although it wasn't especially powerful at least so far he had been able to light up the ceiling with it—but now the ceiling had disappeared. That is, it would now have to be more than 10 meters above him.

It was the same with the walls on either side of him. They, too, were beyond the reach of his hand light. He found himself in a wide, high-ceilinged chamber. He played the beam across the area in front of him and suddenly stopped when he saw a bright reflection. A few meters ahead of him a cylindrical piece of gleaming metal towered upward. He played the beam upward as far as it could reach. Struts or braces were attached to the cylindrical piece in at least a dozen places. When he turned his lamp to, the right and the left he saw that there were still other metallic uprights.

The whole thing was a framework of some kind. Lofty had an idea of what it was but couldn't yet tell for sure. The beam of the lamp didn't quite reach far enough.

He went a few steps farther, ducked under several cross-braces and finally stood inside the big frame. He raised the flashlight beam upward a second time. Now he could see that 8 cross-struts came inward from the 4 outer uprights and formed a kind of nest in the centre. It was not a bad metaphor, he thought. Because in that nest was an egg. Of course it was a giant one, no less than 2 meters long. Its shell consisted of a dull-gleaming metal plastic. Lofty held his beam on it for some time. The outer shell of the thing did not reveal any uneven areas. Anyone who was uninformed about it might think, upon entering the chamber, that it was merely some kind of weighty object that was being given a stable platform by the frame structure around it.

Lofty knew better. This was the bomb.

* * * *

It was very simple to climb up the braces. Of course he had to use both hands and was forced to pocket his flashlight in the process. That left him in pitch darkness where he couldn't see a thing but he had fixed the position of the nest fairly well in his mind. All he had to do from time to time was to brace himself on the cross-struts and take a quick look around with the flashlight. This was enough to guide him.

Gradually the awareness began to seep into his consciousness now of what danger he was in. That strange egg there—at any second it could change into a blast from Hell which would vaporize the rocks around him and spew fire across the surface of the planet, turning Kusma itself into an exploding inferno.

It caused him to stop a moment as he held onto the strut-work and pulled out his lamp again. His finger pressure caused the gas-tube behind the lens to glow. The beam moved along the strut he was on until it found the nest—and the bomb.

How harmless it looked, this treacherous thing!

Suddenly the pressure of fear that had been held back all this time in his subconscious mind like some lurking monster now burst upon him. He bit his lip and sat astride the cross-beam like a horseman, edging centimetre by centimetre toward the waiting menace. The cold metallic brace under him trembled slightly as he progressed, which didn't help his nerves very much. Sweat ran into his eyes and he wiped it away angrily, forcing himself to go on. He finally leaned forward and was able to touch the metal strip around the edge of the "nest" platform. Bracing an arm against it he brought out the light again. The bomb lay directly in front of him. By making a long reach upward he could even touch it with his hand.

He even climbed onto the platform itself and felt around on the outer shell of the contraption. It was smooth and seamless. There was no place where he might have opened it. It was what was called an irreversible bomb. Once the time-trigger device started working, nobody could stop it.

Maybe if he had a high-temperature cutting torch he might be able to do something. But he didn't have one. He could do nothing. He was a fool. All this time he had overlooked the fact that the enemy could have placed a bomb in operation that could no longer be deactivated. After all, he had known that there were such devices.

So all his efforts had been in vain.

* * * *

Now the fear sat on his neck, gripping him in cold claws of terror. He scurried down the framework, falling more than climbing down, and he landed badly, bruising his right foot. Limping and cursing, he hurried along the passage he had just traversed. He was panting heavily by the time he reached the place where the other passages branched off. Above him the antigrav shaft reached into the heights. A dim light came down from above.

Lofty shoved the flashlight into his pocket and moved to the righthand side of the shaft where the synthetic gravity field was reversed and stronger than the asteroid's natural attraction. When he shoved off his foot pained him, and since he had pushed harder with his left leg than with the right he went through a series of somersaults before he got to the top of the shaft.

Finally he was standing again on solid ground. Before him was the colourful arc of the transmitter. He stepped into the gate. Then something struck him in the face and he was knocked backwards. Fireworks sparkled in front of his eyes. He heard an angry voice—then lost consciousness.

* * * *

When the transmitter signalled that someone had entered the other end of the tube, Nike Quinto stationed himself at the gate on board the K-3605. Just as Lofty appeared in the receiver, Quinto's right arm shot out with full force and his balled fist landed on Patterson's jaw. Lofty didn't have a chance.

"That'll teach you to call me a fool!" he scolded.

Ron didn't find this form of retaliation to be particularly fair but he knew that Nike Quinto was cashing in on a haymaker in place of exerting his prerogative officially. Even though Lofty Patterson was a civilian officer, Nike could bring him before a court martial for insubordination in action. Which seemed to balance the scales, in a way. When Lofty woke up he would be glad to know that he had swapped a court procedure for a sock on the jaw.

The K-3605 picked up speed. It had not yet reached a distance of 200,000 km from Kusma before the tiny planet was converted into a glowing mass of incandescent rock.

2 suns gleamed close to one another in the otherwise starless void between the spiral arms of the galaxy.

The mysterious station dome was no more.

* * * *

The Administrator of the Solar Imperium had come to Arkon. The Emperor received his friend in his private residence within the governmental complex. Perry Rhodan did not conceal the concern he felt for his old friend.

"I've taken a look at Quinto's report," he said, by way of beginning their talk. "I've run a positronic analysis of some of the specific items of observation and I can tell you one thing: I wouldn't want to be in your shoes, Atlan!"

The Emperor smiled at him without turning it into a bitter smirk. "That I can well imagine."

Rhodan continued. "I've been mulling all this over. Your own people are no longer capable of protecting you. On board my ship are a couple of members of the Terran Mutant Corps. They will stay close to you until the danger has passed."

The Emperor raised his brows. "All this trouble for just an old man?"

Rhodan remained serious. "You know it isn't only friendship. Galactic politics are involved. Terra can't afford to have any unrest in the Arkonide Imperium at present. The balance of power must be maintained."

Atlan the Emperor nodded. "I understand. I accept your offer with thanks."

Rhodan took a deep breath. "Good. Then at least we've gotten that far. Has the film report been evaluated, the one our man photographed on Kusma?"

"Yes. The results are not especially encouraging. The master positronic—our erstwhile robot Regent—registered all the pictures. It succeeded in tapping an almost forgotten old memory bank which enabled it to remember the machines that the films depicted. You may mark my word, we know the purpose of those devices. But even the robot Brain doesn't know the principle of their operation. So we wouldn't be able to reconstruct them, and since Kusma has eluded our grip..." He made a gesture of futility with his hands.

"I understand that," said Perry, "but what was their purpose?"

"The activation of organic brains, expansion of their capacity, awakening of the extra brain that every intelligent creature drags around with him uselessly and which is the centre of paramechanical and paranormal faculties."

"The same installation," said Perry, "that processed you about 10,000 years ago—don't you think?"

"Well, yes—at least the equipment must have looked something like that."

"And what was Carba doing there?"

"That we don't know."

"We're going to have to find out," replied Rhodan. He was deliberately emphatic in order to shake his friend out of his incipient lethargy. "Our fleet has captured the Arkonide ship that was used to bring Carba to Kusma. Two of his companions were on board—Minthor and Palor by name—but when they saw they were the target of Terran ships they committed suicide. All our men could do was pick up the corpses so we didn't learn much there. But one thing we do know: people from the Blue System have their fingers in the pie. The Akons are involved in the conspiracy. That makes the situation too critical to allow us to waste a single minute of our efforts."

The Emperor tensed suddenly. "That reminds me of something," he said. "Arkonide police discovered the body of a man whose identification papers bear the name of Harathron Belubal Yazgan. The man is—was—an Akon immigrant. He was found within 10 km of Admiral Thekus' house."

Perry Rhodan smiled. "So it seems that our robot wasn't telling such a lie when he claimed that Thekus had gotten rid of this irksome Akon."

"No, that he did not. There is no doubt that the deceased was shot from the front. I'd like to know how Thekus managed that. Even in death, Belubal doesn't look as if he could have been an easy target."

"We've all been fooled by Thekus," remarked the Administrator. "He was a member of a conspiracy against the ruling order while still retaining his responsible position. How much damage could he have caused if he had failed to see eye to eye with his own people—and if he hadn't become a liability to them?" He stood up with a grim smile.

"Where are you off too in such a hurry, Barbarian?" asked the Emperor.

"I just remembered something," answered Rhodan. "Not far from here one of my officers is waiting—a certain colonel. He's eating his heart out because he thinks that he and his men have travelled over 80,000 light-years without bringing back even the smell of any success. I have to console him. I have to tell him that he's brought us a far piece down the road."

The tall Terran stopped when the door opened for him. He turned around with a grin and added: "At least I owe him that. If nobody consoles him, his imaginary blood pressure could turn into the real thing!"

DEATH'S DEMAND

[1/ UNKNOWN ASSASSIN](#)

[2/ ENTER DIVISION 3](#)

[3/ THE SUPER DECOY](#)

[4/ A STUDY IN SCARLET](#)

[5/ THE "FACE" OF THE ENEMY](#)

[6/ WHEN THE ROBOT FAINTED](#)

[7/ THE ADMIRAL DIES TWICE](#)

[8/ KISMET FOR KUSMA!](#)

DEATH'S DEMAND

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