

It was the most difficult decision Perry Rhodan had ever been forced to make--"Gentlemen, after due deliberation I find it necessary to declare a state of emergency and to place the Solar Imperium under a full military alert." Every one of his highest-ranking officers had to agree with his decision, even though they would soon have to face the most powerful force in the galaxy--the Regent. Each man knew what the end result would be ... the destruction of Earth!

## THE PSYCHO DUEL

### 1/ IMPERIAL IMPASSE

#### ASSAULT TROOPS!

When Salor Henno, the Greater Imperium's representative on Zalit, looked through the side window of his office, he could see the assault troops of the rebels who were making a breach in the barricades with the help of 2 combat robots. With him in the office were one modern robot and three Zalite officials. As for the latter there was no doubt where their sympathies lay and Henno didn't dare turn his back on them.

"Set the building on fire!" came a loud yell from outside.

Henno was a chubby man with small eyes and short legs. He nodded to the robot. "It would be better if you took these three out of here," he ordered. "They might suddenly get an idea to attack me."

The walking fighter machine silently opened the door and then raised its weapon arms threateningly. Henno noted the flash of angry defiance in the Zalites' eyes, but they controlled themselves and went out of the room without a word.

"Guard the door!" Henno added.

He looked below again where the resistance of his guard troops was weakening rapidly. The clamour and tumult of the battle was indescribable. The rebels' 2 robots seemed to be programmed by the Devil himself. In spite of their obvious vintage of design they continued to press forward ahead of their masters, their outer surfaces battered and dulled by the scuffings of battle. Behind them came the Zalites who hurled themselves with deafening yells at the barriers and tore them down. It was a hodgepodge army equipped with a hodgepodge of arms and with only one thing in common: their greatest and most fervent desire was to kill Henno and take over the ruling power of Zalit.

At the moment it looked very much as if they were about to get their wish. Henno stepped to his desk and obtained his service weapon from a lower drawer. He weighed it reflectively in his hand and then shoved it into his belt. When he came back to the window he saw a lone figure standing on top of the broken barricade. The man held a rock in his hand and carefully aimed it at the lower windows of the

building. Henno used the butt of his weapon to break the window pane in front of him. The clattering of the glass could not be heard above the din of the fighting. A dark blue pillar of smoke was rising a few meters away. Evidently the lower floor was already in flames.

Henno looked doubtfully at the radio transceiver. Two days ago he had sent out a distress call when the uprisings had begun. Did they expect him to wait around here until these raging rebels broke in upon him? If the Emperor failed to send a fleet to his aid, Henno didn't see why he should stay here and sacrifice himself.

All his life Salor Henno had been in the habit of carefully weighing events in his own favour. He knew very well when he was on the losing end of things and there was no motive of pride in him which could have moved him to hold out as a loser. The planetary official responded solely to the facts of any situation.

Those wild attackers down there had achieved a forward momentum now; they had set the building on fire and were pressing in from all sides. The people were on their side, having been whipped into a frenzy by flaming speeches. They had drunk in the promises of liberation and now they were intoxicated by the heady wine of revolt. Once more the cry was: "Down with the Emperor!"

The rising smoke irritated Henno's nose and forced him to sneeze. The robot stood waiting at the door.

"We'll make a run for it," Henno decided. "You lead the way!"

He pulled himself away from the window with the roar of the rebels still in his ears. Above the desk was a 3-D picture of himself which had the effect of making him look younger than he was. Henno raised his weapon and destroyed it because it made him uneasy to think of it gradually burning away in the flames of the rising fire.

The combat robot had entered the passage in front of the office, its weapon arms raised in readiness to fire at any resistance forces.

"Wait!" ordered Henno.

Opening a secret compartment in the desk, he took out a pouch containing paper currency. He grinned as he secured the pouch in his belt. Very calmly he aimed his beamer at the desk and opened fire, causing it to burst into flames immediately.

"Too bad about your tax money, Emperor!" he said scornfully. After one last look around in these familiar surroundings he turned toward the robot. "Alright, let's go!"

As they ran out into the passage they encountered the first of the retreating guard troops who were pouring out of the lifts and storming up the staircase. Their sweat-gleaming faces stared at him in desperation. Henno blocked their way. "We must fight!" he shouted at them. "If we give up, all of us will be lost!"

He brandished his own weapon and the soldiers reluctantly turned back to the fighting again. Henno smiled, satisfied. If these fools could delay the attackers long enough for him to get to the roof, nothing more would happen to him. The glider would take him safely to the spaceport where he could continue his flight in a robotship. It was unlikely that the spaceport had fallen already because it had been strongly fortified long since as a matter of policy. Ever since the earlier Arkonides had colonized Zalit, the planet had been a focal point of seething unrest.

Henno turned in an opposite direction to continue his retreat and the robot glided along soundlessly beside him. But at the end of the hallway a man appeared in front of him. He was neither a Zalite nor a pure line Arkonide but he moved toward Henno so casually that it bordered on recklessness. Henno signalled to the robot and came to a stop as he drew his weapon.

The stranger was not especially tall but he was broad in the shoulders and on his angular face was what seemed to be an expression of mockery or scorn. He was wearing an Arkonide combat suit and leisurely carried a weapon under his arm. When he had approached to within 5 meters or so, Henno called out a warning. "That's far enough," he said. "Who are you?"

The stranger grinned with an almost childish frankness. He did not seem to be worried about the swiftly approaching sounds of battle. "My name is Tate," he drawled as he looked at Henno closely. "And you are obviously the Emperor's representative on Zalit." Although he spoke Arkonide with a strange accent he made no errors in the process.

Henno regarded him suspiciously. "What do you want?" he asked irritably. "Do you want to wait around here until they shoot us?"

Tate merely smiled. "I was going to give you some help," he said, "that is—to quell this rebellion."

Henno was too surprised to speak for a moment but finally he blurted out incredulously: "You surely don't mean that the two of us could handle this mob?!"

Tate nodded affirmatively. "The two of us and Granny." He patted the strange weapon he was carrying. The amazing part of it was that he actually seemed to be convinced of what he was saying.

Henno was sure that he was looking at a madman who was merely wasting his time. "Get out of my way!" he shouted. "I'm heading to the spaceport with this robot. There's a glider on the roof. If you have any sense you'll come along. Within a few hours the Fleet will be taking over here."

Tate lifted the Granny and aimed it at Henno point blank. His casual expression hardened instantly. "You don't understand me," he said quietly. "Not a single ship is going to land on Zalit." The dark muzzle of the Granny seemed to stare balefully at Henno. The Arkonide representative paled visibly but he still hesitated to tell the robot to move in. "Let me explain something quickly," suggested Tate. "But don't try anything foolish. I can fire this before you can even blink at that tin soldier of yours."

This was no madman talking now. Never in his life had Henno seen such self-confidence in a man. "Then speak!" he said hoarsely.

"I am a Terran agent on Zalit," Tate confessed. "Until now my job here has been merely to observe from a safe distance and send out periodic reports."

"You are actually a Terran?!" exclaimed Henno.

The weapon wavered slightly as Tate nodded affirmatively. "The battleship *Troy* and 6 light cruisers of the Solar Fleet were on their way to Zalit escorted by 44 heavy-class robot warships of the Greater Imperium," reported the agent.

"They were?" repeated Henno in amazement.

"Now we're on our own resources. Effective as of now I am in command here. You will soon receive instructions from the Emperor which will explain everything."

A hand-thrown bomb exploded at the far end of the corridor.

"Let me get out of here!" begged Henno.

"Too late!" retorted Tate as he nodded toward the other end of the hall.

Henno whirled around and saw the first group of rebels storming through the bomb smoke. They were shouting and raving, some of them carrying bottles which they were nipping at as they went along.

"We're lost!" exclaimed Henno.

Tate dove to one side as a shot from an energy gun hissed by. Henno felt the impact of the near miss and was thrown to the floor. In the midst of a rising bedlam, the Arkonide turned over in time to see Tate aim his weapon at the attackers.

For the first time, the Granny went into action. Its superior fire power swept the hall clear of rebels, ripped out a segment of the wall and split the staircase in two. Tate chuckled in satisfaction while Henno gasped for breath and his eyes watered from the acrid smoke around him.

By now Tate had regained his feet and was charging toward a new group of attackers who were surging up over the ruins of the staircase while yelling battle cries and firing wildly. Henno also started to take part in the fight but he had to be careful not to hit the Terran who seemed to be everywhere at once, driving back the assault forces with murderous fire from his weapon. Meanwhile the Arkonide was asking himself what could have happened to keep the Fleet from coming to their aid. He heard the Terran shouting an order but at first didn't grasp what he was saying.

"The robot!" shouted Tate a second time. "Send that thing into the fight!"

Within a few minutes the Terran had become the epitome of courage and decisiveness for Henno. The only thing he doubted was that the agent could ultimately hold off the attacks in the long run. He saw the other's warlike figure standing at the top of the shattered stairs, half-enshrouded by a pall of dust and smoke. As usual, he weighed his chances, realizing that in spite of it all the percentages weren't too favourable for him if he were to remain. Above all he had to get the Terran's attention distracted from his own activities. So he gave an order to the combat chapek and the machine moved forward at once to give assistance to Tate.

For one last moment Henno registered the battle scene in his mind and then he ran. He heard the thunderous voice of Granny again and its shockwave reached him with unexpected impact even at the entrance to the roof-lift. Henno swung into the lift and pressed buttons. His heart was practically in his mouth yet the sense of relief at his escape began to calm him down. The elevator came to a stop and the Emperor's deputy stepped out onto the roof.

When he felt the fresh air against his face he sighed with relief. Although the sound of the battle below was only muffled here, a number of explosions made the building tremble. Dark grey columns of smoke were rising up in many places around the edges of the roof.

The glider was still there in its parking slot, undamaged. Salor Henno patted the money purse at his belt with grim satisfaction. Again, he thought, there was no situation that a shrewd head couldn't handle. All

one had to do was keep his senses about him and not go crazy like this fellow Tate. Henno shook himself. Actually he should be grateful to this Terran because he was furnishing him with an excellent cover for his retreat.

Henno reached the glider and climbed aboard. Two minutes later he ran into an unpleasant surprise because he discovered that both the automatic and manual flight controls were locked or blocked off in some manner. Henno uttered a dark curse and began frantically to search for the cause of the trouble. Although he worked until he was in a sweat he finally came to the realization that it was useless.

A few levels below the battle still appeared to be in progress. Now actual flames were whipping up past the edges of the roof. Henno felt the return of his fear of death. Without knowing where he was going, he tumbled out of the glider. At first he was not even thinking of defending himself. Like a frightened animal he searched about blindly for a hiding place.

A figure stepped out of the elevator shed. The man seemed to stagger slightly but he was close to Henno and grasped him with one free hand—while in the other he carried the Granny.

Tate was shaking him. "What's the matter with you??" he shouted.

Henno pulled his wits together. "You're still alive?" he muttered.

Tate chuckled and released him. "Naturally," he answered with incredible casualness.

"The glider's controls won't work!" reported Henno hopefully. It occurred to him that this man might be able to solve the problem.

"I know," said Tate calmly. "I took the liberty of making a few adjustments in your aircar, in case you got the idea to leave me and Granny in the lurch."

Henno began to ask himself if being shrewd alone was enough, as compared to this combination of shrewdness and courage which Tate seemed to embody. "What about the rebels?" he asked.

The agent made a vague gesture with his hand "They're down there," he said. "They managed to snuff out your robot but I've given them something to keep them busy for awhile. We're free to fly to the spaceport now."

Henno felt flustered and embarrassed. "I couldn't have left you alone here that would have been preposterous to fly off without you."

Tate didn't seem to be giving the matter much thought. He merely beckoned to him with easy confidence. "Come on!" he said, and he led the way to the glider.

They climbed in and Tate brought the controls to life with a few quick adjustments. Meanwhile he whistled happily to himself, making sure that Granny lay close at hand.

"What kind of a weapon is that?" asked Henno hesitantly.

"It's old, out-dated and it really has no business being in service anymore," the Terran told him. "It's a high-speed grenade thrower. Aside from being messy its main advantage is noise. When those grenades explode it sounds like a bomb raid."

He started the glider and they rose up from the roof. Henno looked down into the street where the rebels were still ensconced around the burning building and were starting to celebrate their victory. If at this moment the Arkonide felt any regrets they were related more to his own losses than to those of the Imperium.

Sooner or later those in power would be swept aside by another revolution, new names would emerge and new usurpers would decide the fate of Zalit. Zalit was a restless world because the colonists were never satisfied. Their centuries-long fight for independence had left them excitable and perpetually unruly. The only way to overcome them would be by the intervention of the Fleet.

But the Terran had told him that no ships would be coming here. For Henno, Zalit was merely a small episode in his life; for Tate it had been a mere assignment to intrigue and battle; for the rebel—a symbol of freedom. For many men a planet could mean many things. It all depended on the point of view.

As Henno saw the countryside glide past beneath him was only vaguely aware of movement and colour. He was staring at the broad back of the Terran who was bent over the flight controls. He thought fleetingly that he might be able to strike him down from behind but he dismissed the idea because he knew only too well how dependent he was upon this agent.

"Alright," said Tate finally; "now I can tell you finally what happened to those ships you alerted with your distress call." He turned around, supporting himself casually on the barrel of Granny, and began to tell his story.

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The mission directive came through a few minutes after 07:00, standard time. Commodore Michael Fellman was on board the heavy cruiser *Troy*, which was scouting certain regions of star cluster M-13 along with 6 light cruisers and a backup escort of 44 robotships of the Greater Imperium.

As he took the dispatch from his Com Officer, MacDanies, he said: "Give them a confirmation, Sparks. We'll lay a course for Zalit at once."

Fellman was a quiet type who almost gave the impression of being melancholy but it was said of him that he was unusually capable. His blond hair was combed back flat against his head and carefully parted. His heavy eyebrows gave him a gloomy expression. No one had ever heard him laugh out loud and when he spoke it was merely with a movement of his lips like a toothless old man.

The Commodore was never unfriendly but at times there was a barely perceptible note of scorn in his voice. He and the crew always communicated with a reserve that was neither sullen nor tense. It was merely the result of Fellman's taciturnity which in a way was reassuring. He had graduated from the Space Academy with honours and his missions had been successful.

"It's a personal order from the Administrator," Fellman explained to his First Officer, who was an African named Donald Suwari. "Our task group is to fly immediately to Zalit. There's an uprising there and the Imperial representative, a certain Salor Henno, has put out a call for help. Meanwhile we'll get in touch with our Zalit agent, Wayne Tate.

Suwari's eyes flashed brightly in his dark face. He smiled. "I know Tate, sir. We were on a mission together 4 years ago. He's a pretty wild go-getter. He always carries an out-dated weapon around with him. I think he even has a name for the thing."

"Granny," commented Fellman incidentally, but once more it was a demonstration of how well informed he was about everything.

"That's right, sir!" exclaimed Suwari, surprised. "It probably means grenade."

"Get going with the transition coördinates for Zalit right away," ordered the Commodore. "let's not come out too close to the system. Just make it the usual distance. Meanwhile we'll make contact with Tate on the hypercom. He has his own code call and also he has his own remote unit that can pick up from his main receiver so that he can replay whatever's come in, even when he's not at home. He should know that we're coming."

Radio messages were sent out from the *Troy* to the other ships. In the case of the Terran vessels the various commanders received their instructions directly whereas there was no one on board the robot warships to register orders—other than lifeless positronic machines.

About an hour later the task force went into transition. Wayne Tate had been advised and the agent had assured them that he would join Henno as soon as the spaceships emerged from hyperspace. As soon as the pains of dematerialisation had subsided, Fellman got back on the hypercom to talk to Tate again.

"Hold on a few minutes yet, Lt. Tate. After a briefing with the squadron staff I'll be issuing the final operation orders."

"Very well, sir," answered the agent.

Fellman turned to Suwari. "Notify the robots that we're moving in on Zalit," he said. "After our briefing, tell them to be ready."

Like every officer of the Solar Fleet, Fellman knew that the robotships, of the Arkonides were not as manoeuvrable as the Terran units. One reason for this was the lack of a human crew but probably the main reason was the need for the robot vessels to always double-check with the positronic Regent on Arkon 3.

Suwari went into the Com Room to give MacDanies the necessary instructions. However, the African came back very quickly. Fellman was in the process of studying a surface chart of Zalit but he interrupted his work when he sensed Suwari's uneasiness.

The Commodore's heavy brows came together. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Sir, they don't answer!" exclaimed the First Officer, obviously confused.

Fellman's expression hardly changed. He shoved the map back into the chart rack of the Nav desk and stared openly at Suwari. "I don't quite understand," he said calmly.

"The robotships haven't answered—they won't confirm the orders to move against Zalit!" said Suwari swiftly. "MacDanies tried everything. They must have received our messages but they don't respond."

"But that's impossible!" Fellman retorted. "Sparks!" he shouted at the open Com Room. "Is something

wrong with your equipment?"

MacDaniei thrust his bristly head through the door and stared anxiously at his chief. "My gear is in top shape, sir," he insisted. He sounded as though nothing in the world could shake him from that conviction.

Fellman nodded to Suwari and they moved in unison toward the Com Room. Suwari could virtually feel the eyes of the other men on them as they left the Command Central of the *Troy*.

"Alright, Sparks," ordered Fellman. "Let's try it again."

Sparks went through the usual operation once more at his panels. They listened for awhile without getting any response. "There, you can see for yourself, sir," said the radio man almost sullenly. "Not the slightest squeak of an answer!"

Fellman ran a hand through his straight blond hair while avoiding the helpless look from Suwari. "Try another kind of message, Sparks," he ordered. "Ask them what the devil's going on!"

He had to admit that the situation was making him uneasy. If living men were there in those command centrals instead of robots, maybe they might have gotten an explanation by now. But all they were dealing with was mindless positronics that operated on commands from the Regent. Cybernetic operations had always been a problem for Fellman and he couldn't imagine *what* was causing the robotships to act this way. After all, Rhodan had expressly advised the Fleet that Atlan's robotships were to serve as backup to the Solar Fleet and that they were under the orders of Terran commanders. But now something had happened where the chapeks refused to answer a radio call and they seemed to be following some unknown command of the mammoth Brain on Arkon 3.

MacDaniei interrupted his thoughts after a few moments. "They won't answer that one, either, sir," he announced.

"I presume that it's only due to some temporary interference," remarked the Commodore. "In any case we will fly to Zalit without any further delay."

Fellman's orders went from ship to ship and were confirmed. It was only the Arkonide ships that remained silent.

"The main thing is that they stay with us," commented Fellman, "whether they answer or not."

The *Troy* slowly separated from the formation and its mighty engines began to turn on power. The 6 light cruisers followed after the larger ship.

Suwari had been watching the scanners and now he shouted to Fellman. "The robots aren't following us, sir! They haven't moved."

Fellman had the *Troy* slow down. On the viewscreens the great battleships were easily discernible. Fellman was aware of a growing sense of impending disaster. He racked his brains for an explanation.

"It looks as if they don't want to follow us to Zalit, sir," said Viceroy, the officer in charge of the positronics.

Fellman nodded. "But I'm wondering why," he answered despondently. Then he hardened his resolve. "We have orders to put down the revolution on Zalit—and that is exactly what we're going to do,



gentlemen!" he announced. "We'll do it with or without the support of those robots!"

He heard a murmur of agreement from the men who had always felt an unspoken antipathy toward the Arkonide ships. Fellman knew that all members of the Solar Fleet were anxious for a chance to prove that they were superior to these bloodless war machines. And when he looked deeply into himself the Commodore had to admit that he was no different from the rest.

"Let's leave them sitting there," he ordered.

Not a muscle quivered in Suwari's dark face as he took over the flight controls of the *Troy*. In general, however, the African was temperamental, in contrast to Fellman.

"Increase engines to full—" Fellman was interrupted in the middle of his command as the *Troy* shuddered under the impact of a sudden blow. The Commodore was thrown sideways and he collided with the navigation console.

"They're firing at us!" yelled Suwari excitedly. "They've opened up on us!"

It only took Fellman the fraction of a second to realize that his First Officer referred to the robotships. The disaster he had been suspecting all along had suddenly broken upon them in full force. What had happened was an atrocity. Spaceships of the allied Emperor Gonozal VIII, otherwise known as Atlan, had opened fire on them—warships which had been assigned to support the Terrans in any and all operations.

It was incredible. Everything in Fellman's nature strove to resist accepting the event as factual. But the dim presentiment grew in him that this was only a part of it—only a fragment belonging to a larger framework that cast a threatening shadow as far as the Earth itself.

"Apparently they want to stop us from going to Zalit!" called Viceroy as he got to his feet next to the indicator consoles. The impact had knocked him down and his lean face was still trembling.

To Fellman it was clear that the Regent was behind this action because the ships' positronic brains could never have directed such a manoeuvre without checking first with Arkon 3. For some reason or another the Regent had changed tactics and decided to withdraw its support of the Terran ships. In fact it was even ready to attack Terran fleet units if they wanted to engage in any action within its sphere of influence. Fellman wondered how Atlan the Emperor would proceed in the face of this development.

At the same time the Commodore had an awakening urge to resist this unexpected attack. Yet he was trusting that the one jolt they had received was only a warning shot because of course his 7 ships would not be able to withstand a sudden mass bombardment from all of the robot warships. In fact, simple logic told Fellman that in case of a battle his chances for a victory were hopeless. He had to suppress his anger. He carried the responsibility for many hundreds of crewmen and he was not ready to rashly gamble their lives.

"Let's break up the operation and pull back," he ordered. "Suwari, make a check for damages immediately and give me a report."

MacDanies staggered out of the Com Room, still holding his hands to his head. "They finally answered us, sir," he said grimly and with pointed sarcasm. "I hope we're not going to wait around too long before we send them our reply—and *Idon't* mean by radio!"

Fellman regarded his Com Officer critically. "Sparks, if you're hankering for a space battle then maybe you'd better climb into a combat suit and take over this command."

MacDanies brought his fist down resoundingly on the Nav console. His face reddened with anger. "Sir—don't tell me you're going to just stand by and take that attack with no answering fire!"

"Against the overwhelming odds we wouldn't have a chance," Fellman replied, matter-of-factly.

MacDanies became aware of the bone bruise on his hand. He massaged it ruefully and turned back to the Com Room without another word.

"That Scotch-Irish temper of his blew a fuse again," said Viceroy as if seeking to make excuses for the radio man.

Followed by the 6 light cruisers, the *Troy* withdrew from the Zalit area without hindrance from the robot formation which still remained motionless in space. Fellman set up a hypercom contact with Terrania in order to report the incident personally to Rhodan. That was when the Commodore learned that similar events were occurring everywhere in M-13 and that the Administrator was issuing general orders for all Terran ships to return to the Sol System. Fellman called for transition coordinates and headed his small squadron back toward Earth.

Just prior to the first transition he made a last hypercom contact with the agent, Tate, in order to give him an exact picture of the situation. It was the beginning of a development that would ultimately lead to a test of strength against the robot Regent. Under normal circumstances, Earth wouldn't have a chance.

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Thus Tate concluded his report to Henno. "So it's pretty unlikely that we're going to get any help," he said. "I don't think the robotships will come here on their own. Something's gone wrong with the giant Brain on Arkon 3."

Like most Arkonides, Henno had always placed a blind trust in the Regent, for after all it had guided the destinies of the race over an unthinkable period of centuries. "Well, certainly there is a logical explanation for everything," he replied.

"It's not our place to try figuring it out," the agent reminded him. "We have other things to do. The only question is whether or not you're with me."

Henno felt inspired by the inner strength of this man. He felt confident that with Tate he could face any struggles to come. "What will we do?" he asked.

"Do you still want to try for that robotship at the spaceport?" asked Tate.

Henno unfastened the money purse from his belt and waved it in front of Tate. "I think that this will help us to do a lot of things," he smiled. "Whether at the spaceport or anywhere else you may want to begin your work."

"The three of us," replied Tate quietly as he patted T.L.C. "We'll set this planet on its ear if we have to."

Nor did Henno doubt for a minute that the Terran was capable of doing just that...

## 2/ EPETHUS—DISASTER KEY

There is an old proverb that says one never sees the worth of something until it is gone. Undoubtedly there were many people in the Greater Imperium who knew how to evaluate the Regent and its work but the majority merely took its activities for granted. One accepted it like the sun or a natural moon which simply belonged. For many Arkonides the existence of the mammoth positronicon was taken so much for granted that they no longer saw the robot Brain as a giant machine. To them it was merely a well-oiled part of the Imperial machinery and was integral to the natural state of affairs.

In other words, with but few exceptions the Arkonides had fallen into a state of complete dependence upon the Regent. For such men Atlan was merely an unimportant figurehead, a representative without political significance, a futile strawman who submitted to the will of the Brain.

However there were some who were only too well aware of Atlan's *real* significance and the nature of his tasks. These men knew the scope of influence that was wielded by the Emperor. The important commands and decisions came from him and not at all from the Regent. Atlan was actually a key figure and with the robot Brain behind him he represented a mighty factor of power.

Of course the people who understood the political position of Gonozal VIII were anything but happy with the situation—on the contrary; their total efforts were aimed at overthrowing Atlan and bringing to power a man chosen from their own ranks.

In the camp of the underground movement it was a foregone conclusion that whoever was to overthrow the Emperor must first get the Regent out of the way. Thus in connection with the repeated attempts against Gonozal VIII a mysterious attack against the giant Brain had also occurred. With the help of one of their transmitters, 8 Akons had penetrated the interior of the Regent and proceeded to go to work at their leisure, until Rhodan had moved in and eliminated their receiving station. However, before Rhodan could subject the 8 intruders to questioning, the Regent had destroyed them with its automatic weapons. All that remained were a few incomprehensible fragments of their equipment.

So far no one knew whether or not the Akons had succeeded in programming the Brain according to their own designs.

But then came the evidence that the attack must have succeeded because the Regent started to make decisions which caused the very foundations of empire to tremble—both in the Greater Imperium and the Solar Empire.

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The man who stepped gravely in front of the lighted star map was accustomed to making decisions which were of far-reaching significance for all of humanity. From a physical standpoint he seemed to be young and supple but his eyes contradicted this first impression. In their grey depths gleamed an older wisdom and knowledge which made him eminently suitable for the position of First Administrator, who guided the destiny of the Solar Imperium.

Perry Rhodan removed the light pointer from its case beside the map. He used the beam to point out various dark-red spots on the chart. "In these areas," he said, "we have an unusually strong concentration of our fleet task forces. You all know why this has been done. This deployment is based on strategic considerations."

He turned around and scanned his audience of top-ranking officers and leading officials. "Moreover, we must admit that it's been in our self-interests to do so because our main forces are everywhere where it's necessary to demonstrate to Springers and other races that we are not asleep and that we're ready at any time to defend ourselves against attack. In the past few months it has developed that Arkonide robot units joined us in support of our various fleet groups. With Atlan's help, a military merging of the 2 Imperiums was in its full course."

The light pointer in the Administrator's sinewy hand described an inclusive circle. "This development, gentlemen, brought us to the point of being too sure of ourselves. We dropped our guard a little and we concerned ourselves with trivial things when compared to the present situation. So now we're facing the consequences." He shook his head slightly. "We all know that we can't blame Atlan for it, but it seems that the 8 Akon saboteurs who got into the Regent were successful, after all. At least we know the robot Brain is acting very strangely. All over the galaxy the robotships are pulling back from our fleet units or they refuse to take part in patrolling missions. In one case a Terran ship was even fired at. The robots dropped a warning shot across the *Troy* when it was following orders to fly to Zalit and put down a revolution. Since then I've received a detailed report from Commodore Fellman."

Reginald Bell shouted angrily from the rear of the room. "We ought to put the Regent in his place again!"

There was a murmur of agreement as many of the men turned to nod their heads at him. Rhodan raised both hands in rejection. "We mustn't allow ourselves to overact, gentlemen. If we don't proceed with caution now we'll pay for it later."

Allan D. Mercant, the Chief of Intelligence, had a question. "Have you arrived at any conclusions yet as to what we might do?"

"Of course," said Rhodan. "It's no longer a secret to anyone in the galaxy that the robotships have stopped responding to our commands. That leaves us facing 2 problems. Various interstellar races could think we've been weakened to the point where they may try new infringements. But that's not the main danger, which is the Regent himself. If he is drawing his ships back in spite of Atlan's counter commands, it's entirely possible that he is planning an attack against Terra."

Rhodan's words were followed by an oppressive silence because every man present was well aware of what a surprise attack by Arkon's robot fleets could mean. The Solar Fleet was still no match for that kind of concentrated military power.

"All we can do at the moment is to keep bolstering up and tightening our security," continued Rhodan. "A general order has gone out to all units of the Fleet to return at once to the Sol System. At present our ships are racing home from all sections of the galaxy in order to build up a heavy defence ring around the

Earth."

The Administrator replaced the light pointer and faced the men with folded arms. His bronzed features wore a slightly pensive expression. "After due deliberation I find it necessary to declare an emergency and to place the Solar Imperium under a top alert condition," he said.

He waited to see if anyone would oppose his suggestion but no one raised his voice. Every man present knew Rhodan well enough to know that his experience gave him a special overview of all eventualities. If the Administrator felt that a top alert should be declared, then there could be no doubt that he was right.

Rhodan revealed further plans. "We're going to call up all reserves—more than 100 million trained spacemen. I hope we'll never have to send them against the most powerful military force in the galaxy, meaning the Regent."

When Rhodan looked into the eyes of his colleagues he saw the same wish reflected there. Each of them was a determined fighter but none was so blind that he couldn't picture how an attack by the Arkonide robot fleet would end. It would be the destruction of the Earth.

Rhodan still saw a last hope in Atlan because after all the Regent had recognized Gonozal VIII and accepted him as the rightful heir to the imperial throne.

But Rhodan still did not know the difficulties that Atlan was facing.

\* \* \* \*

Wock considered himself to be a loyal supporter of the Imperium and a reliable servant of the Emperor—but such he was not. His conviction was merely based on the fact that so far nothing had happened to put his loyalty to the test. It was easy for Wock to be an "Emperor's man" because until now nobody had tried to prevent it.

His presumably incontestable loyalty had even continued when Atlan announced that he would be leaving Arkon 1 because he no longer felt safe in the Crystal Palace. Inasmuch as Wock knew practically everything that happened around the Emperor he remembered the recent treacherous assassination attempt which had only been thwarted by Pucky the mousebeaver in the last second. So Wock had taken off with Atlan in a small ship from Arkon 3 and had come here a few days ago. He was aware of the fact that Gonozal VIII was worried but even that had failed to disturb his allegiance.

What finally caused Wock to waver for the first time was a raygun of very considerable calibre—but it was the man behind the gun who actually brought Wock to the point of renouncing his imperial partisanship.

Wock had just traversed the air-conditioned main hall of Atlan's new residence when a man stepped out from behind a pillar. His first reaction was merely a sense of vexation because of the carelessness of the robot guards who certainly must have noticed the intruder. The stranger was tall and his eyes were cold, which indicated he knew how to use the weapon in his hand. Wock stopped and raised his arms above his head, implying that he was well aware of the futility of offering any resistance.

"That's fine, old fellow," said the stranger. "I see already that we understand each other."

Of course Wock had never realized that communication between 2 people could be enhanced by means of a weapon in the hands of just one of them but at the moment he was ready to subscribe to the strange philosophy.

"What do you want?" he asked, knowing that his voice had taken on the obsequious tone of an inferior.

The man looked at him thoughtfully and scratched himself with a free hand on the back of his neck. "The two of us are going to carry out an experiment," he announced.

Wock winced at the other's sharp tone. Besides, he had never liked the word "experiment" because it had the connotation of some kind of action that had an uncertain outcome.

"You will go directly from here to His Highness," ordered the stranger, "and you will offer him my compliments!"

"The Emperor will call the robots!" Wock blurted out. "You will not leave this building alive!"

"I'll go as and when I please," the man assured him. "Now do what I said!"

When Wock moved away with his back to the intruder he shuddered, expecting any second to be struck down by a murderous energy beam. Every muscle in him urged him to simply run for it but he managed to walk at a normal pace. Once when he looked back, the interloper was nowhere to be seen.

In his excitement Wock forgot to knock when he entered Atlan's chamber. He opened the door and stammered out the first thing that came to his mind. The Emperor was bent over his desk examining a strange device which must have just been installed there because Wock had not seen it until now.

"Excuse me, Your Eminence!" muttered Wock indistinctly.

Atlan straightened up, his face still expressionless as though he were mentally elsewhere. Wock pointed over his shoulder into the main hall.

"There's a stranger out there with a weapon!" he finally cried out excitedly. "He—he ordered me to send you his compliments!"

Atlan struck the alarm button for the robot guards and simultaneously whipped a small pistol out of his pocket. A loudspeaker crackled as an impersonal voice was heard: "Alarm signal duly noted."

The Emperor stared at Wock in sudden consternation. He leapt forward and closed the door, which made Wock sense that something was seriously wrong. He would have gladly run somewhere else where he could feel more secure.

Atlan had a microphone extension with him. "I command you to search for the intruder immediately!" he said into the instrument. Then he covered it with his hand and whispered to Wock: "Something is not right with the robots. They usually respond immediately to an alarm and post themselves outside my door—but just now all the guard control did was to acknowledge my signal."

The mechanical voice interrupted him. "We have orders not to accept any instructions from Gonozal VIII," it announced unobtrusively.

Wock made a croaking sound of horror and dismay as he realized what kind of experiment he had helped the stranger to perform. The intruder knew something about the mysterious change that had come over the robot guards. He was here to convince himself that the fighting machines would actually leave the Emperor undefended.

In feverish haste, Atlan established a direct contact with the Regent. Cybernetically the robot guards were subordinate to the Regent; therefore any failure to respond on their part must be attributable to the giant Brain itself. Atlan secretly asked himself if the crisis he had expected for so many years had finally arrived. He considered it a miracle that he was still alive because the countless attempts against him had only been thwarted by luck or some chance circumstance. Power and isolation were traditionally a bad combination because mighty men in their loneliness tended to become embittered and to react under mental tension. Members of the imperial nobility greeted him with icy formality and in spite of their outward show of subservience they made him feel that they considered him to be an unwanted anachronism in the Arkon stellar empire.

Little by little they had taken all his friends away—even Moku, a little female dog that Rhodan had given him as a present. Fellmer Lloyd, the mutant, had been forced to kill the little pet because it had been booby-trapped to cause his assassination. So Atlan had chosen the old Arkonide Wock to be his personal aide although he well knew he was capable of betraying him. Yet Wock was too much of a coward to ever try something against him directly.

The indicator lamp flashed red and Atlan switched on his voice channel to the Regent. "This is the Emperor speaking," he said, although the vast robot knew precisely who was speaking to it. For one thing, Atlan used a private channel direct line, and for another the mechanical optics of the Regent could "see" the great man by means of the video transmission.

"What do you want?" came the calm response.

Atlan frowned at the sudden absence of formality. The question was obviously impolite. The immortal admiral tensed. Something was not right with the Brain. It was vital to determine at once how the trouble could be rectified.

"The robot security here, refuses to follow my orders," he said.

"That is correct," came the reply.

"Why?"

"A decision has to be made," replied that section of the Regent which had been connected to this conversation.

Atlan knew at once that he would not make any headway in this direction because the vagueness of the answer indicated that the Regent would maintain silence on the subject. There was only the single alternative of making his demands sound so logical to the Regent that he would have to carry them through.

"Certainly my presence will be needed in some way for this decision to be made." Atlan strove to make his voice sound quite calm.

"Very probably," agreed the Brain.

Atlan smiled slightly because he thought he had outwitted the positronic behemoth. "But if I am killed now I can't be present for this decision and so it could not be carried out. Logically, therefore, it is important for the guards to protect me."

For awhile there was a silence in which only Wock's rapid breathing could be heard.

Then the Regent said: "Your death would change nothing. On the contrary, it could be a foregone conclusion."

Then Atlan knew he could no longer depend upon the positronicon. His only help now would be the Terrans. With a hysterical cry, Wock charged out of the room. Atlan listened calmly to his waning footsteps in the hall. He checked his weapon.

Suddenly he could almost virtually see the vast expanse of the Greater Imperium in his mind's eye and he wondered why this great burden hadn't crushed him before. He played a major role in time and space—or at least this had been true until now—and yet he felt small and lonely and tired. He would have preferred to wipe away the whole picture with a sweep of his hand and vanish incognito among the stars. But that would not do.

2 hours later he received news that all the countless worker chapeks, which were also subordinate to and guided by the Regent, had ceased their labours. The giant shipyards inside the war planet became empty and all manufacturing was brought to a stop. The Regent stubbornly refused to receive any instructions from Atlan.

There was only one single man in the galaxy who could help him now and that was Perry Rhodan. Of course the Administrator was no doubt faced with his own troubles now but they also stemmed from the Regent. Thus there was little doubt that Rhodan would come.

So Atlan sent his distress call to Terrania.

\* \* \* \*

Atlan unconsciously held his breath as the *Ironduke* became visible on his viewscreen and prepared for a landing. He feared that the Regent might try something against the Terrans but nothing happened. Even the usual robot cars that always darted out to landing vessels remained in their stalls and it seemed that the giant Brain had become entirely lifeless. However, Atlan knew that this was not the case and that the Regent was waiting for some special event.

Rhodan's voice sounded from the loudspeaker: "Well, here we are, Admiral."

"The Regent is being very quiet, Perry," reported Atlan over the telecom. "You should be able to disembark without any trouble."

From his chamber Atlan could see on his viewscreen that the first heavily-armed men were leaving the linear-drive warship. He would have been happy to run out and meet them but he was convinced that he must not leave the security of this room. After awhile he observed Rhodan himself moving across the



landingfield with apparently casual strides.

In that moment Pucky, Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta materialized in his chamber. The 2 men wore a new type of weapon while Pucky spread out his empty small hands. "We're the advance guard, old friend," he explained to the Emperor.

Within a few minutes a large part of the Mutant Corps along with Rhodan, Claudrin, Maj. Krefenbac and Dr. Carl Riebsam had assembled in the administrative chamber of the Emperor. Atlan briefed them on the situation that had developed and confirmed that the Regent had ceased to respond to his commands.

"We haven't been napping in the meantime," said Rhodan gravely. "Our specialists have gone into the problem in detail. With computer help and the available data they've come to a conclusion which seems to me to be completely logical."

Atlan looked expectantly at Rhodan but the Terran nodded to Dr. Riebsam. As the mathematician rose to speak, Atlan was impressed by his quiet manner. He knew the man would give him a true and clear exposition.

"We have to face the fact that the 8 Akon saboteurs were able to change the Regent in a negative sense," began Dr. Riebsam. "It's very probable that they concentrated on the A-1 security circuits because according to, what we know the programming in that section is very old and absolutely needs to be updated to present standards and conditions."

"That's right, Doctor," admitted Atlan. "You know that we've tried to make that approach but the Akons beat us to it."

Dr. Riebsam brushed a strand of hair from his forehead. "I don't believe the 8 men from the Blue System have gone about their work in an arbitrary manner," he said. "Undoubtedly they were specialists who knew precisely what they had come here to do. It would be my guess that they obtained the necessary information from the revolutionaries under Carba."

"But the Regent would have defended itself at once against any false programming," objected the Emperor.

"You're perfectly correct, Admiral," Rhodan agreed. "And the rascals also thought of that. So they didn't just go about trying to alter the original programming—all they did was to put in a few additional circuits."

"Additional circuits?" asked Atlan, amazed. "That's a rather vague concept."

"Only at first glance," explained Dr. Riebsam. "Actually, any additional programming of A-1 would have to be very carefully studied so that it would not conflict with the traditional data involved. Therefore the logic areas the Akons had to work with would have been very restricted. In fact, it should be possible to define with a fair amount of certainty just *what* the extra circuitry contained."

"By all the planets! *Epethus!*" cried Atlan, striking his forehead. "Of course! That's the simplest way of all! They've merely forced the Regent to analyse the overall situation according to its own positronic logic. A-1 is nothing more than a part of Disaster Program *Epethus* ."

"Tell us more about this disaster circuit, Emperor," urged Riebsam with new interest.

"A disaster input from *Epethus* would cause security section A-1 to take over power immediately and irrevocably—that is, if A-1 concludes that any Emperor recognized by the Regent has failed, according to the old Arkonides and the old empire security standards."

Riebsam and Rhodan exchanged significant glances.

"According to the *old* Arkonides," Perry repeated

sarcastically. "Well, of course by *their* standards you've failed, Admiral."

Atlan's fists clenched and his eyes narrowed. "What a fiendish move!" he said bitterly.

"Fiendish but carefully considered," said Rhodan. "As you say, it was the simplest of all. The only problem remaining was to get inside the Regent and to plug in the new circuitry. With the new inputs from the additional programming, *Epethus* was awakened and caused A-1 to scan the overall status quo. But centuries have passed since these 2 sections have worked together and much has changed. Yet a positronicon can't simply adapt itself to such things—it must act according to its data even if the data are out of date."

"The Brain thinks I'm a failure," commented the Arkonide. "That's why it's put me on ice and follows none of my orders."

Rhodan paced restlessly back and forth in the room. He knew that this was only the start of the difficulties because what the insurrectionists had achieved so far would not satisfy them. They had blocked out Atlan without killing him. In fact they had even managed to shut down the Regent until the point would be reached for that decision the robot Brain had spoken of.

"That machine is like an old fool," said Dr Riebsam with the objectivity of a scientist. To him the Regent was an object or a thing that had been misguided by living brains. From a mathematical standpoint, of course, the actions of the Regent were entirely understandable because the vast robot was a prisoner of its own square kilometres of registers and data banks.

By comparison to any positronic computer a human brain was slow, sluggish and stupid, a mere nothing beside the tower of knowledge contained in the mechanical memories of such devices. The one advantage of organic brain—and its deciding factor—was that it could adapt itself immediately to new situations and was able to sweep old standards and convictions aside.

Col. Jefe Claudrin's stentorian voice boomed through the room. "We have to find a way to program the Brain in our favour," he suggested.

"The Regent refuses to give me access," explained Atlan bitterly. "The entire area of the robot Brain is closed off by an impenetrable honeycomb screen of energy. And even your mutants have to bow to that kind of barrier, John."

John Marshall, the chief of the Mutant Corps, nodded confirmingly. "The teleporters can't get through it," he said. "If they try it they'll get thrown back by it. Not even Pucky would have a chance against it."

Everyone seemed to become silent in thought but it could be seen by their expressions that no one had a usable idea.

"Ship call, sir!"

The voice of Stant Nolinow suddenly came over the speaker. The lieutenant had remained on board the *Ironduke*.

"What's the matter, Stant?" asked Claudrin in his usual bellowing tones.

"A small spaceship is making a landing approach. If I'm not mistaken it's of Akon design. At any rate it's spherical with flattened poles. The Regent's scanners must have picked it up long before we did."

"The Regent seems to be shut down," Atlan reminded everyone.

Rhodan didn't waste a second on useless discussions. "Pucky, you jump with me to the *Ironduke* immediately Ras, you bring the Admiral. We have to take action at once."

Pucky waddled forward with an enterprising grin. Rhodan gripped his hand and waited until Tschubai and the Arkonide had dematerialised.

"Let's go, little one!" he ordered.

For a brief moment the men could still discern the mousebeaver's face but then the image appeared to flicker and both figures vanished as if they had never been there.

They materialized in the Control Central of the *Ironduke* and Rhodan joined Nolinow at once before the space surveillance indicators.

"The Akon ship has beamed out some mysterious radio impulses, sir," said Nolinow. "We can't figure them out."

"They were probably identification signals for the Regent," interjected Atlan. "Apparently the Brain was to be informed as to *who* was making a landing approach. It looks very much as if the Regent has been waiting for this particular ship."

"That's it!" exclaimed Rhodan. "We have to hold back that ship under any circumstances—or perhaps even destroy it!"

"I think that's being taken out of our hands from another direction, sir." Nolinow pointed to the great panob screens where the seemingly endless spaceport could be observed.

Although almost all the men present had seen the spectacle many times before, nevertheless the scene revealed by the screens lost none of its usual fascination for them. More than 1000 Arkonide robotships rose up from the landing-field like gargantuan black soap bubbles and climbed into the skies of Arkon 3.

"They'll make short work of that Akon ship," said Tschubai quietly. "Apparently the Regent decided in our favour at the last moment."

"Do you really believe that, Ras?" said Atlan dubiously.

The swarm of ships disappeared from the viewscreens but the deep-space scanners followed their course. The warship armada rushed outward toward the Akon ship which was visible on the *Ironduke*'s indicators as a tiny blip of light.

"Sir, the Akons aren't making any attempt to get away!" reported Nolinow.

"Naturally not," observed Rhodan, deeply shaken. He had to avert his gaze from Atlan when he spoke to him. "We were far too slow, Admiral."

Atlan's uncomprehending stare gave way to a bitter realization. He now knew the real reason for the lightning take off of the Arkonide ships.

The lieutenant spoke again. "The robotships are not attacking the Akons, sir. They are only circling the aliens."

"They are taking the Akons under protective escort," Rhodan told him. "The Regent foresaw that we might attack the ship and has moved to block that idea before it got started. The Brain is well aware that our small force here on Arkon 3 is in no position to risk an open confrontation."

Atlan smiled. "I've just been thinking about *my* position," he said. "I'm an Emperor without an Imperium because there is no one to transmit my commands or to follow them. The only thing left of my glory seems to be the title alone—or at least so far no one has stepped forth to lay claims to it."

Atlan's words had been full of irony but sooner than anyone on board the *Ironduke* realized it was to be discovered that this very irony was but a mask for the truth. He who was about to challenge the Emperor's position and announce his claim to the throne had just arrived in an Akon spaceship and had landed in plain view of the *Ironduke*.

### 3/ THE DEAD COMMAND

From the beginning of it all it had been like stepping, from the shadows of a dark cave into the bright light of day, there to observe things of whose existence he had never dreamed before. He had rushed toward this new light, drinking in the new impressions almost greedily, and soon the darkness of ignorance had been left behind.

Carba would not have thought it possible that the augmentation of his intelligence could have such an effect upon him. Actually he found himself in a state of mental intoxication. He was bewildered by the voracity of his mind and the swiftness with which it absorbed everything. Like an addict living in the two-faced Paradise of hallucinations, Carba discovered that in his previous ignorance he had been going through life like a blind man. With the new mental gifts which had been activated in him by ancient Arkonide techniques, he was able to obtain a completely different picture of his environment. A brain like his was deserving of being at the summit of his race. It would not do for him to be living among a bunch of empty-headed fools whose intelligence quotient was less than level 50, whereas he, Carba, now soared way beyond L-50.

What Carba did not know was that he had been deliberately condemned to death because no organic brain could withstand this kind of alteration.

Carba was still young and consequently inexperienced to a certain degree. His accomplices made him

nervous and irritable with their patient procedures and the careful circumspection with which they tucked in the various threads of their plan. The Akons never plunged into things rashly. They were in the habit of sometimes brooding for days on apparently unimportant phases of a security plan.

There was only one reason why he put up with their slow operations: they were successful. They were well on their way to taking over the power in the Greater Imperium and this would place the young Arkonide at the pinnacle—as Emperor. The Regent would doubtlessly acknowledge him because he possessed the high grade of intelligence that security circuit A-1 demanded. Moreover, since he belonged to the House of Minterol he was from one of the old-line families of Arkonide aristocracy, which was another point in his favour when the Regent ran its positronic evaluation of him.

Carba was tall and lean and had a habit of fidgeting with his hands about his person as though he were searching for something that was hidden in his clothing. As he stood now before the oval viewscreen and looked out at the spaceport he was aware of being here for the first time with a certain amount of justification. For his protection the Regent had provided a fleet formation. Mular, the morose Akon commander, had mentioned that another 10,000 ships would be taking off in order to watch every move of the Terrans. Carba smiled secretly to himself when he thought of the Earthmen having to stand by and watch while he carried out his plan—or what he *believed* was his, plan. With 10,000 warships circling overhead, they should, get the message that any attack now would be futile.

Tusnor, the glib-talking Anti, came to Carba's side and gave him a similar nudge in the ribs. Carba felt repelled by the Baalol's unctuous friendliness. He would tolerate his presence only as long as it was absolutely necessary. Uronla was another member of the sect on board but he seemed to be quiet and uncommunicative.

"You will soon be ruler of all you see out there, my friend," said Tusnor, and Carba thought he detected a note of jealousy in the Anti's voice.

Nevertheless he could not refrain from answering. "it's time to free the Imperium from these Terran parasites who have gotten in everywhere."

Carba always spoke of Terrans as if they were animals. What made the young Arkonide so dangerous was his inner conviction that he had been chosen to be the saviour of the Imperium. He thought and expressed himself concerning his mission in abstract ethical terms which were so exceptional as to leave no leverage for criticism. The Akon resistance fighters knew well how to exploit this peculiarity and they had used Carba as a straw figurehead through whom the Blue System sought to achieve its goals.

"Yes," agreed Tusnor hatefully, "we have to put these barbarians where they belong." At the same time he was thinking of the failure of his own race to accomplish this.

Mular the commander and Jergo the navigator came into the room followed by Sansaro, the actual leader of the operation. Mular's broad figure momentarily concealed the scientist from Carba's view.

"I've just been talking to the 'Emperor about his plans," announced Tusnor without taking the least notice of Carba's look of displeasure. "It wouldn't do any harm if later he had a few experienced advisers around him."

"But those advisers could have different names than ours," retorted Jergo challengingly.

Sansaro caught up to them then. "There is little purpose in being concerned about such matters at the moment," he said mildly. "We must proceed one step at a time if we are to succeed."

Sansaro had spoken unemotionally and he had a way of expressing himself which always sounded quite rational. This made him a born leader who could convince other men and choose the right words to lead everybody in the desired direction by always remaining objective. Sansaro the revolutionary and rebellious was nonetheless calm and circumspect. A level-headed thinker from the green hills of Daraman, he was one of the leading figures of the Akon resistance movement.

"You're right," of course," agreed Jergo. The obvious edge to his voice was to let Sansaro know that although he was in agreement he harboured an insuppressible resentment for the Anti.

Tusnor only laughed. Carba walked slowly over to Sansaro. He towered a head above the Akon and was only half his age.

"We have work to do," said Sansaro soberly. "There is no time to lose. We have to arrange for Carba's admittance to the Regent. It's probably doubtful that either the ruling Emperor or his Terran allies are going stand idly by and watch us. We still can't be certain that the Brain is giving us full military support. We must proceed from the premise that it is not going to help us. We have to operate here as if the Positronicon were still on the side of the opposition." This was typical of the Akon. He always put things in their proper proportion and always judged a situation slightly on the negative side in order to avoid the unexpected.

"Everything depends on convincing the Regent that Carba is a suitable contender for the imperial throne," he continued. "Once Carba gets into the Brain's interior we will have won, because it will be a sign that the Great Cöordinator is ready to take orders from our young friend." He turned to Mular "Try and make contact with the Regent. We wish to inform him that we have with us a true Arkonide who has the light of power and intelligence in his eyes, who still has the capability of the ancients and is determined to do everything in his power for the continued existence of the Imperium."

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The rest of the advance group had come back to the Command Central of the *Ironduke* because Rhodan considered Atlan's new residence to be too unsafe for their meeting. At the moment, Maj. Hunt Krefenbac was just shutting down his remote sensor equipment and he looked at Rhodan questioningly.

"Say it all out," Atlan urged him. "You" don't have to hold anything back."

"You won't like it, sir," warned the major hesitantly.

"Naturally not," admitted Atlan, "but by now I'm used to hearing what you call the 'bad news' first."

"There's a man on board the Akon ship whose level of intelligence has been increased to an abnormal extent. I presume this is Carba—and sir, his IQ is above L-50." Krefenbac swallowed slightly before adding: "He could have a higher IQ than your own."

Dr. Riebsam spoke up. "We don't have to be told what this means," he said. "Carba will be able to take over the Imperium completely unhindered. He's equipped with the necessary level of intelligence and he'll maintain that he has come here in the best interests of the Imperium whereas Atlan is working hand in

hand with the 'dangerous' Terrans."

Rhodan had remained silent until now. "We have to put a stop to this game," he said. "Pucky will teleport to the Akon ship and try to put this Carba out of action."

John Marshall objected. "I'm sorry to tell you that there are 2 or 3 Antis on that ship, sir. I've already mentioned that some of my mutants experienced a certain restriction of their special faculties from the moment that ship landed. Pucky wouldn't be able to do anything over there because the Antis will find it easy to neutralize his paranormal powers."

"But *we have* to do something!" exclaimed Krefenbac despairingly. "Are we just going to stand around and watch, without doing anything, while these characters grab off the Imperium with a mere flick of the wrist?"

The major's outbreak was followed by an oppressive silence. Everybody knew that for the moment they could only stand still and wait for an opportunity. Now at the very time when the Terrans were in the process of taking over more and more of the responsible positions in the Imperium, they were faced with an unexpected obstacle.

After awhile, Dr. Riebsam spoke again. "Our last hope is the Regent," he said.

"You mean of all things we're back to that inhuman think-tank, Doc?" complained Claudrin.

Riebsam nodded. "I can't imagine that the security circuit will simply acknowledge Carba right off. At any rate I'm sure the Brain will take a closer look at Atlan and perhaps question him further so that he can make a comparison of the 2 contenders. Whether Atlan remains the Emperor or this Carba takes over his position will depend on the outcome of that comparison."

"If you put it that way," said Atlan, "then actually nothing more can go wrong."

"It's not a cause for optimism," replied the mathematician. "You must not forget that the A-1 circuit evaluates the present situation according to the standards of the of Arkonides, because they were the ones who programmed it. Besides, we're now up against the extra circuit the Akons installed. The new input activates *Epethus*, which makes it necessary for the Regent to reanalyse the entire situation—*according to* old-line Arkonide values.

It was much the same as if a Terran positronic computer had been programmed with the political perspectives of an Abraham Lincoln for the purpose of evaluating the modern age. Undoubtedly the machine would conclude that the present-day politicians were a bunch of bunglers since all it would have to go by were the views of a man long dead. Although in his own time he had no doubt been an ingenious leader, his brand of politics would nevertheless be out of place in the year 2105. The difficulties were enhanced by the fact that a positronic of the Regent's proportions could turn the first small mistake into a catastrophe.

The men of the *Ironduke*, including Atlan, were faced with a completely different set of political conditions and they could not reconstruct the deliberations which had guided Arkonide scientists over 5000 years ago in their specific programming of the security circuit. The influence of the old Arkonides reached into the present day although they were now long dead and forgotten. To Rhodan, since A-1 controlled everything else, the strategic circuit appeared to be a long arm of the ancients which could still reach into the present and make changes according to their former sense of values.

Now for the first time Rhodan realized what a menace the Regent was for every living creature in the galaxy. No one was familiar with its original program. No one knew what insane decisions it might be capable of making. The mammoth positronicon on Arkon 3 was like a cosmic bomb and no one could guess at what moment it might explode. Only the effects of such an explosion could be foreseen. If the Regent were to strike, nothing in the galaxy would be able to stop it.

When this vision came to Rhodan a cold shudder ran through him. What was in the minds of those Arkonides of the olden regime, those scientific geniuses of their day, when they built the Brain and set up its massive program? Was not the Regent but an expression of their ancient presumption and arrogance? Did it not represent a positronic version of the old lust for power?

The Regent had to be destroyed!

The thought came easily to Rhodan as though it had always been there waiting to be heard. Perhaps, this was so. He must have been playing with this idea subconsciously all along. However strange it was, his decision reestablished his faith in the capabilities of his own men. He was convinced that neither Carba and his backers nor the Regent itself could stand in the way of the developments which had already begun. The upward course of humanity had often been a rough and rocky road but Carba was merely another boulder to be cleared from the path.

Krefenbac's voice suddenly penetrated his thoughts.

"By all the bowlegged mousebeavers in the galaxy!" exclaimed the major. "The Akon ship is trying to contact us on the telecom!"

Pucky took offence and was about to make a retort but Rhodan silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"Let's find out what they want from us," he decided.

The lanky major turned on the videoscreen and a sharp-visaged man appeared who had all the facial characteristics of an Akon. "I appreciate your willingness to hear what we have to say," began the Akon courteously. "My name is Sansaro. It would be proper if you would turn on your video transmission so that I may see with whom I am speaking."

Rhodan signalled to Krefenbac and stepped up behind him. As the 2-way video channel was established he said gruffly: "You're talking to me!"

"Perry Rhodan." The Akon smiled. "The name has a good sound to it. I am proud to finally..."

"Come to the point," Rhodan interrupted. "I don't believe you made this contact for a mere exchange of amenities."

Sansaro smiled again. "When one has respect for his opponent, it will express itself."

Rhodan stared back scornfully. "I don't recall ever having expressed my respect for you."

Sansaro slowly stroked his chin. "You cannot push me into anything, Rhodan—I am not disturbed." It seemed to Perry that Sansaro was looking straight through him. "I will only say what I am prepared to say, no matter what your conduct may be."

"I'm waiting," replied Rhodan calmly. This Sansaro possessed an above average intelligence but even



more formidable. was his obvious experience. The man was wily and shrewd.

"We can't very well deceive each other," said Sansaro. "Our goals are fairly well marked out and we both face difficulties. But from our side we have meanwhile spoken to the Regent for the purpose of having him install Carba as the Emperor. He does not seem to be opposed to this plan." The Akon smiled anew as he saw Rhodan's reaction. "However he has obliged us to arrange a certain meeting with the former Emperor."

Atlan's voice was heard in the background. "Perry, I think I'll speak with him now."

Rhodan willingly made way for Atlan as he stepped forward.

When Sansaro saw him he bowed. "Your Eminence, I regret very much that we meet under these circumstances," he said. "It is my hope that we may bring this unfortunate situation to a quick conclusion."

"You must be joking," said Atlan. "Who do you suppose has *staged* this 'unfortunate situation?'"

"Let's not quarrel over definitions," suggested Sansaro. "All I want is for us to agree on a time for the meeting."

"What kind of meeting are you talking about, and who will attend?"

Sansaro's expression remained unchanged. Rhodan thought that he had seldom seen a man with such self control.

"Actually it is to be an encounter, Your Highness, and only you and the new Emperor are to take part in it," replied Sansaro. "The Regent wishes to test both of you and he invites you to engage in a mental duel, during which he will determine who should continue as the Emperor."

Atlan appeared to be slightly caught off guard by this but Rhodan did not want to distract him by interrupting.

"What will happen if I refuse to take part in such a duel?" asked the Arkonide.

Sansaro turned around as though looking at a clock. "The Regent has allowed a period of 3 hours for you to decide. If you refuse to take part in the duel, Carba will automatically be established as the Emperor."

Atlan folded his arms across his chest and regarded Sansaro thoughtfully. "In such a case, what would happen to me and my Terran friends?"

"However regrettable it may be, Your Eminence, we would have to arrest you," Sansaro confessed. "The Terrans must then return to their central world."

"Don't think that would be so easy," warned Rhodan. Sansaro disregarded him. He was observing Atlan who stood before the screen with his head bowed in thought.

Atlan looked up. "I declare myself prepared to begin the duel," he said finally.

Sansaro gave no sign of either satisfaction or any other reaction. No one could guess his thoughts which were skilfully concealed behind an inscrutable mask. "In about 1 hour, Carba will come out of the airlock

of our ship, unarmed and without escort. The Regent requires you to leave the Terran ship at the same time." Sansaro laughed in a peculiar way. "Naturally you will also come out without weapons or escort. A robot will pick up the two of you and take you to the area where the duel is to take place. There will be no spectators since they would not be able to see anything anyway. At the end of the encounter, the Regent will install the victor as Emperor."

"How can we be certain that all this isn't just a trick to lure Atlan out of here?" interjected Rhodan with an icy tone of voice.

"You can confirm it with the Regent directly," suggested Sansaro. With that he cut the connection and his picture faded.

At the moment there wasn't a man in the Command Central who did not have his eyes on Atlan, expectantly waiting for an explanation. Even Pucky perked up from his rather negligent attitude as he inadvertently bared his incisor tooth. The Arkonide walked silently back and forth.

After a few minutes, Rhodan's voice broke the silence: "What is this mental duel all about?"

Atlan looked at him briefly and smiled. The Arkonide was as tall and slender as Rhodan but there was some princely quality of extra polish and refinement which distinguished him. "In former times when my people were still mentally and physically more active, naturally there were disputes among noble families over the issue of who had the greatest right to the throne," he explained. "The Regent decided such differences between rivals by means of a mental duel."

"How does it work?" asked Rhodan.

Atlan shook his head. "I'll be alone with Carba," he said. "It's useless to say much about the strange processes of such a conflict."

"Is there a chance for you to win this battle?"

"My prospects are no more nor less than those of Carba," replied the Emperor with apparent indifference.

"It all depends on which of the pseudo worlds we are transferred to." Suddenly he turned toward the mousebeaver. "It's unfair of you to spy into my thoughts, little one."

"Excuse me," Pucky stammered, somewhat caught off his guard. "That was just—uh—pure routine."

Rhodan continued. "Can you tell us more about these pseudo worlds the contenders are transferred into? There might be some way we can help you."

"In such a contest there is no possibility of intervention by other persons," Atlan assured him.

Rhodan realized that the Arkonide didn't want to go into details so he respected his decision. He had been in similar situations often enough. The remaining time flowed sluggishly while Maj. Krefenbac maintained a routine surveillance of the indicators and controls.

At the expiration of the prescribed hour, Carba left the Akon ship. On the *Ironduke*'s viewscreens he could be seen as a tiny figure moving slowly out of the shadow of the other vessel.

"Well, this is it," said Rhodan.

Atlan was strangely adamant. "This is my fight. It's a conflict involving deeper issues which are personal to me."

Rhodan understood what his friend was trying to say. "Not one of us will lift a finger until it's over with," he promised.

"It could last for some time," said Atlan as he left the Control Central.

A few minutes later they could also see him walking across the vast landingfield. The 2 Arkonides met each other approximately halfway between the ships, 2 tall men who were contending for the greatest stellar empire in the galaxy.

A remote controlled robo-car appeared. It came to a stop before the challengers and waited until they climbed in. Then it rolled swiftly away.

When the vehicle disappeared from the field of vision, Pucky's high-pitched voice was heard in the Control Central. "He's thinking that he may not have a chance—none at all."

Rhodan kept staring at the deserted looking field outside. Sooner or later one of the 2 Arkonides would reappear out there—Carba or Atlan. The fate of Earth and all of humanity might hinge on *who* it would be.

\* \* \* \*

The young Arkonide with the finely-chiselled features sat up straight in his seat and said: "I'm extremely pleased to finally be with an Arkonide like yourself, Your Eminence. I regret deeply, however, that circumstances force us to stand against each other instead of with each other."

"No one is stopping you. from coming over to our side," answered Atlan.

Carba's face reddened as he fidgeted with the broad cape he was wearing. "Our political views could never run in the same direction, Imperator," said Carba. "No loyal-minded Arkonide could do what you have caused to happen in recent years; you've bartered the Imperium to the Terrans."

Atlan's lips compressed into a bloodless thin line for a moment. "Only our commitment prevents me from giving you a sound thrashing, you young fool," he said almost in an undertone.

Carba withdrew into the farthest corner of the seat. He realized that he had stepped too far. Atlan was not a man one insulted twice. "We will soon know which of us is right," he commented.

Atlan laughed derisively. "Is that so? I marvel at your self-assurance, Carba. Your Akon friends must have really set something up in section A-1 to make you so sure of victory at this stage."

"Are you insinuating that I'm a coward, that I would only fight when things are stacked in my favour?" shouted the rebel indignantly.

Atlan looked at him pityingly. "They've boosted your intelligence way above L-50 but apparently they failed to match it with reason."

"I'm sorry we broke our silence," retorted Carba.

The robo-car glided down a subterranean shaft that was only dimly lit. It was apparently one of the countless means of secret ingress into the interior of the Regent. Undoubtedly the robot Brain had to cut off its security screen for a moment so that the vehicle could pass through.

While secretly observing the young Arkonide, Atlan concluded that Carba was a man who had been under the constant influence of the Akons and had consequently been led down the wrong path. But the immortal admiral had to also recognize the fact that there was nothing that could dissuade Carba from his intentions. There was a fanatic gleam in his opponent's eyes. It was an over-brilliance that already seemed to mirror the shadows of approaching insanity.

Carba would have to pay a high price for his short period of super-charged intelligence. But Atlan suppressed his sympathies. The rebel was his enemy, in fact a very formidable one. On top of that was the fact that the Regent seemed to be more inclined to the persuasions of Carba and his accomplices than to Atlan's policies.

The robo-car came to a stop and the side doors opened. The 2 Arkonides got out and were met by a silent chapek which proceeded to guide them farther on foot. Atlan was thinking of the men of the *Ironduke* who were forced to stand by in a helpless rage. Yet their presence here on Arkon 3 was Atlan's only moral support.

The corridor they were traversing ended in a large room which contained a bewildering maze of control panels and switchboards. The wheeled robot rolled onward with a sure precision. They passed mighty generators, power stations and cable shafts which presented a familiar picture to Atlan because everywhere in the Regent's interior the environment presented more or less the same aspect.

Carba's uneasiness was becoming apparent. "Have you ever been in a mento duel before?" he asked hesitantly as they turned into another passage.

"This will be my first," replied Atlan calmly. "And my last."

"I have heard that even the victors have often lost their minds in the process," remarked Carba. "I hope that neither of us suffers the same fate. The Regent has to make a clear decision as to which of us will be the better Emperor for the Empire."

Although Atlan saw the futility of it he made one, last attempt to convert, the young aristocrat from the House of Minterol. "Carba, if you'll think things over again quite calmly, you'll see that we mustn't let that happen."

"Renounce your Terran friends and an agreement will be reached," demanded Carba.

Atlan fell silent. The two of them stiffened in their attitudes and neither would yield his opinion in favour of the other. They reached a smaller room and the robot came to a stop. From somewhere out of the wall came a metallic voice.

"Please take places in the wall niches."

2 recesses were to be seen at one side of the room. Carba gave Atlan the first choice and he decided to take the niche on the left although it obviously made no difference. He discovered a maze of sensor-monitor equipment and saw a web of electrical conduits leading from a comfortable-looking chair into the wall. On a small podium in front of the chair was something that looked like a helmet. No doubt Carba was discovering an identical setup in his own niche.

"Sit down," came the Regent's command.

He lowered himself into the seat and sat back. Strangely he did not feel overly disturbed.

"Place the helmet on your head. The V-symbol must be centred on your forehead."

Atlan thrust the helmet onto his head almost mechanically. He could envision Carba in the adjacent niche doing the same but probably his hands were trembling.

Once more the voice of the Regent was heard: "In a few minutes the equipment will be turned on. You will then be in an illusionary world but you will have forgotten your true environment. Everything you will experience will not be real in any sense; it will be only a projection generated in your brains with the help of the mento-helmet. But during the duel neither one of you will know that you are in a pseudo existence. For you everything will be actual and you will react accordingly. At the end of the duel you will both be asked several qualifying questions so that the security circuit will have a basis for making a final decision."

Atlan began to perspire under the heavy helmet and he was aware of his breath striking its inner surface. He strove to compose himself and to prepare for what was to come. At the same time he told himself that it was fairly senseless to prepare oneself for something unknown. That would he like a man outfitting himself for a rainstorm only to land unexpectedly in the middle of the desert.

"Are there any questions?" asked the robot Brain.

"No," replied Atlan and Carba in unison.

Atlan relaxed and leaned back in the chair. What lay before him would be like a dream and he knew that if he had a chance later to think of it again he would remember it as such. But while he was experiencing it the whole illusion would be real to him. His gaze wandered over the complex maze of coils and wire's leading from his helmet into the control panels. Thousands of years ago, mighty Arkonides had sat here and submitted to the judgment of security circuit A-1.

Atlan thought resignedly that none of them had gone into the fight in such a weary and hopeless state. He was certain that his duel with Carba was more or less a farce.

In that moment he heard a faint humming sound and he felt as if someone were in the process of sticking a needle into the back of his neck. He was about to say something but his tongue failed him. A leaden weight fell on his limbs and his eyes rolled upward. The control panels blurred in his vision and he felt as if he were lying in a thick ball of cotton. Somewhere on a subconscious level his thoughts still struggled feebly but they had to give way to the vision which continued to press in upon the surface of his brain.

His head lolled to one side and his body went limp. Then all that was left was the soft hum of the machinery echoing away into the endless subterranean corridors and losing itself like a whisper in the cavernous chambers. The mento duel had begun...

#### 4/ NULL-POINT IN LIMBO

The hot winds from the steppes seemed to have blown him into the town along with the dried-out elder-bushes. He was a tall, almost haggard-looking man whose eyes burned like coals in his sunken face. He came with wide swinging strides down the slope behind Dolanty's house and looked over the town as if evaluating the place and its inhabitants in a single glance.

Dolanty's older boy had just finished repairing the windbreak for the turnip bed and was the first to see him. He looked up in surprise because his father had told him that no one lived anymore in the direction the stranger was coming from.

The big man came as far as the windbreak and looked silently over it at Sowan Dolanty. The youth straightened up fully and felt the sand trickling down on him—the sand which the town was battling eternally while continuing to retreat before it.

"Hello," said the stranger. His voice had a strange ring to it as though it came from the depths of his emaciated body.

"Where do you come from?" Sowan called out to him, unable to contain his curiosity. Behind him he heard his father come into the garden and he became aware of his suspicious attitude when he heard his angry voice above the wind.

"Who are you?" demanded the elder Dolanty.

"My name is Carba," said the stranger. He turned to look back toward the hills and there was a vague expression of sadness in his features. "This is the first town I have found on my journey," he added.

"And it's the last one in existence," declared Sowan's father. "You won't find another town no matter how far you go."

"The others have all given up and turned back," said Carba.

"We will never give up," said Sowan's father. He stood there sturdily in his faded leather jacket, giving an impression of invincible determination.

Carba placed a hand on the windbreak and rattled it. "The sand is stronger than all of us. The last of the colonists are here in this town. They'll be turning back soon," he said.

"Is that what you've come here to tell us?" shouted the elder Dolanty as if provoked.

But the stranger didn't seem to be impressed. Sowan had the definite feeling that this man represented the beginning of irresistible changes in the colony, which nobody would be able to oppose.

"Who is the leader of this town?" asked Carba. For a moment Dolanty wavered between an impulse to chase this stranger off of his place or to tell him what he wanted to know. "Atlan," he said finally.

Sowan wasn't sure but he thought he detected a gleam of satisfaction in Carba's eyes.

"The young man will take me to him," the stranger demanded.

Sowan couldn't understand how a man could come through the desert beyond the colony and still have enough energy to proceed at once with his plans. Carba seemed to him to be more and more of a mystery. If there were no other towns or cities left on this planet, where could he have come from? How had he kept himself alive?

"Sowan, take this man to Atlan," he heard his father tell him.

Carba smiled at him across the windbreak but Sowan timidly looked away because the stranger seemed to be sinister and his friendliness was only an outward mask.

"Follow me," he said reluctantly.

They left the garden together while Dolanty the elder remained standing at the entrance of the farm. His stocky figure stood effortlessly before the wind whereas Sowan and the stranger had to bend forward as they walked. The sunlight came only dimly through the pall of dust that lay over the town.

"I'd have put the windbreak at a right angle," said Carba when they reached the street. He made the comment without criticism, in fact with a calm objectivity and a slight inclination to be helpful.

Nevertheless there was something in the suggestion that irritated Sowan. "You don't know much about windbreaks," he retorted angrily.

"Let's hope the wind doesn't, either," returned Carba sarcastically.

"We grow the best turnips in the colony," replied Sowan defiantly, although he knew very well this wasn't true. Fennler, Omassage and Porante produced better crop yields.

Carba looked critically at the road. "Why hasn't this street been surfaced?" he inquired.

"Because it would be choked with drifting sand in a matter of hours," Sowan explained.

The big man shook his head. "Not if suction pumps were placed along the way at regular intervals," he said.

"Listen!" retorted Sowan. "Nobody asked you to come here! If you don't like it then just go somewhere else!"

"I'll go when my task here has been completed," said Carba.

Sowan stopped and took hold of the other's ample cape sleeve. "What task are you talking about?" he asked.

"I am going to close down the colony," Carba told him matter-of-factly.

Sowan felt as if somebody had hit him over the head with a plank. He moved onward with this uncanny person and their footsteps stirred up little clouds of sand. Sowan had a vision of his father standing in front of the house with his legs braced apart and armed only with a club, ready to strike down any

attacker. The stranger had spoken of the end of the town as if he were here to merely close a door—nothing more.

"You'll never be able to do that!" Sowan shouted hatefully.

"Oh yes," confirmed Carba. "Every colonist knows that it's over with for this town. It was only necessary for someone to come here and have everybody face the truth. My company's spaceship has landed a few miles from here. It's your last opportunity to leave this world."

So the strange origin of the man was explained. He had come in a ship of space. "Atlan will stop you from doing that," Sowan assured him.

Carba's laughter rose above the roar of the wind and the crackling of sand against the walls of the surrounding houses. It became an ugly sound that was like a pain in the ears of the younger Dolanty.

"That house on the other side of the street—the one with the brown support posts—that's Atlan's government building," said Sowan. "You can get there on your own."

"Government building," repeated Carba sarcastically. "A pretty imposing name for just an old shack."

But Sowan Dolanty was no longer at his side.

\* \* \* \*

Lasan Porante looked again at the crude sketch he had prepared a few minutes before. He pointed with his drawing instrument at a darker spot he had shaded in.

"The main water vein flows right under this plot. If I begin the boring operation I'll lose a large part of my harvest," he said. "That would mean I'd have to be supported by my neighbours for some time to come."

"Without water you'll lose it all, Lasan," Atlan reminded him. He new Porante was a stubborn man who was hard to influence. "If you give up that one plot you'll have one of the best water sources in the colony."

Porante's eyes lighted up but before he could answer they both heard somebody mount the front steps and immediately there was a knock at the door. Porante looked at the leader of the colony questioningly but Atlan was equally surprised. He was not accustomed to having people knock at his door.

"Yes!" he called out.

The door sprang open and Carba stood at the threshold with the wind rippling his wide cape. There was a faint smile on his face. "Here I am," he said, and he came slowly into the room.

"Who is this?" asked Porante suspiciously.

Atlan placed a hand on the colonist's shoulder. "Lasan, I have to ask you to leave us alone," he said firmly, and Porante unwillingly left the office. When the latter was out of hearing range, he said grimly: "I



had hoped that you were no longer alive."

"We have shared this deceptive hope for years," retorted Carba.

Atlan felt a great weariness pervading his body although now he had to be more alert than ever before. "So what's your procedure this time?" he asked bitterly. The two of them had gotten older, he thought. Older and more experienced. But they were still following the same line of endeavour which made them enemies.

Carba carefully closed the door. "This town is being swallowed up by the sand. Sooner or later it will cease to be. Now you have a chance to make it possible for all remaining colonists to emigrate in a Company ship. It can all go off very smoothly."

"What happens if I refuse?" asked Atlan.

Carba stepped to the window and looked outside. His lean back seemed to be slightly bent. "Then I'll have to give a speech—to the whole town," he announced. "You know by now how persuasive I can be."

"You will never persuade me, however," Atlan assured him. "In the meantime, I've received a promise from the Hasantians. They will help us."

"The Hasantians are a pack of thieves." Carba turned back and stared candidly at Atlan. "They'll help you alright, and later they'll come to cash in the colony."

"I don't believe that," countered Atlan. "They're sending a ship with vital equipment and sand vehicles—all of which we'd never have gotten from the Company."

"You underestimate the Company. If it's going to exist it has to operate on the basis of material gain. It can't invest fortunes in this colony without being paid for it later."

Atlan laughed derisively. "When it was first founded the Company was of public benefit but since then it's become nothing more than a greedy Moloch."

His anger was too outworn to have any effectiveness anymore. For years he had lived with his hatred of the Company although he was one of its employees. Gradually his sense of revulsion had given way to resignation.

"From the inception you've built up 14 colonies," Carba recalled. "Five were successful and the others had to be shut down. Compared to other men you still came off with the score in your favour."

"In the meantime you've folded more than 50 colonies," answered Atlan bitterly, "and you *always* scored!"

"You chose *your* line of work—I chose *mine* ."

"Alright, Carba, let's wind this up in a hurry. I refuse to voluntarily close out this colony and I'll remind you again that a Hasantian ship is on its way that will help us."

Carba went to the door and turned around for the last time. "I hope you'll come tonight to hear my address," he said.

Atlan pulled a small raygun from his belt and aimed it at the Company's representative. "I could stop you with this," he suggested. "It would be years before our principals would send a new man here. By then the whole matter would be overgrown with grass."

Carba nodded. "You have a point there—but of course you're forgetting that you never could shoot a man in the back—not you, Atlan."

With that he turned and left the office. The wind made the door swing back and forth. Atlan replaced his weapon. As his gaze returned to Porante's drawing he snatched it to him in desperation and tore it to bits.

\* \* \* \*

The news of a stranger in town spread among the colonists like lightning. The younger Dolanty told everybody who cared to listen that Carba had arrived in a spaceship. Within a short time it was known that Carba wanted to make a speech in the community hall.

Toward evening the colonists gathered in the large room and waited to hear what the tall stranger had to say. Everybody came because they were always glad to have an interruption of their monotonous existence. Carba spoke to them for more than an hour. His voice reached the farthest corners of the hall and he was not interrupted with dissenting comments. In a logical progression of the argument he destroyed the hope of the colonists that they could hold on to their town. Meanwhile he kept referring to his ship which was able to take them all on board and fly them off to a happier future.

"Every minute you spend in this desert is only time wasted," he concluded. "Do you want to just sit here and wait for the ship of the Hasantians, which may never arrive?"

He wouldn't have needed these last words to convince the colonists. Standing near the speaker's podium, Atlan watched them. He saw the shining eyes of the bearded men and noted the restless hands of the women who often nervously smoothed back their dry and brittle hair. He knew the mentality of these people. They wanted to work and build but they were thinking: why shouldn't they do it in a place that was more suitable instead of on this world of dust and sand? Carba had promised that the spaceship would bring each of them to a place that would seem like a Paradise in comparison to their present conditions.

It would be futile to attempt to tell them that the Company would only take them to another hostile environment as an experiment to see if it could be colonized. There were few planets that could really satisfy the Company's needs and for those they didn't need the kind of people they were coming after here—hard men who were ready to fight and struggle for every inch of arable ground.

"Now Atlan will speak to you," said Carba, and he stepped aside.

A confused murmuring pervaded the hall, a sound that already expressed the decision of the colonists.

Atlan spoke very briefly. "Each of you may only bring a limited amount of your possessions on board the ship, as the weight must be controlled. You must take care that you do not exceed the baggage

allowance. Effective as of now, Carba is in charge of this operation." He turned abruptly and left the hall through a rear exit but he heard somebody following him.

It was Sowan Dolanty, trembling with anger. "Do you mean that's all you're going to say about that idiotic nonsense?" he demanded.

"That's about it, I believe," replied Atlan.

Sowan's eyes were moist with emotion. "You—you coward!" he shouted, and then he walked away from him in an obvious rage.

"That kid's a hot head," said somebody behind Atlan. It was Carba. "When I first got here he handed me an insult." He had come out of the building and since Atlan had stopped, Carba came up and faced him.

"Get out of my way," Atlan told him threateningly.

Carba stroked the back of his neck reflectively. "You're not much different than he is," he commented amiably. "Only a bit older and more experienced. I imagine that in your youth you were guilty of similar stupidities."

"Get out of here in that damned ship of yours!" retorted Atlan.

"But of course you're coming with me?"

"No!"

Carba frowned. The colonists were streaming out of the front of the hall and were returning to their homes to start packing their belongings. Atlan knew that more than half of their luggage would be disallowed when they got to the ship.

"What do you want to do actually?" asked Carba. "Do you want to stay here alone in this town until the sand eats you up?"

"Why not?"

"As soon as all of the colonists are on board the ship, Atlan, I'll come to get you—if necessary, with force!" said Carba sharply.

"Will you come alone or will you bring your troops with you?"

"I'll be alone."

Atlan looked pensively at the houses around him. The tensions and pressures between himself and Carba had been building up for too long a time and nothing had contributed to easing the situation. So now the time had come to let the sparks fly.

"I'll be waiting for you, Carba," he answered grimly.

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From a strategic point of view the town was easy, to attack from any side. A lone defender could not be in all places at once to guard against an enemy's penetration. Atlan thought over the situation that had been created by the desertion of the colony by its inhabitants. At the moment he was the only living being in the town and he would remain so until Carba appeared to fetch him.

He thought of the colonists who had crammed themselves into the narrow cargo hold of the ship and were hopefully looking forward to the new world that Carba had depicted for them. Atlan harboured no resentment against these people. He had not even been disappointed in them because their actions reflected their mentality. They were always in search of the Promised Land which could never be but nevertheless existed in their dreams and seemed to be attainable. This fixation had been unscrupulously exploited by the Company for its own purposes.

But this was no longer his problem. He would have to prepare for Carba's return. This man must not be underestimated. He calmly checked his weapon. He had no idea of how the Company agent would proceed but he wanted to be ready for any possibility.

He set himself up in the sturdily-built house that the colonists had jokingly referred to as the government headquarters. From the main windows he had a good view of the single street that ran through the town. The wind blew the elder bushes across the open spaces. They would catch on the corners of the houses until a gust came along to uproot them again. The colony had died and now the only sound to be heard in the town was the wailing and whistling of the wind. Now and again one might hear the banging of a loose board or the slamming of a door that someone had forgotten to close.

The sun had gone down and night was approaching. Carba would not show up until morning because he couldn't hope to find his quarry in darkness. Atlan lay down on the narrow cot and drew the covers over him. His thoughts were occupied with the forthcoming encounter. After it had become completely dark outside he began to doze off, but suddenly a cry awakened him.

"Atlan!"

Startled, he sat up and tried to look around. It was so dark that he could hardly see the windows. Had he been mistaken or had somebody down below called out his name? The discordant song of the wind could have deceived him.

"Atlan!"

He sprang from the cot and drew his weapon. So Carba had come in the night, after all! He was down there somewhere between the houses and was looking for him. Atlan cranked down the attic ladder and climbed it. He groped cautiously around until he found the tie-hook, with which he fastened the ladder in its elevated position. This way nobody would be able to follow him from below.

He quietly opened the roof transom and looked outside. Even at this level the wind swept particles of sand against his face. He raised himself onto the transom ledge and crawled out onto the roof catwalk. The roof was not especially steep but it was overgrown with moss and was slippery.

He turned and closed the transom behind him and then crouched on the catwalk, listening. Here on the roof was the safest place. In the darkness Carba would not be able to locate him up here unless he had

brought along the necessary sensor equipment from the ship. But that was unlikely because Carba's pride wouldn't allow him to stoop to such measures.

Atlan attempted to place himself in the shoes of his antagonist. He asked himself what he would do if he were in his place. He tried to think as Carba would think in order to imagine what his first step would be. If he were the Company agent now he would probably be lying in wait in the garden behind Dolanty's house because there he would have a clear view of the street from one end to the other. It would be vital to secure that position during the darkness because when daylight returned it would offer unequalled advantages.

"That's it!" said Atlan to himself. "He's in Dolanty's truck garden."

Then he began to crawl along the roof on all fours.

\* \* \* \*

Carba leaned against the useless windbreak that the youngster had been repairing when he first arrived. He was sure that Atlan had heard his shouting and that he was probably trying to do something about it by now.

Probably Atlan hadn't expected him to venture back into the town at night. From this it could be deduced that the colony's erstwhile leader was still in the so called "government" building. Carba reasoned that only a fool would attempt to leave the house through the front door. Since Atlan was not such a fool, and if there were no rear exit to the place, he would have to try some other escape route. He concentrated on trying to figure out what he might do if he were in Atlan's place.

"I would try to get up onto the roof," he muttered to himself.

The "government" building was located just about in the centre of the town whereas Dolanty's house was at one end of it. Carba tried to recall how far apart the house roofs were from each other. An agile man could easily jump from one roof to another and thus change his location whenever it was necessary.

Carba let out a low whistle. But in the middle of the night this wouldn't help Atlan, he reasoned, because he didn't know where his opponent would be. Or wouldn't he? Carba straightened up, suddenly uneasy. It had been a mistake to choose the best position. With a little shrewd reasoning Atlan could get the idea that his enemy could be found in the vicinity of Dolanty's house. He would be able to stealthily approach over the rooftops and light up the dark with his first wild shot, only to strike home with the next.

With a half-audible curse, Carba ducked down and hurried from the garden. He knew he must not follow any logical plan because Atlan was shrewd enough to foresee all such moves. He would have to play it by instinct.

He quickly left Dolanty's house behind him and moved with swift, silent steps toward the centre of town. Suddenly he was forced to smile. No doubt Atlan was already up there on the roofs somewhere on the other side of the street. He would work his way along to the end of the row of houses and come to a stop right over Dolanty's place. That's when he would shoot. Carba would have to wait for that moment to open his own fire, of course from a completely different location than the one Atlan would presume.

Carba entered one of the houses through an open door and groped through the dark rooms until he found the stairs leading to the upper level. He shoved the short-barrelled thermo-gun into a pocket of his cape and climbed the staircase. After wandering about in the upper rooms for several minutes he located a rope ladder that was fastened to a wall. Releasing it, he tested its strength. It was fastened at the upper end to the ceiling and no doubt led to the roof. Effortlessly he swung himself upward until his head bumped against a wooden surface. While holding on with one hand he pressed with the other against the obstruction. As he had suspected he was suspended underneath a trapdoor which finally yielded to a sturdy thrust. Moments later he was standing on the roof, trying to survey his surroundings, but in the darkness there was nothing to be seen. He thought he heard a slight tapping sound on the other side of the street but it could have been his imagination.

He ripped a chunk of moss from the roof and then felt his way to the edge. He tossed the soft mass a few meters away from him and was satisfied to hear it strike the adjacent rooftop. So the roofs were not as far apart as he had thought. He backed up, took a short run and jumped. In midair he thought he might have miscalculated and a chill ran down his back. But almost in the same instant his feet hit solid support and he went into a crouch in order to take up the impact of landing. He hoped that the wind had drowned the noise of his arrival.

In this manner he worked his way across 4 houses until he was only about 50 meters from Dolanty's spread. He smiled with satisfaction. It was only a matter of time until Atlan would reach the rooftop on the other side and attempt to fire off a shot toward Dolanty's garden patch. In doing so he would dig his own grave. Carba shook his head in self-admiration. For an intelligent man everything was so simple if he took the trouble to use his head.

\* \* \* \*

On his last jump, Atlan almost took a fall. He had lost his footing and slid down the roof but his fingers had gripped into the moss in time to brake his progress. He pulled himself slowly back to the centre of the roof and stopped there to catch his breath. He had reached his goal. In spite of the darkness he was fairly certain of the spot that would be his target. Naturally he wouldn't be able to hit his opponent on the first shot but the energy discharge would illuminate the area brilliantly. While Carba was recovering from his surprise, Atlan would be able to fire a second time and put an end to the matter.

He knelt down and aimed his weapon toward Dolanty's garden. His hands trembled and he had to lower the gun for a moment. It all seemed so easy—in fact *too* easy.

He bit his lip, realizing he could have almost made a mistake. How could he think that Carba would choose the very spot that any amateur would have selected? Carba was no dummy. He wouldn't pick out the most obvious position in town.

Suddenly Atlan was certain that his shot would have accomplished no more than to reveal his own location. He replaced the weapon and squatted down on the roof to reflect on the situation. Just as he had sought to put himself in Carba's place the latter would have tried to figure out his own strategy in advance. It wouldn't be too much of a mental effort on Carba's part to deduce that Atlan would come hunting for him here. So what would the other one do? He would clear out of the danger area. Even a man with less imagination than Carba could figure out that his antagonist would attempt to attack from the

rooftops.

Atlan frowned as he realized that he had gotten himself into a fairly bad fix. In this darkness his opponent could be practically anywhere in the town. In fact it was even possible that he was standing only a few meters away down below.

He crept to the lower part of the roof at the rear of the house and jumped into the garden. His landing made a dull thudding sound which might have been heard at a distance of at least 20 meters or so. Without stopping he moved away from the spot, thankful that no sudden shot glared out in the night. But he bumped against a fence and bruised his hip. He knew there must be a water reservoir close by because he sensed its telltale dampness in the wind. At present he was behind Tastat's house, which was one of the smaller structures in the town. He pressed through a small opening in the fence and groped his way along the house wall to the street.

He came to a stop and listened. A dried elder bush blew against his legs and held there a moment before rolling onward. Somewhere he heard a sound as if a rotted board had snapped under someone's weight. His foot encountered a rock which he picked up and weighed thoughtfully in his hand.

Then he raised it in a wide swing and threw it onto the roof of Tastat's house. The sound of the impact startled him but in that instant a beam of fire flashed from a building on the other side. He dropped to the ground to avoid being seen in the brilliant glare. The darkness returned abruptly and he sprang up with a sense of triumph while bringing his weapon into position. He aimed carefully, taking into consideration that Carba would be changing his position immediately after realizing he had been taken in by a trick. Atlan's shot flamed out toward the house across the street, causing it to stand out in almost painful brilliance. In that moment he saw the figure of Carba crouched down near a chimney with his weapon poised.

Both of them fired at each other simultaneously. A cascade of lightnings was discharged from the 2 positions. Atlan felt a bolt of searing heat just graze his back while at the same time he heard a cry followed by a muffled fall. He plunged to the ground and rolled in the dirt to extinguish the fire that had started on the back of his cape.

Carba raised his short-barrelled weapon and fired but the shot was poorly aimed and only kicked up dirt in Atlan's vicinity. Atlan paused long enough to get off the first shot from his own weapon. He saw the beam strike Carba in the right shoulder, knocking him backwards. While falling, the agent fired again, hitting the door of the government house and causing the front door to burst into flames. Carba's weapon was considerably more powerful than Atlan's small beamer. Probably one direct hit might have killed Atlan.

Rolling on the ground, Carba still fired while Atlan ran in a zig-zag pattern toward him. The man's stubborn battle in spite of his serious wound was cause for concern to Atlan. He also kept up an answering fire but the agent kept writhing and turning, his face in a wild grimace of pain, while Atlan's shots still only kicked up the dust around him.

"Stop it!" yelled Sowan from up the street. "Please stop!"

It distracted Atlan for the fraction of a second but that's when Carba hit him. He was knocked off his feet. Strangely he felt nothing when he struck the ground. He lay there motionlessly and only felt the wind blowing across him. Carba crawled to him on his knees. There was a trace of sadness in his pain-twisted face.

"Now you'll not take me to that ship of yours," whispered Atlan. "Not anymore"

A faint smile touched Carba's lips. "I'm afraid that neither one of us will even get out of the town."

Sowan came up to them and watched them silently.

"Go to the ship, lad," ordered Atlan.

Young Dolanty shook his head. "I'll wait," he said despondently.

He sat down beside them and listened to the blustering wind that drove the sand before it into the deserted town.

## 5/ THE REGENT'S DECISION

Awakening came so abruptly that Atlan's subconscious mind still clung desperately to the unreal events that the mento-helmet had been projecting and it was only with an effort that he adjusted himself to his true environment. For some seconds his mind was torn between the 2 experiences, unable to decide which realm of existence he should recognize as the real one. Gradually, however, his reason returned along with his recollection as the weight of the helmet became perceptible.

He raised his head and then closed his eyes as he felt the dull pain in his neck. Yet he was overcome with relief because it was clear to him now that it had all been nothing but a dream and neither the colony nor Sowan Dolanty had ever really existed. The duel had ended and it was still not certain as to who had emerged the winner.

He could hear Carba taking off his helmet in the adjacent niche and he followed the rebel's example. His hands trembled as the contacts on him began to be released.

The mechanical voice of the Regent was heard. "The duel has not led to any definite conclusion. Each contender did his best in the pseudo-world to carry out his task. Carba proceeded in a more direct manner than Atlan, who was inclined to ally himself with others. Of course certain conclusions may be drawn from this but no final decision can be made until both candidates have answered a few questions."

"I'm ready," Atlan heard his opponent say.

The great positronicon continued. "It is apparent that Carba's pretension to the throne is largely based on his dissatisfaction with the affairs of state under the incumbent Emperor. What arguments do you offer in this regard, Carba?"

Carba laughed sarcastically. "I only want to keep the Greater Imperium from falling into the hands of the Terrans, with whom Gonozal VIII maintains such a conspicuously friendly relationship. I have proofs that the Emperor has placed both knowledge and power at the disposal of these people, who sooner or later will use it against us."

"What do you say to this, Emperor?" asked the Regent.



"I'd like to remind you of my friendly relationship with Perry Rhodan, First Administrator of the Solar Imperium," said Atlan hopefully. "This man has often been helpful to us already in dangerous circumstances."

"Only so that he can receive the same favours through the back door," accused Carba. "Do you think, Emperor, that the Terran has acted out of pure unselfishness? Oh no—his motives were otherwise. Your blind faith has in no wise been justified, Gonozal." He seemed to consider something else for a moment before he continued. "Regent, I request that you search your memory banks for the whereabouts of the following persons: Testol of Amarat, Lischer Amson, Delent Omaris and Halto Teschner.

These 4 men were active as agents of the Greater Imperium in the planetary system of Otalka. Their work was successful because no uprisings were ever reported from Otalka."

Atlan of course knew what the young Arkonide was trying to do. He remembered only too well what had happened to these 4 officers. "It's unnecessary for the Regent to switch to his data registers," he said. "I'll tell him what happened to these 4 persons."

"Your frankness is remarkable," called Carba sarcastically.

Atlan ignored the interjection. Their contest had reached a critical point. It was futile to try to convince the Regent with arguments which his totally antiquated security circuits would never be able to accept. There was also no possibility of explaining his friendship with Rhodan, much less the mentality of the Terrans, to a purely logical brain. In this case feelings and sentiment were completely incidental. It was much more important to prove to the giant positronic entity in logical form that the measures taken by himself had been absolutely correct. This would have been a quite simple matter if it had been possible earlier to reprogram section A-1 so that it could respond to present-day conditions. In this respect Carba and his supporters were a step ahead because they had worked on A-1 and rigged it so that the Regent would evaluate the situation from a point of reference that had been valid more than 5000 years ago.

Atlan could only try to bridge over this tremendous span of time and find a middle path that might seem logical to the Regent. "These 4 men were removed from their posts on my orders," he reported. "Their places were taken over by Terran liaison officers.

The voice from the loudspeaker remained unchanged. "Was there a reason for this exchange?"

"Yes," answered Atlan. "The Terrans are our allies. If they are going to stand by us in every respect they need a total overview. They must be able to assess the situation of the Greater Imperium in its entirety—not just in fragments and pieces. It's senseless to just give them an occasional chance to help us. In that case they'd just be probing around without proper knowledge and they'd do more harm than good."

"If that is so," said Carba, "then for good or bad Arkonides should be put to use inside the Terran Imperium so that we, too, may gain an overview of the situation of our allies."

Atlan realized too late that he had made a mistake in logic which Carba was able to put to his own use.

"That is correct," said the Brain. "Is there an equivalent number of Arkonides in the Solar Imperium?"

"Naturally not," said Atlan. "We need every good man for ourselves. The only thing we had to offer to

the Terrans were the robotships and in the meantime even those have been withdrawn from their fleet formations."

"So it's obvious," said Carba, "that we're dealing with a one-sided infiltration. Arkonides are removed, in spite of good work, and are replaced here by Terrans. I must remind the Regent that this is a dangerous race of people with whom we have already had trouble in the past."

"Carba," Atlan interjected, "do you believe that an Imperium can be maintained only with decadent people and soulless robots? Do you actually think that a people can exist when they're ruled by a robot that only responds to commands that were programmed into it many generations ago?" He knew that with these words he only played further into Carba's hands but now it didn't matter. If he was already defeated he wanted this super-inflated member of the House of Minterol to know what was really involved. It made no difference at all which of them came to power or what the Regent might think of either one. Only one thing was of importance: billions of Arkonides had to be rescued from decadence, from wars and from economic disintegration.

"I don't believe that anything need be added to that," said Carba, now assured of victory. "This man does not intend to remain loyal to the Imperium. He'd much rather grope for his goals with foolish treaty agreements and his vague concepts of friendship. He has no clear policy that would serve all Arkonides in general."

"That is the death knell of the Greater Imperium !" said Atlan with an inward shudder.

"Never!" said the rebel emphatically. "It's the first phase of a new beginning for practical decisions. It will not be long before the Imperium will be free of these Terran parasites. We'll drive them out of this part of the galaxy and take over their ridiculous little system."

"Your banner is bloody before you've even unfurled it," said Atlan. "Whoever follows you will be stained by this blood, Carba. That's what your name will be remembered for when you come to the end of this senseless campaign."

"The decision has been made," announced the Regent. "I shall now issue a general announcement."

Atlan stared at the mento-helmet before him on the console. He had never been happy with his task as Imperator but it seemed incredible to him that he should be ousted in this manner. He leaned back in his chair and waited for the vast positronicon to announce the name of the victor over the loudspeakers.

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Dr. Riebsam looked at his watch and shook his head.

Rhodan was able to guess his thoughts. "It's been more than 4 hours now, Doc."

"I suppose our Akon friends over there in their ship are also starting to get edgy," said Riebsam with a smile. "Maybe they don't know anything more about this duel than we do."

"It could last for days," Marshall reminded them. "So far nothing suspicious has happened. I'm sure

Atlan will be able to advise us as to how it comes out."

Rhodan was not reassured by the words from his Mutant Corps chief. Thousands of Arkonide robotships were orbiting Arkon 3, ready to fend off any attack by the small Terran squadron. In an emergency it might even be difficult to get out without losses.

What had been Atlan's reason for not mentioning the possibility of this duel? Why had he restricted himself to his vague intimations about it? Did he know that he didn't have a chance to win? Of course it would have been typical of him not to burden his friends with the facts where danger to himself was concerned.

However Rhodan brooded over the matter he saw no way of giving his old friend support in this situation. A mutant attack would be futile since the Regent could block them from entering his inner sections.

Suddenly a thought came to him. It could not be presumed that the Akons knew more about the progress of the duel than he did. They were no doubt in an equal state of suspense. In that flat-poled ship that had landed only a few hundred meters from the *Ironduke*, they must be occupied with the same problem. Rhodan considered his idea. It could not be said with certainty that the intelligent Akons would be taken in by the plan but it would be no great loss if it failed.

The Administrator turned to Krefenbac. "Major, try to establish contact with the Akon ship. I want to talk to Sansaro."

Krefenbac bent over the normal telecom panel. The Akons would naturally be watching for any radio signals. Rhodan had also given his men instructions to keep a careful radio watch and to trace every impulse. Above all it was vital to know if the Regent was making contact with the Akons. One did not have to be clairvoyant to bet that Sansaro was maintaining a similar surveillance of the Terran ship.

"Got him, sir!" announced the major in his phlegmatic way.

The screen brightened and Rhodan waited until Sansaro's face became clearly visible. The Akon was as calm and inscrutable as ever. Rhodan smiled easily, attempting to give him the impression that he was completely at his ease.

"How do you feel about the outcome of the duel?" he asked. He pretended to be in possession of information which had also been given to Sansaro.

The Akon observed him for a moment in silence while Rhodan also remained without expression. "It came as no surprise," he said finally. "I knew that Carba would win."

Either this Sansaro was the cleverest actor in the Blue System or he was telling the truth.

Rhodan replied calmly: "I had hoped you wouldn't try to cover up your defeat with such a clumsy answer."

Sansaro laughed like a merchant who had just taken in an extra profit. "Let's not try to fool one another," he suggested. "You underestimate my intelligence. Do you seriously believe that you could start to make us panic? Neither you nor I know what's happening down below."

Rhodan nodded appreciatively. "I regret that we're not fighting on the same side," he said frankly.

"Nonetheless I want to remind you of the possibility that the Regent could be playing his own game. He may have lured Carba and the Emperor inside under the pretext of a mandatory duel arrangement—only so he could capture both of them."

The Akon frowned suspiciously. He and Rhodan could understand each other on a certain level because in a sense they both had the same goal, to exert a greater influence upon the Greater Imperium. In spite of being enemies an unexpressed accord had developed between them.

However Sansaro did not seem ready to soften his unyielding manner in favour of a vague supposition. "I can't go along with your theory," he said. "Your motives just now can all be governed, more or less, by your wish to terminate the duel."

"It would be difficult to prove to you that the opposite is true. However, I recommend that you think over what I have said."

Sansaro did not appear to be impressed. On the contrary, if any emotion was to be detected in his inflexible features it might have been one of secret triumph. Rhodan made a sign to Krefenbac and the major cut off the connection.

"He didn't fall for it," commented Jefe Claudrin angrily.

"Who knows?" answered Rhodan. "Perhaps he will. The longer the duel continues the more uncertain they'll become on board the Akon ship."

"What can we do in the meantime?" asked Pucky hopefully.

Rhodan looked thoughtfully at the familiar faces around him. "Wait," he said. "Just wait..."

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"There can be no doubt that under the rulership of Emperor Gonozal VIII the influence of the Terrans within the Greater Imperium has been continuously on the increase. The incumbent Emperor has aided and abetted this process. There have been many cases in which Arkonides performing services effectively have had to give up their posts in favour of Terrans. This is incompatible with Imperial security. There is no doubt that Carba of the House of Minterol is mentally qualified to be installed as Emperor. In order to protect the Imperium against further influences which might deliver it ultimately into the hands of an alien race, and after due reference to all pertinent areas of information in its memory banks, security circuit A-1 has decided that the incumbent Emperor Gonozal VIII is to be removed from his post, effective immediately. All rights and powers thereto pertaining are revoked and withdrawn as of this moment."

Without the slightest sign of emotion, Atlan sat in the chair and listened to the expressionless voice on the loud-speaker which in this moment was degrading him to the status of an ordinary Arkonide with no special privileges. The significance of this decision was beyond calculation. It was entirely possible that from this moment in time the fall of the Arkonide Imperium could no longer be prevented. Also if Carba's desired course was pursued, the Solar Imperium would come under attack.

The Brain continued. "Carba of the distinguished House of Minterol will be confirmed as the new Emperor with all rights and powers. On the other hand, security circuit A-1 is henceforth and forever unresponsive to the commands of Gonozal VIII. The defence screen surrounding the Regent is henceforth open solely to Carba. The Regent expects that Carba will immediately exploit every possibility to drive off and otherwise control the Terran race, which has become dangerous because of its independent development."

Atlan heard Carba get up and slowly approach him. He lifted his head as 2 hands came to rest on his shoulders. "Go, old man," said Carba.

Atlan stood up and looked into the eyes of the new Emperor of Arkon. They had a feverish gleam in them. Atlan knew that this man had been condemned to death. His extremely augmented intelligence was too unnatural by far—much more than his brain could handle over any length of time.

"I wish you luck, Carba," he said, "You're going to need it."

"Luck is an uncertain concept," retorted Carba with irony. "So far I've always relied on the faculties of the mind."

"Which ones?" asked Atlan. "The ones you were born with or those you just recently acquired?"

For a moment it looked as if Carba was about to attack his demoted antagonist but he controlled himself. "Your mockery will gain you nothing," he said between his teeth. "You are an outcast. Go to your Terran friends because there is no place for you here on Arkon 3!"

"I invoke the right of the vanquished for myself and the Terrans: a safe withdrawal," said Atlan. He didn't know what was going on behind that aristocratic forehead but he hoped that Carba still retained enough decency to permit Rhodan's small fleet unit to take off. It would have to happen quickly before the Akon leaders moved in and started to influence the new Emperor.

"You have my guarantee for it," Carba assured him. "Return to the surface and tell everybody what has happened here. I'm going to look around a bit."

Their robot guide stepped into the room and waited. Atlan went over to it without another glance at Carba. He nodded to the machine. "Lead the way," he said.

The robot turned as directed and he followed it through the cool, quiet rooms which had been the scene of an event that would have deep historical significance. At least this was to be true—in a much different respect than either of the parties concerned could have imagined.

## **6/ RHODAN'S GAMBLE**

He was alone.

He was the only living Arkonide who had access to these rooms. Here it was so still that his footsteps seemed to generate a booming echo. Without exception the walls were white, which gave the place an

atmosphere of sterility.

"Here I am safe," thought Carba. "Nobody can penetrate here, not even my friends."

Nevertheless he felt a certain uneasiness when he thought of his new exalted position which the fluctuating politics of the galaxy had brought him to. He was in possession of power now, perhaps more than any other living intelligence in the Milky Way, yet this power was represented and guaranteed by the vast complex of the robot Brain. Carba suspected that he would need to exert every power of his personal strengths to achieve a measure of influence equivalent to that of Gonozal VIII.

Suddenly he felt the personality of the old Emperor as though it were reaching toward him through these rooms with a physical impact. At the same time his suspicions were awakened. Couldn't there be friends of the Admiral even here in the Greater Imperium who might now be waiting for a chance to kill him, Carba?

At first he snickered. What could harm him? Down here he was absolutely safe. But could he remain down here under the ground forever, alone in this labyrinth of power generators and positronic equipment?

"I'll proclaim myself Emperor Carba I," he thought aloud.

Could he erase the past with a name? No—only if that past were dead! Only then could it be forgotten!

His predecessor must not leave Arkon 3 alive!

The thought came to Carba like a sudden dawn. Carrying it out would solve all his problems. Forgotten was his promise to Atlan to allow him and his Terran allies a safe retreat.

Carba was a lonely man in the subterranean installations of the mammoth Brain. Lonely men and their thoughts are always unpredictable, whether for good or for evil.

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The robot car glided upward through the long passages, passing various control stations and invisible sources of light. The sound of the motor was hardly perceptible and the auto-pilot guided the vehicle more precisely than human hands were capable of.

Memories passed through Atlan's mind as on a film. Before his eyes was a clear impression of that first time when he had entered the interior of the giant brain because the security circuit had recognized him as a descendant of the ancient Arkonides.

Now Carba had taken his place. The fears of Atlan's forefathers that the stellar empire could dissolve into countless self-centred splinter groups appeared to be emerging into reality. Atlan knew that Carba would never be able to save the Imperium because he was too ill. It was only a matter of time before the over-stimulation of his brain would exact its toll. Carba was condemned to death whether he realized it or not.

Atlan was by far too much a true Arkonide to simply accept the new situation. The preservation of the sprawling empire lay close to his heart and he had suffered much for the sake of it. He had lived alone among court dignitaries who had hated him and among automatons who in spite of their programmed responses to him had never been able to demonstrate an emotional understanding. He recalled his occasional times of enjoyment with Perry Rhodan and other Terrans but even there, now and again, he had encountered sarcasm and misunderstanding.

He foresaw that various planets would withdraw from the Imperium, small kingdoms would come into being and the Galactic Traders would take shrewd advantage of the situation. Economic collapse would be unavoidable. Carba wouldn't have too much time to concern himself with the Earth because the tasks of empire would fully claim his attention.

He was jolted out of his thoughts when the robo-car braked sharply to a stop. Atlan straightened up and looked out. The vehicle had just negotiated a curve and the passage widened out from here. Atlan was quite familiar with the ground car's construction and he knew there was no reason for it to stop unexpectedly like this due to a program failure. It was remotely controlled with a triple safety factor. That is, if one auto-pilot system should fail there were 2 more to back it up.

There was only one explanation for the interruption: the car had been brought to a halt intentionally. Carba or the Regent, or both of them at once, had had a change of mind and wanted to arrest him. However it wasn't going to be all that easy for them.

At the instant that Atlan was about to get out of the car in order to proceed on foot, the doors locked shut. He tried the release switches but the doors would not respond. All the operating power had been withdrawn from the robo-car.

Atlan smiled. If his invisible foe chose to keep the doors inoperative, by the same token he was not able to set it in motion. Nevertheless he was in a dangerous situation. Carba could send a second car into the passage manned by chapeks with orders to capture him.

The deposed Emperor began to examine the interior of the vehicle carefully. Surely there must be something in the design of the car that would enable passengers to get out in case of a power failure and locked doors. Although the canopy was transparent it was fairly indestructible. Atlan climbed over the back seats and found 2 air-vents which were only large enough to get his fists through. He returned to the doors and rattled them with both hands.

He was trapped.

He cursed Carba's deceitfulness and his own gullibility which had led him into this trap. Experimentally he tried to activate every button and control he could find but nothing happened. It took all of his strength to dislodge the seat from its mounting frame and push it back. Under it he encountered a plastic plate that was closely fitted into a hole in the floor. He released its 2 bolts and lifted it. Light came through and he could see the car's forward axle.

In that moment a voice spoke directly behind him: "The former Emperor Gonozal VIII is to be captured."

Atlan froze for a moment but then finally realized that the voice was coming from the loudspeaker which was standard equipment in every robo-car. Now it was a certainty: Carba didn't want him to get away scotfree and the Regent was supporting the new Emperor's efforts to hold Atlan on Arkon 3.

He couldn't imagine that he would have a chance of getting away now but nevertheless he redoubled his efforts. The seat blocked about half of the hole in the floor. He lay down on the floorboards and braced both legs against the front panel of the car while shoving hard against the seat with his shoulders. The effort caused his face to redden and he felt a tightening of veins in his head. The support fastenings of the seat slowly bent backward; the paint cracked loose and chips of it fell down his neck.

When he finally thought he had made enough room for himself he got up onto his knees. To get through the opening he had to squeeze by the axle which practically divided the aperture although at a distance of a foot and a half or so. After thinking it over he decided that it would work best if he went feet first. Meanwhile the loudspeaker kept on repeating its message which was now only psychologically significant. Its purpose was to make him panic and do something foolish.

Once the soles of his feet touched the axle he leaned back and worked his legs over the shaft. He struggled farther by use of his elbows until he slipped down and banged the back of his head against the rim of the hole. Heedless of the pain he writhed and twisted farther until he was finally beneath the car but hanging in a twisted position on the axle. Then he began to pull himself forward in the opposite direction. Finally his hands touched solid ground and he pulled himself completely free. He could hear the loudspeaker above him. He breathed a sigh of relief as he lay there directly beneath the car, streaming with perspiration.

That was when the robo-car began to move.

\* \* \* \*

The men on board the *Ironduke*, who had been waiting for hours, suddenly jumped as the voice rang from the speakers: "The former Emperor Gonozal VIII is to be captured."

Krefenbac cut in the amplifier as if wanting to make sure that not one of his fellow spacemen missed the giant Brain's announcement. Then for a short time there was silence in the Command Central of the linear-drive warship.

"He lost," observed Rhodan after awhile.

"We have to help him," boomed Claudrin, ready for action. "We can't just stand by and do nothing while they carry him off somewhere!"

"There'll be no rash action here," Rhodan admonished. "The first thing we have to know is where Atlan is at the present time. Judging by that alarm they haven't caught him yet. He knows his way around there and maybe he can fight through to the surface. Then we'll take a hand."

Rhodan secretly doubted that his Arkonide friend would be able to escape from the interior of the Brain. Nor could he himself sacrifice countless men in a futile attempt to penetrate the Regent's defence screen. Moreover he knew he mustn't lose sight of the menacing superior force of the Arkonide robotships which were being held on battle standby alert by the Regent.

"Ship call from the Akons," announced Krefenbac.



"Acknowledge, Major," ordered Rhodan without hesitation. Maybe they could gain time with a parley. Sansaro was shrewd but his victory might make him careless.

He saw the Akon's face flicker into focus on the telecom screen. "I presume you've also picked up the Regent's order," he said in a courteous tone.

"Naturally," replied the Akon. "It would interest me to know your assessment now of the situation for your little fleet unit."

Rhodan ignored the obvious sarcasm. He must not permit himself to be irritated into making any rash statements. Sansaro and his companions were the actual victors of this contest. Neither Carba nor the Regent realized that they were to be used by the resistance group in order to expand the influence of the rebels within the Greater Imperium. It would serve no purpose to communicate with Carba because the new Emperor would do what his advisers persuaded him to do. They had helped him to his new position of power and it was to be assumed that he would trust them unconditionally. Sansaro was the key figure. Sooner or later all commands would be coming from him or from some as yet unknown figure who had not yet appeared but who would no doubt be even stronger than Sansaro.

"I'll grant you that the situation isn't especially promising for us," said Rhodan, "but that doesn't mean we give up. You're much too smart, Sansaro, to underestimate us. That's why I hope that you will just be a bit cautious in dealing with us."

The Akon pretended indifference. "That's something that Carba and the robot Brain will decide," he answered calmly. "I merely wished to warn you against making any attempt to rescue your Arkonide friend. We have prepared ourselves for any eventuality." He raised his voice. "I warn you, Rhodan, if you want your ships to get away from Arkon 3 unharmed you will have to go peacefully."

"That's putting it plain enough," said Rhodan coldly.

For the first time Sansaro betrayed a sign of emotion. "But let's continue to be frank with each other, Terran," he suggested. "You know what's involved here for us. You and your ships are of secondary importance just now because we'll have enough to do to solidify our position. I only wish to deter you from forcing us into something that would have no advantage for either of us."

"We are quite useful to you as a means of bringing the Regent to your side." Rhodan's sharp irony caused the Akon's brows to rise in anger. "Now you'd like very much to shove us aside and get rid of the one remaining person who could cause you trouble—namely, Atlan."

"How are you going to prevent that?"

By his manner and tone Rhodan seemed prepared to stake everything on one card. "A few minutes ago we activated 5 fusion bombs which will detonate the moment we are attacked."

"You and your men would go up with them, Rhodan. That's not your way of solving problems," the Akon retorted at once.

"Would you care to find out whether or not I'll change my mind?" Rhodan challenged him.

"You're bluffing!" cried Sansaro.

Rhodan moistened his lips. "Could be," he agreed. "But are you absolutely sure?"

In the Control Central of the *Ironduke* a tense silence reigned. Rhodan was making a powerful play with a man who was a logical thinker and had seen through every ruse so far. Jefe Claudrin grunted almost inaudibly to himself and interlaced his thick fingers. Better than anyone else on board he knew the potentials of the linear-drive spaceship. They could have escaped immediately without the Arkonides being able to do much about it. However, the Epsalian realized that the Administrator would try everything possible to save his friend.

"What do you actually want, Terran?" asked Sansaro finally.

"A fair chance to help the deposed Emperor," Rhodan requested. "Just don't open fire on our ships."

The Akon shook his head. "No," he said. "You don't seriously think that we'd simply stand by and watch while you dispatch your troops to rescue Gonozal VIII...?"

"Yes, that's what you're going to do," declared Rhodan. "We'll be having enough trouble with the Regent's robot troops. It won't be necessary for you to take part in the action. As soon as our men set foot on the ground the robots will swarm out like hornets."

The Akon deliberated. "Perhaps you'd like to tell the Brain something about those 5 bombs?"

"That would be useless," announced Dr. Riebsam from the background. "The Regent's logic sectors would never accept the possibility that we would take the risk of being blown to atoms just to rescue one single man who is still considered as an enemy to the Greater Imperium."

Sansaro laughed. "What that machine might or might not regard as logical you'd have me accept as an established fact," he said. "No, that's too crude—I'll not be taken in by it."

"That is *your* gamble," said Rhodan calmly.

Sansaro turned away as if to indicate that he was not interested in continuing the conversation. When Krefenbac switched off the telecom, Claudrin was heard from.

"Do you think we can keep him neutral with that?" he asked doubtfully.

"We'll soon find out, Colonel. In any case it will give him food for thought. If the Regent gives us a bad enough time, I think Sansaro will hold off."

John Marshall, the tall, lean telepath, smiled significantly. "Which means we'll be making an attack..."

"Right you are, John," replied Rhodan. "We're going to send out a small contingent of troops who will engage in a retreating action with the Regent's combat troops. While Sansaro is busy smiling over our defeat and is enjoying his sense of security, Pucky, Ras and Tako will try to bring Atlan to the *Ironduke*." He paused briefly. "Of course everything will depend on whether or not the Admiral will succeed in reaching the surface at all."

No doubt in this moment there was not a single officer who believed this possible. Even if they could see Atlan they would probably have been without hope.

## 7/ MUTANTS UNDER FIRE

It was an instinctive movement but it saved his life. Atlan reached up with both hands and grasped the front axle. The sudden strain on his shoulder muscles made him groan aloud. A second later he would have been crushed by the lower suspension of the rear axle of the vehicle. His feet dragged over the smooth floor while he held on tight and kept his head up as high as possible. The robo-car had turned and was increasing its speed. He knew that he was being brought back into the inner sections again.

Suddenly the car came to a stop. He swung under and out, then rolled to one side and sprang to his feet. The car was humming softly. Atlan watched it tensely. Apparently it had come to a halt merely to determine whether or not its prisoner was still alive.

He went around it and began to run back up the passage. When he glanced back he saw the automatic car turn around and come after him. It gathered speed and was overtaking him swiftly. The Emperor increased his own speed, noting that the passage here was about 3 times as wide as one of these remote-controlled vehicles.

When he looked back a second time he saw that his mechanical pursuer was only a few meters away. He stopped deliberately while the wheeled disaster bore down on him. At the last moment he jumped to one side as a grey blur swept past him. He heard the tortured squeal of magnetic brakes and prepared for a new assault. The robo-car, apparently directed by Carba, turned in a narrow circle and came back. This time the unseen controller was more wary and guided the machine toward the right side of the corridor where Atlan was standing.

While panting heavily, Atlan suddenly heard a noise behind him and turned to see a second car rolling toward him from the opposite direction. Moreover it was approaching along the opposite side of the passage, which would leave him but a narrow space in the middle. It was a space he might be able to use to his advantage but there was little time to think.

He remained where he was as the robo-cars approached almost soundlessly. He was concentrating on the first car since this would evidently reach him sooner. Then he calmly stepped away from the wall into the centre of the passage. He saw he had miscalculated. The 2 vehicles would reach him at the same time because the last one was apparently travelling faster and closing the distance to compensate.

Atlan broke into a run toward the first car, which immediately slowed its pace. He looked around swiftly. Between himself and his metallic opponents was still a distance of 50 meters. Then 30, 20, 10 ...

Atlan took one big jump to the side and the second car veered toward him but the Admiral ran in the face of it, ducking out of the way at the last instant.

"Now!" he yelled.

The crash of the 2 robo-cars was like an explosion. Atlan had made a giant broad-jump to save himself and now lay on the ground. One of the vehicles was smoking and both were so badly damaged that neither one was able to continue the pursuit. With a shudder Atlan realized that the combat robots would soon be taking up the chase. He would have to hurry. Still panting from his exertions he sprinted up the passageway—but then suddenly the lights went out and he was enveloped by total darkness.

He immediately found the wall and ran onward, letting his fingers glide along the smooth surface to guide him. The darkness was a further advantage to the enemy because while he could see nothing he was no doubt a clearly recognizable target in the Regent's sensor equipment. Here he was fleeing from his own empire which he had sought to save. The misguided great positronicon that had advised him through the years was now having him chased down like a criminal and was seeking to capture him if not to kill him.

If the old Arkonides who were the builders of the Regent had made any errors it was this one, in having given their creation too much independence and power. In spite of its complex immensity the Regent was only a machine with all the shortcomings thereof.

Behind him the sounds of pursuit became audible and tore him from his musings. He expected that he might be shot at any moment. Carba knew no scruples and his sick mind was capable of anything. There was nothing for Atlan to do but to keep fleeing through the darkness with his pursuers at his heels.

\* \* \* \*

About 700 meters from the *Ironduke* a stream of combat robots came out of a subterranean shaft and formed a cordon. Rhodan watched the event silently while Krefenbac magnified the picture on the viewscreen until the robots stood out in individual detail.

"Fighter machines!" chirped Pucky. "What are they doing there?"

Rhodan told him. "That's the reception committee for Atlan in case he makes it up to the surface. Now we have an excuse to send out a small force of troops to keep the Regent occupied. I don't think that Sansaro will mix into it."

Decisively the Administrator picked up the microphone. "Rhodan calling Lt. Hotchkins!"

A rough voice answered: "At your orders, sir!"

Rhodan smiled over the mike at Jefe Claudrin, the commander of the *Ironduke*. "Can you see those robots, Hotchkins? They've just now appeared on the field."

"I can make them out, sir," replied the lieutenant.

"Good. I want you to pick out a detail of men you can depend on to keep their heads about them. And I want you to engage those robots in a fight in such a way that from the start it will look like a losing battle for our side." Rhodan seemed to laugh soundlessly. "Don't make it a rout—just an orderly retreat will do."

Hotchkins took a few seconds to answer. "Excuse me, sir," he said cautiously, "but I guarantee you we can take those robot troops with no sweat."

"I understand," Rhodan agreed. "But you are not to gain the upper hand, regardless. Just carry out my order and leave everything else to us."

"Very good, sir," was the lieutenant's curt response.

"He probably thinks he's joined a benevolent society for robots," commented Marshall after Rhodan turned off the mike.

Rhodan turned to the 3 teleporters. "I hope that we all understand what's going to happen. Hotchkins will run a sham battle against the robots which will keep Sansaro off our necks, as long as he sees our attack is failing. The minute Atlan appears, you three will make your jumps. Pucky will keep the robots busy who are out there waiting for Atlan, and they'll also be diverted by Hotchkins and his men. Ras, you are to concern yourself immediately with Atlan and try to bring him back here to the *Ironduke* in a teleport jump. Tako Kakuta will be the backup reserve because it's quite possible that Atlan will be pursued and when he appears he may have some rather nasty opponents on his tail. As soon as Ras has succeeded in disappearing with Atlan, Pucky and Tako will also return. If everything works out, at that time Hotchkins and his detail will be in full retreat. We'll pick them up and take off under the protection of our libration field."

It sounded very simple but Rhodan knew only too well that everything could go wrong unless luck played a part in it. Too many events were dependent upon each other and there wasn't much hope that it would all go according to plan and desire. However, Rhodan's main concern was for Atlan because for his own part it was impossible to penetrate the subterranean sections of the Brain. In that area the Regent was at a superior advantage in every respect.

Rhodan looked at the ship's chronometer. It was 3 Dec. of the year 2105, 08:07 hours Earth time, when the Administrator of the Solar Imperium grasped the microphone, contacted Hotchkins and ordered him to open fire on the robot troops of the all-powerful Regent.

\* \* \* \*

Julien Hotchkins, a lieutenant in the Solar Fleet, was as hard and massive as an oak tree. He stamped rather than walked at the head of his 37-man commando detail as they moved across the vast spaceport on Arkon 3. He wore a combat suit complete with defence screen and deflectors and over his shoulder hung an energy rifle.

Formerly while he was still a sergeant he had known many nicknames but somehow after reaching lieutenant grade he had shaken them off—all except one. The men who grimly followed behind him always associated the name "Hothead" with him. It was a name that Hotchkins had never been able to get rid of. The big Terran was no longer as explosive as he had been in his earlier years but the legend of his youth had remained alive and served to retain the nickname. Hotchkins the "Hothead" who had landed alone with 3 natives in the inferno of Darkun 4 and had returned victorious in spite of the gloomiest predictions.

Hotchkins stopped and raised his arm. "Break ranks—deploy!" he shouted.

He was aware of the group spreading out in a shallow half-circle as they moved forward. By now they had covered half the distance and were at the centre point of a dangerous triangle, the angles of which were formed by the robots, the Akon ship and the *Ironduke* .

Hotchkins kept a wary eye on the Akon ship. So far everything was quiet over there. They didn't seem

to attach much importance to his small detail of fighters. The lieutenant fretted secretly over Rhodan's instructions. He would have been only too happy to demonstrate to these arrogant aliens what his boys could *really* do.

The *Ironduke* hailed him and he heard Rhodan's voice in his headphones. "Have your men open up with an unconcentrated fire, Lieutenant," he ordered.

Hotchkins swung his energy rifle from his shoulder and raised it for action. "'Ten-shun!" he shouted.

A few seconds later he gave the firing order and a pattern of raybeams hissed over the ovoid metal heads of the robots. The fighter machines immediately returned the fire; in fact some of them separated from the main guard and came across the field toward the small Terran contingent.

The lieutenant aimed carefully at the leading robot but the thing's defence screen rendered his shot ineffective. It was only when some of his men also attacked the same target that the robot's field collapsed and it exploded in a jet of flames.

In the ensuing bedlam Hotchkins' voice was heard like a distant thunder. "Alright—fall back slowly now!"

\* \* \* \*

Atlan stopped and listened. Another sound was impinging upon the noise of his pursuers and it gave him new hope. Apparently a fight was in progress on the surface and the fact he could hear it was a sign that he couldn't be very far from the subterranean exit.

The lights suddenly flashed on again, revealing a sharp curve in the passage ahead. Atlan headed for it and before he made the turn he looked back. A group of robots was after him.

However, ahead of him was the end of the corridor, clearly outlined by the light of day. Some instinct gave a new spurt of speed to his tired legs. He had no plan as to how he was going to traverse the large open area between the exit and the *Ironduke*. He'd have to expose himself to his enemies like a bug on a plank. But his hopes were tied to the obviously heavy conflict that was going on outside. It was just possible that Rhodan had found a way to work his forces close to the shaft entrance.

When he reached the point where he could obtain his first view of the spaceport's synthetic surface, however, he was jolted by an unpleasant surprise. Around the exit area was a contingent of combat chapeks who were firing with all available weapons at some Terrans. The Earthmen were obviously in retreat.

Desperately, Atlan looked behind him. What should he do?

Ahead of him the true servants of the Regent were waiting to capture him immediately if he should dare to come out. Behind him, more robots were streaming toward him. Panting and wiping the sweat from his brow, he wondered if he had come this far only to give up. "No," he said grimly to himself, "never!"

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan concentrated all of his attention on the viewscreen. Lt. Hotchkins and his men were putting on a tremendous show but their action was bringing the resistance troops ever closer to the *Ironduke*. Rhodan hoped that if Atlan were going to show up at all he would do it in proper time.

"Sir!" called Maj. Hunt Krefenbac. "We're picking up a broadcast from the Regent!"

Rhodan left his place in front of the screen and went over to Krefenbac.

The tall, lean major added: "Our radio surveillance paid off, sir The Regent is beaming out news bulletins to all parts of the galaxy!"

"Let's hear what he's saying," said Rhodan.

Krefenbac activated the proper receiver switch. "... this new situation has arisen," sounded the emotionless voice.

Rhodan leaned closer to listen and silence pervaded the Control Central of the *Ironduke*, except for the Regent's incoming broadcast. "In the interests of Empire security, a number of fundamental changes have been made, which are hereby made public to all colonial races and associated worlds of the Greater Imperium. Emperor Gonozal VIII has been removed from his office because of his treasonous attempts to make the Terrans the ruling race not only within our own stellar empire but throughout the entire galaxy. The capture and arrest of Gonozal VIII is now imminent. In order to maintain peace and security, after thorough investigation and testing, the Regent of Arkon has established a new Emperor whose loyalty is above all suspicion. His name is Minterol I. His Eminence has begun immediately with the work of reestablishing the old order inside the empire. All colonies are instructed to immediately deport back to Earth any and all Terrans present in your area for political reasons. All government positions are to be occupied by Arkonides. Terrans are to be denied any help of either a military or economic nature. The first command of the new Emperor is this: All for Arkon—all for our Imperium!"

Krefenbac explained: "It's a repeat broadcast, continuous, with the indication that new bulletins will follow."

"We seem to be playing no small role in the deliberations of the new Emperor," remarked Rhodan sarcastically. "Carba and his backers know only too well that we would do everything possible to return Atlan to his rightful place if we had even the ghost of a chance. They'll only feel safe when they've got us shoved back into our own system..

Rhodan did not deceive himself. Without the backing of Atlan and the total military might of the Greater Imperium, Terra would be forced to make a precautionary withdrawal and to continue the slow buildup of its own power. The current development threw the Solar Imperium years behind in its planning. Rhodan shuddered at the prospect of an Arkonide attack against the young Terran empire, led by Carba. The Regent had always been suspicious of the Terrans and now he had a good reason to move against them.

Jefe Claudrin's thundering voice broke into his thoughts. "Atlan! There he is!"

Rhodan whirled about and looked at the viewscreen. The former Emperor had come out of the shaft and was running straight across the field with more than 60 robots chasing him. The distance between him and the machines was closing fast.

Rhodan only nodded. Everything had been planned out; no further words were necessary. Almost in the same instant the 3 teleporters dematerialised.

\* \* \* \*

Mular, the commander of the Akon ship, looked sullenly at Sansaro. "Why don't we move in on them?" he asked angrily. "Do you really believe in that fairytale about the fusion bomb?"

The scientist pointed calmly to the viewscreen. "Why should we expose ourselves to unnecessary risk, Commander? You can see for yourself that this handful of Terrans isn't getting anywhere. The Regent's robots can take them without even trying."

"I can imagine that Rhodan is also aware of that," said Mular. "Why doesn't he send in reinforcements when he sees that his troops are not reaching their objective?"

Sansaro smiled, apparently bored. "You're a good commandant, Mular," he said patronizingly, "but once in awhile you should get acquainted with something other than your ship controls."

Mular didn't seem to be offended by the veiled criticism. "So maybe you have your own theory about that undermanned commando unit?"

"Of course," confirmed Sansaro. "I'm presuming that Rhodan is using this manoeuvre to test the limits of our reserve; he wants to see at what point we'll become involved. But it will get him nowhere. We'll just calmly sit here and watch his men get driven back to their ship—and he'll be just as informed as he was before. In other words, he'll know absolutely nothing."

"It sounds a little fuzzy to me," commented Mular drily.

Sansaro remained composed. He was an experienced old man who always regarded his assistants as though he were their teacher. "You always have to place yourself in the position of the enemy," he said. "Then you'll have no trouble in seeing his intentions."

Mular laughed ironically and nodded toward the viewscreen where Atlan's sprinting figure had just become visible. "Then put yourself *in that* one's shoes!" he suggested.

\* \* \* \*

Pucky materialized in the midst of the robots who were pursuing Atlan. The machines reacted swiftly but they were too slow for the mousebeaver. Before they could fire, his telekinetic forces were already at



work. The first 4 robots rose from the ground and sailed back to crash with full force against the others. Pucky flashed in a short jump to another spot just as the attackers' fire caught his previous location in a searing focal point of destruction. At the same time he saw Tako Kakuta materialize at the shaft entrance. He also took time to look around for Tschubai. At that moment the latter appeared within 10 meters of Atlan and simultaneously disabled a robot with a careful shot. Pucky concentrated on the robots which were closest to Atlan and raised them into the air. From a height of 20 meters he let them drop again and they shattered in fragments against the super-hardened surface of the field.

An energy beam singed his fur and he had to save himself with another jump. Kakuta produced confusion among the automatons as he teleported swiftly here and there and refused to give them a fixed target. Tschubai stumbled over the remains of a chapek and fell. Atlan paused as he finally became aware of his rescuers. Pucky waved his hands and shouted but he was too far from Atlan for him to hear him above the noise of the fighting.

3 more robots were put out of action by the mousebeaver but there was such an unbelievable number of them that they almost got in each other's way. One of them charged Tschubai's prone figure but Kakuta had seen it and materialized in time to bring the robot under fire.

Tschubai finally regained his feet. "Over here!" he shouted to Atlan.

The Arkonide responded at once. Hotchkins and his men opened fire like a whole army and their enthusiastic cries almost drowned out the noise the robots were making.

"Make it fast now!" yelled Tschubai, and he grasped Atlan's hand.

But the automatons were closing in on them. Ignoring the diversionary action of the diminutive Japanese, they charged at Tschubai and Atlan. Pucky was the rescuer at the last moment. With a mighty expenditure of paranormal forces he brought the leading robots to a stop and gave the African a chance to make his jump.

By now the field was aswarm with automatons which were streaming out of the shafts and openings in countless numbers. They were no longer concentrating on the mutants but on the *Ironduke* itself.

"Merk out of here, Tako!" cried Pucky in his high-pitched voice, and he dematerialised.

The Japanese mutant took one last look at the gleaming confusion of metallic shapes around him. Wondering how he could still be alive, he teleported.

\* \* \* \*

Mular's face reddened in anger. "I don't know how you're still able to smile in a situation like this," he flared up at Sansaro. "It's obvious that Rhodan out-smarted us and is calmly bringing his old friend to safety. No matter what, you should have brought the Antis into the action."

The Akon waved a hand negligently. "Alright, so I made a miscalculation. Instead of trying to test our patience with his little troop he was doing the opposite: he was hoping we would remain quiet. And that he accomplished. But think it over, Mular. What does the Terran gain actually if he can rescue Atlan from

here? So he gets a man without power, a friend without influence, stripped of all military strength. Practically all that's involved is the live body of a deposed Emperor who can harm us in no way anymore. Rhodan will have to hide his friend because he will still have to fear attempts against him by agents." Sansaro stretched out comfortably in his chair. "My task has been well carried out: Carba has taken over the role of Emperor—all else is of relative unimportance just now. Why should I have risked the lives of the 2 Antis by sending them out to interfere with Rhodan's mutants?"

Mular shook his head sceptically. "I don't see it that way," he contradicted. "I'd feel better if we had this dangerous Arkonide in our hands. Some day he'll still be able to make trouble for us. His Terran friends are more pestiferous than insects. They'll always keep trying to regain their lost territory."

"Attempting something and succeeding at it are 2 different things," Sansaro reminded him. "But our accomplished plan demonstrates that we did not stop at a mere attempt. Carba is now the new Emperor of the Arkon stellar empire and can be led effortlessly in the desired directions. Now we will have no problem to take over the power here in the very immediate future.

Mular retained his scepticism. "You can never tell ahead of time what a Terran will do," he asserted. "Gonzal VIII has lived so long among these people that he is almost one of their own. I'm afraid we're going to be hearing from him many times again."

Sansaro only laughed. He did not wish the commander's pessimistic objections to spoil his great sense of victory. He gazed upward at the viewscreen where the vast spaceport was visible. He drank in the consciousness of the new power that he and his friends had won.

And he thought: The only true happiness for a man is to stand above another and to rule him.

Which was perhaps the reason why the Akons would never know true happiness.

\* \* \* \*

Julien Hotchkins twirled the energy rifle over his head and gave the order for a final retreat. He and his men moved in a body toward the linear-drive warship. He had witnessed the successful intervention of the mutants and knew that Atlan had been rescued. He, "Hothead" Hotchkins, had contributed his part to the action and had won new renown for himself and his men. He grinned as he thought of this. Why give himself so much credit for chalking up a few extra missions? There were plenty of others like him who had won themselves a famous nickname: the "Organizer", Emery, "Greenhorn" Pincer, Graybound the "Smuggler" and others.

He turned on his suit's antigrav and floated up to the airlock of the *Ironduke*. He heard Rhodan's voice in his headphones: "Well done, Lieutenant. My congratulations to you and your men."

"Thank you, sir! Maybe the next time we can let them have it instead of running!"

Up in the Control Central, Rhodan laughed. He turned to Jefe Claudrin. "We take off at once," he ordered. "General order to all ships active absorption screens."

The mighty figure of the Epsalian sprang into action. While the last of Hotchkins' commandoes were

coming on board, the Colonel took care of the final preparations for the takeoff. The first wave of the combat robots were so close to the ship by now that they were opening up with their built-in energy beams but their fire broke futilely against the vessel's defence screen.

"We'll let the other ships take off first," ordered Rhodan.

Shortly thereafter the Terran spaceships rose up from the landingfield. Rhodan glanced enigmatically at Atlan who was exhausted, resting in a flight seat. "We are now leaving Arkon, Admiral," he said.

Atlan smiled ruefully. "Once again I am in your debt for saving my life," he said. "If Ras and the other two hadn't hauled me out of there I'd have ended up as a prisoner down in the lower chambers."

"Forget it," returned Rhodan.

"Stand by!" thundered Claudrin. "Takeoff in 10 seconds!"

Then the mighty *Ironduke* was borne aloft on the full thrust of its engines. The Kalup converters began to operate, generating a semispace zone around the ship that protected it against any form of attack.

Once they were in outer space, Rhodan announced:

"I'm going to call all units of the Solar Fleet back to Earth. It's possible that the Regent will launch an attack against us.

Atlan did not answer. The Arkonide had gotten up and gone over to the viewscreen. The Arkon system was still discernible. Rhodan came slowly to his side and placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. In the background Claudrin's deep voice was still rumbling out various orders.

"Your home, Admiral," said Rhodan softly.

"Yes, Barbarian," Atlan agreed. "My home—in spite of all." His eyes met Rhodan's with determination. "One day I shall return here," he said firmly.

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