

The Giant Brain of Arkon has given the Terrans two hours to clear out—if they fail to comply, it will activate the necessary orders to ensure their obedience. Have Atlan's worst fears become reality? Has the greatest computer ever constructed gone mad? Find out in the newest instalment of the world's longest-running SF serial—

SABOTEURS IN A-1

1/ SITUATION: EXPLOSIVE

A GLINT.

There was a brief glitter in Hoga's Arkonide eyes. Then he smiled with pretended indifference and listened further to the Springer who had arrived 15 minutes ago with important news.

His report covered many crucial items, such as the Emperor Gonozal VIII, the Terran Perry Rhodan and his mutants and even the robot Brain on Arkon 3, as well as the assassination of Admiral Thekus and the underground movement whose prime objective was to destroy the mammoth positronicon. The Springer had also referred to some of Rhodan's mutants who had formed a Security cordon around the threatened Emperor and made it impossible at present to make an assassination attempt on the Arkonide ruler.

"For the moment that's about it, Hoga," the Galactic Trader concluded. "While I was on my way here, the same report went out to Carba."

The Arkonide tensed in surprise. "Over hypercom?" he asked, now obviously concerned.

The Springer was an older man with a time-worn face. He laughed. "of course. The message wasn't even converted to code, except for the text itself. That's why those nosy Terrans will hardly take any notice of it. All they'll pick up from it is ship's orders, freight schedules and landing times of a few spacers. Besides, it wasn't beamed out directly to Carba. It was addressed to Mentho on Archetz. But you seem to be worked up about it."

When Hoga got to his feet his lean figure towered at least a head above the Springer. He placed his hands on the other's shoulders and shook his head. "Jukan, aren't you familiar with the history of the Solar Imperium? Have you forgotten what a ridiculously small world these Terrans started up from and that they only grew big because of *four* technology? Now why were they able to do this? Well, Jukan, do you know?"

"Hoga, that hypercom message to Carba..." The Arkonide interrupted him sharply. "One of the Terrans' many hypercom stations will intercept and examine that dispatch to Mentho on Archetz. They've shown us enough in the past how they operate. They'll take that message and and pick it to pieces; they'll turn it inside out and run it through their computers; it will make them suspicious. They'll dissect that message as if their lives depended on it. In the end they'll uncover what was concealed in the camouflaged wordage."

"By the gods of our ancestors!" cried Jukan, alarmed. "You're making supermen out of these Terrans!"

"I'm doing no such thing but I'm not stupid enough to dig my own grave. Ever since I found out what Perry Rhodan said when the planet Kusma blew up, I've been doubly uneasy."

"So what did the Terran say?" asked Jukan.

Hoga released his grip on the Springer and stared at him thoughtfully. "It was only one sentence but it was a meaningful one. Rhodan said: *The main weapon of humanity is time...*

Jukan laughed.

The younger Arkonide looked at him angrily. "Apparently you haven't gotten the true significance of that remark. The man from our group who heard Rhodan say these words also failed to grasp their real meaning but he had an instinctive feeling that the remark could be important and that's why he reported it to me. Yes, Jukan, so far time has been the chief weapon of the Terrans. We've always given them an extra breather, that extra bit of time they've needed. We've only taken measures against them after they took the step that always put them ahead. As a result we're going to have to make a last-minute move to save what can be saved—that is, if your hypercom message hasn't ruined everything!"

The Springer, who was twice as old as Hoga, reflectively scratched his bearded chin. "I don't hold much with cryptic sayings. I only deal with hard facts. Are we still going to start this operation by passing the word to Solar Intelligence that somebody is planning to blow up the robot Brain on Arkon 3? Hoga, I don't mind telling you I'm not in favour of these sneaky manipulations. In fact I think what's being planned is plain dirty."

"I think so myself," admitted Hoga frankly, and he disregarded Jukan's look of surprise. "I've even tried to suppress this action but I couldn't manage it solo. In fact I now have the assignment to play this information into the hands of Solar Intelligence."

"But without me," Jukan blurted out, expressing his premonitions.

Hoga gave him a friendly smile. "But you know—on Archetz they'd still give a lot to know who was behind the Subbu swindle racket."

Jukan clenched his fists in helpless rage. "You're nothing but dirty blackmailers!" he growled.

Hoga ignored his outburst. "Luklein has been here 3 years on Trum, apparently running the shipping lines to the Ghonna System, but he's actually a Sol Security agent. I figure he'll pay a pretty price for your information. You can keep the money. Do we understand each other?"

The conversation had taken on a sharper tone. The 2 men faced each other stiffly. The actions of the young Arkonide were the more surprising because he showed not the slightest trace of the notorious mental lethargy of his race. His eyes were bright and alert. However, there was a countering gleam in the Springer's eyes. He knew his hands were tied. He had to do what Carba's group told him to do or the Springers on the planet Archetz would find out who had fleeced them out of several hundred millions a year or so ago when the widely ballyhooed Subbu Company turned out to be nothing more than a very clever swindling operation.

7 months ago when Jukan was just starting to enjoy his pilfered millions he was suddenly confronted by

two Arkonides who told him he was a cheat and a swindler and that he could be in a very serious bind within the hour unless he declared himself willing to work for the Arkonide family of Minterol. Jukan had no choice but to say yes to the proposition and from that day forward he had been continuously engaged in work for the House of Minterol.

It didn't take him long to realize that he was actually performing services for a wide-spread and influential resistance group. It had brought the sweat to his brow when this fact became apparent because he knew the laws of Arkon concerning conspiracies. In the 145 paragraphs pertaining to this area of the statutes it was mentioned in 131 places that death was the minimum punishment for such activities! In its more than 15000 years of existence the Arkonide Imperium had always reacted harshly to subversion and in most cases had meted out death to accomplices in any revolutionary action.

Once Jukan's eyes had been opened to the new contaminations he had gotten into there was no turning back, not even when the Arkon admiral Thekus, a member of the Minterol family, had been murdered during an ambassadorial reception hosted by Marshal Julian Tiffloor. The death of the energetic admiral had revealed to Jukan with a brutal clarity that he must be working for a group Of Arkonides who would stop at nothing to reach their goals. In comparison, his giant swindle on the Springer planet of Archetz had been a mere bagatelle, although his method of operation had also been illegal.

And now his own group was about to betray that circle of Arkonide malcontents who were planning to blow up the mammoth Brain on Arkon 3. Hoga had just explained in no uncertain terms that he had been selected as the Judas who was to bring the facts to the right man! In spite of the unscrupulous characteristics which had always distinguished Jukan as a typical Springer, he still had traces of the honour and propriety which is even known among thieves. It went against the grain with him to betray others, no matter what the operation.

Hoga had noted Jukan's hesitation and realized at once what was on the other's mind. The man could be dangerous, he thought coldly. The Springer was not reliable anymore and yet he knew too much. Perhaps he, Hoga, would have to see to it that Jukan would quietly disappear. However, he did not allow his expression to betray his plan.

"Well, Jukan?" he asked with almost casual indifference.

"Who is this Luklein, Hoga?"

The young Arkonide stiffened in some surprise. He had just explained to Jukan that Luklein was an agent of Solar Intelligence yet the Springer still seemed to be uninformed.

Seeing the other's obvious surprise, Jukan explained: "Hoga, you told me what Luklein does but nobody's yet told me if he's a Galactic Trader, an Ekhonide or perhaps a Terran."

"Since when has Sol Security ever put non-Terrans in important positions, Jukan?" retorted Hoga impatiently.

Jukan demonstrated a certain presence of mind. It was well known to him that Solar Intelligence also placed non-Terrans in some vital posts but Hoga didn't seem to know this. And Jukan wasn't about to reveal his own knowledge in this regard. For this reason he pretended to be disconcerted. He stammered a few incoherent sentences, shook his head and after apparently collecting himself he said his piece.

"I've had a bad day today, Hoga. Maybe it's because when coming through Arkon 3 this morning I saw a massive landing of Terran warships. They couldn't have made a bigger manoeuvre if it had been an

invasion!"

Now Hoga's smile was insidious. "Such large fleet activity is to our advantage just now. So let the Terrans stand guard over the giant Brain!" That will keep it out of danger of going up in smoke." Then he stiffly dismissed the Springer with a parting instruction. "In 2 hours the material will be here that you are to sell to Luklein this evening, Jukan. So I will expect you back here in 2 hours."

Again the Trader kept his presence of mind. He did not reveal that he had perceived more behind Hoga's words than the Arkonide had intended for him to know. He nodded with apparent indifference. "Good. That suits me fine. Then I'll have time to eat. If anything important comes up, Hoga, you'll find me in one of the 3 nearest hotels. Otherwise—in 2 hours." With that he departed—but he could feel Hoga's gaze following him. He had to control himself to keep from leaving the room too swiftly.

For the first time in his life he knew what it was like to feel the breath of death on his neck.

When he came outside he was almost blinded by the bright sun shining down from a cloudless sky.

* * * *

The spaceship was of Arkonide design, apparently a DD-class vessel, measuring only 80 meters in diameter. One hour before it had landed in a location that was not suitable for such a manoeuvre but with the help of the antigrav fields the landing had been a smooth one.

It lay between 2 steeply-rising earth slopes and its greyish colour blended excellently with its surroundings. At only 3 km the naked eye might not have been able to detect its presence here but of course any local energy sensor would have spotted it immediately. This was because its antigrav was extraordinarily powerful for a DD-class ship. The repulsion field was kept running in order to hold it close above the yielding soil. But the superpowerful antigrav was not the only unusual feature about the small spaceship: it also had a ring bulge which was strictly unrepresentative of an ordinary DD-class vessel. Apparently it was of very special design.

Shortly after the landing only one man had emerged from the ship. He had been expected because even as the Arkonide came out of the air-lock a glider moved into place at the foot of the small passenger ramp. Slightly stooped with age, he had climbed wordlessly into the waiting hovercraft, nodded silently to the pilot and let himself be transported away.

The glider set him down in the middle of an alien-looking area that might have been a park. The Arkonide got out and turned at once to his right, where he disappeared between some trees which might have reminded a Terran of giant mushrooms. Apparently this wasn't the first time he had been here because he went his way confidently, looking neither to right nor left. After making a number of turns he came to a long plastic structure.

With the same calm confidence the Arkonide entered the building. With hardly a glance at the robot guards he passed through the entrance checkpoint, went to the door at the end of the hall and opened it. The 3 young men inside had apparently been waiting for him because they revealed no surprise when the older man entered and closed the door behind him. Two of them were obviously Ekhonides and the third was an Arkonide.

Taking a seat, the newcomer asked, "Has anything new come in during the last hour concerning Jukan's murder?"

Neither of the two Ekhonides made a move to speak but the young Arkonide answered in a firm tone of voice. "We just received the third report a few minutes ago, Drakont, thanks to an undercover man we have had working a few months now in Luklein's fake company. The Springer, Jukan, was shot by an unknown assassin right while he was looking for Luklein's private residence."

"So it wasn't one of us who did it, Mith?" asked the older one called Drakont.

"Jukan was to have been cancelled out today. Hoga had already made all the preparations when the news of the Springer's death reached him. As soon as he heard about it, he put out the alarm."

Drakont nodded. "I heard it while flying in here. And what was in the other 2 messages, Mith?"

"The first one to follow the news of Jukan's death revealed that Solar Intelligence has been suspecting for some days now that Jukan belonged to Thekus' group. The Terrans are supposed to have had him under surveillance when he died."

"Then maybe the unknown assailant did us a favour?"

"I wouldn't venture to say that," said Mith, "because we don't know who he was. Maybe the assailant and the people behind him knew more about Jukan than we suspect."

Drakont looked at the younger man sharply. "Are you thinking that Jukan could have been a double agent?" he asked. There was an almost threatening note in his voice.

Mith was silent for a moment, as if not wanting to answer the question. However, when he revealed the contents of the third report that had come in, it more or less took the place of an answer. "This morning on Arkon 3 when Jukan changed ships, a passenger got on board behind him and took a seat next to him although there was plenty of room elsewhere. Jukan was supposed to have been under surveillance of G56 and S21 but they've confessed that they were momentarily distracted by the massive landing manoeuvres of the Terran fleet on Arkon 3, so they failed to give the newcomer the usual inspection. Later on Trum, as we know, Jukan was murdered in front of Luklein's private residence—but it was only minutes prior to the actual assassination that the identity of the stranger was discovered during a checkout of the films that were taken at the time of the ship transfer. The assailant was a courier working for the radicals."

Drakont made no comment regarding this unusually alarming piece of news. He seemed more concerned with the fact that the Springer had immediately gotten in touch with the Terran agent Joe Luklein after leaving Hoga. "How was Jukan able to make contact with Luklein?" he asked.

"So far, Hoga and his men haven't been able to determine that. He couldn't dig too deeply into it because the situation on Trum is critical. Solar intelligence has stepped up operations there to a frightening extent. The word is out that the Terran mutants are back in the action. Which has made it necessary for Hoga and his top men to go under 'protective cover.'"

Mith grinned broadly when he used this terminology and even Drakont could not suppress a slight smirk. The two Ekhonides stared at them in surprise and puzzlement but were not enlightened on the subject.

Drakont continued probing into the puzzling murder of the Springer. "Mith, could Jukan's death be an act of revenge on the part of an accomplice?"

Mith, who evidently held an important position in the Thekus faction, shook his head in denial. "No! The Subbu swindle left no enemies in its wake among those who were involved. With Jukan it was apparently a case of honour among thieves. To cheat on another cohort was crime number one. He and his accomplices divided up the very rich haul as they had agreed to. In the short time Hoga had to look into it, he found out that not one of the swindlers left his concealment."

Drakont's face continued to show deep concern. Jukan's case and its accompanying developments had filled him with more alarm than anything else since the Thekus resistance group had been in existence. As a courier between the strongholds of the anarchists, Jukan had become a very important man. During the past few months he had acquired a unique overview of the various resistance groups which was second to none. Although he was not too familiar with the plans he knew where the general headquarters base was located. And he must have also known that Solar Intelligence had been doing everything possible in the past few weeks to find out what world Thekus' nephew had retreated to.

For a few minutes an oppressive silence pervaded the room. But Drakont and Mith occasionally exchanged significant glances. The situation made the Ekhonides feel like unwelcome visitors.

The Ekhonide with the abnormally large hands had clenched his fists. "We might as well leave if we're disturbing you two!" he said angrily.

Drakont answered him coldly. "That's a completely superfluous remark. Why have you taken this long to leave?"

However, Mith wasn't in agreement with this sharp rejoinder. He straightened up quickly. "No—you stay! Drakont doesn't know yet that you are the authors of operation Emperor."

"What?" queried Drakont sharply, staring incredulously at the Ekhonides. "You two came up with that idea?"

"Not only that, Drakont," said Mith with a slight edge to his voice. He pointed to the Ekhonide with the huge hands. "Tro-lugo has an uncle who serves in the Crystal Palace of the Emperor. Without this uncle the plan could not be consummated."

Drakont's features quickly relaxed and he offered a curt apology. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out an impulse beamer. Casually he placed the dangerous weapon on the table before them. "There it is," he said, and fell silent.

The 3 younger men leaned forward and looked at the weapon as though it were the first time they had ever seen a raygun—but no one ventured to pick it up.

"It's still harmless!" Drakont told them with a touch of sarcasm. "Here!" He picked it up and pointed to the safety setting as he smirked at each of them. "A pretty little Terran impulse beamer, don't you think?"

The other three could see nothing pretty about it.

Drakont placed the weapon back on the table. He reached into his other pocket and pulled out a flat, encapsulated instrument case. On its surface were 2 circular areas, each the size of a thumbnail. One was green; the other was fiery red. "This is the remote control. Maximum range, one-thousandth of a

light-second."

"What about the bomb inside the gun?" asked Mith. He had composed himself again but still regarded the impulse blaster distrustfully.

"In a 3-km area it won't leave one stone on top of another. But you don't have to tell that to your uncle, Tro-lugo..."

Tro-lugo turned pale. Now that his uncle's life was actually threatened, it came to him for the first time how monstrous their plans were. With inhuman callousness Drakont had suggested that he sacrifice his uncle in cold blood.

Drakont attempted to calm him down. "Everything has its price, Tro-lugo. Unfortunately the elimination of Gonozal will take a few innocent people down with him in the destruction but we mustn't let that stand in our way. The existence of the Imperium is involved. It is vital for the rightful ruler to take the destiny of the Greater Empire in his hands."

This piece of fervent rhetoric failed to make an impression on the Ekhonide. "I don't see why our plan to get rid of Emperor Gonozal has been changed. The original idea merely involved a demolition charge, so how did this miniature atom bomb come into the picture, Drakont?"

The yellowish eyes of the older Arkonide suddenly gleamed coldly. He leaned toward Tro-lugo and spoke in an icy tone. "Because Carba, the future Emperor, has ordered it! Now if that isn't enough for you, Tro-lugo, must I remind you of what you swore when you joined us?"

Mith had also been regarding the Ekhonide steadily and knew what he must be feeling at this moment. He tried to minimize the harshness of Drakont's words. "Tro-lugo, you know we've all sworn to give our lives to this cause if necessary. When you consider that fact, your uncle's death may not seem to be so terrible."

"But he's not one of us!" objected Tro-lugo.

"Yes he is!" retorted Mith sharply. "He's one of us even if he hasn't sworn the oath. He has declared himself ready to remove the impulse blaster from the holster of this Terran John Marshall and exchange it for this one here on the table. Now am I right or am I wrong?"

"No—that's right but..."

Mith interrupted him. "Has your uncle been on a leave of absence for some weeks now to be trained in the art of lightning-swift weapons switching or has he not?"

"Well, yes..."

"Does your uncle know that this Terran, Marshall, is a thought reader, or doesn't he know it? Does he know that in attempting to arm the Terran with our specially-prepared weapon he will be placing himself in deadly danger or doesn't he?"

"He knows these things, Mith..."

"So what more do you want? A few minutes after the exchange of weapons, Marshall will be standing in front of Gonozal, and with our remote control we will detonate the mini-bomb that will be in the blaster.

But the fate your uncle will suffer then is no different from the one he has declared himself ready to face, in case Marshall detects him at the moment of the switch. In either case he'll be dead. Are you still going to tell me that what I have explained to you goes against logic?"

"But isn't it inhuman to show gratitude to someone for risking his life to help us—by letting him die?"

"If you give me this argument, Tro-lugo, I'll have to remind you that your uncle is willing to murder Gonozal VIII..."

"But Gonozal is an Arkonide who has used the help of the Terrans to make him Emperor over the Greater Empire. This fact alone is enough to justify his death, Mith!"

"I agree, Tro-lugo, but where is the official court of justice that has sentenced Gonozal to death for this crime? We in the Thekus coalition are not yet in power. We may only act in an official capacity when Carba is sitting on the throne and ruling the Arkon Imperium. So we're still in the wrong, where all revolutionaries have had to be—even when fighting for a good cause as we are. And the insurrection must always be atoned for if it fails. A true and honourable revolutionary must be prepared to give his life without hesitation but he must be equally prepared to sacrifice another."

"Well, there still ought to be some way of warning my uncle. After he switches the weapons he should have a chance to get himself to safety, Mith." Tro-lugo the conspirator was now begging for the life of his uncle, to whom he owed everything. The man had become a father image to him and had given him an expensive education.

Drakont had listened in amazement to Mith's clever rebuttal and only realized now how shrewd the young Arkonide was. He came back into the discussion, this time with a note of sympathy in his voice. "Tro-lugo, your uncle must not be warned. And we cannot make any plans for bringing him to safety in a fast air-car. The weapons switch is complicated enough without adding any more factors of risk. Each additional manipulation in the area of the Crystal Palace only creates additional security setups. Too many assassination attempts against Gonozal have been tried already and failed. So your uncle must be sacrificed. If we try to help him we are all endangered. Have you forgotten your 3 children, Tro-lugo?"

Mith was seeing something here that filled him with dismay. He realized that the Ekhonide was only half-heartedly dedicated to their common objective of overthrowing and eliminating Gonozal VIII. He spoke to him now in a conspiratorial tone. "Tro-lugo, I don't think we have to discuss the fate of your uncle any longer. In spite of everything, however, we'll try to find a way to give him a fighting chance if..."

He got no farther because Drakont interrupted angrily. "Why make a promise you can't keep, Mith?"

The young Arkonide stared at Drakont almost with open hostility. The pause between question and answer was one thought too long. The highly charged moment said more plainly than words that the 3 men were now facing each other with 3 different points of view.

Mith clenched his fists. "Drakont, I'm accustomed to keeping my promises and I'll even make it clear to Carba that the pledge I make now will be kept!"

"But it's insanity to try making an illegal approach to even the vicinity of the Crystal Palace with an air-car!" shouted Drakont.

Mith chuckled patronizingly. "When Tro-lugo's uncle reports to the administration of the Crystal Palace that he is returning from his leave, how can he arouse suspicion among the robot guards and the Terrans if he happens to park a fast aircar in the security zone?"

"This John Marshall is a telepath! By the gods of our ancestors, Mith, do you still want to overlook that? In the past few months that mind-reading mutant has kept us on edge continuously and has caused us to move from one hiding place to another. Is it by choice that we're sitting here now on this forsaken planet? And don't forget how clever these Solar agents were in laying a trap for us with that Thekus robot! Even we who knew Thekus most intimately were taken in by their ruse and it goes without saying that Carba only escaped disaster by the skin of his teeth. So now you dare to endanger Operation Emperor with additional risk factors? Mith, you're wrong. Carba will not go for it!"

Mith straightened up stiffly. "I trust Carba much more than I ever did Admiral Thekus, who was too snobbish and aloof."

Drakont was showing signs of weariness. Mith knew what was happening to him. He signalled to the two Ekhonides to leave the room but he got up with them and out into the hall. They left Drakont staring into space.

Mith spoke to Tro-lugo in a tone of slight apprehension. "Are you prepared to leave here in the next half hour and fly to 'Zero' in order to present the case of your uncle to Carba?"

"What ship do I use?"

"The one that Drakont came in."

The Ekhonide nodded.

The other Ekhonide who had not spoken thus far finally asked a question. "Can I go with him, Mith?"

The Arkonide waved a hand in negation. He nodded toward the room where Drakont sat daydreaming. "I can use you here better than Tro-lugo could, Haan. Drakont's conscious will has not regenerated in the past few days. We can thank our gods that at least the House of Minterol has not yet been afflicted by these effects of degeneration. But if Tro-lugo is going to leave in half an hour I have things to do. Tro-lugo, you are not to leave without a message from me to Carba. My report will help you to preserve the life of your uncle on Arkon 1."

"Thank you," said the Ekhonide with a sigh of relief. "When I've made myself ready for the trip ni report back to you, Mith."

When he left he failed to hear Mith's next remark to the other Ekhonide. "Let's hope his arguments don't rub Carba the wrong way."

Haan was thinking of something else. "And let's hope that we'll soon find out who murdered Jukan—and how much he told that Sol agent during his first contact. I have to concentrate on that mysterious assassination."

"Jukan's death is also very much on my mind, Haan. But what can we do from here to get any explanation for it? We're more than 6000 light-years from Trum where Jukan was wiped out. We can do nothing more than wait—and hope the gods of Arkon will not desert us."

"Hm-m..." muttered Haan. "You're always ready with your gods when you want something from them. That's the only time you Arkonides speak of them. I don't know whether or not that's the right way to live but anyway I'll join you in hoping they won't destroy Carba's plan."

* * * *

The hypercom receiver emitted a very short "pip". It would have gone unnoticed by an inexperienced ear but as a communications specialist for the Terran ambassador Julian Tiffloor, Mike Inderwood noticed it.

He calmly swung around in his swivel chair to the vocoder. This was an ultra-modern device which could perform encoding or decoding processes on hypercom messages in a matter of seconds. The "pip" he had just heard over the speaker was no less than a highly compressed pulse-burst message which he'd been expecting for the past 3 hours.

The dispatch came from Venus where a huge positronic brain was located that was second in the galaxy only to the giant Brain on Arkon 3. The vocoder operated soundlessly. The many thousands of relays and registers beneath the case cover were a miracle product of Swoon technology, capable of decoding with incredible precision in a few seconds. By reading the line counter, Sgt. Inderwood could determine the length of the message.

"Galloping galaxies!" he groaned. "That's a whole novel! 418 lines!"

With his right hand he had unconsciously pressed the alert button. This signalled to his 3 colleagues on the floor beneath him to get up to the Com Central on the double. To Inderwood's right the positronic started to work. Having been fed the decoded text of the message, it had started to evaluate its contents while simultaneously depositing it in its memory bank. The first strip of output tape was still warm from the light press as it fell into Inderwood's hands. To Inderwood the positronic symbols were as familiar as handwriting.

Urgent, to the Chief—he read.

The Chief, of course, was Perry Rhodan.

Rhodan was on board his flagship somewhere among the stars of cluster M-13. The only one who knew of the Chief's actual location was Solar Marshal Julian Tiffloor, Terran Ambassador to the Court of Emperor Gonozal VIII on Arkon I. It would have been a simple matter for Sgt. Inderwood to call the Administrator on a certain frequency band but ever since the emergence in the Arkon Imperium of formidable resistance groups intent on overthrowing Atlan, it was only in the highest order of emergency that the Chief could be contacted directly, thus bypassing official channels.

But by the time Inderwood took the third output tape from the receiver tray and read it he had broken into a cold sweat. He activated a switch that established direct contact with Marshal Tiffloor, regardless of his location on Arkon I. The small viewscreen above the vocoder flickered to life and the picture stabilized. Julian Tiffloor appeared there and stared directly at his communications sergeant.

Mike Inderwood did not know whether or not the ambassador was alone. "Marshal," he announced

cautiously, "it's a Q-3." Q-3 was the latest code designation for a top alert condition.

"You may speak, Sergeant," replied Tiffloor.

"Sir, we have a message from the Venusian positronic brain—urgent, to the Chief. The text is 418 lines."

While Inderwood was delivering this information he managed to compose himself again. He did not turn around when he heard the door open behind him and his 3 colleagues stormed into the room.

"Send the message through to me, Sergeant," ordered Ambassador Tiffloor calmly. "I also want to be advised immediately concerning the evaluation results from the computer. Thank you." The screen flickered and the picture vanished.

Inderwood turned to his assistants. "Urgent message for the Chief, men—from the Venus positronic. So get with it! The Marshal doesn't like to be kept waiting."

The men turned to their tasks without any sign of nervousness. There were no superfluous questions. Each technician calmly took his place and fell to work. Once the redhead known as Blackard let out a whistle as he handed Inderwood a long narrow tape strip. It was one of the evaluation outputs. Action zone: Blue System of the Akons. Sub-division: Political reliability of the Ruling Council.

Although Marshal Julian Tiffloor was still busy reading the long hypercom report, the sergeant put through another call to him. "Sir, we have the first preliminary results. Subject: Blue System, Ruling Council. Another sample of their usual love and kisses!" The latter comment was not a part of the information, of course, but the facts that he could so express his private opinion was a demonstration of the close relationship that existed between the ambassador and his staff.

Inderwood held the tape up to the viewscreen so that Tiffloor could read it. The evaluation figures showed a 90.2% probability that the ruling council of Akon was in sympathy with all resistance groups in the Arkon Imperium. There was also an indication that the official neutrality of the Ruling Council would continue as long as Emperor Gonozal VIII remained in power. Probability:

100%! This meant that if Atlan were to be overthrown as Emperor the Ruling Council of the Blue System would break all treaties with Arkon and the Earth.

Within about 10 minutes after reception of the hypercom message the 418 lines of text were completely evaluated by the team, with the help of various positronic devices. In previous centuries such a task would have required an entire staff of Scientists but now a few dozen pieces of ingenious equipment were able to handle the whole thing.

Julian Tiffloor called back. "Inderwood, pulse code the report. It has to go to the Chief in 10 minutes at the latest!"

Mike Inderwood didn't look up from his work. While sorting the various tape strips he answered: "Sir, I'm already in the process. I estimate that once we check it the message can go out in just a few minutes. I'll call to confirm."

"Thanks, Inderwood. How long will the dispatch be?"

"120 to 150 lines. Most of it numbers, sir."

"Good. Send me a copy. This will be classified T-9."

With that, Tiffloor cut off his connection with the Com Central. Inderwood made no comment concerning the ambassador's order to classify the message as a T-9, but Blackard was not as reticent.

"T-8, T-9, T-10! That's all we get nowadays. Nothing but top drawer stuff!"

Just then a clear-text message came in from Solar Intelligence on Arkon 3. In spite of its lack of transmission coding; however, the words were scrambled so that it would have been unintelligible to an enemy station. The unscrambled version, read:

Murder of Galactic Trader Jukan cleared up. Jukan the victim of a mixup. The dead instigator of the Subbu swindle probably was a courier for the Thekus group. Hoga vanished after Jukan's death. He either left the planet or has gone under mental screening by Antis.

Signed: 12374.

Mike Inderwood had listened with only half an ear. The preparation of the dispatch to the Chief was taking all his concentration. He ran the end results through the checkout, during which process the positronics double-checked the logic. It required about ½ second to handle the 123 lines of words and numbers. A green light flashed for clear. Inderwood pressed the transmission button. Instantly the hypercom transmitter sent out the report, pulse-coded and scrambled, on the *Ironduke*'s frequency band.

Mike Inderwood appeared to be very discontented. When Blackard asked him about it he looked up angrily.

"We get the main traffic here in secret and classified messages but has one of them yet come in that contains some actual facts? All we've seen so far is guesswork and presumptions. Our intelligence hasn't yet figured out why Lord Admiral Thekus was killed by his own people. It doesn't know where Thekus' nephew, this Carba character, may be hiding. It doesn't know the size of the Thekus group. And as for the radical bunch who want to destroy Atlan and the robot Brain, our great Solar Intelligence organization is groping completely in the dark. Not even the mutants are making a move. Anarchy seems to be ruling on Arkon!"

Blackard waved off his complaints. "Mike, you've turned into a doom prophet! Just remember the case of Rhodan's son, Thomas Cardif. He even got to be the Administrator and had all the power in his hands while the Chief was being held prisoner somewhere by the Antis. And how did that turn out? That's the way Rhodan is going to handle these revolutionaries. Maybe developments at the moment are even favourable. Maybe this is just the first step in making a ready ship here."

The other 2 men had been listening with interest but even they didn't know what Blackard meant by a "ready ship".

"I'm no politician," said Inderwood, "I'm just a hypercom tech. But I can well imagine that there's going to be still more turmoil in M-13. Then one day Atlan will see himself forced to ask the Solar Imperium for help officially..."

Inderwood had gripped Blackard's shoulder so hard that the latter fell silent. Somewhat uncertainly, he stared at his colleague.

The sergeant asked him in a lower tone: "And then what do you suppose the robot Brain on Arkon 3

will have to say about that—this thing with its impenetrable program? Do you really think it's going to say yes and amen to Atlan's call for help? Do you know what that thing will do? I can tell you that much, Blackard, without being a prophet! That *Thing* will mobilize about 100,000 robot warships against the Solar Imperium! So now you tell me—what will be left of us if those 100,000 ships come charging down on us?"

The 4 men stared at each other in silence.

2/ BOMB BURST!

John Marshall was chief of the Mutant Corps and the best of its telepaths, next to the mousebeaver Pucky. The Solar Imperium's ambassador on Arkon 1, Marshal Julian Tiffloor, watched the mutant as he gathered his papers together and shoved them into his file case. Marshall carefully closed and locked the case because at the moment it contained secret documents which were classified as high as T-9 and T-10.

"John, when are you ever going to bring me some cheerful news?" asked Tiffloor. It was the type of question that was on the lips of many men these days, at least among those who were all current with the cosmo-political situation in M-13.

Marshall's distinctive features were marked with the gravity of the moment as he looked directly at the ambassador. "Tiff, I may be a mind reader but I'm not a prophet. Who can be cheerful about this whole unsettled mess? Certainly none of us in the Corps. If we ever get out of this we'll never be the same."

Only a few men close to Perry Rhodan referred to Marshal Julian Tiffloor as "Tiff". However, the nickname came easily to the chief of the Mutant Corps because both men had been among Rhodan's closest collaborators since the start of the Solar Imperium.

Many long decades ago as a cadet in the Terran academy, Julian Tiffloor had earned his laurels in the course of many almost incredible missions of valour. In the interim he had been on Wanderer a number of times for his cell-shower treatments and now as Solar Marshal he still retained his youthful appearance.

"John, are you going to tell Atlan all the facts, just as you revealed them to me?" he asked.

"I'll tell him everything—including the opinion of the brain trust that the robot Regent's A-1 circuits must be reprogrammed. I don't think that the Emperor will be against this view. What's so funny, Tiff?"

"I'm thinking of our current 'invasion' of Arkon 3. Don't you think that Atlan has already seen what's behind it?"

The tall mutant explained his own views in this regard. "The mass landing of our ships on Arkon 3 is only a precaution. I'll only mention this to the Emperor after I've given him my report. Maybe the warnings from the brain trust will enable him to see for himself that it's absolutely necessary to reprogram the giant Brain's Security circuits. I'll point out the acute danger that the Akons might be able to penetrate the Brain by use of their time machine."

"The Emperor is not likely to ignore these things, John. I wish you success in your meeting with him. Frankly, I'm glad that it's your turn to be the bringer of bad tidings for a change, instead of me. Will we meet again today?"

"Certainly. If nothing unusual interferes, Tiff. I'll see you as soon as I get back from the palace."

* * * *

John Marshall went through the third robot checkpoint passed through the mighty entrance of the Crystal Palace which for many millennia had been the seat of the Emperors of Arkon.

As usual he made his way toward the small antigrav shaft which offered the most direct route to Emperor Gonozal VIII, with only 3 interruptions. Along with ambassador Julian Tiffior, Marshall was the only other person who had unannounced access at any time to Atlan's private chambers in the upper levels of the palace. As chief of the Mutant Corps he had been entrusted with the responsible task of protecting Atlan from assassins. For this purpose he had deployed most of the Corps in and around the Crystal Palace so that the threatened Emperor would be provided with the greatest possible security screen.

But in addition to this all robots in the palace had been reprogrammed. The changeover had been handled in complete secrecy by Rhodan's specialists. Not a single Arkonide in the palace suspected that the automatons would now only take battle commands from the Terrans or that any attack order from an Arkonide would be rejected.

As Marshall approached the narrow lift-shaft he was mentally rehearsing his impending meeting, wondering which piece of news he should start off with when he made his report to Atlan. Thus deeply immersed in thought, he looked neither to his right nor his left, so he failed to notice an Arkon court official who was approaching him from an angle and who would have to collide with him if neither of them yielded the right of way to the other.

The official also seemed to be in deep thought but if Marshall had made use of his paramental faculties at this moment and had read the other man's mind he would have noticed that the Arkonide was making an intense effort to mask his thoughts with meaningless ideas. But Marshall was much too occupied with the task before him. Therefore it came as a shock to suddenly bump into somebody.

An elderly court official was mumbling apologies to him in Arkonide.

"Here now!" he exclaimed when he realised that the man had both arms around him as though trying to maintain his balance.

The courtier apologized again as he stepped back and stood erect. "I should have been paying attention, sir," he said politely. Then he bowed slightly and said in a lower tone, "One should not be so preoccupied with his work."

Marshall had the same thought in mind. He nodded affably. "You're right about that!" he said, and each man continued on his way.

It did not occur to Marshall to turn and look at the official again. If he had done so he might have noticed how swiftly the latter was moving now toward the exit, or he might have detected the man's frenzied mental efforts to keep his thoughts fixed in certain channels.

Marshall stepped into the antigrav shaft and the flowing force field carried him quickly more than 20 storeys into the higher levels of the palace. These this section of the gravitor ended but until only a few days before it could have only been used by Atlan himself. Now since the internal conversions it could be used also by the mutants and the robots. When Marshall emerged from it he was identified by the automatic security control.

But he was already thinking ahead again to his meeting. He had decided to open his report by informing Atlan about the results of investigations in the Blue System. Meanwhile he walked about 20 paces through a narrow corridor to the continuation of the lift-shaft which would take him on this leg another 30 storeys and deposit him in the passages giving access to the top third of the palace.

After covering this section and getting out of the shaft, he prepared to walk a short distance to his final connection. But here he was met by Wuriu Sengu, the "spy" mutant, who was coming from the opposite direction. One would not have guessed by the little man's outward appearance that he possessed unusual paramental gifts and that he was able to "see" through the densest materials.

"Is everything alright, Sengu?" asked Marshall.

It would have been easier for him to read the other's mind but among the telepaths of the Mutant Corps there was an unwritten law that prohibited them from penetrating each other's thoughts except when they were on an active mission. The mutant chief did not consider the security cordon around Atlan to be that kind of an "active mission".

"Everything's in order, John," replied the "seer", and he came to a stop before him.

"Did you come from upstairs?" By "upstairs" Marshall meant the private apartments of Atlan.

"Yes. Atlan is still tearing his hair over the inquisition of court etiquette and protocol. If I were in his shoes I'd have given that irksome protocol chief the gate by now. That slinking Arkonide is a nightmare. I think he'd be telling Allan even how to bend his little finger if he were given the ... "

Marshall laughed. "Wuriu, I can see you haven't got what it takes to be an Emperor."

Wuriu only smirked in reply but as he looked closely at his superior officer there was an almost imperceptible change in him. The amused expression in his eyes vanished. He suddenly grasped Marshall's arm and shouted hoarsely: "John, there's a mini-bomb in your impulse beamer!"

"What!" cried Marshall. But in the next moment the tall, lean mutant chief collected himself in order to take action immediately.

His para-senses shot to maximum sensitivity as he sought in that terrible moment to contact Pucky by telepathy. He happened to know that according to their security plan the mousebeaver must be somewhere in the palace—that is, if the arbitrary rascal hadn't taken a notion to take an extra trip somewhere.

Pucky, come at once! All of us are in grave danger! My location...

Pucky was on the premises. *I know where you are*, he telepathed. *Here I come!*

Even while Marshall was receiving his thought, the air shimmered in front of him and the mousebeaver emerged from nothingness.

He chirped immediately. "You mean that thing there?"

Marshall had the uncanny feeling that there were only fractions of seconds left. Not wishing to waste those seconds he fell back on his paramental faculties. *Take the weapon! Jump away as far as possible, to an uninhabited area. Then drop it fast!*

At the same moment he felt a slight tug at his holster.

Simultaneously Sengu shouted a warning. He had not taken his eyes from the tiny bomb inside the raygun. "The timer is running!" His transmatter vision had enabled him to see the timer activation as the weapon was removed.

But Pucky had already teleported away with the miniature atom bomb.

"He's dropped it!" announced Marshall suddenly. Like the Japanese mutant, he still stood there frozen to the spot.

A brief thought impulse had reached him. It was evidently at the moment when Pucky emerged from his teleport jump and let the booby-trapped weapon fail away from him.

"Where is he now?" asked Wuriu Sengu tensely.

"I've lost contact," Marshall was forced to admit. "He's cut off his thought waves. I just hope he hasn't stuck his neck out too far again!"

* * * *

Pucky's little neck was in fact way out.

He had materialized 4000 metres above the surface of Arkon I and at the same instant he began to fall. But this didn't concern him in the least since he knew the rate of fall of the Crystal Planet. For him this constituted no danger because it was simple for him to "leap" to safety.

Instead of this his thoughts were concentrated on the bomb in his hand, which could explode at any moment. While he fell he looked at the world below him. He couldn't discover a single dwelling place or settlement. 30 km distant a single highway cut straight through a chain of hills.

Then he dropped the infernal machine—but just as he was concentrating on a teleport jump back to his starting point he thought he saw some kind of aircar far below. Yet when he looked again to be sure he saw nothing.

He never found out that there was an aircar down there which was racing at top speed to get away from

the Crystal Palace. Nor could he know that the Arkonide inside it was that same official who had deliberately bumped into Marshall in order to plant the booby trap on him in place of his own weapon.

What he did learn, however, was that the time between his return jump to the palace and the ignition of the miniature atom bomb was a matter of about 10 milliseconds!

When he again emerged from nowhere in front of John Marshall and Wuriu Sengu the micro-macrobomb exploded 30 km away at an altitude of 3800 metres. A miniature sun suddenly appeared in the cloudless sky. With a terrible howling roar it quickly expanded in all directions. The unleashed nuclear forces also struck a certain air vehicle and slammed it against the ground, where it shattered amidst trees and rocks. The heatwave threw a sheath of flames across more than 2km of treetops in the low range of hills.

* * * *

The shockwave had subsided. Under pressure of the raging air masses the vast, cone-shaped Crystal Palace had trembled slightly. After the sirens had automatically come on to give a radiation alarm they had finally sounded an all clear.

Now, a few minutes later, Marshall, Sengu and Pucky were in Atlan's private chambers. The Arkonide had failed to conceal how deeply he was shaken by this further attempt on his life. The attack also emphasized how seriously the Emperor was threatened here on Arkon 1, in spite of all the security measures. The hidden enemy would not give up.

Atlan was standing in front of Marshall and Sengu but meanwhile the mousebeaver had made himself comfortable on Atlan's couch. Just as the latter was about to speak, Pucky interjected a warning. "Atlan," he chirped, "take 3 deep breaths and a couple of knee bends—then think it over. I believe that will be better than what you have in mind."

The Arkonide stared at him in amazement. "You read my thoughts and I wasn't aware of your spying!"

Pucky refused to be disturbed by the sharp note of rebuke in the Emperor's voice. He lolled on the couch and finally turned on his side. "Coincidence, Atlan—maybe because you're too mad to think of anything else but your treacherous contemporaries. Forget what's happened. It'll do no good. Anger drains one's potency, you know, and at your age that's especially dangerous . . . "

The disrespectful mousebeaver got only this far before John Marshall interrupted him sharply. "Lt. Puck, do I have to discipline you again and call the Chief?"

Pucky revealed his single incisor tooth. The mousebeaver was laughing at Marshall's words and his warning. He was not in the least impressed by the prospect of being reported to Rhodan. He made a grand gesture of rejection and then proceeded to ignore him.

But he appealed to the Emperor again. "Atlan, will you permit me to say something more? And if so, will you see to it that I am not interrupted?"

John Marshall gasped for air. Wuriu Sengu signalled the mousebeaver urgently, trying to tell him to keep

his mouth shut.

Only Atlan observed the cheeky mousebeaver with interest. "You're asking a lot of me, aren't you, Pucky?"

"So I'll give you a good tip in exchange," the little fellow dared to reply. There was a roguish glint in his big mousy eyes.

"Alright," answered the Arkonide ruler, "I accept your conditions."

At once the mousebeaver sat up and chirped in his high-pitched voice: "If I were the Emperor, Atlan, I'd move out of here in a hurry—and I'd go directly to the right place! I'd set up housekeeping *inside* the robot Brain on Arkon 3. From there you'd be in the best position to keep an eye on everything. And above all you'd be the safest there."

Marshall drew a quick breath when he heard Pucky's suggestion but when Atlan hesitated to answer the mousebeaver continued. "Arkonide, after all you have one thing we haven't got an extra brain. Doesn't it tell you that the games are over with and that these revolutionaries are starting to play for keeps—that they will pay any price to get you out of the way? Here your life isn't worth a plugged knuckle. Just call that jumbo positronicon on Arkon 3 and let it run through some calculations. Have it tell you where you'd have the best chance for survival: here or inside the robot Brain. I'm anxious to know, myself, what kind of answer that big brute will come up with."

Wuriu Sengu was nonplussed. Marshall didn't move or say a word.

"Pucky ... "began Atlan but he was suddenly interrupted.

The telecom's loudspeaker rang out: "Rhodan to Emperor! Urgent! Rhodan to Emperor!"

Atlan turned to the apparatus just as the picture on the screen stabilized and Rhodan's face appeared. The Administrator was speaking from a spaceship. "Admiral, I'm happy to see that you are in the best of health. I see that Marshall is with you. Is there anybody else in the room?"

"Wuriu Sengu and Pucky are also here, my friend," answered the Emperor. "Your mousebeaver has just made a suggestion to me that, if it were known in the Imperium, would sweep me from the throne,"

"Would you tell me, Admiral, what Lt. Puck recommended?"

Pucky was suddenly startled to hear Rhodan refer to him as Lt. Puck. It was an unmistakable sign that the First Administrator of the Solar Imperium was not in agreement with his present comportment.

In a few short sentences Atlan related what Pucky had suggested. Rhodan listened to it with a straight face. When Atlan finished, he remained silent. Pucky was beginning to feel very uncomfortable. Rhodan's silence was far too long. The mousebeaver turned imploringly to John Marshall for help but the latter did not respond.

However, the silence finally became too much for Atlan. "Perry, why don't you speak?" he asked with a tone of insistence.

"Was I really silent that long, Arkonide?" came the answer. "Where is Pucky?"

The little one slipped off the couch and waddled into the field of vision of the camera. "Here I am, Perry!" he chirped while attempting to give a military sound to his voice.

Rhodan's eyes searched him penetratingly from the viewscreen. "Have you had telepathic contact with us, Pucky?"

The mousebeaver drew himself up and answered with a touch of repartée. "Perry, I was a little too busy for that, even if I'd wanted to. Besides, isn't the *Ironduke* a teensy bit too far from Arkon 1?"

"What you're probably trying to say is that the assassins are becoming too active inside the Crystal Palace, isn't that right? But who assigned you to the task of being an adviser to the Emperor?"

Pucky's answer was unique. "My brains, Chief. After all, I'm one of your closest friends and it was you who taught me to always take care of important things first. So I figured I had to give Atlan a tip. Wasn't that a good thing to do, Perry?"

"Very good, as a matter of fact. The reason I have called was to make an urgent recommendation to Admiral Atlan to transfer his government activities to Arkon 3 inside the robot Brain. Atlan, in the last 10 minutes I've been in constant contact with the robot Regent and I've asked it a number of questions.

"The big Brain decisively rejects all our fears concerning the possibility of its being destroyed by any kind of attack from within or without. However, it was willing to consider at least the hypothetical possibility, and it deduced from that the conclusion that its destruction would lead to your overthrow as Emperor. It would also result in the sudden collapse of the Imperium into many thousands of individual sovereign states and petty autocracies.

"In the Brain's opinion, today's attempt against you is an incontrovertible proof that the revolutionaries are only interested in getting you out of the way in order to bring about an automatic handover of governmental powers to the Regent again."

"That's machine logic!" objected the Arkonide. His right hand was resting on Pucky's narrow shoulder. "Rhodan, I don't think Carba is stupid enough to want to get rid of me merely for the privilege of being ruled by a robot positronicon. Since this thing happened today I'm inclined to believe more than ever that Carba may think he's found a way to change the Brain's security circuits in his favour. That's why I suspect that Carba has allied himself with Akon scientists, if not with the *Ruling Council of the Blue System itself*."

Rhodan interrupted with a counter-argument. "That's not a true picture, Atlan. Solar Marshal Mercant has assigned a mutant detail to the task of finding out if the Ruling Council has made any contact with Arkonide conspiracy groups. My mutants had to confirm that the Ruling Council is standing by its agreements with us at the moment—although the government of Akon would immediately break all treaties if you were to be overthrown or otherwise eliminated."

"But such inquiries don't stand in the way of assuming that Carba may be meeting with Akon scientists so that they can find a way to make use of Akon hyper-energy technologies as a means of overpowering the robot Brain. The Akons have demonstrated only too well in the past that they can penetrate the Brain. In order to block such an attempt, I'd like to make the same urgent suggestion that Pucky did: Atlan, transfer your government activities into the Brain on Arkon 3. Should you follow this advice, I'd like to also ask you to convince the Brain that it should permit access to its section A-1 by a team of Terran scientists, so that the security circuits may be amplified. In my opinion it shouldn't be difficult to convince the Brain that an updating and perfection of A-1 is vitally necessary. If you show the Regent

that it can hardly hope to defend itself against Akon transmitters and time machines, it will have to permit non-Arkonides to enter A-1."

"Aha!" exclaimed Atlan. His eyes flashed briefly in sudden comprehension. "Now I see it all. This Terran activity, the mass landings of Terran warships only yesterday on Arkon 3... Perry, when I think of how often you Earthmen have prepared yourselves in advance of any possible event, and when I compare you with my Arkonides, I am driven to despair. Am I actually the Emperor anymore? And is it worth it to save this rotten stellar empire from its long-deserved destruction?"

"Atlan, if I were you I wouldn't talk like that, although I can well understand your feelings. But what do you say to my suggestion to leave Arkon 1 and move to Arkon 3? Within a good hour or so, Arkon time, I'll be landing at the spaceport near the Brain, and I'd like very much to meet you there, Admiral."

Rhodan's voice was wonderfully reassuring. At the moment he relieved Atlan of such a mood of depression that he was inclined not to lift his hand again to help his degenerated race.

The Emperor's face had been like a mask but suddenly his features came to life again. "I've made my decision, Perry," he nodded. "We'll meet on Arkon 3. I'll come there in a robotship, along with your men who have been guarding me here. Friend, I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you Terrans ... and my robots, if some devil hasn't just reprogrammed them again! Thanks for your call, Perry."

From the *Ironduke* the hypercom contact was cut off. Silence pervaded the room. But of course Pucky was the first to break it. "Atlan," he chirped, "what robotship will you use to fly to Arkon 3?"

"We'll go in the *Marc-8* —why?"

"If you don't mind I'd like to suggest that you let me take you to the *Marc-8* by teleportation. That's the safest way to go."

John Marshall spoke up. "Sir, it would be well for you. to accept Pucky's proposal."

Atlan chuckled grimly. "So it's come to this already on the Crystal World! The Emperor has to sneak out of the palace like a thief in the night if he doesn't want to be murdered on the way to the spaceport. It's something I've really never dreamed of."

* * * *

From a distance of 418 km the Ekhonide Tro-lugo activated the timer in Marshall's weapon. The flat little capsule case in his hand concealed a highly refined transmitter. On its cover were 2 shimmering circular areas about the size of a thumbnail.

A few minutes before, Tro-lugo has seemed to be completely emotionless as he stood next to his accomplice, Haan, in the glass-enclosed cockpit of the tourist aircar.

"Contact!" he had said as he pressed the red circle on the capsule case.

Almost instantly Haan had turned the craft sharply in a reversal of its course. With its impulse motors

running almost silently at an altitude of 8000 km, the 4-seater vehicle was flying over the last slopes of a long range of hills. But the 2 men had no eyes for the scenic beauties of the Crystal World. Their gaze was directed behind them into the distance—back where the Crystal Palace was located and where the hated Emperor Gonozal VIII lived and ruled.

Haan turned on the autopilot and looked at the countdown indicator. It was 11 seconds into the cycle. Still 64 seconds, he thought, as he turned to Tro-lugo.

"Why doesn't the bomb go off at once?" he asked. "Why the built-in delay? I've wanted to ask you that all day. Is there any reason for it?"

Without turning, Tro-lugo asked him a counter-question. "How much time is left?"

Haan glanced at the countdown indicator again. "Still 53 seconds."

Tro-lugo nodded. "Mith explained it to me. It has something to do with the size of the atom bomb. The normal igniter could not be used and also the remote control mechanism had an influence on the design. Since the Terran impulse weapons are smaller than Arkonide makes, it was necessary to use a timing fuse with a 75-second delay, Arkon time. But what difference does it make, Haan? Even if Marshall is held up on his way to the Emperor, it won't change the end result. Most of the Crystal Palace will go up in a cloud of smoke. How long now?"

"18 seconds."

At that moment a voice was heard on the radio speaker. In finest Arkonide, they heard: "130!" It was spoken 3 times.

"He made it!" cried Tro-lugo in relief. "So my trip to see Carba wasn't in vain. And I was ready to throw this whole thing."

"What?" asked Haan, although he knew what Tro-lugo was getting at.

"What! What! What!" mocked Tro-lugo in a sudden fit of emotion. "Haan, I can tell you now. I would have become a traitor to Carba if he had insisted that my uncle would have to die in this attack against the Emperor. But now he's just passed the 30-km mark and nothing can happen to him when the bomb destroys the palace. What's the countdown reading?"

"4 seconds ... "

Tro-lugo remained motionless. He calmly held the remote-control case in his hand. The small coloured circles on its cover shimmered faintly. The 4 seconds seemed very long...

"Ye gods of Arkon!" yelled Tro-lugo suddenly—and the control case slipped from his fingers.

Far behind them in the cloudless sky a small, bright sun appeared. In spite of the distance the blast of light was so brilliant that Tro-lugo instinctively threw his hands up in front of his eyes. Since Ham had glanced in the same direction at the last moment, he fared no better. Yet he was the first to be able to see again.

The first thing he saw was the synthetic sun in the distance. It had lost some of its original intensity but had extended itself proportionately. Still gleaming brilliantly, the nuclear ball hung in the sky like a giant

cloud. Its lower edge had already touched the ground and it was beginning slowly to lose its shape.

"Haan, call him!" cried Tro-lugo. "Call him at once!"

Haan wondered if his friend had lost his mind. To use the radio at a time like this would only put the robot patrols on their trail.

"Whom should I call, Tro-lugo?" Haan stared at his co-conspirator with still-smarting eyes.

The other's answer came as a shock. "Nobody, Haan. Not now—it's useless. My uncle would never have been able to escape from that inferno!" He slumped down into the seat next to Haan.

"What? Do you think the bomb exploded near your uncle's flier? Are you saying that the Crystal Palace wasn't hit? But that's crazy! Your uncle even sent the code signal. We also received his signal that he had succeeded in making the weapon switch. By the gods, Tro-lugo, what are you talking about?" By this time Haan had grasped the other by the shoulders, trying to shake him back to his senses.

Tro-lugo did not resist him. With his head hanging dejectedly he said softly: "The light flash was way too high in the sky, Haan. Let loose of me!"

"You're out of your mind! You're pushing this love for your uncle out of proportion! What do you think would happen to you if Carba found out you were ready to betray us all? And to make it worse, you were allowed to go-to Zero!"

"ZeroWorld ... " Tro-lugo laughed bitterly. "Yes, I've been at 'Zero', Haan. If I had arrived an hour later I would have found an empty headquarters. Zero World has long since been moved to another planet-I don't know where. Does that set your mind at ease, Haan?"

The other answered gruffly. "A man who was ready to commit treason cannot ease my mind. Look here, Tro-lugo!" Suddenly there was a note of sharpness in Haan's voice.

When Tro-lugo looked up, he stared into the muzzle of his companion's thermo-beamer. "So that's what it's come to," observed Tro-lugo calmly. "I guess you wouldn't find it hard to shoot me."

Haan was still deliberating when the receiver blared out a ship call: "You will heave to immediately and land at position ER-55," came the metallic voice of a robot. "Do not try to escape. Our guns are aimed at your excursion flier!"

Haan lowered the thermo-gun slowly. Through the rounded cupola dome the 2 men could see a robot police ship. It was only 1 km away. Suddenly they were allies again instead of enemies. Although the robot challenge was merely a routine affair at the moment, it would cease to be such if they discovered the remote-control case and examined its contents.

Haan switched on the auto-landing control and set it for ER-55. Their small tourist craft made a sharp turn to the left and simultaneously began to lose altitude. Close below was a plastic landing area where excursion craft were coming in from all directions, herded by robot-manned police vehicles. There was nothing more for Haan and Tro-lugo to do. The auto-flight controls would take them safely to the ground.

"What do we do with this?" asked Tro-lugo, pointing to the small control case at his feet.

"The best we can do is to hide it and hope they don't inspect us too closely. But we can't destroy it in

any case. You can be sure that robotship has its energy sensors running. If they pick up any strange sources of energy from us they'll get suspicious. I'd like to still have a chance of getting away."

"Hm-m . . ." muttered Tro-lugo as he picked up the case from the floor. The little coloured spots were still faintly glimmering. He suddenly froze, staring at the case. "Haan," he whispered hoarsely, "those robots have picked a spurious energy source from us already! Here—don't you see these lights on the cover—one green and one red? The transmitter inside is still radiating energy. Now we can't even hide this thing. We're cooked! Gonozal's police have caught us!"

"Give me that!" demanded Haan gruffly as he jerked the case out of Tro-lugo's hand. Before inspecting it he took a last quick look below. At the moment they were only 1000 meters above the small landing area and within another minute they would reach the ground.

Since the atomic sun had flashed in the sky, Haan had been more alert and active than Tro-lugo. With remarkable calmness he placed the plastic housing of the device to his ear—then cursed. He had heard the typical faint sound of a transmitter crystal. It was enough to tell him that the gadget was still broadcasting radio impulses.

"We're finished!" he said briefly. "But before Gonozal's police get their clutches on me, I'm cancelling out. I have nothing more to lose."

He threw the special transmitter into a corner. At the same moment a light jolt went through the aircraft. They had landed.

Through the canopy they could see robots drifting through the air toward them. To their right the police craft that had hailed them also landed. The hatch swung open and 5 more robots floated out. Within seconds they had surrounded the excursion flier.

"Come out!" ordered a metallic voice over the speaker.

Tro-lugo's face was blanched when he got up Haan got to his feet a moment later but he was scowling and there was a dangerous gleam in his eyes. He followed closely behind Tro-lugo. Outside, more than a dozen robots were waiting for the two Ekhonides.

This is it, thought Tro-lugo, and he waited for the hypno-beams from the arms of the robot police. But there was no hypnosis and Tro-lugo wasn't expecting a thermo-beam. He knew that Arkon police robots were so programmed that they would not make use of their deadlier weapons except in exceptional emergencies.

But Haan the Ekhonide, who was born on the same world as Tro-lugo in star cluster M-13, was hiding his thermo-beamer close behind his companion's back. While Tro-lugo was still waiting for a hypno-beam he felt a pressure against his spine.

Then everything was over for him.

His sudden death from a thermo-weapon constituted a special emergency for the robot police. Their positronic brains had registered Tro-lugo's death and ordered their motor centres to fire their hypno-guns at maximum intensity—but not one robot fired. The glare shields in their optical systems were activated, momentarily inactivating every robot weapon.

Even as Tro-lugo fell forward in death, Haan made an end to his own life. With his last breath he cursed

Imperator Gonozal VIII.

A short time later when the robots searched the excursion craft, they found the plastic control case in a corner. An hour later the police central on Arkon 1 regretted that the two Ekhonides were dead and could not be questioned.

3/ EXPEDITION: BRAIN OF ARKON

Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant the man who some wags claimed could hear grass growing 1000 light-years away, sat facing Reginald Bell.

Red-haired and stockily built, Bell made an impatient gesture, advertising that he was not in a very good mood. On the other hand Allan D. Mercant seemed to be the picture of composure. But this appearance was deceiving. The Solar Marshal and Chief of Solar Intelligence had just given an agitated report to the effect that in Atlan's more than 10,000 years of life he had never been more endangered than during the past few days and hours.

Bell shouted angrily: 'I don't understand these robot police on Arkon 1! Why didn't they get control of the two Ekhonides with their hypno-guns immediately after they landed?'

"Because the Arkon Imperium is not a bandit state, sir. It is a form of government in which the individual has a maximum of personal freedom," said Mercant calmly.

"But it's idiotic to follow those rules when the situation gets like the one they had on Arkon 1 a few hours ago," raged Bell, who was Rhodan's representative in Terrania during the Administrator's absence. "Mercant, if something similar happened here on Earth and anybody were to throw a private atom bomb to get rid of his opponent, I can promise you..."

"...that we would still not become a police state," interrupted the Solar Marshal with a smirk.

"But those lame-brains are starting to throw bombs!" Bell complained irritably.

Mercant contradicted him. "The A-bomb assassination attempt was carried out by Ekhonides, sir. Carba, the successor to Admiral Thekus, is among the new Arkonides. He has not become lethargic due to the general degeneration. But something else is very disturbing, which is the fact that it was possible for the revolutionaries to take John Marshall's weapon from its holster and exchange it for one that was booby-trapped. Mr. Bell, this incident makes us realize that we are not in a position to absolutely guarantee Atlan's safety; It's my opinion that only one who can do that is the robot Brain on Arkon3."

Bell looked at him closely. "You mean you've abandoned your theory that the Blue System or an influential group of Akons is behind the subversive movements in the Arkon Imperium?"

The Solar Marshal hesitated before answering. "Sir, you're referring to the survey our mutants have made in the Blue System and their monitoring of the thoughts of the members of the Ruling Council. The negative results there are by no-means any proof that Akons are not mixed up in these underground activities. If I may judge from experience I'd say that for this very reason the Akons are probably the

driving force behind it all."

"But you don't have proof, Mercant."

"Bell . . ." The Marshal's voice was almost patronizing. "After all, you've known me since you were a captain in the U.S. Space Force and I was even then the chief of International Intelligence. Since then I've spent over a century and a half in the same job, except that now it's interstellar in scope. In all that time I'd say I've learned my trade pretty well—at least well enough to know that in addition to the new Arkonides and the Ekhonides there is an influential group of Akons working in the underground movements. Actually it should be obvious. The Akons regard it as a vital imperative to achieve the destruction of the Solar Imperium, which they can only do by subjugating the Arkon Imperium. Therefore, eliminating the Emperor is only of secondary importance to them."

"I'll leave *you* to tell him that!" retorted Bell sarcastically.

"I don't have to tell Atlan—he knows it already. Except for a few minor differences of opinion, he sees this development as I do and as the Chief sees it. But I find it uncanny that we can neither discover what planet Thekus' nephew Carba is hiding out on nor find out who is pulling the main strings of this underground movement. The only way to explain the complete failure of our mutants is to assume that the Antis are back in action again. They alone represent a power factor of major proportions. Once they have put their whole strength behind what's going on—and since it's ultimately aimed at us—it's enough to ring a red alert for the Solar Imperium."

Bell studied him thoughtfully. "Mercant, all this time we've been talking about the Thekus group but we haven't mentioned the radicals. How do you know that the A-bomb attempt was initiated by Carba's men instead of by the radicals, whose main goal is to blow up the robot Regent?"

"In my opinion the radicals are merely babbling muddle-head—even naive and harmless-by comparison with the underground movement that is being led by this Carba. Carba has a political objective and a political program. Carba is capable of providing a reconstruction once he has succeeded in overthrowing Atlan. He has a very shrewd and realistic head on him and I'm sure he's handpicked the right men to collaborate with him."

"Mercant, it's a rare occasion when I can't buy what you say—but this I don't know. Does the Chief know your point of view?"

"He's thoroughly familiar with it and he shares it with me. Like myself he's convinced that the only reason Carba had to get rid of his uncle, Thekus, was because the Lord Admiral did not agree to involve Ekhonides, Antis and Akons in the overthrow attempt. Thekus, who was a declared enemy of the Emperor, was first of all an Arkonide patriot. Early in the game he must have foreseen the danger involved for the Arkon Imperium if his underground movement had to fall back on help from the outside. If we can believe the rumours we picked up, this was a point of conflict that caused a big argument within the Thekus group itself, particularly between Thekus and his nephew, when the Admiral found out that Carba had established contact with the Akons. Of course, as I say, sir, these are only rumours picked up by our own Intelligence. But they would seem to explain the motive behind Thekus' death at the hands of his own people. He probably refused to take Akons into his resistance group and he paid for it with his life. Carba stepped into his place and allied himself with the Akons. A proof of that was the episode on Kusma, where Carba and a couple of Akons unfortunately slipped out of our hands."

"Marshal, what's your personal opinion concerning the brain-activating station on that ice planet? Do you think maybe Carba had his extra-brain activated there? Or do you believe that our arrival was in time

to hinder it?"

"It's no use asking such questions, Mr. Bell. We're getting into conjectures and personal opinions. We have so little data about what happened at that station that all I can do at present is throw up my hands. It ..."

He was interrupted by an alarm signal from the main hypercom station. Simultaneously the big viewscreen flicked to life.

When Rhodan's face appeared, his eyes flashed in a way that told Bell that the Chief was in a high state of agitation.

Then Perry Rhodan reported the incredible...

* * * *

Joe Luklein was 32 years old. For 3 years he had been the proprietor of a small fleet of space freighters which plied between the Ghonno System and the planet Trum in M-13. From all outward appearances he ran this business on his own account and at his own risk. In reality, however, he was an agent of Solar Intelligence. The ships registered under his name in the Arkon archives were a part of the Solar merchant fleet although instead of originating in Terran shipyards they had come off the line on the planet of Archetz.

Luklein was just listening to the latest news broadcast in his private office when he heard a familiar crackling sound. He reached out with his right hand to turn on a concealed hypercom set, having suddenly lost interest in news of the Arkon Imperium.

He was surprised to hear music coming from the hypercom speaker, nothing but rhythmical music. "Alright, what gives?" he muttered, shaking his head in bewilderment. He didn't have any deciphering equipment for musical transmissions. It was the first time he had ever heard music on this secret frequency. But he couldn't believe that Solar Intelligence was broadcasting music to sooth the nerves of its active agents in the field.

"Bursting bolides! That's actually an old fashioned fox trot, and it's supposed to be *forme*?"

From moment to moment he became more tense. He had a feeling that he was in danger but he didn't know what direction it was coming from. He got up hastily and went over to a bookshelf where he selected a seldom used volume. It had a very significant title. Page 1945—that was the code key for today, tomorrow and the day after. He was looking at line 18 where the key word was: *momentarily*. He put the book back and stepped over to a small decoding machine that was standard equipment for permanent agent stations. He fed in the words *momentarily* and *music* and waited for the punched-tape strip to pop out of the slot.

He was still receiving light entertainment music on the secret waveband of Solar Intelligence. Although he had learned during his training period on Earth that musical broadcasts could be used for coded messages, he had been told that this method was hardly used anymore.

The punched tape fell into the receiver tray. Joe reached for it curiously and read it.

"Oh-oh!" he muttered, half aloud.

In that moment a secret of Sol Security had been revealed to him. The additional word *music* had triggered it. There was a coded message on the tape: *Tempo 18.6, scrambler frequency 49.2 Hz. plus-minus-plus tempo 2.*

It was data that no enemy agent could have made any sense out of. Even if some unlikely circumstance were to make these values meaningful to an enemy, he would still have floundered on the *plus-minus-plus* part. For Joe Luklein this had a specific meaning but until now he had not known that these values could be multiplied—which the *plus-minus-plus* required of him.

So he set to work again with the decoder machine, which was a miracle product of Terran code specialists and positronics engineers. Not even Arkon had such equipment, which had only been put into use by Solar Intelligence in the past few months. A new punched tape came out of the slot. Joe's face was very tense when he took it over to the hypercom and fed the strip into the feeder guides of the section 5 registers. Meanwhile the loudspeaker had become silent except for a familiar hypercom hum. Luklein went back to his chair in a high state of tension.

He waited. The passing seconds seemed to stretch out endlessly. The speaker was still silent and the tension of suspense was beginning to be agonizing. It was the first time he had known that his hypercom installation could also be used for decoding.

Having been qualified by his talents to be an intelligence agent, Luklein congratulated himself for having made the decision 13 years ago to enlist in the forces of Sol Security. It was just now he realized clearly that he was working for an intelligence organization that was second to none in the galaxy.

Then the loudspeaker crackled and a metallic voice rang out:

Hoga located on planet Trum. Presumed he is presently in Gilkar, a small village near the city of Reni. Population 118. Use of mutants not possible as they are all engaged in other quarters. Success is questionable. Caution: consider possibility of presence of Antis. This is a solo assignment—there are leaks in your shipping office. Hoga must be captured alive. He is an important contact man for the Thekus group. Action effective immediately. Report hourly by tracer tone over 345-J. This assignment highly dangerous. Call your space freighter Ghonno-3 and have it fly to planet Xygt to take on a load trull furs. Confirm reception of your orders. Caution: assignment is highly dangerous. End of message.

Joe Luklein sat stiffly in his chair. The message had ended minutes ago but it was still echoing in his ears: *assignment highly dangerous...* He was breathing heavily from the shock of what he had heard about "leaks" in the shipping office. The message implied that there must be an agent of the opposition among his employees. This had hit him hard but when the headquarters of Solar Intelligence put out such warnings they were usually tied to facts.

He got to his feet again. This was something he couldn't bother with now. He would have to postpone the matter till later, when he came back.

If he came back...

Again he heard the metallic voice in his ears: *assignment highly dangerous*. And he was to look out for

Antis, no less!

He was standing in front of the unpretentious little cabinet that was apparently a mass-produced item of the Trum furniture industry. Actually it was a little piece of Terran workmanship which had been designed for Solar Intelligence. It served to keep its agents' energy weapons out of reach of unauthorized persons.

The unpretentious-looking cabinet was a miniature armoury.

Luklein required 3 minutes to get it open, after which he made his selection carefully. A .38 Colt was included in his armament. It was specially designed to fire diamagnetic plastic projectiles. This material was the only means of penetrating the personal defence screens of the Antis.

In a lower drawer was the special minicom. He set it on 345-J as per his instructions from Terrania. 345-J put out a tracer tone of 2.8 seconds duration.

Luklein laughed grimly. "This looks like a suicide mission," he muttered to himself. Wherewith he replaced his normal mini-transceiver with the special minicom.

One hour later he entered the rooms of his shipping office. No one would have been able to detect that under his clothing he wore the combat suit of Solar Intelligence or that he was concealing 4 energy weapons and the .38 Colt.

As calmly as ever he passed through the outer chamber and said a few words of greeting to his two Trum secretaries. He was about to enter his office when he was stopped by Mergy, a particularly pretty Trum girl.

"Sir, we received a call from planet Xygt in the Orion System a few minutes ago. The Dress Forwarders in Alker are asking if we can take a load of trull furs to the Ghonno System: 8006 tons with a group C freight tariff."

Here again was an example of Solar Intelligence efficiency. At the headquarters in Terrania a few specialists had figured out how long it would take him to prepare for his mission on Trum and then almost to the minute they had calculated when their agent on Xygt should send through his hypercom message to the shipping office.

Luklein put on an excellent show of being very pensive about the matter. "Freight per tariffC, eh? 8006 tons, you say? Not very much. Hm-m ... Mergy, have you checked to see what freighter we could use?"

The pretty secretary nodded eagerly. "I've asked Operations. The *Ghonno-3* is still on the planet Mers, only 6 light-years from Xygt, and 30% of its cargo holds are still open."

"Then the *Ghonno-3* can take over the assignment. Get in touch with the Com Room. Terms as usual ... you know what to do. I'll leave it to you, Mergy. Contract processing by hypercom, et cetera, et cetera ... "

He closed the door of his office behind him. From now on his actions would be guided by the warning from Intelligence HQ: *there are leaks in your shipping office*. When he called Accounting and checked on payment receipts into the various accounts, his questions sounded very routine. On the subject of the planned purchase of a new freighter he used the occasion as an excuse to leave instructions not to make any further payments during the next 2 days.

"Give me Offre in Market Research." And with that his conversation with the Accounting Department was ended.

Joe Luklein was the only Terran member of his operation. All employees were inhabitants of the planet Trum. This race was not a direct offshoot from the Arkonides but had evolved instead from the Ekhonides who were not subject to the degenerative effects which were rampant in the main Empire. The still mentally-active Ekhonides had colonized Trum over 3000 years ago and had soon granted free trading rights to the planet. The Trum System had been an economic failure for the Ekhonides because first of all the planet Trum was located in a stellar economic region where agricultural products were predominant and secondly the indigenous races of the adjacent worlds were always in revolt against Arkon while striving to adapt themselves to the higher culture of the Imperium.

The colonial Ekhonides had built their industries on Trum around the simple needs of the other primitive worlds and had done some good business while the trade balance of the Ekhonide mother worlds had remained relatively passive in spite of all their efforts. This was one of the main reasons Trum had become financially independent in such a hurry.

The Trumanian Offre reported over the videocom.

"Listen, Offre," began Luklein, "I've had a change of mind. Maybe tomorrow I'll order a new freighter or even buy one outright. Extend your market research into the Menthi System. And while you're at it, make sure that the freight capacity of the new ship is 180,000 tons greater than that of the *Ghonno-3*. When will you be ready with your study, Offre?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"That will do. I'll expect your report then, Offre. Thank you!" With that, Luklein cut off the connection but he still watched the viewscreen pensively after Offre's face had vanished.

Did Offre belong to the "other side?" —he asked himself. The warning from Intelligence HQ had disturbed him more than he wanted to admit. From the first moment of that warning he had begun to suspect Offre. A few days ago Offre had been in his office when he had received a call from Jukan, the Galactic Trader, in which the latter had urgently requested to speak to him personally right away. Shortly thereafter, Jukan had been shot.

"But I can't worry about it now," muttered Luklein as he got up and went to the door. In the outer room he gave instructions to his 2 secretaries. "I don't feel very well so I won't be back today. And I don't want to be disturbed. See you tomorrow."

10 minutes later when a man emerged from the private entrance of Joe Luklein's residence he did not have the slightest resemblance to the Terran who lived there. A Springer with a slightly bowed back crossed the street and mingled with the numerous people who thronged through the main thoroughfare. Lost in the stream of pedestrians and vehicles, he sauntered toward the spaceport while checking to see if he were being followed.

He devoted considerable time to this precaution. Only when he was certain that he was not being shadowed, he stopped a taxi and had himself driven to the port. While en route to his goal he made the first use of his special minicom, as he had been instructed.

When the trace beep went out, Solar Intelligence knew that Joe Luklein's commando mission had begun.

* * * *

Over an area of 10,000 square km stretched the greatest positronic computer installation in the galaxy. Thousands of years ago Arkonide scientists had created this giant as they discerned increasing evidence of the fact that the Arkonide race was degenerating visibly and that these frightening changes could not be stopped by any means at their disposal.

Generations of scientists had prepared the preliminary plans for the construction of the robot Brain, checking them again and again to see if any slightest detail had been overlooked, because one day in the future this mammoth device would take the place of the Arkon Imperators and on the basis of its acquired knowledge it would rule the mighty stellar empire.

It had been an almost insurmountable task to which every capable Arkonide was dedicated—an undertaking with millions of difficulties involved. But the still active inhabitants of Arkon, whose ancestors had managed to manoeuvre planets in their orbits, finally achieved the utterly impossible, completing the giant positronic in a single Arkonide generation.

Perry Rhodan and Imperator Gonozal VIII were standing before the telecom on board the *Ironduke*. They had radioed a signal to the mammoth Brain in order to establish contact with it.

Almost instantly the Cöordinator answered. Its bizarre recognition pattern of lines appeared on the screen and at the same time a metallic-sounding voice rang out. The contact signal had informed the giant Brain that Imperator Gonozal VIII was requesting a connection, so the vast positronic addressed itself solely to Atlan

By now Rhodan had sat down next to the Arkonide and the 2 men were alone in his cabin. Previous to this, Rhodan had asked his visitors to leave. When the Arkonide had asked him why, the Administrator had not been able to give a satisfying answer.

"I don't know why I sent them out, Atlan. Just as I don't know why I've had a very uneasy feeling these past few hours. Maybe it's because your position is deteriorating from hour to hour and because developments in the Arkon Imperium are heading irresistibly toward a catastrophe!"

"In which case the situation would also be hopeless for the Solar Imperium—wouldn't you say, Barbarian?"

Atlan's question was not a malicious innuendo. But he had hit the bull's-eye and had expressed in a few words how closely the destiny of the Terran stellar empire was linked to that of the Imperator. If Atlan were to be overthrown, within a few days there would be no Solar Imperium because the treaties would be null and void.

In which case the robot Regent could take over again. Since the colossal think-tank had been built for the purpose of guaranteeing the continuance of the Arkon Imperium, this meant that *that end* would justify the means. The Brain knew nothing of any bonds of friendship, and both honour and compassion were foreign to its thinking processes.

Rhodan had made no response to Atlan's question. but his look was answer enough. And now here was Atlan, the Arkonide who knew 10,000 years of history, attempting to reason with the vast computer creation of his ancestors.

The Brain listened, totally devoid of emotion, while its millions of positronic elements and circuits ran a logic evaluation of Atlan's statements in the same moment in which they were spoken. The objective was to prove to the positronicon that its security circuits in A-1 must be converted and adapted to the new situation, which had been precipitated basically by the discovery of the Blue System.

The Coördinator's metallic voice sounded cold and hard: "An inspection of the security circuits has revealed that there is no reason for changing them!"

Atlan and Rhodan exchanged meaningful glances. Now Rhodan took over the conversation with the giant Brain. "Coördinator, 3 years ago your security section A-1 was not able to prevent the penetration of Akons into your screening terminal. That proves the present unsuitability of A-1."

Again the reply was glacial: "The penetration of Akons into the terminal chamber caused additional safety circuits to be activated, which are capable of averting similar dangers. Therefore manipulations of section A-1 are no longer necessary."

"Coördinator, we Terrans have information concerning an Akon time-converter. I am reminded also of the incident of 3 years ago when Arkon 3 was thrown 15000 years into the past and the entire Imperium was crippled due to the failure of some of your most vital functions. In order to make any repetition of such an occurrence impossible, security section A-1 must be modernized!"

"Not even Emperor Gonozal VIII is permitted to enter section A-1. I am not able to override Rule 18 which my creators programmed into my logic circuits."

Rhodan and the Emperor suddenly held their breaths in amazement. Neither of them could recall ever having heard anything about a Rule 18. Until now they had always believed that in an extreme emergency the giant Brain could allow any and *all* of its sections or rooms to be entered.

"Coördinator," said Atlan, "what is this Rule 18? What does it actually say?"

The positronic intelligence answered without hesitation: "Security section A-1 shall be inaccessible to anyone."

Rhodan took over again. "Does A-1 have its own defence weapons?"

"The question is illogical, Rhodan. A-1 cannot be entered. Therefore armaments are unnecessary."

Atlan and Rhodan had too much experience with the giant Brain to be irritated by its answer. Rhodan drove home another question with deliberate hardness: "Coördinator, must I refer again to the Akon weapon? With the permission of the Emperor, I ask you is security section A-1 capable of counteracting the effects of a time-converter?"

Atlan spoke up immediately: "The question is authorized!"

The Brain's voice rattled in the speaker. "A-1 lies behind a separate honeycomb screen."

This was another shock for Atlan and Rhodan. Was this all that the positronicon could say in response

to the question? It was too much to believe.

Atlan took several deep breaths to compose himself and then said: "Cöordinator, I demand to know whether or not A-1 is protected against the effects of an Akon time converter by virtue of its extra honeycomb screen."

"The answer to that is the fact that A-1 lies behind a separate honeycomb screen."

The 2 men realized that this question could only lead them in circles. It was useless to continue their conversation with the mammoth positronicon. Its refusal to allow a modernization of A-1 was based upon Rule 18, which it had received from its builders, and for that reason it could not even permit access by Atlan himself to its most vital section..

Rhodan cut the connection and the strange line patterns vanished from the viewscreen.

"What now, Perry?" asked Atlan despondently. "Here you've made all your preparations, even with a massive fleet and an army of scientists you've brought along, so that the Brain might be protected against misuse or destruction, and the positronic brute takes refuge behind some provision 18 that you or I never heard of before."

"My friend, if we walk away empty-handed, at least that's how we came in. I just hope that my fears will never be realized—that one day we may be facing a reprogrammed and hostile robot Brain."

"Barbarian, are you still referring to the Akons and their time-converter?"

"Yes, because I'm afraid that the honeycomb screen is no protection against it. From a physical standpoint I just can't see how such a screen can offer any resistance to attacks coming at it through Time. But what's more disturbing is the fact that the Brain obviously isn't able to recognize this danger. While we were talking to it I kept wondering if we were making some kind of error in logic or something but I can't see where."

"Yet when you look at all this from the other side and you consider that the builders of the Brain didn't provide it with the capability of extrapolating this problem, you can't actually blame the positronicon.—What are you laughing about?"

"It's the irony of it all. We're dancing on a thin thread over a boiling crater and now we've gone so far as to close our eyes even to reality! Am I right, Atlan?"

The 2 men studied each other. Then the Arkonide nodded. "Quite right," he admitted. "But now I want to know what's at the core of your uneasiness. Is it the Brain itself, Perry?"

"Yes."

"You mean, that it may turn against me? When did you start to fear this possibility?"

Rhodan leaned back in his chair. "The Brain's obvious lack of logic gave me a jolt, Atlan. In fact, that part was frightening. We only uncovered this invalid logic flow by accident. And now I can see where we made an unforgivable mistake in our conversation with it. We have caused the robot to become suspicious of us. We should have known that A-1 is the biggest taboo you could mention to the Cöordinator. Don't you see? According to that thing's mechanical logic, anybody who seeks to change security circuit A-1 automatically becomes an enemy of the Arkon Imperium!"

A yellowish fire gleamed in the Arkonide's eyes. "In that case, wouldn't the Brain have made an attempt by now to destroy me, Rhodan?" he asked irritably.

"I don't say that the percent of its mistrust would be enough just now to drive it to that extreme. Our mistake was that we came up with the suggestion to modernize A-1. We should have manoeuvred the Brain into approaching us with its own request to update it according to the latest technology. If only we had known about that Rule 18!"

Atlan got up and began to pace back and forth in the cabin. Suddenly he came to a stop in front of Rhodan. "I guess one has to be an Arkonide not to lose his mind at the prospect of having a giant positronicon replace a ruling Emperor!"

"But Arkonides were capable of building such a monster. When they built it Atlan, they were sicker than they realized. That positronicon is the pathological outgrowth of a degenerated race! I wouldn't be surprised if there were a secret circuit in the Brain that could change it back to the Regent in an instant—if its own logic convinced it that you were operating against the interests of the Empire and were endangering its existence.

Atlan laughed bitterly. "Perry, you have a fantastic talent for picturing me as a mere puppet of the Brain! An Emperor who is powerless to act and who must expect at any hour to be executed for high treason! By our ancient gods, Barbarian, the Arkonides who created the Brain must have been a suspicious lot! Again I say—dammit—is it worth lifting a finger for such a people!"

Rhodan calmly replied: "Certainly *It* on Wanderer would not have supplied us with cell activators so that we could give up at the first point in our development when everything is standing on the razor's edge."

Involuntarily Atlan groped for the miracle device on his chest which had given him more than 10,000 years of life. His strained expression relaxed. "Barbarian, if we had had only one Terran for every ten Arkonides, the galaxy would have been ours thousands of years ago!" he blurted out. He was startled by Rhodan's laughter. "It shall be ours, Atlan."

Just then the intercom fairly rattled with an alert signal. "Sir, the robot Brain is sending out an alarm. I'll switch you over!"

Both men tensed. Although neither had ever lost their presence of mind in a thousand tight situations, they stared at each other helplessly. An alarm signal from the robot Brain? Could the Com Room officer of the *Ironduke* have made a mistake.

The viewscreen flamed to life with the familiar line pattern of the positronicon. The metallic voice rang out. The robot Brain was calling for help! It had detected alien intruders in section A-1.

"...Rule 18 not in effect because of critical emergency. Twenty persons will be allowed access to A-1! There are 8 men in there now. They have succeeded in penetrating the honeycomb screen. Security circuit A-1 is in danger!"

"We're coming!" said Rhodan calmly as he got up. He didn't wait to watch the line pattern disappear from the screen. He took a seat behind his desk and pressed a red button on his control panel. It activated alarms in every spaceship that was on the landing field in front of the great energy dome of the mammoth Brain. The ultra-modern auto-switching system in the *Ironduke*'s Com Room provided a simultaneous video connection with all ship commanders.

"Rhodan speaking! Marshall—alert your group. Rendezvous point: dome entrance to the Brain! To special detail of positronic techs—immediate action! All hands on standby. Orders will follow for final roster of commando team. Prof. Crane, do you read me?"

"Crane here, sir!" came a new voice from the speaker. "I read you!"

"Pick out 10 scientists—but I need men who can fight in an emergency.

"Understood, sir," returned Crane.

"The list of names must be in my hands in 3 minutes, Professor!"

"3 minutes, sir ... "

"Marshall!" called Rhodan.

The speaker crackled. It was a sign that the telepath, John Marshall, was already on his way and had just turned on his minicom. "Marshall here, sir!"

"I'll want a total of 8 mutants on the mission, including yourself. Everything is at stake. Do you understand?"

"Understood, sir!" came the answer with military sharpness.

The air in front of Rhodan shimmered briefly as the mousebeaver, Pucky, teleported into view. Normally given to playful tricks, he was now all business and only nodded curtly to Atlan. "Perry—you have any special orders for me?"

Rhodan looked up at him, deliberated swiftly, then shook his head negatively. It was as though he were giving Pucky a signal to be gone.

Rhodan called to the Com Room again. "Connect me with Terrania as fast as you can ... "

The answer was there: "Sir, Terrania standing by!"

"Contact with Reginald Bell!"

"Right away, sir! Only a few more seconds!" replied the Com Chief of the *Ironduke* .

But the few more seconds turned into a minute. Then the viewscreen revealed the faces of both Reginald Bell and Allan D. Mercant.

There was a slight gleam in Rhodan's eyes as he reported to the two of them that the robot Brain was under attack. With telegraphic brevity he explained the altered situation on Arkon 3. "I presume the enemy has gotten into the A-1 section by using an Akon time-converter. If my suspicion is correct, we probably won't be able to do anything against the time-field. But I am personally leading the relief expedition into the Brain. Over and out!"

4/ THE TIME INVADERS

5342 light-years from Arkon on the planet Trum, Joe Luklein arrived in the small settlement of Gilkar where one of Carba's most important men was supposed to be located, according to indications from Solar Intelligence HQ.

For some time now Hoga had been suspected by Intelligence of being a member of the powerful Thekus group. He and his few collaborators on Trum had been under constant observation but so far the proof was lacking which could convict him of conspiracy against the Arkon Imperium.

Although Luklein had put in a request for several telepathic mutants he was forced to accept the fact that no mutants were presently available for this project since in the first place they were assigned to protecting the Emperor and in the second place they were being held in reserve for more important operations.

This is why it had been possible for Hoga to remain a suspect and yet pursue his subversive activities undisturbed. The fact that Solar Intelligence was now claiming that Hoga was one of the top figures in the Thekus combine was a matter of relative indifference to Luklein. He sat in the shade outside the small restaurant and thought about his assignment as he watched a small aircar, engines softly humming, take off for the town.

He had come to Gilkar by the normal route although disguised so well that his friends would not have recognized him. He pensively stirred his cup while cautiously surveying his surroundings.

Although Gilkar was small its provincial atmosphere had attracted wealthy retired people who sought to live out their days there in their widely separated bungalows in purely Arkonide style. There were only 4 houses left at the edge of the small airport—which was the site of the old Gilkar, where a last vestige remained of the simple settlement it had once been.

Joe Luklein didn't look up as a man sat down at his table without saying a word. He continued to stir his refreshment which by now had gotten quite cold. He suddenly had the feeling of being hemmed in on all sides. Pretending to grip his cup absently, he let his elbow slip off the table. The kafok, which was a coffee-like drink, splashed over and spilled onto the stranger's clothes.

Acting somewhat confused, he offered an apology in Interkosmo. Now he was looking directly at the man opposite him, who suddenly sat back and looked angrily at his spoiled suit.

"Does this drink leave spots?" Luklein asked with concern.

"Naturally kafok leaves a stain! Couldn't you be more careful?" retorted the stranger angrily.

"I didn't know I had company—or did I miss the introduction, sir?"

The man was a Trumanian native, somewhere between 40 and 50 years of age. He was still very indignant.

"Can't you speak without that thick accent?" he asked. "I can hardly follow you."

Luklein had the restraint to keep his innocently friendly tone. "I don't speak Arkonide, sir, but can you tell me where in Gilkar I might find Loun Tatanoon, the famous doctor who studied with the Aras?" During this, he made every effort to speak as brokenly as possible.

Loun Tatanoon was not an invented figure. At his transfer point in Renl, as far as time permitted, Luklein had sought to pick up information and had heard that the famous Dr. Tatanoon, who had studied on Aralon, resided here.

"I am Tatanoon!" he heard the other exclaim.

Luklein did not conceal his surprise. He had not expected such a coincidence. He had to quickly scramble together his medical knowledge in order to adjust to the situation, which was none to his liking. "Why, that's wonderful!" he cried out, beaming.

To the consternation of the famous doctor he sought to clean off his saucer with his coatsleeve. While doing so he had the misfortune to knock the cup over and spill the rest of the kafok into Tatanoon's lap. Although Luklein was pleased with this result he concealed it by acting the opposite. As Loun Tatanoon stomped away in high dudgeon, he managed to sound crestfallen and call out further apologies.

He knew he must have presented a pitiable figure and he looked about him on all sides with a helpless and dejected expression. But in the process he was able to see that 2 men at a table behind him got up and whispered something to a third man, after which they left. They disappeared between the slender trees nearby, which only offered shade because they were close together.

This development indicated to Luklein that the 2 men had been observing him, along with the third man who was still at his table. At the same time he recalled the warning from Solar Intelligence: *highly dangerous assignment* .

Suddenly the tavern owner was standing before him. Loun Tatanoon must have already told the proprietor about his terrible Interkosmo because the man spoke to him in this common galactic language. Luklein played his role to the hilt. According to his slang he appeared to be the type who had spent all his life on board the spacers and who only felt at his ease when among his own kind, whereas when on a planet he was miserable wherever he went. This was the impression Luklein tried to give and it seemed to be working.

"Of course I'll pay for the damages," he said, appearing to be intimidated. "I didn't mean to offend the famous doctor—in fact I was on my way to see him. I've gotten 3 days Trum-time of extra leave from the Pitzo Pit." It was an item that could be verified and would be found to be valid.

"Tatanoon refuses to have anything to do with you. As recompense for his soiled clothing he demands payment of a hundred . . . "

"A hundred?!" shouted Luklein. In his feigned agitation he thickened his accent so that it sounded like a thousand.

"The doctor is asking for a hundred, you thick-headed Springer, not a thousand!" The proprietor was now showing an uglier side and his clumsy guest cowered under the unfriendly reprimand.

"That's a lot of money!" Luklein dared to protest, though meekly. He pulled out his sweat-stained purse and produced an Arkon hundred-note.

The owner snatched it from him and then held out his other hand. He practically snared at him. "Pay me for one kafok!"

Luklein complied and gave him the proper coin.

"And now there is no place for you here, Springer!" thundered the innkeeper. With an outstretched arm, he ordered him away.

But he couldn't have done Joe Luklein a greater favour by making such a scene. The agent shuffled slowly away and did not turn around until he was-out of sight beyond a sharp bend in the road. Then he stopped in order to send out another tracer beep over his special minicom: duration, 2.8 seconds, as requested.

It was the 8th such signal since he had already been on the mission for 8 hours.

If the suspicion of Solar Intelligence was correct and Hoga was in one of these bungalows, then Joe Luklein was at his target point.

* * * *

100 meters in front of the marker line of the deadly honeycomb screen, four Terran ground vehicles came to a stop. They were manned by 17 men and a mousebeaver, all of whom were forced to wait now for the Chief and Emperor Gonozal VIII. John Marshall and Prof. Crane had selected this detail from a large group of mutants and scientists.

For the mutants the only thing special about the mission before them was that it involved the giant robot Brain, which had called for help and was apparently in a desperate emergency situation. otherwise the operation was no different than many thousands of other missions they had behind them.

For the scientists, however, it was something else. For them the vast positronicon of Arkon 3 represented *thenon plus ultra* . These top specialists in their own fields were awed by the tremendous scientific achievement of the Arkonides who had created this unprecedented marvel and this was why it was doubly hard for them to imagine that the Brain could be in a situation where it was unable to help itself.

The robot entity was prepared to give access to 20 persons into an area that no human had penetrated since its inception. Professor Crane was faring no better than his colleagues. There was a film of sweat on his brow. He kept turning to look at the *Ironduke* , waiting for the vehicle that was to bring the Chief and Atlan here.

Dr. Vally grasped his shoulder tensely. "Here he comes!" he exclaimed

Guided by a robot, the new vehicle raced toward them and kept on going. It crossed the marker line and stopped abruptly before the entrance to the Brain, beyond which were the only rooms the positronicon would normally permit access to.

An order snapped from speakers in the 4 waiting vehicles: "Follow!"

About one minute later, Rhodan and Atlan were followed by 17 highly qualified scientists and mutants and one mousebeaver into the interior of the Brain. They entered a hall-like chamber. No one said a word. They all watched Rhodan and the Emperor as they stood in the middle of the hall apparently waiting for a message.

And then it came.

The metallically-ringing voice of the positronicon gave precise instructions, indicating a certain location on the floor where everyone in the hall was to stand and wait. "Further directions will follow. That is all!"

The metallic reverberations were still echoing in the chamber when Rhodan's voice sounded out sharply: "The instructions of the Coördinator will be obeyed under all circumstances, with one exception: we are allowed to go against such instructions if our lives are endangered. Please follow us!"

After 30 more paces they reached the place in the hall that the Brain had indicated. Suddenly the floor beneath them slipped to one side. They were gripped in a powerful antigrav field which carried them at a notably high speed into the depths.

Rhodan had been taken by surprise. "Atlan, did you know about this shaft?"

"I'm as astonished as you, Perry."

And that was all that was said. They plunged downward in utter darkness. The walls, of the shaft had no sources of illumination.

Abruptly but not painfully their fall was suddenly broken. They felt the ground under their feet again. In that moment the wall lights flared up and all around them it was as bright as day. Before them was a light-flooded tunnel that seemed to lose itself in the distance.

Again they heard the metallic voice: "Enter tunnel in closed single file. Do not pass beyond red warning light. That is all!"

The tunnel was a tube that was at least 30 meters in diameter, completely circular in cross-section except for a flat strip of floor that was about 3 meters wide. Far ahead they could clearly see the red warning light. Rhodan moved into the tunnel with his men and waited.

Suddenly they were gripped in another antigrav field but this time it operated horizontally. Simultaneously the tunnel lights were extinguished and they were once more plunged into darkness. All they felt was a slight but constant pressure. They had no sense of motion or speed.

Then the illumination was back and they found themselves finally in a domelike chamber. Wherever they looked they saw passages leading away, but each of the corridors was visibly closed by a shimmering energy screen.

Atlan spoke in a low tone to Rhodan. "There are 28 branching passages here."

Rhodan couldn't answer because the Brain spoke again: "Enter the passage with the bright blue energy screen. Any attempt to enter another passage will end in death. That is all!"

"Wait!" cried Rhodan. "Coördinator—who are the strangers in A-1?"

"Aliens, Rhodan. No other information possible."

The Administrator and the Imperator could only stare at each other. They understood each other without words. They were both almost 100% sure that they would find Akons at the end of their journey into the centre of the Brain.

One of the shimmering energy gates in the 28 tunnel entrances began to shine with a bright blue light, which fit the description the Brain had given them. No one had any intention of trying any other entrance. But when Rhodan and Atlan approached the bluish screen and it failed to disappear they stopped abruptly. Behind them there was not even a sound of breathing from the men: 19 commandoes and a mousebeaver fixed their eyes on the blue energy screen, not daring to take another step.

The metallic voice broke into the tense silence: "This bluish defence screen is attuned to your physical frequencies and is not dangerous."

"Blast!" exclaimed Rhodan spontaneously.

Atlan muttered, "*The builders of this thing certainly didn't miss any tricks!*"

He and Rhodan stepped through the blue-shimmering curtain and stood in—void. They were suspended in empty space which lowed dimly with a diffuse light. Only in the distance could they make out something material, which also floated in this emptiness.

Rhodan looked about him. Above him arched a seemingly endless wall, apparently of metal, which could be part of the interior of a sphere of tremendous dimensions. He stood suspended inside the ball, dangling in nothing but air. Wherever he looked there was emptiness and diffuse light. Only directly ahead was that other something—a spherical form that was at the centre of the larger sphere's interior.

He recalled the words that Atlan had just spoken before: the builders of this thing certainly didn't miss any tricks!

One could only marvel at the ingenious way in which the ancient Arkonides had build the giant Brain. The present situation was proof of how well they had secured the vital centres of the positronicon against all foreseeable eventualities. Rhodan recalled that Atlan had counted 28 energy gates in the domelike room behind them. He was fairly certain that within the 10,000 square km area of the vast Brain there were 28 different control centres which were all sealed off like this one and also floating inside giant spheres—held there by incredibly powerful antigrav fields.

Something else he had noticed on his way here: the structure of the Great Cöordinator extended much deeper under the surface than either he or Atlan had previously assumed.

As the others came through the screen there was a chorus of surprised exclamations not unmixed with awe or fear but they were drowned out by the monotonous-sounding voice of the Brain. "Make bodily contact! In 20 seconds you will be taken to A-1."

The 19 men and the mousebeaver had hardly clasped hands before the ball in the distance seemed to hurtle toward them. Within seconds the sphere was so big that the men could only make out a part of its smooth, grey-gleaming surface. Close before them the slightly-curved wall opened like a shutter and gave them access to the interior of the control centre.

"A-1!" sounded the robot voice but so softly now that Atlan and Rhodan could barely hear it.

Again there was solid flooring under their feet. They found themselves in a very long room, the walls of which were covered on both sides with a giddy maze of cables, switches and circuits. On either side of them in front of the positronics panels stood 2 work robots which appeared to have taken no notice of their entrance. They did not move.

"Infra-red control!" exclaimed Dr. Vally. Without waiting for orders he stopped between the 2 robots who had their optics fixed motionlessly on the flickering red lights. They didn't make way for him.

Nor was it necessary. Dr. Vally had read the Arkonide inscription under the warning light. It told him very much. On the spot he turned and looked at Rhodan.

"Sir, this is the *main* control centre!"

"I've already figured as much," replied Rhodan. He turned and called out: "Sengu!" When the mutant came to him he asked: "Where are the aliens now?"

"In the A-1 circuit section, sir!" replied the teleseer without hesitation. "I saw 8 men. They are setting up apparatus of some kind but I can't say what the equipment is for. I've never seen that kind of paraphernalia before."

"Have they posted guards? Robots perhaps?"

"No sir! They seem to feel completely secure. Not one of them even looks up from his work!" Wuriu Sengu sounded as though he were in a trance.

"Do you see ... wait a minute. A-1 circuit section? That's where we are. But you said *they* were in it!"

The others meanwhile were listening to this conversation in breathless suspense.

"The room where the 8 aliens are working represents one giant circuit that's lined up in a number of rows, sir ... that's all I was able to make out so far. But now I see the glow of a transmitter arc! It's ... yes, it is, sir—an Akon transmitter arc! it's unmistakable. From this angle it is located in the rear left corner of the room and it's concealed by a massive wall of circuitry."

"If you see anywhere where one of our teleporters could hide, describe the surroundings, Sengu."

"In that big circuit room there are many hiding places. The best place seems to be behind the emergency converter. The way it's set up is ... "

Ras Tschubai and Pucky were the 2 teleporters in this truly unique operation. The little mousebeaver was already cozying up to Rhodan in the hopes of influencing the Chief to let him make the first jump.

But Rhodan had already decided. He turned instead to the tall, highly-trained African. "Tschubai, you make the jump, but only after we've reached the circuit room. Sengu, you keep watching the intruders... Marshall, you may take charge of the rest of your men... Professor, you and your group will keep in the background but within calling distance. Has everybody got that?"

"And what about me?" chirped the mousebeaver, who had tried in vain to read Perry's thoughts.

"Isn't Marshall your commanding officer?" retorted Rhodan. His tone was hard and sharp enough to discourage Pucky from asking any further questions.

They left the main control area through the only available exit. It was typical of Rhodan and his men that they carried shock weapons in their hands while their deadlier impulse, thermo and disintegrator weapons, remained in their holsters. The only ones also carrying fire-ready impulse beamers were Rhodan and Atlan.

Wuriu Sengu and Tschubai followed closely behind Rhodan and the Arkonide. Pucky stayed close to Marshall, who was also trying in vain to detect the thought impulses of the intruders.

It looks bad, John, telepathed the mousebeaver. I can't trace a single thoughtwave from those burglars.

Same thing with me, little one, responded Marshall by the same paramental medium. *I've already told the Chief. He thinks it looks pretty hopeless for us.*

Maybe I could get somewhere with telekinesis, John. But one thing I don't understand: how the heck did those characters get through the honeycomb screen? Is it possible they can do more than we can?

That's what it looks like, Pucky.

The telepathic conversation between the two ended as the passage everybody was following terminated in a shaped chamber.

"Sir, we keep going straight ahead!" directed Sengu. "All other passages lead to separated special relay stations. The master circuit lies exactly in the centre of the sphere."

"How far yet, Sengu?" Rhodan asked, without looking at the teleseer.

"About 100 meters, sir."

Fellmer Lloyd was a mutant in their group who was a tele-tracer of brainwave patterns. He never forgot a brainwave configuration once he saw it; it was a pattern by which he could recognize persons. He was also able to determine whether the person belonging to such patterns threatened danger, and from what direction. For the first time since leaving the main entrance to A-1, he reported through. "I get no reception, sir."

The closer they came to the inner circuit chamber—the more concerned Rhodan became. He was increasingly disturbed by Sengu's observation that the intruders had not posted any guards.

Wuriu Sengu broke in on his thoughts. "We're only 5 meters from the entrance to the inner chamber!" he warned. Yet the passage they were traversing still seemed to be several km long!

Atlan and Rhodan halted abruptly and turned to the mutant.

"Where is the entrance, Sengu?" asked Rhodan sharply.

"In front of us, sir—directly ahead! I see it now although you cannot. The builders of the Brain have placed an optical barrier here. The passage actually ends within 5 meters. What you see is a kind of

mirage!"

"The camouflage around here is incredible!" grunted Atlan irritably, and before Rhodan could stop him he moved forward.

He disappeared before their eyes, apparently vanishing between one step and the next. Yet there ahead was the continuing passage, still many km in apparent extent.

Then the waiting men felt an eerie sensation when Atlan reappeared before them, totally unaffected by what he had just experienced. "It's true, Perry," he said calmly. "The entrance to the circuit chamber is less than 10 feet from here. The main portal is partially open and I was able to see the 8 aliens working in there."

Rhodan turned to his men. "Professor, you and your men stay within calling distance, preferably on this side of the optical barrier. Don't forget to keep your minicoms open-but on our channel, not the *Ironduke*'s. Alright—mutants, forward with me!"

Wherewith he and Atlan stepped through the mirage followed by Marshall and his mutant commandoes.

"Here's the portal," said Atlan, and he stepped aside for Rhodan.

The latter was able to peer into a room that was one giant circuit assembly. But his eye was mainly attracted to the glow of the Akon transmitter arc. It revealed conclusively that the Akons had penetrated here but the mystery still remained of how they had overcome the extra-dimensional honeycomb screen. Also Rhodan recalled that the Brain had said A-1 was secured by a separate honeycomb barrier of its own—yet on their way here they had not encountered it. That meant the Cöordinator must have shut it off to enable them to get in.

Rhodan's gaze turned from the transmitter arc to the 8 intruders. They were busily working with completely unrecognizable pieces of equipment. Suddenly he tensed and craned his neck a bit farther to check a flash impression he had received. He thought he detected an intervening invisible something—like a faintly iridescent wall—yet when he concentrated on the elusive phenomenon it was gone.

He quickly ducked back behind the portal. "Atlan, did you see that energy screen in there?"

The latter thought he referred to a honeycomb screen. "No—it's something else. Sengu, what do you see?"

Their transmitter 'spy' concentrated and finally his eyes widened in surprise while he stammered, "S-sir ... can I have a look directly into the chamber?" It was a very odd request for Wuriu Sengu, who normally needed no direct line of sight to peer through solid objects.

Rhodan seemed to be the only one who understood what he meant. "OK, Sengu, come here and take a very good look!"

Wuriu carefully poked his head forward to look into the room. John Marshall had formed a telepathic link between Sengu's thoughts and Rhodan so that a 3-way communication was established. Whatever transpired in Sengu's mind was immediately transmitted to the Chief.

Spherical energy screen ... Time seems to—what? Time is there in glowing rainbow colours! But the equipment that generates the screen isn't there ... What's this impression I keep getting about

time? A protective screen built up from a time-field? Time-field!—Time converter! How can I describe it to the Chief? Is it possible my eyes and my para-senses are seeing 2 different things—like a double vision in 2 slightly different times? But there isn't such a thing!

At that moment Sengu felt a hand on his shoulder which helped him to free himself from the vision held by his paranormal faculties. As he turned around, taking a half step behind the portal again he found himself looking into Rhodan's face.

To his surprise he heard the Chief say: "Sengu, I believe you have seen correctly. Ras Tschubai will now make an attempt to teleport himself *into* that spherical field."

For the tall, lean teleporter, Rhodan's announcement was his order for action. Ras Tschubai concentrated. He produced a shimmer of light in the air around him, in the midst of which he vanished—only to reappear almost instantly, falling helplessly to his knees in a paroxysm of pain. He gasped, "Sir—that spherical screen must be a time-field!"

"Ishibashi, it's your turn!" ordered Rhodan.

Kitai the suggester nodded. Simultaneously he mobilized his abnormally powerful hypnotic forces and concentrated them on the 8 intruders who were calmly working under the protection of their time sphere.

For several seconds the native-born Japanese sought to bring the Akons under hypnotic control but suddenly he jerked his head back and then turned slowly to Rhodan. "Sir, I can't get through. That's no energy screen in there. I mean it has time-field characteristic—but it's different from the time-field, they used that time on Arkon 3 to mobilize the phantom fleet of Emperor Metzat III from 15000 years in the past ... "

Rhodan was startled by a loud groan from Atlan. "Now I know!" exclaimed the Emperor. "I can see how the transmitter station could penetrate A-1! Whatever the nature of Time may be, Akon research is centuries ahead of us!"

"No wonder the robot Brain shouted for help," commented Rhodan. "Even the giant positronicon is powerless against alterations of Time. Atlan, Akons somewhere in the past have somehow inserted the transmitter into A-1 and I wouldn't be surprised if this time-field isn't being produced by equipment that's here in A-1 now! Sengu, take another close look in there!"

While the mutant activated his hyper-sight again, Atlan whispered privately to Rhodan: "Aren't we losing too much time? Has it occurred to you that these men in there could be putting a bomb together?"

"It occurred to me, Atlan, but I dropped the idea. What we're dealing with here is Akons—not With fanatical, narrow-minded Arkonides who are out to blow the Cöordinator apart. What we should be more concerned about is that this group of aliens may be able to make effective changes in the A-1 circuits!"

"Sir," said Sengu again, "I can't identify any apparatus inside that sphere that would be capable of generating a time-field. But there are so many unknown pieces of equipment in there that I can't completely eliminate the possibility."

"Strange ... " muttered Rhodan.

"Now what have you discovered, Perry?" asked the Arkonide.

"Only Sengu's faculties seem able to do something with that Akon screen where the other mutants are helpless. It's made me think of something. We all seem to forget that a transmitter station is working somewhere to generate that arc in there. That could be a clue to the possibility that what's building this time-field may be something like the gigantic power plants that once generated the screen around the *Blue System*. A linear space-drive would be able to get to these eight Akons—but aside from our time factor it would be impossible to set up such equipment here... My God! ... Marshall, go out to the scientists! I need every frequency specialist! Why didn't any of us hit upon something so basic? We have to see if we can determine the transmitter's frequency!"

John Marshall had already vanished beyond the optical barrier to give the message to the waiting specialists.

Perry was distracted from his train of thought by a sudden interruption by Atlan. "Perry—I believe the robot Brain could handle that problem better and faster than your scientists!"

It was then that the Cöordinator revealed it had been listening to every word. They suddenly heard its ringing voice, which was as inhumanly unemotional as ever: "You will have the transmitter's frequency within 1 minute."

Rhodan was slightly vexed at himself. "Atlan, none of us have been seeing the forest because of the trees! I'm going to make an experiment to find out if those Akons in there can see us as easily as we can see them."

"And how do you propose going about it?" asked Atlan apprehensively.

"With this," said Rhodan as he showed him his impulse blaster.

5/ A BLINDING FLASH, A DEAFENING REPORT—AND SUDDEN DEATH

For more than 3 hours Joe Luklein had been observing the lone bungalow on the outskirts of Gilkar although no one had appeared either in the house or on the terrace. In fact the place gave the impression of being deserted. But Joe was not to be taken in by the ruse.

That day around noon when he had been sitting in the shade of the tavern, the aircar he had seen take off toward Renl had risen from here. Also, the large plastic runway next to the terrace was 50 meters by 50, which was an item of note. As a landing and takeoff ramp it might have been only half that size to be ample for aircars and similar personal vehicles. And the infra-red security system he had discovered at the last moment while scouting the area wasn't exactly the type of thing one would find around an everyday bungalow containing harmless residents.

Joe noted with satisfaction that it was growing dark. Completely hidden by a bush, he was just thinking of the supposed presence of Antis in Hoga's vicinity when he was startled by the sound of footsteps. Instinctively he gripped his shock-weapon and carefully pushed a branch aside so that he could look in the direction of the barely audible sound.

Through the small gap in the foliage he saw a man who was looking about him sharply while making his way toward the apparently deserted bungalow. The daylight was now so faint that Joe didn't recognize him at first—but finally he knew who it was: it was none other than the famed Dr. Loun Tatanoon who now stepped to the door of the bungalow. The door opened and he quickly disappeared inside the house, which again appeared to be deserted.

Luklein let the branch fall back in place and continued to wait. Impatient fretting was not a part of his nature. While night fell on the planet Trum, he sent out his required hypercom signal two more times. It was the only link of communication he had with his superiors. He knew that his hypercom frequency was being monitored by a robot in one of the many relay stations somewhere in star cluster M-13. If 3 hours went by without his tracer beep being received there, the robot's programming would, cause it to send out an alarm, whereupon a special commando from Intelligence would be sent out to save him in literally the very last second. But many such cases in the past had proved that the final second had often been missed and all the would-be rescuer had left to report was the death of his colleague.

In his lone hiding place, Joe Luklein reflected that HQ had given him a very "heavy" assignment.

He was just about to change his position because his foot was threatening to go to sleep on him but he paused as he heard the rising whine of an impulse engine. The sound grew louder from one moment to the next. Joe listened carefully and was quite sure that the craft was overhead by now. Then he heard it lowering toward a precision landing. When he looked across toward the plastic runway he couldn't make out a single field or signal light.

Infra-red system, he thought to himself, as the flier settled with a faint grating sound and the engine was suddenly silenced. He could hear 3 men getting out of the craft. Their footsteps approached the house and then he thought he heard a door closing. In the next moment he was again surrounded by silence.

While he had been here hiding, his opponents had increased by four more. Luklein had the uneasy feeling that his assignment was becoming riskier all the time. But now the training came to the surface that he had received from Solar Intelligence before they ever gave him his first assignment. He blocked out his emotions so that only logic could speak.

Soundlessly he left his hiding place and once more checked in all directions. Then he moved like a shadow over the well-kept lawn, being doubly careful to bypass the infra-red beams as he went. Five minutes later he reached the wall of the bungalow.

In a pocket of his concealed combat suit was a supersensitive listening device with an extra high-powered amplifier, both items being the finest product of Swoon micro-technology. He pressed the pickup mike against the wall at eye level and it held there. He took the thin cord with its connecting jack and guided it to the proper contact with the amplifier under his clothing. After that, all that was necessary was to attach the little earphone to his ear. The field-modulation membrane reproduced the voices inside with clear audibility. He even heard his name mentioned. Evidently they'd been searching for him in Gilkar since he had left the inn. And he heard another name that was very familiar: Offre—Market Research head in his shipping office! Apparently he had worked as a contact man for Solar Intelligence as well as for the Thekus group.

Again he heard his name mentioned and the comments that went with it: "Right after Luklein received that Terran music on his hypercom he disappeared without a trace. Outside the system, that Springer who spilled the kafok on Tatanoon—he must have been Luklein! But where is he now? He just couldn't have vanished into the ground!"

Another voice spoke emphatically: "Our infra-red system is intact but so far there's been no alarm. So he can't be around here ... "

"You fool!" bellowed a third voice. "Don't you know the Terrans by now? They're more dangerous than a secret Ara plague! Where are Drakont, Ezruk and Pinti?"

"They're waiting outside, Hoga."

Listening to all this, Luklein was silently elated.

"Bring them in—and you stay here. I'm not interested in having to deliver a message from Carba twice. Tell everybody to come in here—without exception!" This was Hoga's voice again.

Luklein figured there could be nothing more convenient for him than to have all the occupants of the bungalow in one room. His chances for coming out of this dangerous gig successfully were getting better.

He heard somebody protesting: "But, Hoga, we can't pull in all the guards!"

"We can!" shouted Hoga in evident agitation. "That Terran isn't going to be showing up precisely in the next 10 minutes. Besides, is Gisfe on guard in the aircar or isn't he?"

At his outside listening post, Luklein tensed. Then the aircraft the 3 men had arrived in contained a 4th occupant! And here he was standing against the wall of the house within less than 40 meters of the ship! In spite of the perilous situation, Joe made his decision. Hoga's order for everyone to gather into one room of the bungalow forced him to it.

He swiftly dismantled his little high-powered monitoring station. The mike and the headphone went into his pocket and he again became a soundless shadow. He had to get past the entrance door into the house. On the basis of experience, house doors were usually the least formidable link in any private security setup.

By the time he reached the door he heard the sound of heavy footsteps inside the house. Two men were clattering down a staircase—evidently guards who had been posted at attic windows. Joe used a micro-sensor and scanned the front door for energy sources. The little gauge was so dimly lighted that he couldn't see the indicator needle until he brought his face within inches of it.

There—an output!

Type 3/C catch. It worked on a magnetic lightbeam basis. This was a simple obstacle which he could handle with his electronic "pass-key"—a universal locksmith and burglar tool. But another kind of lock was next to the door on the left side. Luklein frowned when he read the sensor and recognized the kind of security-barrier it indicated. The "pass-key" was powerless against it. It would not respond to a mechanism operating on hypercom wavelengths.

He made an exact measurement of where this "hyperlock" was located. He already had a plan in mind as to how to get rid of this new obstacle but he also realized the risk it would involve. Nevertheless he did not hesitate for a moment.

He pulled out his thermo-weapon and set it for maximum intensity. Then he aimed the muzzle of the beamer at the area he had located. In about 1 millisecond the shot would vaporize the plastic material of the wall along with the hyperlock device hidden inside.

He pressed the trigger.

There was a split-second hissing sound, an incredibly hot flash of energy, followed by a dull plopping noise, Then a frying and crackling of molten plastic as it cooled and hardened around the edges of a hole that was about 1 foot wide. Those edges were still glowing red-hot, throwing light about 3 feet out from the house. If the pilot in the parked air vehicle didn't happen to be dozing now he would have to be alerted by this.

But Luklein was lucky. The pilot actually did seem to be asleep. Luklein was able to proceed unmolested with his "pass-key" and release the lightbeam catch. Then all he had to take care of was the normal night-latch. It was the 3rd and last obstacle.

He had not spent 2 minutes on the door before it opened silently. But he held it only slightly ajar before entering, as he waited and listened. In a room to his left he heard Hoga's voice. The Arkonide was talking about planet Zero where Carba's headquarters was supposed to be located.

Luklein was mindful of his assignment now, which was to attempt to capture Hoga unharmed. But just then something rattled somewhere off to his right. This was followed by a heavy stamping of footsteps which caused the very house to tremble. Joe broke out in a sweat. Here he was not only up against men but a robot as well—and the thing must have detected him. The metal monster was coming from somewhere inside the bungalow and was about to reach the entrance vestibule.

By now Luklein had entered. He quickly activated his deflector field. Although this would make him invisible even to a robot, it made him dangerously perceptible to any chance energy sensor.

The robot's movements had alerted the others. A door flew open and light flooded into the foyer. Arkonides came running out of the other room but at a glance Luklein also detected Antis among them. A door opened on the opposite side and a robot came to a stop on the threshold. Joe saw its optical lens system swinging his way. There was a clamour and a blur of movement and sound—commands, cries of panic, shouted questions and a surge of bodies. In seconds the vestibule room was swarming with the enemy. Three men came between Luklein and the robot, thus temporarily blocking the machine's sensor beams.

One of the Arkonides discovered the hole in the plastic wall next to the door. Another bumped into Joe's deflector screen and was repulsed by it. Three Antis realised what he had struck. They drew their deadly weapons and fired.

But they fired at a blank wall because Joe had jumped to safety in another direction. Then the front door banged open again and the aircar pilot came storming in. The shouts of alarm had attracted him into the fray. Luklein himself came within a hair of yelling aloud when he saw the bomb the pilot held in his hand.

"Out!" he heard Hoga shout in sudden consternation. "The robot doesn't have your I.D.!"

But the warning came too late.

The robot raised 2 deadly rayguns and fired at the pilot. For the fraction of a second, Luklein saw 2 bluish energy beams. Then he was enveloped in a blinding glare. The heat from the football-sized thermo-bomb did not register on his senses. An impulse beam from the robot must have triggered the deadly device.

As a brilliant white jet of flame shot into the night with a clap of thunder, blasting the peaceful silence of rural Gilkar, there was one less bungalow on the settlement's outskirts. The structure had been vaporised and the glowing remains left no trace behind which might have explained the cause of the catastrophe.

Somewhere in the personnel files of Solar Intelligence, a cross-mark was placed after Joe Luklein's name. A positronic computer had attended to this detail without giving it a second thought. But Joe's parents and a few friends mourned his passing.

6/ "THE BRAIN IS MAD!"

The impulse beam from Perry Rhodan's hand weapon splattered ineffectually against the spherical time-screen. The quietly working Akons inside the barrier looked up suddenly in alarm, however, to see that the portal was standing half open.

Atlan had expressed his misgivings about this attempt by Rhodan but had not found a willing ear. "You're placing too much at stake with that, Perry!" he had warned Rhodan had rejected the warning with a shake of his head.

The beam had been playing against the energy field, spraying out as if it were a stream of water striking a wall. The Akons had come to a stop in their work, watching the display in surprise. But their astonished expressions were soon replaced by sneers of gloating triumph.

When Perry saw that this was their reaction he turned off the impulse beam and continued to observe the strangers while half-concealed by the portal. The Akons turned back to their work as if nothing had happened. No one had even made an attempt to reach for a weapon or to answer the impulse fire. For Rhodan it was proof enough that the Akons felt absolutely secure behind the spherical screen and it was also the final proof for him that the field was some kind of time-warp.

When he closed the heavy door of the portal it signified that an important phase of their action had been concluded. He turned to his colleagues and looked at each of them in turn. All remained silent including the scientists whom Marshall had brought forward through the optical barrier.

"Gentlemen," he began, "using traditional methods will get us nowhere in this situation. We have to transfer completely to Akon technology and I hope..."

The robot Brain interrupted him. It announced the sending frequency of the Akon transmitter and also confirmed that it was actively in a receiving mode.

But before the positronic could cut off, Rhodan shouted back. "Is it possible for my teleporters to jump to the *Ironduke*?"

Unimpressed, the giant Brain asked a counter-question: "How much time will be required, Rhodan?"

From past experience Rhodan knew how long it should take Pucky and Ras Tschubai to teleport 18 men back to the linear ship. "Ten minutes by standard time, Cöordinator."

"Countdown as of now, Rhodan. Both honeycomb screen are inactive. That is all!"

Both teleporters knew they had no time to lose. Not even waiting for Rhodan's command, they took action but with controlled precision. Before the 2 high-frequency specialists knew what was happening to them they felt a mutant grip around them. There was a brief sensation of pain and then they were startled to find themselves back once more in the Command Central of the *Ironduke*. In a strangely shimmering mass of air before them they saw the teleporters disappear again.

Ras Tschubai and the mousebeaver kept teleporting like high-precision machines. By the end of the 8th minute they had brought the last 2 men, Atlan and Rhodan, back on board the linear-drive-warship. The unexpected invasion of the commando team in the Control Central had precipitated some confusion. The officers not only took it as a sign of failure for the operation but even thought that Rhodan and his men had been driven from the Brain by some threat of terrible danger. Nor did the Chief's next order help to clear up the situation. He ordered Ras and Pucky to go fetch 8 space combat suits. "That includes yours, Pucky!" Rhodan called after the little fellow just as he was about to jump.

Next he picked up the intercom mike. "Transmitter station! This is the Chief! Adjust the transmitter to the following frequency but check your adjustments at least 3 times. The parameters are as follows..." His phenomenal memory had enabled him to retain the complicated frequency data and he read it off automatically. Then he asked it to be read back to him.

It came, and so did Pucky from one of his shorter teleportations. He dropped 2 spacesuits on the deck and vanished again. Ras Tschubai appeared with another 3 suits. The men were still struggling into the heavy rigs when the mousebeaver popped into view a second time. As a windup Pucky had brought Rhodan's suit and his own.

The intercom buzzed. The officer in the transmitter station announced that his adjustments had been made.

"Don't switch to transmission yet!" returned Rhodan. "Just keep it warmed up and on standby!" He carefully checked out the systems of his suit and then turned to Atlan. "Please get in touch with the Brain. If it wants to warn us of any danger we can be reached on hyperband F-847. Put out a general alarm for all ships on Arkon 3. All engines should be on standby for emergency takeoff. Any questions, Atlan?"

Although the Arkonide had come to be on the receiving end of the orders it was by no means degrading to him. The situation quite simply demanded it and he knew that he could put his trust in Perry Rhodan. "No questions, Chief!" Atlan replied with a fleeting smile.

Momentarily there was an amused twinkle in Rhodan's eyes as he heard himself thus addressed by the Imperator but then he turned to the 2 teleporters. "Transport us to the transmitter room!" he ordered.

The regular crew of the Control Central still hadn't caught on to what was happening. They might never have recovered from their astonishment if Rhodan had confessed to them that he himself didn't know where he was going to land next.

* * * *

As they came out of the transmitter in the unknown receiving station they heard a piercing cry of alarm and saw the shadow of a man disappear. Pucky who was close behind Perry was in his element. He reached out for the fugitive with his paranormal senses.

Another cry was heard. Through an open doorway the shadow reappeared and fell back into the 10-meter-square transmitter room which contained nothing more than this terminal station. The shadow was followed by a man with a velvety brown skin who wildly waved his arms and legs in the air and cried for help in the Akon language. He simply could not comprehend why he was floating back into the room like a balloon after he had just fled from it because of the appearance of the 8 strangers.

As Pucky allowed the man to glide softly to a landing on the deck, the latter gained his feet and stood there motionlessly staring at the intruders—until a shock-beam struck him and he fell.

It was John Marshall who had silenced the Akon. "Sir," said the telepath, "I hardly had time to read his thoughts but the man was convinced that the crew would be able to handle us."

"I'm already aware that we must have emerged on board a spaceship. Lloyd, where's the Communications Central?"

The tracer mutant had been searching for brainwave patterns and looking for threatening impulses but to his astonishment there was nothing threatening so far. "No danger yet, sir. Com Room is that way!" He waved a hand toward the corridor the Akon had tried to escape through.

Without being asked, Sengu announced the results of his wall penetrating observations. "Sir, this is one of the Akon Energy Command ships—50 meter diameter with flattened poles. Radio and flight controls are all in the same room, about 30 meters ahead of us. The corridor leads right to it!"

Rhodan looked around at the 3 scientists. "Wait here for us," he told them. "Don't take any risks. Use your shock-guns the instant you see any of the crewmen. Under all circumstances avoid any blood-shed."

The scientists watched the Chief with mixed feelings as he and his mutants left the transmitter room. They took cover behind a quietly humming generator and waited.

Meanwhile the others had already entered the passage. They were no longer concerned about the Akon whom Marshall had knocked out: he would not recover from his stunned condition for several hours.

"The engine and power room is directly beneath us, sir," said Wuriu Sengu. "Three men at their stations there and 4 in the control room, plus ..." He paused, tensing in alarm. "Chief they've seen us over their video monitor system!"

Rhodan's command was fast and brief: "Close helmets! Screens up!"

The plastic bubble-helmets closed with a clatter of fasteners snapping in place. In each combat suit a micro-converter revved up to full power and supplied energy to every defence screen.

"They're going to attack, Chief," came Fellmer Lloyd's calm announcement over the helmet voice-com.

Sengu also came through: "2d door left, 3 men. Three others at stations, 4 in control room.

Lloyd broke in again: "The crew is bigger. Now I'm tracing 12 men—no, 13 so far, Chief!"

"Pucky—to the control room! Play it safe but the Akons must not send out a distress call ... "

Without having heard the last 2 words, Pucky was gone. When he rematerialised in the small flight-control chamber he was behind the backs of 3 men who were dashing for the exit door. Only the 4th man who sat in the pilot's seat saw the mousebeaver but he was momentarily speechless out of either amazement or fear.

Invisible forces ripped him out of his seat and slammed him against the ceiling. In his zeal the mousebeaver had failed to moderate the telekinetic attack. As a consequence the Akon struck his head severely against the ceiling plates and lost consciousness in the process.

But the muffled thump caused one of the Akons at the door to look back, which invited a direct hit from Pucky's shock beam, and he fell soundlessly to the deck. Pucky strafed the other two at maximum intensity. They collapsed in the outer passage and were instantly stunned out.

Perry how's the weather over your way? asked Pucky telepathically. In situations like this Pucky's expressions left something to be desired from a regulation standpoint but there was no one in the Solar Imperium who would have reproved him for it—not even Perry Rhodan.

They're starting to close in on us, little one, Rhodan answered by means of his weak paranormal faculties. *Come as quickly as you can!*

Pucky looked at the ceiling where the still unconscious Akon was suspended. Directly beneath him was the pilot's seat and that's where the mousebeaver brought him in to a rather rough landing. It was because at the same time he was receiving an urgent distress call from John Marshall. The rest of the Energy Command crew were coming at them with energy weapons.

Without further hesitation Pucky raised his impulse beamer and melted the hypercom as well as the normal transmitter and the nav-positronics. In order not to take any chances he also destroyed the emergency manual circuits. The Akon spacer may have still been a flat topped metal ball but it was no longer a starship. It was even incapable of sending out a call for help.

The mousebeaver concentrated and made his jump.

An ugly hole appeared in the wall within only a meter of Rhodan. The disintegrator shot had barely missed the Administrator. In his helmet phones he recognized panting sounds from Fellmer Lloyd who was suddenly in conflict with three Akons.

"Watch out a light bomb!" yelled Marshall in sudden alarm. Although not deadly the device was still dangerous because it could blind them all.

Pucky appeared in time to hear the warning and see the thumb-sized pellet flying through the air. He had rematerialised on a trajectory that sent him crashing against a bulkhead but his repulsion field took up most of the impact. The mousebeaver unleashed his telekinetic powers and reversed the bomb's course—but this did not by any means reduce the danger.

So once more Pucky placed his life on the line.

With a short jump he was ahead of the bomb so that he could catch it; then he teleported. With it into outer space. There he released it and jumped back into the ship in a flash.

It's all over! This was a despairing thought Pucky caught from Fellmer Lloyd. Pucky literally moved into the fray at the last second. Stunned by a shock-gun, the mutant was just sinking down to the deck but the Akon who was about to finish him with a thermo-weapon felt himself gripped by an irresistible force and slammed against the wall. The other one who had shocked Lloyd had to let loose of his raygun when it was ripped from his fingers by some invisible hand and banged sharply against his chin.

While the mousebeaver disarmed the 2 fallen aliens he telepathed: *Ship secured, Boss! Except for Fellmer—he's shocked out!* Receiving no answer, he probed into Rhodan's mind. This time he went against the rules without compunction and was relieved to read in Perry Rhodan's thoughts that the last of the Akons had been put out of the fighting.

Pucky clapped his helmet back and waddled up to Rhodan. He faced him with his little arms folded across his chest. "Well, Perry," he said, "we wrapped up another one!"

Wuriu Sengu interrupted with an announcement that Fellmer Lloyd would come out of his stunned condition in 2 hours.

"Take care of him, Wuriu," Rhodan ordered. "John, I think we can tell our scientists they're out of danger now. Tell the gentlemen that they should concentrate exclusively on the transmitter and to inform the robot Brain as to the sending frequency. Under no circumstances is the station inside A-1 to be switched from reception to transmission. If that should happen it must be switched off. Be sure the scientists understand that instruction!"

When John Marshall left, Pucky and Rhodan were alone. The Administrator was frowning in deep concern because in spite of their success here on the spaceship he saw the battle as incomplete. "Our time spent here can be very costly," Pucky heard him say.

"What do you mean by that, Chief?" asked Pucky curiously.

"I mean we have to still wait a couple of hours until one of those Akons comes out of shock."

"But Perry!" There was a slight note of reproach in the mousebeaver's chirping voice. "Don't you know I saved one for you? That Akon pilot in the control room should be coming to any minute. *Itold* you that!" When Rhodan quickly admitted this had slipped his mind, Pucky was amazed. "Boss, whenever *you* forget something we're *inreal* trouble! Is Atlan's throne in that much danger?"

Rhodan placed a hand on the mousebeaver's small, furry shoulder. "Not only Atlan's throne, little one, but the Solar Imperium as well! If Atlan is deposed or killed, at that moment we will have a fully active robot Regent again—but this time a Regent who knows the position of the Earth. And the Great Cöordinator will again be in command of about 100,000 robot warships. What do you think would be left of the Solar Imperium if such a gigantic fleet were to move against us?"

Excitedly, Pucky asked him: "Perry, then why don't you just let those Akons in A-1 go about their business and plant their bomb?"

"Are you absolutely certain that they're planting a bomb there? They may be trying to reprogram the security circuits so that they can use the Brain as a tool to get rid of Atlan. I—"

John Marshall reported telepathically and they both received the message: *Sir, we just blocked an attempt from Arkon to switch over the transmitter. It is now disconnected from the A-1 station.*

But we're still linked to the Ironduke, John?

Absolutely, Chief!

Thank you—that is all.

10 minutes later, after the pilot had been scanned telepathically, events went into high gear. It was discovered that the crew of the Akon ship knew nothing of the plans of the intruders in A-1. They had not been briefed in regard to the special team's assignment.

"Back to the *Ironduke* !" ordered Rhodan. And he gravely added: "Hopefully those Akons will see that they're sitting in a trap. Let's hope very hard..."

* * * *

They came back to the *Ironduke* via the transmitter. Their action on board the ship of the Akon Energy Command had consumed slightly more than one hour. This was a comparatively long time which would work to the advantage of the 8-man sabotage team in A-1—if their objective was to set up a bomb. On the other hand, it was still an inadequate respite if they were to make any effective changes in the main security circuits.

A-1 deserved the term "master circuit" because truly gigantic complexities and huge banks of specialized circuits were involved. The Akons required a great deal of time to trace down the logic flow of such unprecedented positronic complex and to learn how it really operated.

Rhodan had Pucky teleport him from the transmitter room to the Control Central. He felt pressed by a dark presentiment to bring everything to a conclusion as swiftly as possible, if all their efforts were not to be in vain.

While he was getting out of his combat suit, Atlan gave him his own report. The Arkonide did not have much to say because there was no time to get into details. Among other things the galactic position of the Akon transmitter ship had been determined and orders had been issued to a Terran warship to take the Energy Command vessel into custody.

"And now let's have a connection with the robot Brain!"

Contact was established. Rhodan did the talking. He requested permission to enter A-1 with some of his men.

Strangely, the Brain did not answer. Rhodan repeated his request. The great positronicon remained in a shroud of silence.

More than a dozen officers noted that the Chief was working into a rage. It was the third time that Gonozal VIII nervously brushed a hand through his hair. Behind the 2 leaders the teleporters were bringing up the men from the transmitter room.

Perry Rhodan stepped as closely as possible before the pickup camera. In a rattling tone of command

he turned his request into an order: "Cöordinator, I demand entrance into A-1! The Cöordinator must know that I can enter there without his permission—by the same route that was used by the Akons!"

The powerful voice of the Brain rattled the speaker: "Access permitted. What's the personnel count, Rhodan?" Nothing in the tone of the answer indicated that the positronicon regarded Rhodan's warning as a form of extortion.

"4 men, Cöordinator."

"Granted. The honeycomb screen will be shut off for 5 minutes. That is all!"

Even as the maze of lines faded from the viewscreen, Atlan spoke with a note of sudden concern. "Something's happened to the Brain already! Twice it failed to answer you. That's something new, and its present attitude is in sharp contrast to its recent distress signal. Perry, isn't it too dangerous now to go back into A-1?"

Rhodan checked his watch. "Arkonide, 5 minutes go by in an awful hurry. Unfortunately I don't have time to worry about the Brain's attitude just now. That may sound foolhardy but maybe there's no other route to go. There's too much at stake! Your Greater Imperium as well as the Solar Empire. I have to go all out now to save what can still be saved. See you later, friend... Pucky! I've got to have a light-writer projector—on the double! There must be one on board somewhere. No time to waste—jump into depot 3. I'll call through in the meantime ... "

His communications with the depots only raised counter-questions because no one knew what the Chief meant by a light-writer. But before Rhodan could take any further action the squeaky voice of the mousebeaver was heard on the intercom.

"Perry, depot 3 is the right place. I've found the thing—no time to talk!"

Almost as if he had come through the wires, Pucky appeared in a shimmery swirl of air, carrying the apparatus with him.

"Marshall, Tschubai—you're making it with us. Tschubai, you teleport Marshall into A-1. I'll come with Pucky. We have just 2 minutes and 18 seconds. All set? Let's go!"

The 3 men and Pucky emerged from the teleport jump in front of the optical barrier. Without pausing, they traversed the mirage and stopped directly in front of the closed portal. Rhodan gave instructions. John Marshall and Ras Tschubai were to cover them with their weapons. The heavy light-writer device was floating at shoulder level in front of the mousebeaver, which was typical of his aversion to unnecessary labour. If something was to be carried, he usually made use of his telekinetic faculties.

"Come with me!" ordered Rhodan as he swung back the right wing of the portal.

An amazing sight met their eyes. The eight Akons seemed to have gone berserk. They were destroying-their own equipment while leaving the A-1 circuits unharmed! A great weight was lifted from Rhodan. His greatest fear that the security circuits might be destroyed or damaged had not become a reality.

Pucky nudged Rhodan. "Chief, should I go ahead?"

"Yes! Start signalling them! Give them a 10 minute ultimatum. If in that time they surrender and drop their

time-screen without causing any further damage—I'll guarantee them safe conduct back to Sphynx within a month."

The mousebeaver put up a storm of protest. "You mean you're going to let them go free, Chief?"

"I'm accustomed to keeping my word, Lt. Puck!" Rhodan replied sharply. "Now get busy and start sending!"

Pucky didn't wait to be told a second time. The micro-converter began to hum and a concentrated beam of light leapt from the optical projector. A brilliant spot of light appeared on the far wall of the A-1 chamber and soon spread into a word that was in the Akon language.

At the first flash of light the Akons stopped their destructive labours and looked up. They watched the light on the far wall and closely read every word of the message.

"Pucky, also tell them that their Energy Command ship is hanging crippled in space in star cluster M-13 and that within a few hours it will be taken on board one of our Terran warships."

Pucky did more light-writing as directed.

Now the lead Akon with the highest rank insignia raised his arms and placed his hands on his head. It was the typical gesture of Akon surrender!

"I didn't expect that so soon!" muttered Rhodan half-aloud. He immediately made telepathic contact with Marshall and Pucky: *When they drop that screen, try to find out what they did to the security circuits!*

The spherical time screen was still in place but the eight Akons had gone into a huddle and seemed to be discussing their situation. Neither Pucky nor Rhodan could detect any slightest gesture of excitement among them.

Now one of the Akons separated from the group and went over to the equipment they hadn't yet destroyed. He stopped in front of a square cabinet that measured about 1 cubic meter on each side. Suddenly he drew his weapon and reduced the machine to molten metal.

"That's against our conditions!" cried Pucky, horrified.

In the same moment they heard one of the Akons shout: "We're coming!"

And that was when Rhodan and Pucky let out a double yell of their own. Brilliant streamers of energy shot out of the walls of the chamber as the automatic weapons of the Brain opened fire. Within seconds the Akons were gone.

With an uncompromising programmed logic the mammoth positronic Brain had struck back, thus revealing the fact that it had lied to Atlan and Rhodan. There were defensive weapons in A-1 after all.

"Cöordinator!" roared Rhodan above the dying sounds of the deadly bombardment. "In the name of Imperator Gonozal VIII, I had promised those Akons..."

He was interrupted by the unemotional voice of the Brain: "Imperator Gonozal VIII cannot make any agreements which contradict the basic programming!"

"Cöordinator, why did you tell Atlan and myself that there were no ray weapons in security section A-1?"

"The false information was given because the programming demanded it. The Terrans are hereby instructed to leave the Great Cöordinator at once. Your presence is no longer required. Rule 18 is effective immediately!"

"And if the Akons have planted a bomb in A-1, Cöordinator?" suggested Rhodan although he himself did not believe it. He was hoping to get the remaining Akon equipment out of there so that his specialists could examine it.

The giant Brain answered at once: "The Terrans will be given 2 hours to inspect A-1 for the presence of a bomb and to clear out the alien equipment there. Transport medium: teleportation! At the end of that period, Rule 18 will be activated. That is all!"

* * * *

Shortly before the expiration of the 2-hour time allowance, Pucky and Ras Tschubai teleported Rhodan and Marshall back to the *Ironduke*. Rhodan's 5 scientists immediately began to examine the devices which had escaped destruction but they determined very quickly that the equipment could give them no clue as to the activity of the Akon commandoes.

When Rhodan received this news, Atlan cursed and repeated his earlier statement: "The Brain is insane!"

"Atlan, that shows you that the Akons have done plenty to A-1. Reprogramming maybe—but the Brain can't be insane ... "

The Arkonide snorted angrily. "A-1 is isn't just any circuit, Barbarian! It wasn't designed to be fooled with! Whoever tries to manipulate it can destroy it, yes—but there can be no readjustments! Of that I am positive!"

Rhodan answered sceptically. "Let's hope you're right about that, Admiral. Let's just hope so! But let's also hope that you haven't underestimated the Akons. Don't forget that you Arkonides came from their mother race. And..."

The special communicator for contacting the giant Brain signalled to them and the viewscreen stabilized. The voice of the mammoth positronicon came through in stentorian tones. It thundered in the Control Central of the *Ironduke* as the Great Cöordinator of Arkon 3 issued a command: "All ships of the Terran fleet shall vacate the zone of influence of the Greater Imperium within 8 hours; otherwise, in the name of the Imperium, the Great Cöordinator will take expedient measures against the Sol System!"

Imperator Gonozal VIII was in front of the camera in a single jump and he roared into the microphone: "As the rightful Emperor of the Greater Imperium ... "

But he stopped abruptly. The Brain cut the connection, thereby completely ignoring the imperial challenge.

The Arkonide was close to utter despair. After going to Rhodan's cabin with him he finally expressed his greatest fears. "This is the end! Now even the giant Brain is against me! It's not enough that I have to fight against 2 resistance groups as well as the Akon usurpers—the positronicon has joined the dogpile! So what do I fight with, Perry? Do I use these empty hands against 100,000 robot battleships?"

Rhodan didn't go into details. His reply was almost prophetic. "Atlan, the main weapon of humanity is time. I firmly believe that time will be on our side."

"You mean if there's anything *left* to believe in, Perry Rhodan!" said the Arkonide resignedly.

Rhodan was silent. He knew from experience what it felt like to be depressed. But he knew this Arkonide, Atlan, and he did believe that their weapon would be—

Time.

THE TABLE'S SET
(*Feast On!*)

SABOTEURS IN A-1

1/ SITUATION: EXPLOSIVE

2/ BOMB BURST!

3/ EXPEDITION: BRAIN OF ARKON

4/ THE TIME INVADERS

5/ A BLINDING FLASH, A DEAFENING REPORT —AND SUDDEN DEATH

6/ "THE BRAIN IS MAD!"

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