

Perry Rhodan 125 Savior Of The Empire 1/ THE BRAIN MUST DIE! "THE JUMP! "Please, sir, you should let me make it! This is my kind of job, not yours!" I waved my hand in a signal of refusal. Ras Tschubai, a teleporter of the Terran Mutant Corps, had called to me over the helmet phone. He looked at me once more imploringly and then went out. The energy arc of the matter transmitter took form. Blue fire streamed up from the twin floor projectors, turning to a flaming red at the apex of the arc. The thundering of the nuclear power generator drowned out all other sounds, which had forced Ras to use his radio. Between the fiery legs of the arc a darkness yawned, representing the extra-dimensional dematerialising field. I clutched the bomb that was suspended from my neck. It had been constructed in the atomic laboratories of Terra and was of a thermonuclear design. Its detonator had a built-in time delay which would allow me time to get out of the danger zone, if everything went according to plan. "IF-!" said my logic sector. I had already closed the helmet of my Arkonide combatsuit. The oxygen supply and the air conditioning were functioning properly. I was ready except that I could not activate my defence screen as it would cause interference with the lines of force in the Akon Transmitter. The Akons! They were the unseen masterminds behind the galactic stage. Without their help and technology it would be impossible for a certain treasonous Arkonide to deceive the robot Regent. About 3 months had passed since my escape. Now I was once more in star cluster M-13 but this time, instead of being the ruling Emperor, I had come here as a dethroned outcast. "Full power in 42 seconds," I heard somebody say over the radio and I recognized Perry Rhodan's voice. He was in the Control Centre of the Ironduke. The Terran linear-drive ship had emerged but a minute before from the semispace generated by the Kalup fields. We were within 20 light-years of the outer defence ring of the Arkon System but could not risk coming any closer. In fact the robot Brain's fortresses. "It's disgraceful!" I thought bitterly. "Nonsense!" retorted my extra-brain. "It's a tactical necessity." The sound of the reactors became deafening. I was alone in the transmitter room. In the few seconds remaining before the start of "Operation Last Ditch", as we called it, recent events ran through my mind as in a fast-moving film. Three months before, a contest between myself and Carba from the insignificant ancestral House of Minterol had ended in a check-mate situation but he had been named Emperor Minterol I. Meanwhile the Solar Secret Service had reported that Carba's reason had been wavering because of an over-driven brain activation and that he was probably on the brink of a mental collapse by now. Which was all the more convenient for those who had used him for seizing power in the Arkonide Imperium. Those masterminds were the ones who manipulated the robot Regent through this puppet ruler whom the brain recognized. The vast Positronicon was unable to differentiate between Carba's voluntary and involuntary commands. In the construction of their super robot my venerable ancestors had sought to prevent the very situation which had now developed: the Empire was being taken over by aliens; it was being split up and divided among various interest factions. It was the end of a 20,000-year stellar imperium and perhaps it also meant doom for Earthmen. Rhodan had already performed miracles in the buildup of the Solar Imperium but he was not a magician. Without the support of the robot fleet, Terran was lost. From all indications an offensive was being planned, and apparently the Regent's fleet would not be operating alone. There were only a few intelligent races who were favourably inclined toward the Terrans, who had become all too irksome or troublesome to others. Most aliens hated them, in particular the Galactic Traders, the Aras, the Antis and of late the Akons, who had suffered the greatest defeat in their history because of Rhodan. My own power was gone. My alliance with the Earth might have been gratifying to the Terrans but it was no longer to their advantage. In fact a deposed Arkonide Emperor was more of a burden than a support to their extra-terrestrial political structure and policy. Rhodan had been fully aware of my mental and emotional distress. He had not brought up the question or placed any pressure on me until I myself

had made the proposal to blow up the Regent. It was then that I learned that Solar Intelligence had already made all the preparations. Once the Brain was eliminated it would be up to me and the Terrans to save the Imperium. I hardly dared think of the magnitude of such a task at the moment. The Regent controlled industry, the entire food and supply administration and the military might of the Empire. If these controls suddenly vanished it would cause a catastrophe. However, we had conscientiously asked ourselves if those revolts and petty wars which would come as a result could be worse than the present splinterings and divisions caused by the greedy powers of the galaxy. I had to do it! The criminal augmentation of Carba's intelligence was leading to destruction. By nefarious means the Regent had been convinced that Carba's supercharged mind entitled him to the position of Emperor. During the mental duel, which was carried out on an almost incomprehensible plane of robot logic, my opponents had been able to "prove" that I had become an incompetent ruler. They claimed that I had violated the doctrines of our ancestors by supporting the development of the Terrans, that I had furnished them with technical secrets and had thus enhanced the advancement of an almost invincible enemy. The Robot had not understood my real concerns for the Imperium. It had responded to the ancient catastrophe program "Ephethus", according to which an Emperor was to be removed immediately as soon as he was not exclusively concerned with the well-being of the Empire. I had not succeeded in giving a purely logical proof that the friendship of the alert and highly intelligent Terrans would be of great benefit to the State. In the end, Carba had been named Emperor and I had been forced to escape. "Transmission in 3 seconds," Rhodan announced. "Good Luck, friend." It shocked me back to the present and I was aware of the stark reality of the bomb. I would have to ignite it within the inner circuits of the Regent. "You should have sent a Terran mutant," my logic sector informed me. Certainly a teleporter would be able to help himself better in a dangerous emergency. However, this destruction of the most magnificent creation of my ancestors was strictly my affair. By virtue of my heritage and my office it was I who must make the attempt to preserve the Imperium. "Very heroic!" retorted my extra-brain. I ignored it. My synthetically activated logic sector had little use for sentiment or feelings. Actually it was an organic computer which transmitted its conclusions or perceptions. But it was up to me to either respond to its admonishments or to reject them. The energy field had thickened visibly and the transmitter arc was high enough to admit a man. When the violet signal lamp began to flicker I advanced toward the yawning darkness between the rising legs of the arc. One more step and I would emerge inside the Brain 20 light-years away. The Terrans had been able to analyse this Akon technology so that the formerly long-range transmitter no longer held any secrets for them. I felt the pull of the dematerialising field. Taking a deep breath I cast aside all thoughts of the pros and cons of my actions and prepared myself for the "jump". "Stop-get back!" somebody shouted. "Danger, Atlan! The receiver station's been short-circuited!" I responded without thinking, as had become my habit in recent years. When a person is continuously threatened by assassins he develops a 6th sense. Before I had consciously registered the warning cry I had already leapt back but I still fell to the deck within a yard or so from the transmitter arc. My heavy equipment prevented me from moving swiftly. I had to crawl back into the room until I was beyond the marked-out danger zone and could take shelter behind the thermal defence screen. The hatch swung open and 2 men rushed in with Ras Tschubai in the lead. Without a word they snatched me from the transmitter room and set me on my feet outside. "Are you all right sir?" asked the second man, who was younger than the African teleporter. I recognised Lt. Brazo Alkher, one of the backup cadre of officers who would one day have a voice in the destiny of the Solar Imperium. "Yes, thank you," I answered. "What happened?" But I had not spoken loudly enough because of the thundering of the converter, so I repeated the question. Alkher pressed the release button on my helmet and it glided back onto my shoulders, where it was magnetically

anchored. Ras Tschubai smiles apologetically and relieved me of the bomb. he seemed to concentrate for a moment and then he disappeared in a bright flash of shimmering air. It was all happening too fast and my brain refused to register the events in their proper sequence. Rhodan and the commander put in an appearance. Jef Claudrin had turned off his micro-grav generator and came along the passage in mighty strides, just as if there were no gravity at all on board the Ironduke. Once more I received no answer. They led me away as though I were a child. Apparently they had recognized my state of confusion as a form of temporary stupor. In fact I was becoming drowsy by the time Rhodan brought me into the Control Central and bedded me down on a contour couch. Here it was more calm and quiet. The humming of the equipment and instruments was more pacifying than disturbing. I was wondering about my condition. Normally I should have been fairly agitated under the circumstances but in this case I could barely move. It was similar to a state of shock. I had been torn abruptly from a condition of high concentration and weeks of nervous tension. A medico gave me an injection and after a few moments I felt more collected and able to move. Perry was squatting beside me, surrounded by the officers of the Ironduke. I sat up, staring at them, unable to miss Prof. Kalup's heavy figure in their midst. "Maybe old soldiers never die," he said ironically, "but you came very close to fading away. Do you happen to know, sir, that you were already within the range of the dematerialising field? How did you manage to jump back just in the nick of time like that?" "Instinct, self-preservation-I don't know..." "Most likely instinct. The transmitter was short-circuited just as you were about to enter it-which meant that the other end of the line wasn't able to receive you. Anything going into a mess like that would have been shuttled back and forth about a hundred thousand time per microsecond." Rhodan chuckled unconvincingly and clapped me on the shoulder, hoping to reassure me. "Forget it, friend. We caught it just in time." However, my thoughts were racing. During the considerable period of my office as Emperor Gonozal VIII, I had succeeded in setting up a transmitter station in the subterranean section of the robot Regent. The Brain had never become suspicious because it was not equipped to detect the equipment's extra-dimensional forcefield. Moreover the device had been built by Terran specialists and it contained security circuits which were unknown even to the Akons. Who had caused it to short circuit? Who would have been capable of it? A strange sound gripped my attention. It sounded like the whinnying of a hound. Rhodan was staring at a viewscreen which revealed the inner room of the ship's transmitter station. Within moments the sound became shriller until it resembled the shrieking of a power-saw. Rhodan was shouting to me. "We've sent a robot into the field! there-take a look at that!" I jumped up. Once more my legs seemed to move involuntarily and I realized that I must have become frightfully pale. The dematerialisation field between the bases of the energy arc was normally black but at present it was aglow with a greenish flame. Within it was silhouetted a nebulous shape which appeared to become more deformed with each passing second. Jefe Claudrin gave an order and the transmitter was shut off. There was a lightening flash from the armourplate bulkhead of the sending room and remained fastened to it. When the thunder of the power pile subsided we were still staring at the viewscreen. The robot had apparently been compressed to a lump of metal the size of a fist. The densified mass clung to the steel plate, glowing white hot and seeming to pulsate like something alive. I couldn't utter a word. Everyone in the Control Central could well imagine what I would have looked like by now if I had not jumped back in time. Rhodan cleared his throat but also said nothing. Kalup wiped his bald head with a handkerchief. "The atomic regrouping there doesn't seem to be very tidy," he said. "Could you give me an idea, sir, of what's happened to your transmitter receiver? I thought you had concealed it." I suppressed my excitement, realizing that this whole thing had become futile. No one said anything until after I had struggled to express what was really on my mind. "A good question, Professor! The Regent could never have found it. Nor could Carba, either. So it meant that somebody must

have penetrated the robot who is familiar with Akon transmitters." "Terran transmitters," corrected Kalup irritably, "based on the Akon principle." I shrugged. "Have it your way. I know you and your experts took special pains with it. Nevertheless the equipment has been discovered and evidently somebody was able to understand the technology involved. They were waiting for our sending station to beam out the ready signal and that's when they caused the short circuit. So it seems I've escaped once again. But how to destroy the Brain now is a whole new problem." Kalup turned away. I watched his portly figure until he disappeared through the door to the tracking central. His gruff tone did not disturb me anymore. I knew it was only an expression of his choleric nature and that he was not half as formidable as he sounded. Rhodan was leaning with both hands on a map table. His gaze seemed to bore through the top of it. Without looking up he made a statement that I could not refute. "that was the last possibility of attacking the Brain with relative safety or at least a minimum of risk. Now Akon scientists have penetrated the situation and they are allowed to do things that we were always prevented from doing. It's certain that the Regent's basic security circuits have been reprogrammed; therefore the machine has become a general menace. Our observations indicate that a large part of the robot fleet has been deployed into the Arkon system. An open attack would not only be hopeless but it would also threaten the existence of humanity. And since our mutants can't enter the Brain's interior it would appear that the tele-transmitter is the only solution." The idea startled me. The special transmitter was located on board the Fleet flagship. "It's been proved that the Brain's honeycomb screen is impenetrable," I said. "The Akons have modernized the defence weapons. Besides that they also have linear-drive spaceships. What do you have in mind?" He looked at me cautiously. Jefe Claudrin avoided my gaze. That's when I realized that the Terrans had been discussing something that I was not aware of as yet. "Nothing, Atlan. Or at least nothing yet! It would have to depend on your decision... " "Pertaining to what... ?" "It would require your agreement to strike Arkon 3 with nuclear fire—it would mean the destruction of the planet. Wait!" He raised a hand and I checked my angry reaction. "Let me finish. We're quite aware that the delicate gravitational balance of the three Arkon worlds would be disturbed. Without the mass of the war planet, the tri-planet configuration created by your ancestors might fall apart. The synthetic orbits would be destroyed. The Crystal World of Arkon I and the industrial planet, Arkon 2, would be ravaged by annihilating earthquakes and catastrophic floods. To say the least the climatic conditions would undergo a violent change. This much must be admitted." I turned to go into the tracking centre, struck to the core by Rhodan's words. "I am against the plan," he said. When I turned to look at him his face was expressionless. "Thanks for that," I told him. "It won't work. Billions of Arkonides would be sacrificed. I might go along with the destruction of Arkon 3 since hardly anyone lives there. An evacuation would be possible. The Crystal World and #2, however, must not be disturbed. I haven't given up yet." The armoured hatch opened and I stepped through. I knew that we had reached out wit's end in the matter. Rhodan followed me and we came to a stop before the echo screens of the energy sensor. Jefe Claudrin's voice reached us from the Control Central. He was ordering an engine warmup. The sudden roaring of the hypersensors did not come as a surprise to me: I had expected an enemy sighting. Rhodan interpreted my weary smile correctly. We had come here to destroy the Regent. If it ceased to exist, Carba's plans would come to nought. The alien power groups would lose their interest in him. Far more importantly, however, about 100,000 ships of the Arkonide robot fleet would be put out of operation. "If!", said my logic sector. I ignored the interjection. The Akons had been behind the revolt of the degenerated Arkonides and now they had reached their goal. The Regent was acting illogically, which proved that they had been able to influence it decisively. The sensor mummings indicated transitions. Therefore, we were being attacked by the Brain. I hardly paid any attention to the howl of alarm sirens. The Ironduke was in battle readiness. Within seconds

after the first long-distance sighting, the warship had begun to pick up speed. As usual in such moments, the commands seemed to come so fast that they overlapped each other. The off-duty crews were hurrying to their combat positions. The heavy gun turrets emerged from the hull as if to say that Terra was not as helpless now as it had been 100 years ago. Following the hyperspace entry manoeuvre of the detected warships the hypersensors registered a second set of shockwaves. On the mass-sensor's echo screens appeared 4 green blips, and seconds later the evaluation came through. The Terran translight sensor-tracking system worked on the principle of hypercom-reflex analysis. The equipment could also pick up return echoes from physical objects in normal space, so the state of the art was no longer dependent upon tracing energy contrails from the impulse engines of other vessels. Although the latter technique served to determine range and bearing, the new features permitted an estimate of the size of the tracked objects as well. The voice of the O.D rang from the speakers. Presently the Ironduke, was hurtling into deep space with an acceleration of 600 km per second squared. "Four superbattleships, Imperium class, in close formation-red 33.467, vertical 7.274. Broadside action-turn about and open fire." I frowned, realizing that the robot-controlled space giants had unquestionably received orders to destroy the Ironduke. What astonished me was that our main positronicon had responded to the open fire without an override. The 4 battleships had emerged from hyperspace at a distance of about 10 million km and their speed was close to that of light itself. It was ridiculous to assume we were in effective range for a hit. The distance was also too great for overtaking a swift opponent. Rhodan did not concern himself with the invisible energy beams sweeping past us. "Broadside pattern sustaining," came a voice from tracking. "Lousy, too-excuse me, sir!" I ran to the Control Central where the bogie blips were more discernible on the larger screens. The Imperium-class ships were in a braking manoeuvre. Even the Regent would not be able to handle the complex factors this introduced to the firing coordinate data. The thunder of our engines made normal communication impossible. I snatched up a radio helmet, slapped the earphones to my head and switched the receiver on. And at once I was aware of Rhodan's shouted orders. He was sitting in the commodore's flight seat while next to him the commander monitored the navigation and defence controls. "... should give it a try," I heard Perry say. "Fire when ready!" I looked in surprise at the outboard monitor as something leapt away from one of the launching domes. It was an old-fashioned rocket of the type we had used in our fight against the Antis. For a brief moment its micro-impulse engine flamed brilliantly as it broke through the reverse-polarity field Iaminations of our defence screens, and then it vanished. But we could still see a green blip on the energy-sensor screen. The missile was accelerating at a maximum rate of 800 km per second squared. It was self-guided, employing 3 different principles which a robotship would find it difficult to recognize. For thousands of years, projectiles had not been used as weapon carriers. "Do you think it'll work?" I asked. "The proof is in the pudding, as they used to say on Earth. We're working just now with the mass detector. If it's jammed out the energy sensor will take over. That in turn becomes ineffective if they cut their engines. Residual radiation is too weak for long-range tracking. The crudest method is used by the laser-amplified echo-tracer. It starts working when it comes within range of the return beams reflected from the ships. I don't think they'll try dampening the echoes. At any rate, the missile will home in on the leading vessel." I was impressed. These men never hesitated to use any weapon they had to, from situation to situation, even if it involved such an archaic device that any other intelligences would have haughtily rejected the thought of employing it. The robotships were still firing at us. Their courses were approaching ours although they had broken up their formation. Before we penetrated into the Kalup-generated semispace zone, tracking announced a massive energy burst at a range of 8 million km. One of the echo blips disappeared and in its place appeared a glowing orange-red fleck of

light. "Approximately 40,000 megatons," announced the duty officer in the tracking centre. "A dead hit-total destruction. Their nuclear fuel helped amplify the chain reaction." Rhodan leaned back in his seat while I fairly trembled in reaction. Had the Regent become so sloppy that its ships could be destroyed by a primitive nuclear projectile? I myself could have figured out at least 10 different ways of handling the clearly detectable rocket, either by weapons fire or by outmanoeuvring it. I avoided Rhodan's gaze. The howling of the compensating converter died away. The star-strewn firmament of the normal void disappeared from the viewscreens and once more I was captivated by the phenomenon of translight linear flight. Rhodan's voice rang in my headphones. "The Brain is at the end of its rope. I wouldn't have thought I could hit an Imperium-class battleship this way, much less destroy it. It's time to wipe out that machine. It's a source of growing disaster. Within a few months the galaxy will be in an uproar and by that time Carba will probably have gone mad. From then on the Akons will try to tighten the reins, whereas at present they still have to move cautiously. Can you imagine what will happen when they have a free hand?" I nodded dejectedly. Yes, I could well imagine. Even though these 4 robotships had acted erratically the Terran fleet could not hold out against 100,000 of them. The Springer fleet units would also penetrate into the Sol System, in addition to the ships of countless colonial races who would still be in support of the Arkonide Imperium as ever before. In spite of this, however, I still believed that I could shut off the Regent. In our case the mammoth Brain was the sword with which the Gordian knot could be cut.

2/ A "GHOST" OF A CHANCE

I was prepared for many surprises from the "Little Man", as everyone called the slightly built Chief of Solar Intelligence, but this time the Solar Marshal had proposed the craziest plan I had ever heard of. With their advancing technology the Terrans appeared to have a penchant for trying the impossible. I had known the human race for 10,000 years. They had always shown themselves to be intelligent, resolute and frighteningly acquisitive when it came to knowledge. These were characteristics which had caused me some apprehension as a former Arkonide admiral. In those days when I first set foot on Earth, in view of my training, my rank and my Arkonide outlook I had pondered at length how I was to compose my field report. I had been inclined to inform those who might follow me that here on an insignificant world in the 10-planet system of Sol a race was developing that would bear watching. Now the Terrans had become a major power. They were fighting for their life which was something that could not be avoided ever since their official emergence into the political macrocosmos of the galaxy. A significant figure in the Rhodan game of recognition, expansion and swift retaliation was Allan D. Mercant, a semi-mutant with slight telepathic capabilities and the brain of a genius. He had formerly been chief of NATO intelligence and Rhodan was indebted to him for the fact that the "New Power", founded toward the end of the 20th century, had not suffered still greater difficulties than it had been forced to face. Mercant's "hobby", as he called it, was secret service and espionage activity. To my way of thinking the work of such an organization was of course indispensable although not always neat and clean. While orchestrating such instruments, no intelligence chief can avoid an occasional sour note or discord. We had landed 2 days ago in Terrania. The city had increased still more in size and modernity. Even Rhodan did not know exactly how many inhabitants were in Terrania. In response to Mercant's invitation we had gathered together in the conference chamber of Defence-Intelligence Headquarters. The security measures were sobering if not alarming. In addition to robot guards, soundproof walls and the unobtrusive presence of mutants, the small briefing hall was enclosed in a protective energy field. Here there was no "officious" atmosphere, however, no horse-shoe shaped green-top tables. We sat unrestrainedly beside each other as if at a social gathering, placed at our ease by an awareness that no one could eavesdrop on our conversation. The most important leaders of the Solar Imperium were present. I noted that there wasn't a man among them who had not received the life-prolonging cell-shower

treatment. Even Homer G. Adams, the powerful but never conspicuous Chief of the solar GCC, had put in an appearance. GCC-General Cosmic Corporation- was conceived in a century that hardly knew anything about manned spaceflight until Rhodan flew to the moon. That had been the beginning of a cosmic gamble whose most important phase had now been reached. I continued to take count of the notables present. Solar Marshals Mercant and Freyt were in attendance as well as generals Deringhouse and Kosnov. Rhodan of course was there, as well as Reginald Bell in the capacity of Defence Minister, in addition to leading scientists and other men I had only heard about but had never met personally. A man who was veiled in considerable mystery was Col. Nike Quinto, a chief of one of the Intelligence Department's divisions. It was said of him that he was a master of secretive operations. Unquestionably Mercant's wild idea had come partially from Quinto, who sat perspiring in a corner and informed anyone who cared to listen about his imagined illnesses. So I found myself in the midst of a task team which was capable of shaking the galaxy itself. Here was Homer G. Adams with his GCC, whose financial power was such that his signature alone could authorize a subsidy amount of up to 500 billion Solars. And there was Mercant with his unfathomable Security and Intelligence resources, plus of course Rhodan himself and his whole Solar Fleet, the actual strength of which he had never divulged. For several minutes a tense silence had fallen upon the room. Mercant's proposal had sounded too incredible. Even Rhodan seemed perplexed. "My friend-are you sure you're sober?" he asked. Mercant glanced at Quinto. I knew that courteous smile of the Intelligence Chief. I had never known a dangerous man with such a harmless appearance. "With your permission-I am quite in possession of my faculties," he replied. Rhodan seemed to stiffen as if a cold shock had run through him. In fact I too could feel cold perspiration starting down my back. "Mercant-but that's insane!" he protested. Yet at the same time I was surprised to detect a fire of enthusiasm rising within me. Mercant, shrewd psychologist that he was, winked at me knowingly. He seemed to interpret the gleam in my eye correctly. "Now there are two of us who have rocked off," observed Bell. "How is that?" interjected Prof. Kalup in his loud voice. "I find myself fascinated." Rhodan chuckled dryly. "Seems to be quite a difference of opinion here. Quinto, are you the one who suggested this audacious idea to our Chief of Intelligence?" Nike Quinto stirred his short, rounded figure and puffed out his cheeks. "Sir, in view of my high blood pressure I'd never permit myself to agitate my superiors because that only develops other difficulties for me. However, since my blood pressure at present isn't up to its usual-" "If we're lucky you'll explode on us one of these days," grumbled Kalup. His fat cheeks trembled visibly. Quinto feigned offence but finally smiled. It helped me to find my inner calm again. When Rhodan looked at me I discovered that same old expression in his features which he had always displayed at the inception of a daring venture. "Well, old pirate?" I said to him. "I see you're getting the itch, right?" He laughed. We understood each other. "Well, that puts it together," commented Bell sarcastically. "Two nuts at the highest level-if Your 'Retired' Excellence will forgive me..." When he bowed mockingly I began to feel impatient. Turning to Mercant, I inquired without preamble: "Have you made a thorough analysis of the data I gave you? You know that the slightest mistake can be fatal for all of us, granting that your plan even gets off the ground." The marshal made a sign to Quinto and the chief of the so-called "Brain Trust"-otherwise referred to as Division 3-got up from his chair with a grunt of exertion. He acted as if it were hazardous for him to place both feet on the floor at the same time, yet he manoeuvred himself quite agilely to the control console. The seat creaked audibly under his weight when he sat down at the panel. The snap of a switch was heard. The lights in the windowless room were darkened. A wall-sized viewscreen brightened with the 3-D colour image of a spaceship. I sprang to my feet, clinging with both hands to the table before me. I stared in utter amazement. This could not be real unless the Terrans had become magicians! "Mercant... !" I groaned aloud. "Take it easy, will you? Even

Arkonides can only stand so much shock treatment!" "You are looking at reality, sir. This film was taken early today. You are looking at His Highness Tutmor VI's heavy cruiser Soralo, commanded by Capt. Tresta of the distinguished House of Efelith. On the 10th of February of 2106 it will be exactly 6023 years since a hypercom message from the Soralo reached the Supreme Council of Arkon. The news was so important that it was brought to the attention of the ruling Emperor at that time, Tutmor VI. In the nebula sector, Capt. Tresta had succeeded in simultaneously liberating two worlds from the enemy-but in the process his cruiser was destroyed. The Soralo, never returned to Arkon. Capt. Tresta went down in the history of his people as a hero, sir." "The spaceship you see has been converted by using every branch of technology and science available to us while sparing no expense, and now it resembles the old Sotala down to the last detail. Nothing was overlooked. That is guaranteed by Solar Intelligence. During the conversion many details had to be considered. The outer hull had to be reduced in its measurements by 189 meters. The modern full-scale positronicon had to be replaced by the kind that was in use at that time. Engines, power plants, weapons, power circuits and conduits, the computer central, officers' and crew quarters-all this and about 10,000 other details had to be copied. Even the propulsion rating of the original engines was simulated. Any Arkonide technologist from the time of Emperor Tutmor VI could go over the ship to his heart's content and not discover the slightest difference from the original. We thoroughly familiarized ourselves with the construction plans that we found in the microfilms you salvaged." I trembled almost feverishly. My extra-brain came to life, activating my photographic memory. I knew how my ancestors had built their ships. Like one hypnotized I walked up to the viewscreen and began to inspect the vessel. The name Sotala had been painted in 2 places on the spherical hull in Arkonide letters. Here the same flaming red had been used as was employed then. "The composition of the colour is correct," commented Mercant, just as casually as if he were chatting about the weather. To me it was almost frightening. The Terrans were masters of camouflage but here Mercant had outdone himself. The sharply wedge-shaped engine ring bulge was typical of the Sotala class. The personnel airlocks were hexagonal-also correct! The lower sections of the landing struts also had the typical bulges containing the auxiliary hydraulic units. The gun turrets displayed their sensor antennas for individual precision firing. In those days they had not relied completely on remote control from the fire command central. I looked closely at every last detail but couldn't find an error. "Does the inside of the ship look like this, Mercant? I mean-copied to such a degree of exactness?" "You have my word for it, sir," Quinto assured me. So he had been involved with this, after all. "A real counterfeiter," observed Kalup. "Nevertheless-my compliments!" My mind was fairly swimming as I went back to my form chair and sat down. The cell activator hanging on my chest was pulsing louder than usual, reminding me once again of my extreme age. Under my present state of excitement it was evident that some extra cell-regeneration was necessary. Rhodan handed me a refreshment. "Satisfied?" he asked. "No defects?" "None," I confessed. "Of course I'd still have to take a look at the inside. Mercant-what's it all add up to?" So far the Intelligence Chief had done very little explaining but we had already been flabbergasted by this plan, which had to do with "time-line alteration for penetration into the brain". What followed now caused me to hold my breath occasionally. Mercant remained quietly objective. He did not even raise his voice when he came to particularly spectacular and vital points of his exposition. In fact his telegraphic style of delivery made it almost too impersonal-yet for that very reason the whole thing sounded extremely impressive. At no time did we have the impression of listening to a visionary. "After transmitting her victory message the Sotala was not heard from again. Later reports from Arkonide Fleet Headquarters confirm that the cruiser was destroyed. So we are taking over the role of the Sotala and will return to the Arkon System 3 days after the reception of its last known message. Atlan is to play the part of the

commander. We have also provided uniforms, all types of documents and credentials-even provisions in the form of dehydrated foods and conserves, such as were used at the time. The munitions supplies correspond to the number series issued by the ordnance chief of 'Base T-187'. Nothing is missing, gentlemen. Even the manufacturer's mark inside the collars of the combatsuits will be found to coincide with the facts. The Arkonides were very thorough and all the old data are completely at our disposal. When you land on Arkon 3 you will be the crew of the Sotala. There are no margins of error." "Land, did you say?" Rhodan emphasized the word deliberately. "When? Don't tell me that this talk about 'time-line alterations' is tied in to that"! "It is the basic condition necessary to the success of the plan, sir," replied Mercant, as pleasantly as before. "The conversion of a Terran cruiser and transforming the crew into Arkonides of the time of Tutmor VI could only make sense if we can succeed in penetrating the corresponding historical epoch." "I can't believe it!" I exclaimed. "But it's true, sir. I recall the attack on the robot Regent shortly after the discovery of the planet Sphynx. At that time an attempt was made to alter the lines of time. The phantom fleet started to attack the Earth until we succeeded in destroying the converter equipment. A second machine of this type is located on the central world of the Akons." "Time displacement?" asked Rhodan, leaning forward. "In a way, sir. Certainly not time travel in the tradition of your fantasy tales. The device generates a 5th dimensional absorption field in which relative phases of 'time' can be altered. It is impossible to actually leave one's own time reference and live somewhere else. One can't just travel about as he pleases and act the part of the visitor from the future. However, the narrow radius of action this offers us should be sufficient for our purpose." Kalup went into some of the technical aspects. The principle involved was understandable even though no one could explain how the Akons had influenced the present lines of time. Mercant waited patiently. The conference gradually took on the semblance of a casual gathering, breaking down into separate discussion groups. Everybody came to attention again when Rhodan sought to bring the meeting to order. "Continue your presentation, Mercant. We're just about ready for anything by now." "Thank you, sir. We have learned that the machine is stationary. It would have to be transported in a spaceship and transferred in outer space to the converted cruiser... The converter's operating crew is known to us. It consists of 4 Akon scientists who are still able to operate the equipment. But they aren't capable of handling repairs in case of a breakdown. The secret construction details have been lost. However, there is no particular danger involved in case of equipment failure. No one can be cut off in another period of time. As soon as the energy held collapses, everything becomes stabilized again. Our commando force on Sphynx has already been instructed to keep the 4 Akons under surveillance. The mutants will make sure that these men will be in the vicinity of the converter at the proper time. The device is kept in a museum but any practical use of it is forbidden, subject to punishment by death. Only experiments under government control are permitted. And that gives us our point of attack, through the 4 Akon scientists. You must acquire the machine and get it installed in the simulated Sotala. Once you are in the Arkon System the time-field is to be activated. The phasing has to be very exact. Once you have picked up and registered the famous hypercom message of the original Sotala you will be able to make a vernier time-line adjustment. Wait 2 days and then announce your victorious return over local telecom. It's certain that the genuine cruiser won't be able to cause you any trouble. By the time you will have made your landing, the old Sotala will have already been destroyed" I almost forgot to breathe. Mercant had to be insane. Of course a virtual trip through time was equally crazy but even this idea of a time-displacement field presented problems that neither the Terrans nor myself would be able to resolve. The ancient science of Akon had left a machine behind that no one really understood anymore. Just the operation of the controls alone would be a gamble which could neither guarantee a trouble-free performance nor any security at all for our task

force. On top of these difficulties we had to face the problem of stealing the machine along with the 4 scientists. No doubt the latter had learned more or less which switches to activate, as a result of years of experimenting, in order to achieve this or that effect but this was still not in the realm of professional operation. I couldn't even imagine what effect a rephrasing of time would have on us. If we should actually manage to land on Arkon 3, 6023 years prior to present time, we would still be energy components of our own temporal plane or epoch. Mercant had admitted that it was impossible to achieve a stable entry into the era of Tutmor VI. The plan was senseless. Mercant's voice pulled me out of my stupor. It was evident from his concluding remarks that the scientists of the Intelligence staff were aware of the difficulties. "At the maximum output of the converter the effective range of the phasing field is about 200 km. No one should venture more than 100 km from the generator. Granted, that's a tight squeeze. Everything will depend on landing the false Sotala as close as possible to the Brain. At that time the Regent's last sections were being completed and there wasn't any defence screen. You will have to use your ingenuity, with the help of the mutants, to get into the lower labyrinths and conceal a nuclear bomb in such a manner as to prevent its subsequent discovery. The weapon has a time-fuse based on a Uranium clocking device. Exactly 6023 years later the fusion process will be activated. That will be on February 15, which is a few days from now." Rhodan got to his feet. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his uniform, walked over to the film projector and came to a stop. "Mercant, this time you're going too far out on a limb. If the bomb is to detonate on the 15th of February, that means theoretically that it's already located somewhere inside the Brain." "A relativistic conclusion," interjected Kalup. "It shouldn't be but it can be! The function of the Akon device is an unknown factor." "Professor, I believe I have a fair reasoning faculty but you've lost me somewhere." "Me, too, sir," Mercant admitted. "Nevertheless the attempt should be made. I don't see any other possibility of destroying the Brain. Recent events have proved how dangerous the Robot has become because of a reprogramming of its most vital circuits and installations. Members of the Akon Energy Command were detected in the security section. It would have been possible to capture the 8 scientists of that team if the Brain hadn't jumped the gun, so to speak, and opened fire. Atlan couldn't use his transmitter, and to use our most powerful weapon would mean the destruction of the Arkon System. Nor can mutants get through the modernized honeycomb screen. So I'm asking you-show are you going to ward off this menacing situation?" Quinto spoke up. "Division 3 is of the opinion that something must be risked. Unusual situations require unusual methods. We've worked out a plan of action and it tells us what we have to do. You will be able to contact the greatest Arkonide scientist, the great councillor Epetran. He died 8 years later. Perhaps Epetran can be influenced to reprogram the robot Brain-fresh from the start." "Nonsense!" retorted Rhodan. "If that were possible the Robot would be acting differently now!" I had to agree with him. "That's hard to say. The present situation indicates everything and nothing. We still can't tell whether or not you've been back 6023 years or not, or whether you then reached the Brain. We would have to wait for February 15 to determine that." "Then let's wait!" I cried out in desperation. Mercant made a gesture of rejection. Suddenly he seemed to be very resolute. "Impossible, Your Eminence. You would miss the precise point in time. It was on the 10th of February, 6023 years ago, that the hypercom message was received from the Sotala. Her commander received orders to return home immediately. So the arrival in the Arkon System would have to be 2 days later, which would be February 12th by Earth reckoning. Of course you will have the conversion tables with the Arkonide units of time to go by. You will have 2 or maybe 21/2 days at the most to conceal the bomb-or to influence the chief builder, Epetran, to build in some security circuits that will satisfy our requirements in the present. Otherwise the bomb must explode on the 15th of February. So if you miss the decisive moment there will no longer be any chance of landing you

on Arkon in the bra of Emperor Tutmor VI. That the Sotala sent a victory message but failed to return is a very unique circumstance. There is no other spaceship you can copy." "Why so? Thousands of Arkon ships were destroyed in the battles of that time." "Of course, sir, but within the few days that are important to us, this only applies to the Sotala." My extra-brain interceded. Mercant had made a mistake in his reasoning. When I stood up, Rhodan looked at me questioningly. "Mercant, you know how long it will take to program the robot fleet. An attack is imminent but it isn't going to happen tomorrow or even in the next 3 weeks. So I ask you: why should the 15th of February, the cruiser Sotala and all these other things be so critical and decisive? Also you know that the Akon converter enables us to alter time. If we started this operation later we could still follow the necessary schedule." I believed I had given a logical argument but I was wrong. These Terrans could think! "Certainly you could start 4 weeks from now and still reach the right moment in time, sir. That still means the 12th of February for your landing on Arkon 3. This cannot be changed by any machine. But to make the plan work, the Sotala would have to be used and none other." "I don't understand." "Sir, during those specific days, 6023 years ago, the last controls of the Regent were being completed. If you arrive only a short time after that, the honeycomb screen will be there. So you have to select a time for your landing that is prior to the activation of the screen and which coincides with the arrival of the Sotala. The loss of that ship was a fortunate coincidence for us. As for the 15th of February, that is an arbitrary point that was determined by mathematics-pertaining to the Uranium timing device of the bomb. It was quite a problem to calculate the exact detonation time, based on the half-life rate of radioactive decay. Why should we alter that and have to start all over again? You would still be able to steal the Akon machine and begin your operations-but there is no getting around the schedule of the Sotala." I felt that I had been taught a lesson by the Security Chief-but he was right! If the honeycomb screen was activated only a few days later, any delay in our schedule would be catastrophic. The Terrans had thought of everything. Rhodan went back to his seat and I also sat down again. We looked at each other searchingly. The room became silent. When I finally nodded to him he seemed visibly to be relieved. "Mr. Mercant, run the film through again. We want to take a look at the interior of the cruiser." I was filled with new courage. Rhodan had decided. The operation was "go". My extra-brain prodded me mentally but I couldn't quite make out the signal. It was probably calling me a fool. The image of the Sotala appeared again on the screen just as Reginald Bell remarked resignedly: "Ever since the start of the New Power I've seen everything but this is the zaniest operation I've been involved in!" "Wrong!" Rhodan corrected him. "You will take command of the Fleet and wait until the Regent is destroyed. When that happens, you will begin immediately to capture the Brain's robotships, which will have become helpless." "What...?" "That's right, you are to begin with the task without delay, once the Regent's control has been eliminated. We have the advantage of knowing that something is going to happen. Before other intelligences realize how easy it is to take over the valuable ships of the Regent's fleet, we will have had to beat them to it. It's your task right now to find out where the larger formations can be located. They will be the first to be taken over. The lone wolves way out in deep space will have their turn later. Mercant-switch reels. I want to see the inside of the cruiser. I finally felt relaxed. The die was cast. Rhodan had begun to take over with his usual drive. He was already thinking of things that hadn't occurred to me yet at the moment. Naturally, if the Brain should be destroyed, about 100,000 warships would be incapacitated. Unless we acted first, anybody would be able to take them in tow without resistance. "If!" said my logic sector again. I lost track of how many times it had used this word in recent days. Two hours later the towering buildings that housed the facilities of Solar Defence and Intelligence were like one big madhouse. Rhodan was too busy to be reached. He sat in a control room surrounded by at least 50 communicators. Next door to

him the Fleet's General Staff was in session. I felt lost in all this hustle and bustle, which was only possible on Terra. A small but tremendously energetic stellar empire was preparing to strike a major blow. A way had been found to achieve the objective, consequently that way was followed. This was what I admired about these Terrans. Once they made a decision they never gave up until they had reached their goal. I withdrew to my quarters. Almost hourly I was contacted by videophone for information. They wanted to know even the social status of an Arkonide captain of the rank I was to portray. A uniform tailor from Intelligence wanted my exact measurements. Weapons experts wanted to know if officers of the Arkonide fleet in those days were permitted to carry beautifully engraved private sidearms. For 2 whole days I was busy trying to satisfy the Terrans' thirst for knowledge. But I became increasingly impressed with the feeling that I was dealing with realists rather than visionaries. These men were experts and specialists who considered details which ordinarily wouldn't have been thought of. Then at last I fell to waiting again. However, I avoided any attempt to influence Rhodan's decisions with any advice of my own. There was still time for that should anything occur to me that might be significant.

3/ THEFT OF THE EPOTRON Event was heaped upon event until it was time to go. We were accompanied by the simulated Sotala as we took off in the Ironduke to pay the Ruling Council of Akon an official "courtesy call". The deputy commander of the Arkonide cruiser was Maj. Heintz, a cosmonautics expert from Solar Intelligence. His crew consisted of 750 men as was the custom on heavy cruisers of the Imperium. In those days we still had sufficient manpower because the degeneration of the ruling race had only just begun. It was only later that I and Rhodan were to transfer to the cruiser along with Jefe Claudrin and several other staff officers from the Ironduke. Our special equipment was already on board the Sotala, such as our uniforms, documents, weapons and whatever went with them. The Ironduke proceeded in direct linear flight to the near centre of the galaxy where we sent out a message to the Ruling Council. The giant blue sun of Akon, whose 5th planet was the home world of the Akons, had already illuminated our viewscreens when the answering dispatch was received. Within 10 hours Claudrin started his braking manoeuvres and once more I had an opportunity to admire the beauty of Akon 5. Rhodan had named it Sphynx although the natives referred to it as Drorah. The reception by several delegates from the Council had been noticeably cool. We were happy to withdraw to the Terran commercial base where almost all the members of the Mutant Corps had assembled. Two days were taken up with festivities and inspection tours. The Akons had no choice but to show a proper amount of attentiveness to the ruling chief of the Solar Imperium but at the same time it became increasingly evident that the members of the Ruling Council were supporters of the Arkonide rebels. They had given me to understand that my presence on Sphynx could be tolerated for the moment but that it would be in the best interests of their relationship with the new Emperor for me to cut my visit short. The radio monitoring station at our base had intercepted several hypercom dispatches and decoded them. My successor, Minterol I, was advised that my appearance on Sphynx was unfortunately something that could not very well be hindered, inasmuch as I was in the "retinue" of the Terrans' Chief of State. I was no longer concerned about what they thought of me or what conclusions they might draw. I knew that the Zorab was waiting for us at a distance of 10,000 light-years in an almost unknown sector of space. All that remained was for us to steal the time converter. The mutants had made all the necessary preparations. Rhodan had just returned an hour before from another reception and now he was relaxing in a contour chair while he listened to a report from Corps Chief John Marshall. Mousebeaver Pucky had gone on a mission with the mutant Kitai Ishibashi, by means of teleportation. It was the latter's assignment to "prepare" the 4 Akon scientists. Ishibashi's talent enabled him to use a kind of remote hypnosis to force his will upon other individuals. The resulting mental block or suggestion was hardly noticeable but of long duration. To this extent everything had been done to enable us to "appropriate" the secret

device. However, a few problematical items still had to be clarified. The so-called trading settlement was actually a modern and fully equipped base for Solar Intelligence. On the viewscreens the structures of the main spaceport of Sphynx were discernible. After Perry Rhodan's discovery of the Blue System the Akons had been forced to take up space flight again. Now as before, however, they still managed their interstellar traffic by means of gigantic matter transmitters, although these were not adequate in a military sense. It had not been too difficult for Rhodan and the Terran Fleet to overcome the system's defences-after due provocation-and to destroy the satellite power stations. After that the system-wide blue defence screen had ceased to exist. The Akons had clearly recognized the fact that in spite of their perfected transport technology they would not be able to have any role in galactic affairs unless they built up their space travel once more. Doubtlessly they wouldn't have been so peaceful if they had been able to call in 10,000 warships to their aid. The Terrans were considered to be intruders. I well knew their opinion of me, the former ruler of a rebellious colonial race. By Akon values the Arkonides were degenerate savages, comparable to galactic vermin, undeserving of notice. It was calm and peaceful at the city's new spaceport. There were no robotships of the Regent's fleet to be seen. Merchant ships of other races were not allowed to land. The Akons maintained a zealous surveillance of their zone of influence which included an unknown number of colonial worlds. All such planets were contacted and supplied exclusively with the help of the giant transmitters. They had set up a communications system which had functioned well until Rhodan discovered the Blue System. He had startled the Akons out of their calm complacency and now we were feeling the effects of it. The Terran agents had informed us that the Ruling Council maintained relations with the rebels on Arkon. A few months before this, that fact had been denied, but meanwhile conditions had changed. Rhodan had followed my gaze and become pensive. "It looks quite deserted out there. In a few years it will be swarming with spaceships of every type and description. The Akon ship-building industry will soon be on its way. Considering the high state of science and technology here I'd say we can expect to see some pretty sensational products." "We won't have to wait for that, sir," interjected Marshall. "They are already setting their trap for us. Emperor Minterol has been officially recognized. Of course they know he's only a shadow figure. Our latest investigations have revealed that the Akon government has sent scientific teams to Arkon. Guerilla actions have come to a stop. Within a few months the Regent will be so completely reprogrammed that it will be nothing more than a super computer, stripped of all command functions. This will enable the Akons to become the first nation in the galaxy. They are already making preparations for taking over the Regent's fleet. The new shipyards represent a heavy expenditure but their chief purpose is to convert the robotships. Things are getting serious, sir." Rhodan got to his feet. Bordering the territorial region of the Terran settlement the gleaming force lines of the energy screen could be seen. Our hypersensors were reacting continuously. The Akon long-range transmitters were functioning again. "They're sending crews to Arkon and the Brain is allowing it," remarked Rhodan. "Well, John, what have you accomplished? 'Operation Last Ditch' is becoming critical." I observed the Ironduke with interest. It was parked in the port sector, which still belonged to the Terran sphere of influence. Jefe Claudrin and the crew were on board. The big warship was in battle readiness. There was still no space vessel on the planets of the Blue System that could have offered it any resistance. The few smaller spaceships of the Akon Energy Command had been destroyed in December of 2102. At that time we knew that the Akons would not take such a blow lying down. On the other hand we had counted on a breathing space of at least 30 years. Even with the Akon state of technology a major fleet-building program could not be realized earlier. But now thanks to my rebellious countrymen they had found a better way. The Imperium possessed about 100,000 modern robot units which could be quickly converted for human crews. It was a diabolical plan which was characteristic of the

Akons. Marshall's strategic report was brief. All that was still necessary was to tie down the final details. "The time converter is located at Impton. Akon pride in the accomplishments of their ancestors has led to the erection of a museum city which is called Impton in honour of a famous physicist. The device is cubical and measures 8.3 meters on each side. It rests on a platform that is 5 meters high, which contains the power plant. The latter consists of high-powered reactors of an alien design. A fusion principle is used in it which could not be simulated by present-day Akon scientists. Its power capacity is an unknown factor but we estimate it to be about 50 million kw." I was impressed. Such power outputs were not unusual, in fact quite commonplace on board the major spaceships, but in such a relatively small machine this was enormous. "The museum town is closed off by energy barriers and the air space is closely monitored. The only way to take the machine is by putting it to work. That is, the mutants will have to get in unobserved and turn it off. The museum complex was built around 3000 years ago, so we'll have to go back about 4000 years where we'll probably be in an open area. We'll have to bring antigrav transporters with us. In the converter field we'll be able to move the time-phaser to the place where 4000 years later the Terran trading base is located. That way we'll have the machine right here. The museum was to be destroyed by means of a nuclear explosion-which will help to explain the sudden disappearance of the time converter." "How will it be accomplished?" asked Rhodan. "A special commando detail is standing by. For several days now the Akon service posts have been informed that unknown agents have been wanting to get into Impton to study the products of the ancient Akons. Moreover, according to local security officials, the Terrans are suspected of having something to do with it." "No wonder!" I muttered aloud to myself. Rhodan chuckled. After checking his watch, Marshall continued. "The scientists who are familiar with the operation of the time-converter will arrive punctually. Kitai is already at work on them. And that's about it, sir." I looked about me. The tracking room looked like a military encampment except that the warriors present were not carrying swords and spears. They were equipped with the most modern energy weapons in the Milky Way. I wore a Terran uniform and my white-blond Arkonide hair was concealed by a radio helmet. The best experts of Terra were poised on the threshold of a mission which could decide the fate of the Solar System. It was beginning to get dark. The blue sun of the system sank behind the horizon. The dense maze of stars here in the centre of the galaxy appeared so suddenly that it seemed an invisible hand had raised a cosmic curtain. "Synchronize your watches," said Rhodan. "The scientists will arrive in 2 hours." My extra-brain was bothering me again. Undoubtedly the men here had worked very thoroughly but nevertheless I was apprehensive. The whole plan was somewhat too bold, especially since nobody could say what the effects of a time-displacement would be. Even if everything succeeded, could the theft off the machine be covered by an explosion so cleverly that no one would guess the truth? I learned later that I had underestimated Mercant once more. This man knew how to play a double game behind the scenes. It had been an ingenious idea to inform the Akon defence posts of the activity of the Terran agents. . . . The commando detail consisted of 20 men who were led by the telepath John Marshall. Rhodan and I were the last to make the jump. Our teleporters were Pucky and Tako Kakuta. The gravity neutralizer had already gone ahead of us. The combined powers of 3 teleporters had been necessary to bring it to the museum city. We were wearing Terran combat suits which had been designed after the Arkonide pattern except that the Earthmen had built in some improvements. For example the deflector screens were no longer detectable by instruments because the energy radiations were damped by special absorbers. Pucky was looking at me with his loyal hound-dog eyes. "Are you nervous?" he asked in his shrill little voice. "What else would he be?" Rhodan cut in, sounding more harsh than he intended. The little fellow wrinkled his mouselike snout in an obvious expression of injury. "Why is everybody so uptight? We got here safely, didn't we? Sure the Akons have set

up extra guard details and they even have snoopers gadgets at every entrance but there are a thousand rooms alone in the physical section of the museum. They can't all be watched at once, you know." "How about the room where the converter is located? Is that strongly guarded?" "No more and no less than others. They probably think we wouldn't know what to do with the machine if we had it." "They'll soon change their minds about that," commented Rhodan. "Are you ready, Atlan?" I nodded and bent down to take up Pucky into my arms. He wore a custom-made combatsuit that even accommodated his tail. The little fellow patted my nose. We understood each other. Moments later came the sensation of dematerialisation. It was the same as ever. Before I could fully register the pulling pain of teleportation I arrived at my destination. Automatically I turned on my deflector field and the micro-reactor responded soundlessly. Pucky still clung to me but he was the only living thing I could see at the moment. The other men of the commando detail who were present were already under the protection of their screens. They were invisible. My pulse raced almost audibly. In this empty-seeming stillness the weapon in my hand appeared a bit ludicrous. I holstered it and looked around. We had landed in a giant hall that was filled with machinery and equipment that was strange to me. However, all items were provided with nameplates in ancient Arkonide, explaining what each had been used for. "Use your absorption filter," whispered Pucky. I reached up to my helmet and swung down the special viewing device. Without affecting normal vision it eliminated the optical effects of the deflector screens. Now I could see the other men who had deployed themselves in a semi-circle in front of an arched doorway. I carefully placed Pucky on the floor. Ras Tschubai and the third teleporter of the Corps, Tako Kakuta, were beckoning to us. Rhodan moved silently to Marshall, who was standing by an oblong machine. We communicated only by signs and gestures. As for our mutant "seer"-Wuriu Sengu was standing before the partition wall that separated us from the adjacent room. It was there that the converter had been installed. Films previously taken by the mutants indicated that the device had been given a special location. The room was comparatively small and contained no other displays of equipment. Sengu concentrated his gaze on the wall. The illumination from the few glow tubes on the ceiling seemed to disturb him. After a few moments he raised his hand. His 4 outstretched fingers told us that Akon security had posted a stronger guard than expected around this device which was probably the most valued legacy of their ancestors. Pucky nudged me. Before I joined Rhodan I noted that the mousebeaver had vanished along with the other teleporters. They had gotten their orders to go fetch the 4 scientists who were familiar with the converter. If everything had gone according to plan, these men would be meeting together about now in order to discuss some things that Ishibashi had previously suggested to them. What we had in mind wasn't especially difficult when regarded from the purely practical side; however, the psychological factors involved were by far more important. We had to avoid letting anyone know that the machine had actually disappeared. Otherwise conclusions as to our further intent would be inevitable. A second "psycho-point", as John Marshall called it, was the 4 scientists. Solar Intelligence had decided to bring them into the museum by force. Their abduction was to be made known to the Akon secret service as soon as the machine was ready to operate. For this purpose it had been arranged for Marshall to be in telepathic contact with a mutant waiting on the outside. The result of such a "tipoff" from unknown sources would be an immediate occupation of the museum area. By that time we should have disappeared with the machine but special combat robots would start a mock battle, during which the nuclear explosion would occur. It was a complicated plan. It contained many elements of danger that we had to consider. Above all, the abduction of the 4 scientists must not be discovered prematurely. They were presently meeting in the country home of a physicist named Artol of Penoral. There they were to be overpowered and teleported secretly to the museum site. Perry pointed to the interconnecting passageway. We heard a loud, commanding voice. Another voice answered. Marshall gave us a signal. It was apparent that he

had picked up the thoughts of the Akons. "The guards have permission to fire on sight," he whispered. "The tipoff strategy is working." Rhodan checked his shock-gun. We were not to make our move until the scientists were on hand. Without their help the use of the time-phaser would be impossible. The second hand of my watch seemed to have stopped. As always in such situations, time stood still. A red-headed sergeant moved carefully to the arched doorway. Sengu passed him a small diagram which indicated the position of the Akon sentinels. Other specialists of the commando group examined their sensor and tracking devices. Beyond the intervening wall there were no signs of a surprise buildup of energy, as in preparation for an attack. They actually seemed not to expect a move in the direction of the time-phasing machine. It was another 20 minutes before the teleporters appeared. In 2 separate jumps they brought the scientists along with Kitai Ishibashi, whose suggestive influence had made the Akons think that their arrival here was quite normal and proper. When Tako Kakuta approached us the soles of his boots were squeaking. It was hardly audible and yet it seemed to me that it could be heard in every room of the museum. Rhodan raised a hand and Kakuta paused long enough to wipe his soles with a cloth. Evidently he had come in contact with some kind of wax material used in floor maintenance. When he moved again his footsteps were as silent as those of the other men. "Sorry!" he whispered. "The kidnaping worked out alright. Betty Toufry has been advised. We can begin." I observed the Akons more closely. They were wearing robe-like shoulder capes as a sign of their dignified stations. There was still a slightly blank expression in their eyes, which would soon change, however. I was wondering if a total suggestive block in their minds might not have undesirable repercussions. If these experts did not operate the controls correctly the whole mission would be unfeasible. The only thing left would be flight. Rhodan came out from behind the machine where he and Marshall had been standing. His signal sent the commando detail into action. I joined Marshall as we entered the adjacent hall. It was a large, vaulted room which contained the strangest apparatus I had ever seen. It was a large cube resting on a platform that was several meters high. On one side of this square "foundation" there was a built-in staircase. Nearby a steel door could be seen which gave entrance into the power room beneath the assembly. When I looked about for the guards I saw two of them standing at the other entrance. One was crouched down at the staircase but the fourth man was so close to me that I could have touched him. The Terrans operated smoothly and soundlessly. A team of two attacked each sentry and prevented him from crying out, while a third man pressed an anaesthesia mask over his face. Finally the unconscious Akons were placed in deep sleep by a doctor. Once more no word was spoken aloud. Kitai Ishibashi had the scientists fully under his control. I could imagine the challenge it must have been for his paramental faculties to force them to disregard the surrounding circumstances. They were under the impression that they had come here of their own free will to carry out an experiment that had been authorized by the Ruling Council. They moved with the assurance of men who were being escorted by the highest of official dignitaries. Moreover they did not speak with one another. Marshall and Pucky led them over to the machine. One of the Akons-it was Artol of Penoral-extracted a code-signal device from his pocket and inactivated the energy screen that surrounded the machine. I nodded appreciatively. The Terrans had thought of everything. How quickly a plan like ours could go wrong because of details like this. I remained in the hall until the intricately worked-out steps had run their course. The technicians came in with the powerful grav-neutralizer and anchored it magnetically to the converter floor plates. Twenty robots took up positions at the entrances. They were armed with heavy energy weapons. Their special programming was equivalent to a kamikaze assignment. They were to hold the site until we had disappeared with the time-phaser and then the bomb was to explode. For Rhodan the 20 robots were a small price to pay when the salvation of the Earth was at stake. Only a few commandos remained outside. I went up the stairs of the machine and passed through an airlock. I heard

voices in the connecting passage. John Marshall was briefing his men. "This way, sir," said the red-haired sergeant. "Please turn off your deflector screen." I depressed the control button and the hum of the projector died away. When I shoved up my filter I could again see quite normally. The passage led to the control room which was additionally secured by hermetic hatches. This was also a cubically-shaped room which was filled with a maze of equipment of every description. Not too much room was available for extra personnel. No one paid any attention to me so I drew back into a protected angle between 2 triangular viewscreens where I was able to watch the operations of the Akons. Apparently they had no intention of violating Ishibashi's instructions. Moreover, they really seemed to be familiar with the intricate controls. When I heard the machine start to hum, my extra-brain immediately sent me a warning signal. "I'd hold off with that until the Akons attack," I said aloud. "They could get an energy trace on us." Rhodan nodded and ordered the machine to be turned down again. Ishibashi passed the order along to the Akons. Moments later a telepathic message was received. Marshall and Pucky detected it simultaneously. "It's Betty calling us," said the little one. "The local security boys have found out about the kidnaped scientists. Airborne commandos are on their way. Red alert for the museum town." He had not quite finished speaking before we heard a racket outside. It was the typical thundering of impulse weapons. Rhodan looked at his watch. The scientists were finally allowed to speak and they began at once to discuss the problems of activating the time field. I only understood a fraction of the conversation. They thought that Kitai was the chairman of the Ruling Council but they took no heed of the commando troops. Outside we heard the sounds of heavy firing. The rumbling of the powerful robot weapons indicated that the Akon defenders had responded as we had expected. "Get ready!" Rhodan called out. "Ras, go plant the bomb." The swarthy-skinned Terran nodded. Around his neck was suspended a micro-bomb of Earthly design. Ras Tschubai dematerialised. When he came back he told us he had planted the device outside the hall in an adjacent chamber. This time I looked at my own watch. We still had 10 minutes. The robots would have to hold their line until then. Our hypno-mutant was very silent. I was worried about the drops of sweat that had appeared on his forehead during the past few minutes. Unquestionably it must be a terrible strain on him to keep the 4 Akons continuously under his mental control. "Activate!" said Perry almost too swiftly. "Have them build up the phaser field so that it just encloses the machine." The last of the commando troops came on board. The hatches closed automatically. Under our feet the nuclear pile of the power plant came to life. The indicator needles began to rise on the scales. I was more or less familiar with such power controls since the same kind of arrangement had been used on the old Arkonide spaceships. I noted that the reactors were only operating at 2% of their capacity. The physicist Artol appeared to be the leader of his group. We could all hear his instructions but for the most part he was explaining things that we could only grasp by using our imaginations. "Speed it up!" urged Rhodan. His blanched face revealed the extent of his inner turmoil. I attempted to monitor the activity of the Akons. The power step-up control of the converter was operated by contact buttons. So far only the power plant itself had been fired up. Current feed for a field projector, regardless of what kind, had a much different sound. Kitai suddenly groped about for support. I leapt forward, pushing a Terran technician out of the way, and grasped the slightly-built mutant under his arms. Marshall saw what was going on and understood. I was waiting for something that I could neither explain nor even estimate. A displacement or conversion of the applicable time lines was so much to conceive of that the brain failed to produce the normal thinking processes for comprehension. All I could do was struggle for some mental image that might reasonably match the situation that was to come. When the phaser field came on, the converter did not move from its position. This meant that many things were happening in the same place but separated by different planes of reference. The determining factor here, however, was time rather than

distance. Ishibashi groaned. I gripped him more firmly but his glassy-eyed look told me he had reached the end of his stamina. He had been working for days to produce the suggestive mental block in his subjects. If he should collapse now there was no telling what the Akons would do. Naturally we could force them by other means. The only question was, how long would we have to do it to keep them tractable for our purposes. The humming of the power plant irritated me. It was a steady, monotonous sound-too normal, in fact, to indicate the technical wonder we were anticipating. Rhodan was bending over the shoulders of the Akons while they concentrated on their control panels. The viewscreens were functioning by now, revealing both the outside world and the machine itself. "Pucky!" said Rhodan suddenly. "Get ready to dispose of that bomb!" This startled me as I realized the demolition device would explode in 2 minutes. If we hadn't pulled out of the present time frame by then we could be caught in a fire of annihilation. "Hold on another minute," Marshall interjected. "Jump within 30 seconds of ignition." The red-haired sergeant pointedly checked his impulse beamer. Breaking out of the museum could bring on a catastrophe. It would precipitate incalculable political complications. If only one wounded Terran should be found here it would mean more than a lost battle for Rhodan. The mousebeaver was standing beside me. Kitai's knees began to tremble. Outside we could hear the thunder of the robots' weapons. Mingled with this were frequent bursts of metallic sounds, usually followed by an explosion. It was obvious that our combat machines were being shot down. It had only been intended that they would have to provide a brief holding action. The fighting force had been adequate for our planned schedule except that by now we should have vanished from the present time plane. "Pucky...!" The little one glanced at Rhodan. In 5 seconds it would be time for his teleport jump. Everyone stared at him entranced as he concentrated-except for myself. My attention was occupied by Kitai, who slumped against my chest. But in that instance I happened to see the viewscreens. The battling robots had disappeared from view while under my feet I felt and heard the rumbling of another apparatus. Without thinking I cried out: "Stop-come back! We're pulling out. Stay here, Pucky!" I shoved the mutant into Marshall's arms and sprang forward. The Akons were busy discussing their work, apparently fascinated by what was happening to the machine. Artol of Penoral was bent forward intently concentrating on a circular screen above the controls of the phaser field. I reached the mousebeaver just as he came out of his fixation but I jerked him off his feet and shook him roughly. "Snap out of it!" I shouted."Pucky, don't jump-it would be the end of you!" Pucky understood. Without a word he leaned his head on my shoulder and closed his eyes. I realized that even mousebeavers have nervous systems. By now Ishibashi was lying on the floor and the medico of our commando team was taking care of him. Rhodan and the other mutants were watching the scientists. Apparently their mental blocks were very deep-seated because they had not yet become aware of Kitai's withdrawal. "Can they come out of their trance?" asked Rhodan quickly. Our other hypno mutant, Andre Noir, seemed calm about it. "Kitai did his work well. They still don't know what's going on here. If they start to get edgy I'll move in on them. No sweat, sir." I couldn't take my eyes from the viewscreens. The bomb must have detonated a minute or so ago but we had not felt any repercussions from it. It was hard to imagine that the exhibit hall that we were looking at as though in a fast-motion film had already been destroyed. I finally followed Artol's gaze. The digital counter over the control panel seemed to be measuring the rate of reversal of relative time. It was impossible to read the flickering numbers, however, to determine how many years we had returned into the past. Within a few moments my logic sector reacted. It reminded me that the impression of "time travel" was confusing and false. The counter was only measuring the increasing strength of the phaser field. But somewhere there would have to be a synchronously operating device to convert that indication into equivalent years of time. When I shared this thought with Rhodan we soon found the computer that was doing this work. It stood behind me. We'd have to

figure out the schematics later. Apparently Artol could read them and interpret the output data. The pictures on the screens were changing in such rapid succession that we could hardly distinguish one from the other. It was like a runaway film. The cultural periods were rolling past while the exhibit hall remained unchanged. Then suddenly it was gone. We saw open country that was bordered to the north by a long stretch of forest. We had reached a time period when the museum town of Impton had not yet come into being. A bell sounded. The maximum power of the phaser field was being held constant by an automatic program control. It meant that we had come to a "stop". I awoke as if from a dream. Rhodan kept looking at the screens. "Success, Your Eminence," said Artol. But his eyes were still glazed and vacant looking. Andre nodded to me. I realized that Kitai's suggestive block was stronger than we had anticipated. I stepped forward since I spoke the ancient Arkonide language better than the Terrans. Apparently the physicist was now considering me to be the chairman of the Council. "Hold the machine steady where it is," I said. "How big is the radius of the phaser field?" "20 meters, Excellence. It only encloses the epotron." I realized this was the Arkonide name for the machine. "Is it possible to go out on the platform without being exposed to any danger?" "Yes, it's possible but it would be advantageous to intensify the phaser field in that case." "Why?" The scientist seemed strangely reserved. "You have the research data, Your Eminence," he replied. Rhodan cleared his throat warningly. I did not follow up the remark. Naturally, Artol would have prepared and submitted the results of his studies. I knew it would be useless to bring him out of his state of hypnosis. Andre pressed me aside. "I'll take over," he whispered. "Get on with the transport operation." I followed Rhodan, who was already at the outer airlock. Certainly the atmospheric conditions of the planet Sphynx could be no worse than those of our own "present" time. We could open the outer hatch without any special preparations. When we stepped out onto the platform we experienced something that it took me a few seconds to analyse. "Illogical!" warned my extra-brain. "Something is not right. If the phasing field's radius is so limited-how is that you don't see the surroundings of your own time frame beyond its effective range?" I grasped Rhodan's arm. My logic sector was right! When I told him my thoughts he cleared his throat as if embarrassed. "This is over my head," he answered. "We should have brought Kalup along. I would presume that a person inside the field could not see the normal world." "Especially when the field only encompasses a fraction of the other time plane. Perry, this disturbs me. We were told this wasn't to be a regular trip through time-merely a distortion of the reference point. I imagine I'm seeing everything that exists within the distortion zone. What lies beyond it should either not be seen or it should be only shadowy and vague. Actually what we should be seeing out there is our own plane of time!" If the other men were as confused as I was they didn't show it. They were only concerned about the antigrav transporter which had apparently come through the strange journey unharmed. "We'll discuss it later," said Rhodan, changing the subject. "Right now what we have to do first is to get this thing to the Ironduke." I withdrew and strolled around the platform. To the east of our real position lay the museum town-that is, in our own time reference. In that sense one could say that we were in the exhibit hall which had already been ripped asunder by the nuclear bomb. "Enough to drive you donk," commented Pucky. I turned to see the little fellow standing at the top of the stairs. He was looking down uncertainly. Directly before us was a growth of Akon air-root trees. Far and wide, no one was to be seen. "If I had my druthers, Atlan, I'd take a jump right now," he said. "Then we'd really know what it looks like out there." "That you will not do." "I could make it." The little fellow's incisor tooth gleamed enterprisingly. Wordlessly I took his hand and drew him back from the stairs. If I myself couldn't understand what physical laws were affecting us at the moment I could at least imagine the consequences of suddenly leaving the phaser zone. The commando troops had taken up defensive positions along the edges of the platform. Their weapons bristled menacingly.

The technicians activated the antigrav transporter and adjusted its field to the mass of the converter machine. "Whether or not it'll bear up under the phaser field we'll soon find out," said a young engineer almost indifferently. Rhodan was listening at the entrance passage. He had sent somebody back inside to keep an eye on the scientists. They were still under the impression that they were carrying out an authorized experiment. An unexpected jolt threw me to the deck of the platform. I clung to the railing and waited. The transformer bank of the antigrav was in an uproar. The time-phaser lifted uncertainly from the ground, reeling and jerking, finally hovering at an elevation of 3 meters while the antigrav took its measure. I remained lying in the same position although I turned on my back to look over at Rhodan. His features were trembling visibly with agitation and then I knew that someone had miscalculated. The antigrav field was just barely sufficient to neutralize the weight of the machine. I waited patiently until our 2 small propulsion units started whistling. Their base plates had been welded to the platform. The converter slowly began to move. I didn't try to calculate the effects of the air resistance nor did I think in terms of how fast the entire mass could move. Certainly our speed would not be very great. The propulsion units had a thrust capability of 150 kilos per unit. It was enough for me that the whole structure moved at all. We glided around a group of low hills where a new view presented itself. The tops of high buildings could be seen beyond the horizon. The blue sun of the Akon System had just risen. It was early morning. "Now all that's left is to make a precision landing at our own settlement in the extra-territorial zone," said Rhodan. I laughed ironically. "All that's left..." How simple it sounded! Wuriu Sengu smirked but he refrained from commenting. The nervous stamina of these Terrans was astonishing. I never stopped marvelling at their spirit of enterprise. I finally got to my feet and dusted off my uniform while trying to be casual in my observation of the "non-existent" landscape. After about 10 minutes a ground vehicle put in an appearance. I waited curiously to see the reaction of its occupants. They only noticed us when we were close upon them. They looked up in surprise. Somebody shouted something I couldn't make out. Rhodan casually waved at them. We knew then that we could make contact with the inhabitants of a specific era through the displaced time lines of the phaser. "Those 2 men have been dead for thousands of years," said Wuriu. I said nothing. My eyes burned as I watched their figures grow smaller in the distance. Far ahead the first of the buildings of the city rose completely above the horizon. They were considerably smaller than those of the time reference we belonged to. And of course the spaceport was not yet in existence. We flew toward the familiar group of hills where Terran engineers had erected the trading base. The tall limestone cliffs had not changed. This was our goal. The Ironduke was scheduled to come back to the base in time to meet us, so we knew that if we landed exactly in a certain relationship to the hills we would be about 30 meters from the warship's nearest landing strut-that is, from where it would be located in our own time. We were sighted twice again by the "local" inhabitants. I made a note to check Akon history to see if anything would be noted there concerning our strange advent. Rhodan went back into the time-phaser. I remained on the platform until we sank softly to the ground. The howling of the over-burdened antigrav subsided. The men's faces had grown tense. The plan called now for an immediate return to the regular time plane. How would this come about? The transition was so sudden that it struck me like a shockwave. I felt a painful pulling sensation while a red mist welled up before my eyes. When I could see clearly again, it was night. Above us shone the stars of the Milky Way and to our right the contours of the battleship loomed into the sky. A blood-red nuclear flare illumined the horizon. Our bomb! Rhodan joined me. Shadowy figures rushed toward us. They were troops from the Ironduke. Colonel Claudrin was the first to pound his way up the staircase, which trembled under the Epsalian's weight. As usual his voice was thunderous. I groped my way toward him and stretched out my hand. He shoved his weapon into its holster and

gripped me. A sudden pain shot through me. When this giant shook hands with enthusiasm it could be felt. "Relax, sir," he said. "You'll have to excuse me but I thought I should let you know for sure that you're back here again." "It's been a mad dream," commented Rhodan. "You'd better give me the same treatment, Jefe." I had to laugh when the tall Terran sank to his knees with a groan. "Alright! Don't overdo it!" The warship's commander desisted at last. "You're ahead of schedule, sir. We figured you'd be an hour yet getting back. About an hour ago the Akon guard patrol wanted to talk to you. I held them off-and then the bomb hit." "When it happened, Jefe, we were about 4000 years in the past," I told him. "So you say we've hit the bullseye? No time displacement? Our preparations for departure took about 30 minutes. I'd say that the flight itself lasted about 45 minutes." "That fits the picture exactly, sir. It proves that when the field is shut off there's an immediate return to the true plane of reference. So timing of operations on our side can take that into account. From that standpoint there's no danger. Knowing that, you can't ever go wrong." Somebody shouted. When I turned around I caught sight of a slender figure darting out of the sliding hatchway. The lock door closed again with a dull thud and the light from inside was cut off. Sengu had just come out of the inner chamber of the time-phaser. He spoke in a calm and objective manner. "The 4 scientists have pulled out of their trance, sir. What are your instructions?" Rhodan pondered swiftly. Men were moving about under the giant spherical hull of the ship in the darkness. The cargo lock slid open. It was big enough to have taken in 2 converters. Everything was carried out silently and under cover of the night. Rhodan delayed answering until somebody announced that the ship's tractor beam was ready. Now it would be easy to handle the mass of the machine. "Make an official arrest," he finally ordered. "Bring them into the Ironduke." "Arrest-?!" I echoed in surprise. "That's right-it's an arrest," he confirmed. "Intelligence information indicates that the physicist Artol of Penoral had a great deal to do with the reprogramming of the robot Regent. That means he violated the non-aggression pact between Terra and the Akon Empire." "He was only following orders, Perry." "Probably, but that doesn't change my position in the matter. The other 3 scientists were pretty high up in the Blue System and they also had their hands in the operation. Carry out my instructions, Col. Claudrin." As Rhodan turned away my extra-brain came through to me again: "Fool! Is it so important-when the existence of an entire race is at stake?" I looked around uneasily as if the admonishment might have been overheard. Then I hastily got off the platform. The machine was grappled by the loading equipment and drawn into the lower cargo hold of the Ironduke. "Let's go," cried Pucky. "Some class, eh? Man, was that ever a caper we pulled!" The mousebeaver emitted a shrill chuckle. I went with him to the ground-lock entrance. The arching hull above us blocked out the starry firmament. The only lingering sign of strange happenings was the red glow hanging over the museum town of Impton. What had become of the people we had seen back there 4000 years ago? 4000 years? For me it had been but a moment. I shuddered at the thought of this machine, which was to be my means of destroying the robot Regent.

4/ AURIS CROSSES THE LINE

She had arrived 15 minutes earlier in an aircar and she had quietly spoken to the officer of the watch, requesting an audience with Perry Rhodan. We had no other choice but to invite the young woman into the Control Central of the battleship. And now she stood before us. Auris of Las Toor fascinated me. Her dark eyes contrasted with the coppery red of her hair. It seemed to me that she had seen through some of our actions. Naturally she had no proof but that was a mere superfluity. She knew the Terrans and she knew Perry Rhodan. Auris suspected that there was a definite connection between our sudden arrival and the events in the museum city. She wore the 2-piece uniform of the Akon Energy Command. But her billowing shoulder cape was an indication of her distinguished position as a scientist among a great race of advanced people. Perry looked at me imploringly. This ingenious man became somewhat uncertain in the presence of women, especially when such a beautiful woman was involved. Auris

was not only beautiful but very intelligent. I knew that she harboured certain strong sympathies for Perry. She had only favoured me with a smile, to which I responded with a courtly bow. She frowned slightly in some surprise at this customary Terran form of courtesy, to which I replied ironically: "For those who are merely tolerated it's fitting that they should adopt the customs of their host. I trust you will forgive me." She had only nodded to me while declining the invitation to be seated in one of the form chairs. The personnel of the Control Central had withdrawn from our vicinity. The only ones remaining with us were Col. Claudrin and John Marshall. I was disturbed when I noted the barely perceptible quivering of her nostrils. The satin-brown skin over her high cheekbones had paled under tension. Auris of Las Toor was not making a routine courtesy call. When she brushed back her voluminous hair it was as if she had made a decision. She apparently refused to continue with this vapid form of conversation. Rhodan felt himself under sharp surveillance. He cleared his throat uncomfortably but manned the ramparts of his emotions behind a cold mask of indifference. He passed me a look that urged me to take the lead in the conversation. My mind raced for a few seconds until I perceived only one way of getting Perry off of a hot spot. Winking surreptitiously at Claudrin, I stepped forward. I noted at the same time that Auris was only a few centimetres shorter than I. "Welcome on board my ship, Your Eminence-or may I call you Auris?" She looked at me for a long moment. Her young lips trembled slightly. Colonel Oberst caught on in time to suppress a surprised reaction. "Are you the commander, Excellency?" she asked. "Or may I call you Atlan?" I smiled at her. "I request that you do so, Auris. Yes, I am the commander of this battleship as well as commander-in-chief of the Solar Fleet's 480th battle cruiser task force. Your visit comes at an unexpected hour. Unfortunately I must advise you that we are taking off in 15 minutes." "That's a matter for the First Administrator to decide." Rhodan avoided her gaze. "My orders stand," he said. "I am urgently required to return home. According to Terran custom it is not my place to influence the decisions of a unit chief and ship's commander. I am a guest here, nothing more." She still managed to control herself. I looked at her more closely and noticed again how desirable she was. When our eyes met she abruptly changed the subject and came to the point of her visit. "Alright, then carry on with your schedule. But first I must request that you free my uncle along with his 3 assistants, and that you unload a certain piece of equipment. In which case I will pledge myself to silence regarding this situation. I have considerable influence with the members of the Ruling Council." Rhodan raised his brows deliberately in surprise. I looked about me in feigned wonderment. "How is that? I don't believe anyone here understands what you're saying." She remained self-controlled. "I thought as much. My uncle is the hyper-physicist Artol of Penoral. The device I mentioned has presumably been destroyed in an atomic explosion. I have come here alone without the knowledge of the proper defence authorities in order to avoid complications on both sides. Or do you perhaps assume that I regard these happenings as mere coincidence? The reason for your landing on Drorah is quite apparent." "I still fail to understand you, Auris." She tried to bypass me. "I'd like very much to negotiate this with the Administrator." "Admiral Atlan has my fullest confidence," Perry interjected. Her eyes darkened in anger and alarm. I looked over at Marshall, who was monitoring the conversation with his paranormal faculties. He seemed to catch his breath tensely when she touched her wrist just a bit too inconspicuously to adjust a bracelet. Rhodan suddenly tensed also but I forced myself to be calm. Appearing to be merely pensive I went up to her so closely that I caught the seductive scent of her hair. Without saying a word I grasped her hand and banged it against the cabinet of a computer console. The bracelet shattered and fell from her wrist. I was indifferent to her outcry because I knew the blow had not been painful. Rhodan bent down and retrieved the broad-banded piece of jewellery. Auris leaned back against the bulkhead, pale and trembling. I waited, knowing well that my expression was anything but friendly now. I heard a tinkling sound and turned to see Rhodan bending open

the precious metal casing of the bracelet. A crevice was revealed in which there were micro-elements of an electronic nature. "Not bad," he said. "You should have activated the transmitter immediately, Auris." "Barbarian!" she fumed at him. "I wish to leave now!" I took the camouflaged device and examined it. It was a high-powered transmitter. I next checked my watch but before I could say anything Rhodan took the initiative. "Col. Claudrin-you are cleared for emergency takeoff. Advise the Akon Energy Central. Tell them to open the screen. Auris of Las Toor remains here." He gave us an impersonal nod and strode over to the armourplate entrance hatch. The Ironduke was filled with the howl of sirens. Crewmen ran to their stations. Three minutes later the machinery was warming up. During this time I was standing beside the young woman who had made no effort to resist Rhodan's decision. Nor was there anything left to conceal from her. She had seen through our plan. "I'm sorry, Auris. You will have to go with us. But it's not the first time, is it? The last time we were your guests so now we have the honour to offer our hospitality to a bewitching young lady." She governed herself in an exemplary manner. Only the paleness of her cheeks revealed her inner turmoil. "You are going too far, Atlan! The Ruling Council suspects you of having stolen the time-phaser. There are storm clouds on the political horizon which are straining to the breaking point." I considered her declaration to be honest and forthright until I caught Marshall's derisive expression. Apparently he had been able to break through the Akon woman's natural mental screen. "I must inform you," he said, "that no one suspects us of having brought the machine into our possession. They are merely of the opinion that we wanted to penetrate the museum in order to obtain certain technological information. They believe further that they were able to apprehend our agents and that the latter were killed by the nuclear explosion. You have come here without the knowledge of either the Council or your Security forces." "You're dreaming!" "I'm sorry but I believe not. The purpose of your micro-transmitter was to record your conversation and to beam it out. You planned to have the discussion picked up by an automatic receiver station. After leaving the ship you were intending to use the tape to force us to hand over the phaser machine. We're grateful for your cooperation." Now I understood! This wonderful woman had offered us a chance; or rather, she had not wished to make difficulties for Rhodan. Her face revealed her real desperation now. Her fleeting glance told me that she was looking for a way out of her predicament. The men of the Control Central had taken their flight positions. Intelligence and Security officers were discussing Auris' presence here. I placed a hand on her arm and whispered to her. "The stellar empire of Terra is at stake, Auris. You should realize that we can't let you go now. Your suspicion is too well-founded for us to take the risk of letting you speak with your very shrewd countrymen. They think the converter has been destroyed. Your uncle is in good health. I must ask you to resign yourself to this journey and to wait for the outcome of our operation." She pushed my hand away as her gaze shifted to Rhodan, who was just strapping himself into the commodore's seat. "You are forcing me to be a traitor!" "Nonsense! Besides, there's nothing you can prove. Or do you believe Perry would be agreeable to your Searching the Ironduke?" Marshall seemed to be reading her thoughts again. I wasn't quite sure whether or not Auris was deliberately lowering her paranormal screen so that John could perceive what she was thinking. "A formation of warships from the Regent's fleet is approaching, sir," said the telepath. "It's advisable to make a forced takeoff." Perry overheard it and turned to Auris with a strange smile on his lips. She tossed her hair back with a quick movement of her head and finally sat down in a form chair. I knew then that she had consciously revealed the information to John. I cleared my throat gently and sat down next to her. "Many thanks, Auris. How was the Regent notified? Our radio monitors didn't pick up any such message." "They sent a courier by transmitter, sir," announced Marshall. It finally seemed to be painful for him to keep probing the young woman's wide-open thoughts. When I gave him a signal he bowed and left us. Auris of Las Toor said nothing more. We sat there

and listened to the intercom voice traffic from the sector chiefs. Rhodan made a personal contact with the Akons. They tried to detain the warship but didn't dare to do it forcefully. Rhodan expressed his sympathies concerning events at Impton and asked if there had been any casualties. The spokesman for the Ruling Council briskly cut off the videophone contact. It was obvious they suspected Terran agent activity in the case but had not been able to pinpoint the evidence. Minutes later the giant battleship thundered into the sky. The still glowing crater of the explosion appeared on the viewscreens. It wasn't too large. Only a minor portion of the museum city had been destroyed. I only breathed a sigh of relief when we had gotten out of range of the Akon defence fortresses. We hurtled out into space at full acceleration, where we soon detected the entrance shockwaves of about 20 heavy class ships. No one paid much attention to the roaring of the hypersensors. The Regent's robots had arrived too late. Rhodan came and joined us. Claudrin was busy preparing for linear flight. "Why didn't you relate your suspicions to Akon Intelligence, Auris?" he asked. She stared at him silently. I gave him a sarcastic look which he also couldn't fail to catch. This Terran might be an outstanding statesman and an even better fleet commander but he understood nothing about women. He looked at me in sudden confusion and reddened visibly like a schoolboy. Then he stammered and excused himself. When he left I chuckled softly. "He'll soon comprehend, Auris," I said to her casually. "If we hadn't discovered your wrist transmitter in time, what would have happened then?" She lowered her gaze. Apparently she was suffering from certain pangs of remorse or a twinge of conscience but was leaving the decision to fate. She had attempted to be loyal to her people yet she had hoped that something would happen that would not corroborate her suspicions. Now I could guess why she had grasped her camouflaged wrist transmitter so quickly. It was probably true that no one knew she was on board the Ironduke. Rhodan had counted on it when he spoke to the chairman of the Council, since he did not mention a word about her presence. Nor was he questioned concerning Auris. She sat there staring into a corner of the room. Although her face was still tense I had the impression that a faint smile touched her lips. I sighed and got up. My place was with the men at the flight controls. Marshall gave me a nod. He would continue to monitor the situation. Before I left her, however, she spoke quietly: "Atlan-who is this new Imperator?" I stopped abruptly. Without any preamble she had reminded me of why I was here. "He's a deranged scoundrel who is being misused by Akon madmen." "Do you believe the Imperium will collapse or fall into the wrong hands?" "If Minterol I is not deposed-absolutely!" "Does that mean your robot Regent has failed you?" "Yes it does. The Brain was tampered with. And that's where your uncle played an important part. He is here on board as a prisoner of war." "What are you planning to do with the time converter?" I finally turned back to her. Her eyes were bright and alert. She wanted to know the truth. "Auris, you did the right thing. If you want to keep peace in the galaxy, don't question our actions. I have decided to destroy the most ingenious creation of my ancestors. A robot that starts acting up and making mistakes isn't usable anymore. In fact the Regent has become dangerous. It has to be destroyed or the races of the Milky Way-" "Yes, I know." The loudspeakers announced a signalling on the tracking monitors. We were approaching the realms of relative light-speed. The echo screens of the remote scanners were showing green bogie blips. The robotships were in a retropulsion mode. A few coded pulse messages were intercepted but we were no longer concerned about them. A few minutes later we entered semispace under the protective field envelope of the Kalup compensator. A strange, greenish sun glowed suddenly on the target screen of the para-tracker. It marked the location of an imitation cruiser of the imperium. There the Sotala was waiting for us. I slanted my seat back. Auris seemed to be brooding. Once in awhile she appeared to shudder slightly. She had given us to understand that she belonged to us. To us? I looked across at Rhodan. "To him, you fool!" retorted my logic sector. I nodded involuntarily. Years had passed since Rhodan had met this young woman.

Meanwhile her feelings for him had ripened. I had given up all hope of ever winning her for myself. Finally I fell to wondering again what might have happened if the Ruling Council or Akon Security had gotten the slightest suspicion of our real activity. Without any question they would have done everything possible to block the takeoff of the Ironduke. So far the Terrans' mad plan had succeeded. However, I dared not think of the task ahead of me at the moment. A feeling of apprehension came over me every time I tried to imagine how the time converter would function during the next phase of our operation. The engines rumbled onward. Within a few hours we would reach the Sotala. Then our final power move would begin. I thought of the 4 Akon scientists on board. What conclusions would be drawn from the fact of their disappearance? Our agents on Sphynx had a hint of the possibilities but only after the physicists had already been kidnaped. Probably the general opinion was that they had died in the explosion. On the other hand, such considerations might lead to further thoughts about the time converter. But if it were really possible to reach another time era of Arkon 3, all counteractions by the Akons would be useless. They could only hinder our attack out of nowhere if they should succeed in snatching the device from us in time. At the present state of affairs the rulers of the Blue System had lost. If they did manage to arrive at the right conclusion, however, all they would be able to do was to hope for a failure of the machine. My eyes felt damp, which was a characteristic of my race under this kind of tension. My broodings were getting me into a state of excitement which was not tolerable in view of the responsibility which faced me now. I had to force myself to remain calm and collected. "Are you getting nervous?" inquired Auris. Her face was as expressionless as it had been when she arrived on board. Yes, I was nervous. After all, it wasn't every day that a man prepared to meet his ancestors.

5/ THE ANCIENT HIGH COMMAND The hypercom loudspeaker emitted a short chirping sound. It signified the reception of a coded pulse message on the special frequency band of the Arkonide Intergalactic Task Force under command of Admiral Notath. The dispatch was addressed to Fleet High Command on Arkon 3. The call letters were not encoded. We waited until the repeat message stopped coming in. The auto-analyser shoved the magnetape foil into the depulser unit. After serial arrangement the the input the coded message was fed to the computer in the mathematical section. The code was known to us. The deciphering process required 12 minutes, which indicated a range of possibly 6 billion variables. My ancestors had known well how to guard their secrets. By normal Earthly time it was the 10th of February of the year 2106. By use of the time converter we had moved back 6023 years into the past, to await the reception of our historical hypercom message. We were the only ones who knew that within 2 hours the real Sotala would be destroyed. We were taking its place. It was an uncanny experience. Our converted heavy cruiser had been enveloped by a time-distortion held. The thing that was hard for me to grasp was the fact that inside this insensible and insensible mesh of forces we were able to receive a radio message which had been beamed out more than 6000 years ago from a spaceship of my ancestors. Mercant and Col. Nike Quinto were with us in the Control Central, which had been perfectly simulated. We were all wearing the grey uniforms which were standard issue in the Arkonide Fleet. On our shoulders and breast flaps glittered the colourful symbols and rank insignia that were in traditional usage at that time. Rhodan was the "First Officer" and I played the role of Commander. Once more the 750-man crew had been processed through a session of hypno-training in old Arkonide and the technology of the past. I had attempted to trap them into making incriminating mistakes but they had not been tricked by my questions. In effect they were Arkonides of the era of Emperor Tutmor VI. After coming on board I had even secreted myself in the chemical lab where I had cut up a uniform and subjected it to analysis. When I found out that Solar Intelligence had also carefully simulated the synthetic fibres used in those days, I gave up. These men had made no mistakes! We had arrived in the vicinity of my home system 24 hours previously. We hovered in space at a distance of 8 light-years

from the Arkon sun. We were using the gravity field of a red sun as protection against tracking detection and felt relatively safe. We knew that the outer cordon of satellite fortresses had come into existence by that time. No one in the Control Central spoke a word but the burden of tension could be seen in the Terrans' faces. Rhodan had again taken refuge behind his expressionless mask. Mercant smiled a bit too fixedly while Quinto streamed rivers of sweat. Everyone had his own way of reacting to the situation. The mutants were gathered in the lower cargo hold of the Sotala. The telepaths together with the suggestor Ishibashi and hypno-specialist Noir were monitoring the 4 scientists, upon whose operations the success of the entire enterprise depended. The phaser field did not waver. The time plane we had reached remained constant. I wasn't quite sure just how the Akons had been coerced to do their work or how they had been convinced of how vital the perfect function of the machine was to us. It would have been impossible to continue keeping the Akons under hypnotic influence although Ishibashi's powers were urgently needed. Apparently the other mutants were merely standing by for the present. Auris of Las Toor had definitely come over to our side. For her there were no more compromises. At the moment I wasn't concerned how the scientists had been persuaded to work in our interests. On a computer console before me lay the deciphered message from the man I was supposed to represent, who had actually been dead for more than 6000 years. As I leaned over to read it, Rhodan was beside me and I noted that his breathing was tense. He was much more nervous than he cared to let on. Perhaps it was the uncanny aspect of our undertaking that tautened the nerves and caused the blood to race. "CCFK-1919-ABOAT-, Heavy cruiser Sotala, Cmdr. Capt. 2d cl. Tresta, to Fleet High Command Ark-3, attention of His Omniscient Eminence Tutmor VI. Task assignment Nebula, special orders 4th phase completed. 4 methane cruisers destroyed, 2 com stations eliminated. Evacuation of numbers 2 and 4 in Ilatzi System follows. Transporter with landing troops requested. Holding position. Signed Tresta, ship Sotala..." I read through the dispatch twice. It agreed with the historical text that had been handed down. Rhodan cleared his throat dryly. Allan D. Mercant reached for the dispatch foil. "In a few minutes the answer from Fleet High Command should come through. Tresta will be instructed to return home immediately. A new weapon was employed in the Nebula operation. The war against the methane breathers is nearing its end." He spoke of things we knew. We had only a few more minutes to wait. The fighting men in the time of Tutmor IV had been swift and logical in their responses. In those days the signs of the degeneration had only been seen by the scientists. The fact that they had immediately begun the construction of a super robot brain said much for the decisiveness of their leaders. The answering message came through as expected and was deciphered. The contents coincided with our information. Tresta was given orders to return to home base without delay and submit his battle report. We continued to hold our receivers open but the Sotala, was heard from no more. Mercant looked at his watch. Finally he straightened his frail frame and looked around. "Gentlemen, at present the heavy cruiser is being destroyed by superior enemy forces. No survivors! No time to beam out a distress signal." My voice failed me for a moment. I had to swallow several times before I could speak. "I'm beginning to doubt my senses. Did you say-the Sotala is being destroyed at present...?" "Yessir. We are located precisely in its own plane of time." I sat down. My legs were shaking. It would have helped if we could have at least sensed the operation of the incomprehensible machine but we could feel nothing. The stars of star cluster M-13 glittered on the viewscreens. Thus I had always known it. Nothing had changed. Of course the short timespan of merely 6000 years was much too negligible to effect any change in the constellations. Mercant turned to Rhodan. He was as disturbed as I was. So Terrans were also familiar with the feeling of being at the finish line. "Sir, it would be advisable now to transmit a simulated weak signal to the Fleet High Command-that is, using our prepared message. We have to confirm the reception of their order to return." "Whatever you say," replied Rhodan huskily. He nodded to the com officer. Behind the transparent

metal partition we could see the communications specialists getting to work. The confirmation was sent out on the same frequency and in the same code. Mercant nodded his satisfaction. I looked down at my uniform, which was very plain except for the gleaming symbol of the Greater Imperium on my chest. I tried to shake off the idea of the past. Seconds later I had the impression of actually being a part of this plane of time. It was wrong to think of a present that didn't exist anymore. The year 2106, in Earthly reckoning, had become unreal although "now-time" was out there only a few miles from the false Sotala. I had to keep telling myself that this relative reference was only effective inside the phaser held. "Chow time!", Quinto called out. Still perspiring, he went over to the transport chair. These were incorporated in the design of the old Arkonide cruisers, being used to carry men from the Control Central to the officers' mess. It wasn't much more than a simple basket. When I got up I heard Rhodan clear his throat again. "You should see the doctor, Terran," I said listlessly. His answer was incoherent. Everybody on board knew that we now had to wait out a period of 48 hours. The true Sotala would not have been able to arrive before the 12th of February by our reckoning. It had been a typical transition-type ship whose earlier design of the nav-hypermatics section made it necessary for long and complex calculations. Still, one might say that not so much had changed on the most modern units of the robot fleet, discounting the first weakness of not having a living and thinking crew on board. We went to the messhall and there was very little conversation. I had to force down the repulsive-looking synthetic food. It reminded me of a still more remote past-10,000 years ago. At that time I had flown from Arkon to visit the planets of an unimportant little star. The colonists on the second planet had sent out a call for help. The star had been Earth's sun. I had to restrict my flow of memory so that I wouldn't start fantasizing. One way to do that was to push the reddish-blue mush away from me. On board the old Arkonide fighting ships there had been no other rations than this. When on a mission there were no social differences between officers and crewmen. I retired to my cabin, where old memories plagued me again. Finally I had to ask the ship's doctor for a deepsleep injection. When he arrived I learned that many men had requested the same. Perry had been among them. I smiled with relief as I fell asleep. It was the best way to bridge over our period of waiting. . . . We encountered a phenomenon which strengthened Kalup's theory only a few hours after we had rejected his claims. The scientific genius had drawn some conclusions from the fact that outside the phaser field we were looking at the relativistic past instead of at the environment of our present time. He had explained the results of some of his research before we had started out. He claimed that we-the Sotala, and every atom inside the conversion held-were components of present time, now as before. He meant specifically February 11 of the year 2106, by Terran reckoning. However, that existence within the frame of "now-time" was relative. To any observers in the plane of reference of the era of Tutmor VI, we were materially stable objects of their own time. And on this basis a remarkable effect was obtained. Kalup had concluded by saying that to anyone in this past of 6023 years ago the ship was a recognizable physical object-and could continue to be so if the time-phaser should suddenly put us back to 2106 in our own time, that is if we tried to leave the field in some precipitate manner. In the final analysis it showed us what a bewildering time trip this was. Although we could not actually leave our own present time, to all persons on the outside of the field we were "present" in their own temporal plane. Shortly after his exposition we finally got under way. Prior to this we had sent out an auxiliary craft to perform a piece of advance strategy. We used its guns to damage one of the engines in our ring-bulge with a precision shot. We wanted to come in with a crippled ship so that we could justify asking for a specific landing site. After allowing the glowing hole to cool down we had gone into transition, which brought us back into the Einstein continuum in the orbit of the 6th planet of the Arkon System. The manoeuvre failed to alter any effects of our time-line warpage and this was a

positive indication that the nature of the time-phaser's energy was not subject to the laws of the 5th dimension. It was then that Kalup had his triumph. We were tracked by several patrol cruisers of the inner defence ring and were hailed, even though our 200-km phaser field did not extend to them. So they could see us and also track us on the radar-echo basis. It proved Kalup's theory. For these long-dead crewmen of the past we did exist. I had ordered a transmission of the Sotala's code signal and call letters. The answer had been gratifying because the landing permit had come through from Fleet Command immediately. At the moment we were moving at a moderate speed toward Arkon 3. A light cruiser escorted us. For the first time I had a chance to speak to one of these "ancestor phantoms" out of the past. As the false Tresta I was treated very respectfully by the commander, who was a 4th-class captain. Apparently he already knew of my success in the nebula sector. Since I was a few steps higher in rank and could also boast of more service seniority, the young man addressed me as "Your Excellency". In the fleets of the old Arkonide Empire, such things were important. No one ignored the order of rank. Over the radio I requested a landing place be assigned to us near the main shipyards. We knew that the robot Regent was being constructed in that immediate area. The request was processed through the prescribed service channels. According to regulations it was not my place to personally contact the port authority while under escort of a patrol commander. While I waited for a confirmation, Rhodan smiled sarcastically. "Long live bureaucracy! Your ancestors must have really had some red tape to contend with." I took his little barb calmly. Where wasn't there such a thing as bureaucracy? As soon as intelligent beings started to think, the first thing they always did was to entrench themselves in red tape and regulations which were then usually handed out by people who had no idea of the practical applications. I could well remember the heyday of the Imperium. Although I had been the Crystal Prince and was Commander-in-Chief of a special fleet, I had once had to present 5 signatures before a certain colonial world granted me permission to take on fresh water supplies. It seemed that here was a similar case. First, the cruiser commander advised me that my request to the port authority had been approved. But it was then necessary for me to call directly and to repeat the request. The port commander referred me to the wharf officer, who then had to determine through Headquarters if the landing was agreeable. By the time we were already plunging into the atmosphere with our roaring retro-engines ablaze, I was finally advised by a young lieutenant that we should use landing apron KP-176. "Jumping Jupiter!" exclaimed Maj. Heintz, the deputy commander. "I'll take everything back that I ever said about red tape in the Terran Services!" I glared at him unappreciatively but I think all 750 crewmen on board the Sotala were starting to grin. These Terrans had a strange sense of humour. Usually it came to the surface when other intelligences were ready to break under the strain. Perhaps this was what was great about this young galactic race. I looked at the viewscreen tied to the outboard cameras. The commander of the escort cruiser requested permission to withdraw. When I had obliged him he still had to notify the chief of the ground-based defence fortresses that I had authorized his manoeuvre. It was only then that I was free to bring the spherical warship down through the inner defence zone. I didn't know at this moment that the exhausting bureaucracy of the Arkonide officials was helping the Terrans to view our forthcoming task like a spirited bunch of sports enthusiasts. They were amused at me and my tussle with the petty instruments of a petty officialdom. We flew over the titanic installations of the war planet. The remote-control central took over and guided us into the prescribed flight corridor. My energetic protest resulted in a mild rebuke from the local commandant. This official gave me to understand that my engine damage was "a mere scratch". I told him angrily that this was a matter which he should kindly leave to the judgment of an active service technician such as we were already provided with on board our damaged vessel. In spite of our perilous situation, Rhodan's grim sense of humour was enough to bring tears of laughter to his eyes. He suddenly found the operation

to be quite entertaining. In every section of the Sotala, a final checkout of all personnel was made. The names of the crew members of the genuine cruiser were known to us. Heroes had always been well recorded in Arkonide history. The hypno-training proved itself effective. Every man knew what his name was supposed to be, where he came from and what his background had been. In this case the extensive pedantry of administrating officials had come in handy. Nothing could go wrong now unless we encountered Arkonides who were personally acquainted with the commander or any members of the crew. Then our only salvation would be the quick intervention of the mutants, to control their minds. Solar Intelligence had thought of everything. Mercant was still giving instructions over the P.A. system by the time the landing struts had extended. Beneath us was the main spaceport of Arkon 3. We caught a brief glimpse of the mammoth building site to the west of the wharfs. There the robot Regent was being completed by the top scientists and technicians of my venerable ancestors. In a few days of relativistic conversion time the impenetrable energy screen would be in place. When we touched down and bounced gently on our hydraulic struts I was intending to bring the special bomb into the Brain as quickly as possible and then to take flight. But for that we'd have to find a means of gaining regulation approval through official channels for a take off again. Without a takeoff permit we couldn't get very far with the cruiser. The Arkonides of this age had been hard and alert. Nobody could get off Arkon 3 if the commander in charge did not approve. Not even Perry Rhodan. When the engines died out I warned Perry again: "Listen well, little barbarian! When these Arkonides really were alive, your ancestors were living in smoke-filled caves and whimpered helplessly at the thunder of every storm. Don't get the idea that those troops out there can be compared with the Arkonides of the year 2106 A.D. You would be in for a surprise. You have to compare my forefathers with your most capable elite soldiers. Then you will know how to comport yourself." "Understood, sir," Mercant answered in Perry's place. "But the operation of the time-phaser is much more important. If it fails us we'll soon be standing before the Regent under orders of somebody from the Akon Energy Command. I'm wondering which could be worse." I glanced at him appraisingly. He was a model of self-control. Major Heintz, who was officially the 2d officer, handed me the green shoulder mantle I was to wear in my position of commander. I fastened the magnetic clips to my shoulders. My radio helmet was a magnificent piece of workmanship. Captain Tresta had been granted the privilege of wearing such custom gear in his time. Even this detail had been documented in the microvideo tapes covering the crew of the Sotala. The Terran experts had simulated the helmet perfectly. "Should somebody accompany you?" asked Rhodan hesitantly. "Out of the question! The commander disembarks alone and-according to custom-climbs into a groundcar of the robot reception escort and then reports to Central Command. The crew along with the officers have to remain on board until the captain returns. After that the granting of ground leave for the crew lies within his own jurisdiction." Perry looked around. The facts were self-evident. "We have to go along with the Arkonide customs," he concluded. Mercant cleared his throat. "Here's where the difficulties begin, sir. Take care that you don't run into somebody who thinks he knows the real Tresta. Can you use a mento-beamer?" "No. Arkonide brains don't react to the suggestive frequencies. That weapon was developed for use on alien planets. I believe the Terrans found that out toward the end of the 20th century." I managed to chuckle, seeing Rhodan's perplexity. Apparently he had forgotten that after his return home in the moon rocket Stardust, he had used the beamer to make a decisive impression on Reginald Bell. Quinto looked at his watch. We didn't yet know exactly how late it was. Within the time distortion we could determine the day but not the hour. Our astronomers were already at work on the problem. The rotation rate of Arkon 3 could not have changed. Before I left, the correct time of day was announced. It was 13:24. When I stepped into the outer airlock and the ceremonies began, the telepath John Marshall appeared. He reported to me that the Akon scientists were doing what was expected of them. Whether this was of their own free will

or not was not mentioned. 20 men of the false Sotala had formed a double line out in front. One of them announced me and I walked between them with appropriate salutes. Ahead an escort groundcar was waiting. Shrill robot music started up. The noisy mechanical instruments hadn't changed. Their screeching and fifeing were familiar to me from the time of my rulership. They had always been a strain on my eardrums. In dignified representation of my rank I strode forward to the robots. A uniformed officer straightened up in the car. I wondered if I was supposed to know him! He turned out to be a 1st-class captain. A dark beard obscured his chin. I looked into a pair of red Arkonide eyes. His nearly white hair had been modishly styled. His service helmet did not conceal it entirely. I came to a stop before the hover glider where I struck my hand flat against the left side of my chest and bowed my head. In rank and seniority the officer was doubtlessly my superior. All Arkonide officers were able to note such fine distinctions. It also went without saying that an appropriate form of address was necessary in such cases. Thus I said respectfully: "Captain Tresta greets you, Excellency. I am reporting back in accordance with my signal dispatches." He raised a hand. I shook inwardly. My right hand hovered over the butt of my service weapon. I thought I could deduce from his searching look that he had never seen the real Tresta. And so it turned out. "My greetings to you, Captain Tresta. Welcome to Arkon 3. I am instructed to transmit the request of the commanding admiral for your immediate presence." The polite formality of course meant nothing. But thus it had always been in the old fleet. Whenever a superior commander "requested" something it was the same as a binding order. I bowed my head again and waited until a combat robot opened the vehicle's door. Then I climbed in. I remained silent until the higher-ranked captain had taken his seat again. Above us glared the bright sun of my home system. I felt comfortable under its burning heat, which the Terrans had never seemed to appreciate. The car started up with a lurch. with shrill alarm whistles going we raced across the spaceport, the borders of which blended hazily with the horizon. I thought I was being unobtrusive when I stole another glance at the major construction site but my companion noticed it. He smiled benevolently. "The work goes forward without interruption," he told me. "I believe you were 3 years on active duty, were you not?" "That is correct, Excellency." "Within a few days the giant robot will be surrounded by a new type of defence screen. Excuse me-I neglected to introduce myself. I am Captain Usaph, 1st Adjutant of the Commanding Admiral. A year ago His Eminence, Admiral Kreto, was relieved. The acting chief now is Admiral Aichot." I thanked him for the information, which was something I must not forget under any circumstances. Eminent Arkonides expected everyone to know who they were. According to custom I inquired about Admiral Aichot's family although I already had the data from the Regent's memory banks. But such trivialities were a part of the mentality of my people. I didn't dare overlook them if I didn't want to be exposed. I finally ventured to indulge in the usual jokes about the bureaucratic attitude of the port officials, which was a welcome diversion to any officer in active duty. The tacit animosity between front-line officers and the "tinplates", as the civil service type troops of the administration were called, was always a sure source of amusement. After we had travelled a considerable distance the high buildings of Fleet Command Headquarters loomed into the sky before us. Our conversation kept being interrupted by the thunder of spaceships which were constantly either taking off or landing. In those days Arkon 3 was the centre of the universe. There was no other galactic race which could have dared to stand against us. Now and again a formation of warships would take off into space and the roaring was so unbearable that we had to press our hands against our ears. The car halted and once more I was faced with an honour guard, this time composed of veteran Arkonides. Someone among them could have known Tresta. I kept my head down and strode rapidly to the wide steps of the building. An antigrav lift took us upstairs. The press of service people in the wide corridors and the general hustle and bustle was fairly breathtaking. I had to wait 2 hours until the commanding officer was

ready to receive me. The interview proceeded fairly well. Acting- Admiral Aichot was a younger man who probably held his present position chiefly on the basis of his distinguished heredity. He commanded the Home Fleet, was a military expert in the Supreme Council and was also a member of the Admiralty Staff of the Commander-in-Chief. I had to stand stiffly for an hour before this "Top Brass" representative, who nevertheless treated me with a sort of friendly condescension. I gave him a complete report on the effects of the new weapon. This was a vibration beam which produced certain biological effects and-as I already knew-was soon to be abandoned. The device hadn't held up to its expectations, which I pointed out. I also pointed out that I had destroyed the enemy cruisers with conventional impulse and disintegrator weapons. I finally ventured to request permission to contact the chief scientist of the Supreme Council, hyper-physicist Epetran. Admiral Aichot expressed his surprise openly. For a commander of my rank it was unusual to wish to speak to such an important personage. "Epetran? What do you want with him?" "I'd like to make certain suggestions concerning a simplified technique for making hypertransitions." Aichot stared at me almost pityingly. "Do I understand you correctly? You wish to make suggestions... ? You actually mean-technical recommendations?" "Yes, Your Eminence. My years of research along this line have led to some important observations during actual battle conditions, especially with the last 4 Nebula cruisers. I believe I can offer some interesting recommendations." Aichot may have been an average commander type but he was also an active Fleet officer. Such men were noted for their swift powers of decision. Within 3 hours I received written permission. Only with that could I dare to enter the palace of the Supreme Council. With that the interview came to an end. Of course I was ordered to submit the customary task-action report. Aichot couldn't know that meanwhile the report had been prepared by Terran experts. I then withdrew. A hover glider brought me back to the Sotala, where a team from the shipyards was already looking into the engine damage. My First Officer, meaning Rhodan, had received orders to inform me that the overhaul of the cruiser could not be completed in less than 5 or 6 days. During this period I was free to determine the disposition of the crew. This meant crew leave on Arkon 3 but it was also a big advantage for our operation. The deliberately planned engine damage had been Quinto's idea so when I arrived he was basking in the favour of the men because they hadn't counted on such a break. I had to throw cold water on their enthusiasm. "Your hypno-training seems to be less effective than we expected. Ground leave in this past era is out of the question. At best you would only be able to spend your free time in the subterranean cities of the planet. You will remain on board. I don't relish the idea of your meeting with Arkonides who might actually know the real members of the crew. In our fleet there were thousands of cross-contacts among the fighting men on active duty. Also, relieving and changing of crews was an everyday occurrence, so they all knew each other. It would be surprising if there were no man among the other crews who wouldn't want to try to contact a buddy from the Sotala. So you have to control yourselves." "That's an order," announced Rhodan over the P.A. "You will govern yourselves accordingly. Major Heintz, post the men at their battle stations." The Chief of Intelligence gazed reproachfully at the ceiling. "Sir, for many hours now the cruiser has been on standby for action." Rhodan swallowed, then laughed. "Excuse me, then. I haven't said a word." I looked wonderingly at this tall Terran. He was the chief of the Solar Imperium, he commanded thousands of ships and was practically idolized by 50 billion Terrans and colonists. He was far above Admiral Aichot-yet he could laugh about a mistake in his reasoning without any fear of damaging his prestige or reputation. Perry Rhodan was a wonderful human being and friend. There had been very few like him on Arkon. I had known a few like Rhodan but they were now long dead and gone. Then it occurred to me that the Arkonides here in this relativistic conversion time were actually my descendants. 4000 years earlier I had been born and in my early manhood I had been sent off into action. Perry noted my momentary state of confusion and wanted to be helpful. I felt his

hand on my shoulder. "Don't think about it, Atlan. It's a thing of the past. Never forget that we are creatures of the year 2106, by Terra reckoning. What we are experiencing here is an illusion—a deception under the almighty laws of Nature." When he walked toward the exit hatch my gaze followed him pensively.

6/ THE MASTER MIND OF ARKON 3 hours previously the sun had gone behind the horizon but night had not come to the war planet. The great spaceport was brilliantly illuminated by countless field lights, revolving search beams and hovering nuclear "suns". Also the jet flames from departing spaceships gave an impression of a continuing fireworks display. There was no end to the thundering and roaring. The sky had taken on a blood-red hue above the main shipyards, which were the most modern on the planet. There the bellows of the thermonuclear smelters pushed a continuous river of vaporized metal into the cooling slag troughs. Arkon 3 never slept. The robot-operated assembly line of spaceships of every class and description was the nerve-centre of the Imperium. The Terrans and myself were the only ones on this world who knew what it would look like 6000 years later. At this time the throng of Arkonide spacemen was seemingly endless. The cities swarmed with troops from every branch of the service. Although the prime of the Empire had passed, they could still send 100,000 manned ships into the void. Subordinate races were not permitted on the war planet. They were best employed on the colonial worlds. Pucky and Ras Tschubai had just returned after reconnoitring the area. The third teleporter was still busy with our suggestor. Kitai Ishibashi had the mission of probing the scientist Epetran. I had not been able to make my presentation. Epetran did not live in one of the great conical palaces but had quartered himself instead in an officer billet, which would also have been my own way of doing things. My request was politely but firmly rejected by his subordinates. I was informed that at present Epetran had no time for recommendations from an officer back from the fighting front. I was asked to present my suggestions in writing. When I returned, Mercant had only nodded and said that it was what he had expected. Logically the Arkonides' greatest scientist would have other things to do than to get into a discussion with a second-class fleet captain. According to our conversion table the date back on Earth was the 13th of February, 2106. We couldn't wait much longer. Pucky had rolled himself up into a ball on a contour couch, exhausted from his labours. Even Ras Tschubai had come back breathing heavily. We guessed that their excursion hadn't been easy. So we had to wait until these two had recovered from their exertions. In the meantime I paid the 4 Akon scientists a visit. Artol of Penoral was monitoring the machine as usual. Two telepaths of the Corps were keeping him under surveillance. Auris was also in the cargo hold. For 2 days now she had avoided the Control Central. I inquired after her health. "Alright, considering the circumstances. When will you take action?" I couldn't answer her. We exchanged a few more words, which enabled me to see that she was uneasy. When I returned to the Control Central very much was going on there. Tako had returned with Ishibashi. Pucky reported that the robot Brain already had the appearance of the Regent we knew in our own present day. This meant that it had practically been completed. "How is the Regent guarded?" asked Quinto. "The security is very tight, sir," answered Tschubai. "We had to keep on making jumps continuously in order not to be discovered. Twice we tripped off alarm systems and once I was shot at." "What with?" "A disintegrator, sir." "With a deadly weapon?" "Yes sir. They're playing for keeps. We saw the scientific team. About a hundred men are busy checking out the final circuits. There's no normal way to get in without showing special passes. They are key card devices containing each person's frequency pattern and they are regularly monitored by the guard stations. Any unauthorized entrance seems to be impossible. Even though the energy screen isn't up yet, the Arkonides have gone to every extreme to tighten the security around the Robot." I looked around. The men's faces were grim. Mercant tapped with his fingers on a computer console. "So there's no other choice," declared Rhodan. "We have to go in with the teleporters. What do you have to report, Kitai?" His imitation bio-hair, which simulated that of an Arkonide,

was glistening with dampness. "Nothing, sir-or almost nothing. We located Epetran in the math section. His quarters are close to it. He appeared to be putting special instructions on program tape." "He's the one who designed and built Security Circuit A-1," put in Quinto. "It could be that he's working on it now," said the mutant. "I tried to work on him and influence his mind but I don't know if I had any luck. epetran has an extremely strong voluntary block. Besides-Tako claims that he may have seen us in spite of our deflector screens." A cold chill ran through me. When no one else could see through our disguise, this old scientist was able to. He had an activated brain with special faculties. Rhodan guessed my fears but sought to dismiss them. "Don't be a pessimist, my friend! Even Epetran isn't omniscient. If he had gotten suspicious we'd know it by now." I couldn't contradict his argument, yet from moment to moment I became more apprehensive. I deeply regretted that I had asked Admiral Aichot for a permit to visit Epetran. According to the circumstances Kitai had described, it would be better not to meet him. Mercant looked at his watch. "Soon after sunrise you'll be getting involved with receptions, sir." I nodded, I already had the invitations. My "colleagues" wanted to see Captain Tresta. The situation was becoming intolerable. Quinto was about to say something when the tracking centre put through a call. "To the Commander: a strange vehicle has stopped in front of the cruiser." Rhodan stiffened. Heintz hit the alarm button automatically. The men who were off duty were awakened from their sleep. Tracking switched circuits so that we could see what they were looking at. On our viewscreens appeared an unwieldy-looking contraption. It had wide caterpillar chains instead of wheels and was equipped with numerous antennas. Before we could really get a good look at it, the heavy vehicle rolled away. It disappeared behind a battleship, became invisible once more beyond it, then entered an armoured surface lock that led underground. We looked at each other, nonplussed, until Mercant chuckled heartily. "Could our scientific associates kindly explain what that was supposed to be?" he asked. Kalup still stared at the viewscreen. His eyes had narrowed so much that they seemed to be lost in the fatty folds of his face. "That was a sensor vehicle," he declared. "No doubt about it. Who guided it to the Sotala? Who wanted to find out what?" "Find out?" asked Quinto hastily. "What do you mean?" Kalup didn't answer. He stomped swiftly toward the exit but as he went out he was heard to mutter something that sounded like "sensor surveillance". After he had gone I felt that my activator was louder than usual. Even 6023 years before the present time I was already a very old man. Rhodan was still standing in front of the screens. "It's useless to try to figure it out," I said, "It seems an impossibility to influence Epetran by any paranormal means. So there's no point in making his acquaintance. From what Kitai has to say, it could be dangerous. We move into action. We'll get into the Brain with the help of the mutants, we'll install the bomb and then get out of here." "How?" asked Rhodan, now very alert to what I was saying. "It should be considerably easier to return to the present time-plane of Arkon 3 than it was to enter the era of Tutmor VI. Everyone on board has seen how tight the defences are here. I vote for alternate 2 of our escape plan. We turn off the time converter. When we get back we may have to face a robot attack but the Fleet under Bell's command can cover our retreat." "That's also my opinion," declared Mercant. "But before that there's a lot to be done. Of course if I had my preferences I would have felt better if we could have handled this thing with Epetran's help." "What should I tell the man?" I asked sarcastically. "That I've come from the future to save my people?" He regarded me soberly. "Sir, perhaps that still might not be as crazy as you think." "Mercant, you're dreaming!" exclaimed Rhodan. "No sir, I don't quite see it that way. This scientist was the first Arkonide to detect the beginnings of the degeneration and to perceive its outcome. Moreover, he's expert enough to be able to conceive of such a device as the time-phaser. I'm playing with the idea of informing Epetran." Rhodan bluntly rejected this. When my extra-brain singled me I was astonished that it seconded Mercant's plan. Nevertheless I was also in favour

of dropping the idea of getting any cooperation from Epetran. Rhodan got up and went over to the main computer, where he began to press the input keys. I interrupted him. "It would be useless to try to get a logic evaluation. Mr. Mercant, I must also reject your proposition. The bomb can be relied upon to explode as planned. We have no way of knowing what Epetran's reaction would be and we can't take the risk of being arrested or maybe even shot in case he sounds an alarm. We move as planned. I'll install the bomb." The chief of Intelligence bowed resignedly. The decision was made. Possibly we could be mistaken-no one could say. The computer made a clicking sound. While I was still waiting for its output a message came through from the duty officer at the ground lock. His face appeared on the intercom screen. "Lt. Pinch here, sir. A letter has been delivered to you." "What...?" "An oblong envelope, sir. It was brought over by a robot." Rhodan stopped his computer work. We looked at each other tensely. "Another invitation?" asked Maj. Heintz. His voice sounded apprehensive. I shook my head. If that were the case it would not come to me this way. Such matters were customarily handled over the radio. The letter arrived in the Control Central. The envelope was of fluorescent foil and it bore the seal of the Supreme Council. Rhodan's hand was tense when he handed it to me. I ripped it open and the letter fell out. "It's in handwriting!" said Quinto. "Who's it from?" I thought that my heart stopped for a moment. The signature and seal were unmistakable. After reading it I lowered the letter and looked at the others. "It's an invitation, alright! Epetran asks me to visit him since he's heard from Admiral Aichot that I had some recommendations to make for the improvement of transition techniques." Rhodan also read the message. "It says other officers familiar with the subject are also welcome... Well, I'll be! What is he up to?" "Danger!" signalled my extra-brain. Almost against my will I declared: "The invitation can't be avoided. When Epetran makes a request it's the same as an order. Who will go with me?" Rhodan called his service robot to him. "My extra uniform-fast!" he ordered. Within 30 minutes a vehicle was waiting for us at the cruiser's ground lock. "So he took it for granted that we'd be ready in half an hour," observed Rhodan grimly. "Alright, let's go. No, Kitai, I'm sorry, we won't be taking you with us. Anyway, if this scientist is equipped with an activated brain your efforts will be useless." Our suggestor mutant remained behind. We descended in the antigrav and climbed into the robotcar. It was emblazoned with the escutcheon of the Supreme Council. The third man in our team was John Marshall, who was to attempt to read the scholar's mind. Officially he was joining us as Chief Engineer of the Sotala. We started off, not knowing what awaited us in Epetran's quarters. Certainly he wasn't thinking of any gala reception. Apparently the interview was to be a very sober one. Arkonides of Epetran's rank had been very clear thinkers. They were only interested in facts. It was said especially of the chief scientist of the Supreme Council that he very seldom took part in noisy festivities although he stood well in the Emperor's favour. We drove into the control zone close to the main construction site. Long hangar-like structures loomed before us. Apparently Epetran didn't consider it unusual to be requesting a visit from us in the middle of the night. He was one of those Arkonides who believed that soldiers should be ready at any hour to serve the Empire. Rhodan was uneasy when no inspections occurred. We were allowed to pass through the energy barriers without hindrance. My extra-brain remained silent. My skull felt as if it were held in an iron band. We knew that Epetran had been the greatest man in Arkonide history. It was quite an ordeal to be facing such a personality. "Captain Tresta?" queried an officer of the guard. He belonged to the famous elite troops of the Tentons. "That I am," I confirmed, introducing Rhodan and Marshall as officers "Telater and Aday". "His Eminence is expecting you. Your visit will be limited to one hour." He saluted, I nodded, and the car moved on a bit farther. We got out in front of a tower-like structure. We had arrived. . . . Marshall's face had blanched conspicuously. I caught a signal from him and understood. It was dangerous to attempt to probe Epetran's mind. It was almost as if the

telepath were trying to tell me that the scientist may have detected the paramental interference. However, if this was true the great man did not reveal it in any way. He was a tall Arkonide with snow-white hair that hung down to his shoulders. I had never seen a man with such a high forehead nor such a benevolent expression. For a moment, as we came in, this kindly look darkened. I felt as if the Supreme Council had secretly condemned us to death. Then-quite strangely -his threatening aspect vanished. My presentation took 2 hours. His questions fairly exhausted my technical knowledge. Within the first few minutes he had understood how the transition computations had to be processed in order to accelerate succeeding hyperjumps and make them more accurate in terms of the navigational course. Arkonide history has it that shortly before his death he had introduced considerable improvements in this regard. If I wasn't entirely mistaken, we the "yet unborn" had provided the impetus. Even Rhodan and Marshall did some talking. In fact Perry had gone so far as to allude to the possibility of linear spacedrive. This seemed to fascinate Epetran still more. He regarded Rhodan closely as if he were seeking to penetrate his thoughts. His deep voice trembled with an inner excitement when he questioned us. We found ourselves in a laboratory where the equipment appeared to be dedicated to computer programming. We were fairly surrounded by instruments and consoles. It was quite clear that Epetran had not been planning a gala reception. When Rhodan finally stopped giving hints and reassumed his regular role, to my great relief the old man's quiet smile returned. He wore the uniform of the practical working scientist. Only the symbol of the Supreme Council indicated his high position. "I thank you, Major Telater," he said. "Your statements have been very interesting. But I believe it would be more advantageous to us to first try your commander's recommendations for improving our existing propulsion system. You will be hearing from me. How long will you be staying on Arkon 3?" I assumed he was addressing me. "In any case until my cruiser has been overhauled, Your Excellency. After that I expect to receive new orders." He nodded thoughtfully. "Are you satisfied with the fighting power of your ship?" "It could be better, Your Eminence." The old man frowned as if piqued for the moment. "The Sotala's armaments are the very best." "Which soon may not be enough, Excellency. The enemies of the Imperium are not asleep. I beg you to let me be frank with you." "Of course, as you wish. But I know of no race in the galaxy that would be capable of defeating our fleet." "I was thinking about developing intelligences. No one knows what the future will bring." He rose to his feet by way of dismissing us. But his last words had the heaviest impact on me. "When we are no more, the Imperium will find powerful friends. Then it will all depend on taking the right steps." We left. The old man gazed after us from amidst his machines. Marshall walked out first and I followed him but then I missed Rhodan. When I turned to look back I saw him standing there tall and straight in the lab room. Epetran's gaze and his seemed to be locked together. Marshall stifled a sigh as we heard Perry's departing words. "Most assuredly the Imperium will find friends one day, Your Eminence. And they will remember you and your genius." He saluted and finally came out into the corridor. The sliding door closed behind us. "Was that necessary?" I snapped at him angrily "Even without that I have a feeling he saw through us." "I do, too," he answered, impressed. "Let him make of my words what he will." "Caution!" whispered the telepath. Farther ahead 2 soldiers of the guard appeared. My hand touched the butt of my service weapon. But all they had to tell us was that we had gone way over our visiting limit. They emphasized that it wasn't proper to prolong an interview with a man like Epetran with persistent questions. I was reminded of the hospitality of my race. I had the impression that the old man would not have let himself in for such a lengthy discussion, nevertheless, unless he had wished it so. Unquestioningly he would have dismissed us the minute he ceased to be interested. I made my apologies to the guard officer, who gruffly passed us through. A half hour later we again entered the Control Central of the Sotala. "No unusual events, sir," reported Maj. Heintz. Outside the sun was

rising. I wondered if Epetran ever slept. Rhodan checked his watch. According to our conversion table the date must be February 14. "Tomorrow at 12 noon-our time-the bomb will explode," he said with unusual emphasis. "Pucky and Ras Tschubai, stand by for action. Marshall, your face is still grey. What's wrong?" The telepath was almost apathetic when he spoke but his words shattered our self-confidence. "Presumably Epetran knows who we are and where we come from. Just after we entered his lab we were monitored by paramental means. For half a minute there, you and Atlan were unconscious. I was able to resist it. But I don't know if Epetran succeeded in breaking through your mental screens. I don't think it was possible with Atlan. How about you, sir?" Rhodan sat down. He stared almost dumbfounded at the chief of the Mutant Corps. "Unconscious, you say? You sure you're not mistaken?" "By no means, sir. I was awake. You and Atlan were asleep with your eyes open. Probably the results are coming through now from his para-probe. I urgently advise you to conceal the bomb in the Brain at once -and to leave this time plane." I glanced involuntarily at the viewscreens. Outside the spaceships of my people were taking off and landing. Personnel vehicles were crossing the area back and forth. No one approached the Sotala. Rhodan turned on the P.A. microphone. "All hands! Red alert is in effect. It's possible that we may be attacked, in which case the time converter will be shut off. If we should unexpectedly enter our own time reference we will be close to the Regent and his robot fleet. Open fire without waiting for orders. Com Central: prepare a distress call to the Fleet. Stand by for emergency takeoff. That is all, thank you..." He turned off the switch. The ordnance experts appeared with Terran combat suits. They were far superior to the equivalent products of Epetran's epoch. The energy screens were stronger and the deflector projectors were much more advanced. Pucky and Ras Tschubai reported. We were ready to make our jump. Two weapons technicians brought us the bomb. The uranium timer was already operating. The half life radiation clock would give the ignition impulse in 6023 years. Mercant was getting nervous. "I don't think it's wise for the leaders of both imperiums to place their lives in danger. Since we left our own time on February 10th we don't know if you were still alive on February 14-meaning today." "Mercant, don't get me all confused," Rhodan snapped at him edgily. Obviously his sense of humour had failed him at the moment. "By the same token I could just as well claim I've never lived. That would be the case if something were to happen to us now, wouldn't it?" Mercant turned to look helplessly at Kalup. The scientist said nothing. He was busy studying the micro sound-tape of Epetran's conversation. "He sounds like an oracle," Kalup said finally. "When you read between the lines you can conclude almost anything. Wait till I get the analysis. At first try I can't prove anything." "Request denied. We're teleporting. The bomb must be placed in the Brain. Ready, Atlan?" I nodded. We had decided to dispense with our pressure helmets. Breathable air would be available where we were going. Once more I pointed out to the teleporters the remote power room where I wanted to operate. I was familiar with it from my days as Imperator, since at that time I had free access to the Brain. Then we jumped. 7/ A HITCH IN TIME Rematerialisation occurred in a fair-sized room containing an emergency-power reactor and a converter bank. Farther to the left were the control panels which were connected to the pile by heavy cables. High tension lines led through the thermically-glazed rock walls into an adjoining room where the tanks containing pre-catalysts and nuclear fuel were located. There were also the moderator pumps for dampening down the reactor with regulated injections. I knew that the emergency power pile had never been called upon for any current demands. I had found the place during my numerous inspection tours and learned that its installation had been a useless precaution. Typical of this type of construction, the whole assembly sat on a shoulder-high foundation made of armourplate plastic metal. One wall was broken by a maintenance hatch. Behind it was a passage through which one could crawl to the cleanout access holes around the reactor zone. The hatch was no more used than was the power unit itself. Here was the place for our bomb. It

could lie here undisturbed for over 6000 years, waiting for the impulse from its uranium timer. Pucky took a look around in our immediate vicinity, finding only several technicians making routine inspections. They were checking out individual relays. The construction of the giant Robot had required thousands of years. This particular reactor room must have been completed about 20 years ago and there were no further installations being done in this sector. The only thing we would have to fear would be detection by a security patrol, which was unlikely. I turned off my deflector field. The room was lighted by a permanently burning emergency lamp. We waited until our eyes had adjusted to the dim illumination. It was warm and it became uncomfortable in our combat suits but we didn't dare turn on our air-conditioners. To avoid any danger of being traced by instruments it was better if our micro-reactors could remain inactive. Their residual radiations were enough to worry about. Pucky returned from another teleport jump. Ras Tschubai stood at the closed steel door and listened for sounds outside. "Everything clear," whispered the little one. He looked around anxiously. "Nobody's there but those technicians." "Almost a little too easy, eh?" remarked Rhodan. I thought of Epetran and Marshall's story. If the learned scholar had seen through our game he was certainly reacting strangely. Why hadn't he sounded an alarm? Or didn't he suspect what we were intending to do? Had he merely regarded us as interesting visitors from the future who had come to impart specific knowledge to him? No-Epetran was too shrewd not to realize in that case that we must have come here to destroy his life's work? Would he stand for that? I was helpless to find an answer. Finally my extra-brain expressed itself. Granted that Epetran had guessed our origin, he wouldn't be able to interpret our thoughts. He would have to rely on the vagaries of machine analysis. This thought relieved me somewhat. At any rate we hadn't been eliminated so far. No one seemed to suspect our presence down here. Above us lay about 1000 meters of solid rock. The few access passages were heavily guarded. If there were any hint of our presence, all the sentries would have to do was to move in and attack. This was evidently not the case or they would have come looking for us long before now. Rhodan's voice suddenly tore me from my thoughts. "What are you waiting for?" he asked. I was surprised to see that the Terran was suspicious of me. I could detect it in his eyes. He had always looked this way at other intelligences when he doubted their intentions. "You Terran barbarian," I retorted angrily, "are you thinking perhaps that I'll lose my nerve at the last minute? Will you never learn any better?" The Chief of the Solar Imperium suddenly grinned with the ingenuousness of one of his youngest cadets. Pucky showed his incisor tooth brightly. "Now he's acting human again!" I released the cylindrical bomb from its carrying straps. Rhodan held it while I opened the maintenance hatch. After I had crawled in, he handed it to me and I attached it to the plastic metal wall with instant-grip fasteners. To check it over would have been superfluous. The weapon was sealed. There was nothing more to attend to here. I carefully emerged from the crawl-way and closed the hatch. Pucky was listening telepathically for thoughts impulses from outside. "Almost too easy to be true, sir," said Ras Tschubai. "Is that all?" I nodded. "Then let's jump back," ordered Rhodan. "We can't wait here for 6000 years." He attempted to laugh but it didn't have the desired effect. Pucky ran to me and I picked him up in my arms. It was the best way for the two of us to teleport. "Are you sure the reactor definitely won't be inspected?" asked Rhodan again. He had often asked this question. I couldn't tell him any more than I had previously. The power pile had never been used. The main reactors had never failed. Ras suddenly groaned and I realized why too late. He and Rhodan were standing several meters away. Before I understood why they both started to collapse I was also attacked by a wave of pain. Pucky screeched and I felt his legs tremble. I felt as if fluid fire were running through my veins. I squatted down and let the little fellow roll onto the floor. After 3 seconds it was all over with. The pain faded as swiftly as it had come. Rhodan's reaction was to reach for his weapon immediately. My eyes finally cleared and

I was about to ask what happened when Ras let out another groan. His eyes were fairly popping as he stared beyond me. When I turned, I knew why. The emergency power reactor had changed. Its isolation shielding jacket which had just been so immaculate was now stained and spotted. Here and there were cracks and other signs of decay. A thick layer of dust was on the floor and the equipment. I jumped up. Rhodan was already on his feet. Pucky was still squirming on the floor. "How can a new reactor become a pile of junk in 3 seconds?" asked Rhodan. His voice sounded hoarse. I declined to answer, since we both knew. "It's-it's the time field!" stammered Tschubai, horrified. "Sir, we've gotten out of the conversion field. The machine has stopped working." I helped Pucky to his feet. His mouse face was contorted in a grimace of uncertainty. "The field is gone," he confirmed. "I'm getting many impulses. We're back in our own time again. But the bomb-!" I whirled about to look at the hatch that I had just closed. Just closed? Perry reassured us. "Don't get excited. We left the Sotala on February 14. We haven't spent more than an hour here. We still have 20 hours." His last words were drowned out by a nerve-shattering howl. Outside the alarm sirens were sounding. The Regent had detected us. For 6000 years it had been a harmless machine. Now we had to get used to the idea again that it had begun to deteriorate due to the tampering with its A-1 circuits. Pucky had calmed himself. I took him up in my arms once more. Rhodan took a firm hold of Ras Tschubai. "Where to?" asked the teleporter confidently. He was accustomed to eluding his enemies through the paramental planes. I hesitated. Where could we go? If the time-phaser had ceased functioning, then the cruiser would also be in the present time. That meant a battle which would sooner or later lead to the destruction of the ship. There was no other explanation for our sudden return to our own time. The machine must have failed. Whether by accident or plan was immaterial just now. "Our target is the Sotala," Rhodan decided. "Then we'll see what we should do." I waited for the dematerialisation but it did not occur. Pucky began to tremble. His eyes seemed to grow dim. Ras Tschubai staggered so that Rhodan had to support him. I felt gooseflesh come over me. "Pucky...!" "Antis!" he exclaimed. "Antis are close by somewhere! I can't concentrate-they absorb my psi. Atlan, I can't jump!" Tschubai confirmed it. I didn't ask any more questions. We knew that the Akons had the support of the Baalol priests. Their mental emanations negated the mutants' para-faculties. I pulled my minicom set from my equipment belt and turned it on. I sent out a distress call on the hyper-frequency band of the Fleet. We had found that the Brain's honeycomb screen could be penetrated by relatively weak hyperwaves. If the radio experts of the Sotala were alert they would hear me. Of course that depended on whether or not the cruiser had actually returned to present time. We listened breathlessly. Pucky detected a few brain impulses, then nothing more. So the Antis were also closing in on us. The Sotala did not answer but in its place we heard a strange voice. It was a time announcement in English. Someone was broadcasting on our frequency. "Ironduke-it is now 11:43, 15 February 2106...!" The message was continuously repeated except that the time of day kept changing. I tensed, hardly noting Rhodan's sudden grip. "The 15th of February, sir," said Ras, nonplussed. "The bomb will explode in less than 17 minutes!" "But-we came out of the ship on the 14th," protested Rhodan. "The conversion table-" "Was wrong," I interrupted him. "The time-phaser doesn't work as precisely as we assumed. Friend, I'm getting nervous." He released his grip on my arm. Pucky announced that his psi faculties had surrendered completely. A merciless enemy waited for us outside. We exchanged glances. In a basic sense it made little difference to us which way we would die if it were going to happen. Perhaps an energy beam might be easier to contemplate than being caught up in the sun-hot concussion of a 50-megaton explosion. "We'll use the emergency exit. All set?" We turned on our individual defence screens. They were strong enough to absorb the impact of hand weapons fire although a robot shot might be dangerous. The deflector screens made us invisible. When I pulled down my absorption filter I could again see my companions. Ras opened the emergency

door in the rear of the chamber. Beyond it was a dimly-lit corridor. There was still no one in sight. The hypercom message of the Ironduke was still giving the countdown. It was now 11:46... 8/ FROM THE TOMB OF THE AGES Our deflector screens were machine-generated. Even the mental capacities of the Antis were not sufficient for them to detect these light-diverting lines of energy. This had been our last hope but then the Akon technicians appeared with their electronic sensors, which homed in on our micro-reactors. The famous Terran radiation-absorption features of our suits proved to be useless. It could not be denied that the Akons were masters of an outstanding technology. Arkonides were not in evidence, which was a sign that the men of the Blue System had already suppressed my people. We found ourselves in a lengthy hall that I had never seen before. It was an impossibility to get a perspective of this labyrinth of passages and rooms without a construction plan. Also our orientation was all the more difficult because of the complex system of levels. Many of the long chambers were split by 2 to 3 mezzanine decks. I was lying behind a master relay cabinet from which thick cable conduits led to other switching units. The deep humming sound behind the housing panels indicated that the Regent was working at full power. It seemed to have activated all auxiliary sections. The lighting here was very inadequate. We could hardly see the flitting shadows of our attackers although thousands of indicator and parity lamps were flickering on and off. It caused a confusion of vision which was unpleasant. Rhodan was crouched a few meters away behind the base of a transformer. Its rumbling sound covered our whisperings. I noted that he was carrying his heavy impulse beamer over his shoulder. So far we had not used our hand weapons. The Antis' defence screens were reinforced by their mental abilities and were not normally penetrable. We had not brought along any of the new combination "persuaders" which had been designed to combat the Baalols. No one had foreseen that we might be fighting the mysterious priests. I saw a figure at the end of an aisle. Its outlines seemed to flow and change, which was proof that the god-priest had fully activated his screen. It would be useless to bring him under fire. I checked my watch which I had synchronized with the Fleet's countdown broadcast so that I would know when the moment of destruction would come. The tolerance limit of the uranium timer lay between plus or minus 3 minutes. I was hoping for a breakdown of the bomb's ignition system, which I knew could not happen. I was startled by a thundering sound nearby. Ras Tschubai had fired his weapon. The white-hot glow of a thermo-beam lit up the dim twilight around us. Somebody yelled out piercingly and I saw an Arkon stumble out from behind a bursting bank of equipment. I did not shoot although he was apparently only wounded. Two Antis dragged him to cover behind a stack of memory banks. Ras changed his position. The enemy's greenish weapon beams struck back. Wherever they hit the material was converted to dust. The Regent sounded more alarms. Whenever any part of the installations was destroyed a new battery of sirens became activated. Rhodan jumped across the aisle and threw himself down beside me. "Let's go back to those mezzanine stairs. We'll work our way to the surface," he said. "Are you ready?" I beckoned to Pucky and Ras. Then we ran for it. In that moment the spot I had left was hit by a disintegrator beam. The relay cabinet collapsed under it and meter-long sparks shot out of the cabling and connector housings. The bedlam of sirens increased so that it didn't matter if we shouted to each other. Ahead we saw the stairs. Rhodan yelled at us to take cover once more and we followed his advice. Our battle tactics developed a set pattern within minutes. We would risk opening fire and then quickly change our location. It always took a new space of time for the Akon sensor equipment to pick up our trail again. I figured we had a good chance as long as they didn't get the idea of concentrating exclusively on our gun muzzles whenever we opened fire. But for that it would be necessary to open a frontal attack, backed up by many marksmen in the background. We would then be thrown on the defensive and it would make it still easier for them to fire at our blazing muzzles. I knew it wouldn't be long before the Akons started applying such logic to their tactics. We were now communicating by hand signals. Pucky made

it clear that we were surrounded. In the rear of the hall the Regent's combat robots were showing up. They appeared to have been guided to our position by radio. If necessary they could also track us with their own sensor equipment. But by this time it made little difference to me. On a signal from Rhodan we all began firing again. I shot blindly at the robot Brain's installations. I jumped forward a few meters and opened fire anew. The racket of our energy weapons was greater than that of the alarms. Irreplaceable circuit banks exploded while flying fragments damaged still other equipment. After this onslaught we gambled everything on one last manoeuvre. When our abandoned positions were attacked and the smoke clouds obscured the opposition's visibility, we turned on our antigravs and rose above the floor. After adjusting my equipment for negative weight, I placed my hand against the low ceiling and crept along like a fly toward the stairwell opening." "Stop!" yelled Rhodan. I had braced my feet against one of the landings but drew them back as the robots brought the spiral stairs under fire. We held onto several refrigeration pipes to keep from being blasted away by the shockwaves. Glowing fragments hammered against the pipes and equipment nearby. Where the stairs had been was a bubbling mass of synthetic metal. Our defence screens reflected the heat so we were able to dart up through the opening into the next level. One storey below us everything seemed to be in confusion. The thunder of the robot weapons went on incessantly. Stifling gases shot up out of the stairwell opening. "They're shooting at the Antis," yelled Ras. "Where next? They're giving us a breather!" "From here on we fly," I shouted back. "They haven't found out yet that we're on antigravs. Onward! Keep looking for other overhead openings. Somewhere there must be a way out. Don't fire unless we're under specific attack. They may try to force us to show where we are by keeping up random firing, hoping we'll answer back." Pucky discovered the next opening. Another staircase led upward. We glided through the stairwell gap and arrived in an arched, dome-like chamber which contained the main register banks for a principal memory extension. In these units billions of pieces of data were stored for retrieval. Just as we thought we were reasonably safe we were tracked again. Pucky picked up a few thought impulses but they faded away immediately. The Antis were everywhere. They seemed to be exerting every possible effort to counteract the paramental faculties of the mutants. Then we were finally surrounded. The combat robots and Akon forces appeared simultaneously. I managed to check my watch at that moment and saw that it was 12:04-the 15th of February, 2106. We could no longer hear the warning countdown from the Fleet of the Ironduke. An interference transmitter had come in on the same frequency. All I could hear in my minicom speaker was a faint high squeal. We let ourselves sink to the floor and took cover behind some equipment racks. Rhodan resignedly hung his heavier weapon over his shoulder and then stared at my watch. The explosion would have to come at any moment. Somebody fired up ahead. Robot weapons pay much attention to the shockwaves anymore. I stiffened with alarm when I heard a terrible roaring sound. Ras threw himself to the floor and grasped an upright support. We waited for death but it did not come. The sound increased its volume. The cyclonic howling was not quite like a nuclear explosion. It was as if a hurricane had been unleashed in the labyrinths of the robot Regent. Tschubai's dark countenance was twisted with tension. Rhodan had grasped both my shoulders. We kept on listening. The shooting had been silenced. Underneath us the floor was shaking. Here and there shockwaves shot through the armoured hatches of the exits. The Regent was opening all its doors. It was obvious that the Brain was being destroyed even though our bomb had not detonated. We looked at each other in amazement. Pucky raised up. He listened with his head cocked on one side. Then he cried out: "I'm getting a message! The Antis are dead or they're pulling back." "Can you jump now?" asked Rhodan. There was a spark of hope in his eyes. "No, not yet. Watch it! Somebody's coming! He's sending thoughts on a para-plane. He says: 'Don't shoot-I come as a friend.' It keeps repeating itself, the same words..." " Even though annihilation was raging through every other area, in our

chamber it was still. No machines exploded, except that the memory banks ceased their humming. They had suddenly died out. A strange object appeared in the connecting passageway. It was a coupled vehicle that slithered its way toward us on tractor treads. "The transmitter!" cried Pucky excitedly. We waited until the thing stopped in front of us. The side panel fell open, revealing seats inside. I recognized it as being an inspection vehicle. However, this particular one appeared to be of special design. I didn't hesitate any longer. In this situation it didn't matter what avenue we turned to. I entered the passenger cabin, sat down abruptly and waited for the others to join me. When they had all come inside, the panel closed. The inspector car was completely automatic. In front of us a viewscreen lit up. I tensed suddenly when I recognized the features of Epetran. His smile was genuine. All of his mysterious inscrutability had vanished. The speaker crackled and his voice was unmistakable. "This is a visitape which I prepared after the visit of Your Excellencies, Emperor Gonozal VIII and Solar Administrator Perry Rhodan. I won't be able to work out the principle of the time-converter since my life is too short now. Although I perceived from probing your minds with the mento-monitor where you come from and what you intend, after studying the future I have decided to set up a self-destruct program for the Regent in case it should become influenced by alien powers in a way that is against the interests of the Empire. Thus I am placing the destiny of the Greater Empire in the hands of Your Highnesses." Epetran fell silent while bowing his head. Rhodan had turned pale. "The special vehicle your crew detected in front of the Sotala was able to mento-monitor you also. The results proved to me that you have spared yourselves neither dangers nor difficulties in your efforts to preserve the stellar empire in accordance with the ancient traditions. Your thoughts are known to me. I am informed concerning the situation of your own time. When you hear this tape you will be back again in your own plane of reference. In order to hasten that process, shortly after you entered the Brain I had the simulated Sotala towed to another part of the landing area. I know that this will place Your Excellencies in danger but I have found no other solution. This robot vehicle has been exclusively designed to bring you and your companions to safety. It is with painful regret that I must destroy my life's work. I took the liberty of removing the time bomb from the base of the reactor. In its place the robot Brain was furnished with an extra safety circuit which would be activated when you arrived-you, the rightful Emperor with truth in your heart and risking life itself in the cause of the Empire. This has now occurred-the 'Insanity Circuit' has taken over. The Regent will self-destruct. I thank you for the new data concerning transition technology. I send greetings to the true friends of the Imperium. What will happen henceforth in your own era is unknown to me. I could only follow your thoughts as far as February of your year 2106. Take now the heritage of your ancestors. I have done my best." The voice became silent and the picture vanished. I cried out imploringly, speaking the name of the old scientist, but he did not appear again. Rhodan had to shake me by the arm before I regained control of myself. Now we knew what that monitor vehicle had been up to. Marshall's guess had been correct. Rhodan and I had been scanned again during our visit without our knowing it. By the time we said goodbye to Epetran he had already become informed concerning events of the future millenniums. He had been wise enough not to destroy the Regent beforehand because otherwise he would have changed the course of history. Instead he had chosen our planned date of February 15th as the key point of destiny. The experience left me shaken. Only now could we fully perceive the man's greatness. What other scientist of the era of Tutmor VI would have been able to make such wide-ranging decisions? Epetran had overlooked nothing. We, the visitors from the future, had been recognized by him. The chain of related factors was mind-staggering. We, the intelligences of the advanced present, had to marvel at the genius of the old man. While we were still trying to figure how we could escape from Arkon 3, he had already worked out a 6000-year plan. The rumblings and thunderings were still going on outside. Our vehicle traversed unknown halls. After taking an

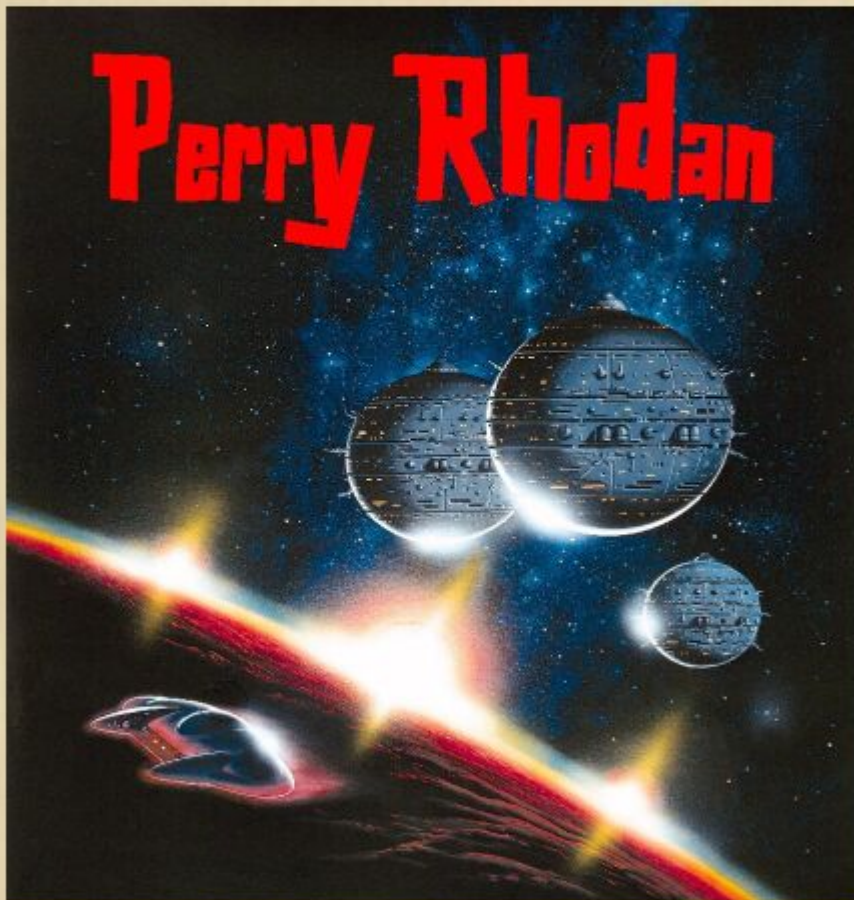
antigravitor upwards it finally brought us to the surface inside an armoured dome. The journey was ended. We got out. The steel gates of the dome stood wide open. Before us lay the central spaceport which we had walked upon in another time. There was nothing to be seen of the Sotala. Epetran had caused it to be taken to another location. With the increasing distance we had come out of the zone of influence of the time-conversion field. The expedient had been correct even though it had placed our lives in danger. Apparently the old man had wanted to be positive of the results. If the Regent had not been tampered with by the Akons it would not have activated its own self-destruct circuit. Epetran could not have installed a better security factor for testing the veracity of our thoughts long after his death. There were thousands of robot spaceships on the landing field but they had become inactive. Beneath us the ground was still rumbling. The "Insanity Circuit" must have reached out to all sectors of the Regent at once. It meant the total inactivation of the robot fleet as well as the remote-controlled defence fortresses, automated industries and supplies and everything else. At the moment the Imperium had become a scrap heap without the slightest ability to defend itself. We waited under cover of the armoured dome. Here and there the ground cracked and fissured as machines exploded below. I thought I must be dreaming. Operation "Last Ditch" had come to an end. The Akons and Antis on Arkon 3 had lost the battle. Without the Regent they were more helpless than before. Rhodan put out a call to the Sotala, which produced an immediate response. The crew had returned to present time. "Heintz here, sir. We are attacking an Akon ship but give us your tracking coordinates." Minutes later there was a distant clap of thunder. A dark point suddenly expanded until it burst into a sun-bright explosion. Then we made out the outlines of the Sotala. It came tumbling down toward the ground in our direction. After grazing a robot battleship it bounced to a stop. The lower section was in flames. The cruiser must have received a heavy hit. Rhodan stared as if entranced toward the West where the planet's atmosphere was beginning to vibrate with rising thunders. The Terran superbattleships were the first to appear. With titanic force they attacked the spaceships of the Akons and the Antis. An hour later the central spaceport was swarming with Terran landing troops. After another emergency call we were picked up by Bell. The most daring operation in recent history had been completed. Terra's fleet was circling within the Arkon System. All resistance was crushed. Arkonide officials were removed from their offices. Akons and Antis were captured. It had all been a fantastic conquest. If the Regent had still been in existence, unquestionably the whole thing would have developed into a war of extinction. 20,000 paralysed robotships were manned by Terran space troops. Large contingents of the fleet were already hurtling into space in order to also appropriate the units which had been posted there by the Regent. We stood before the gutted wreck of the false Sotala. In the decisive action, 82 Terrans had lost their lives. And the 4 Akon scientists were dead. And... And-! My eyes avoided Perry, nor could I trust myself to speak to him. What, under the saddest of circumstances, was there to say? I knew he must be undergoing a terrible emotional trauma. For though no one could ever replace Thora in his affections, could ever fill the vacuum created by her untimely death; and though Auris of Las Toot had not yet joined his side officially; still a strong male-female bond had developed between the Peacelord and the Lady of Las Toor. A chemical attraction heightened by spiritual affinity that, given a different timetrack into a more compassionate parallel world, could have eventuated in-who knows what? Very likely a second marriage for Perry. Perhaps a more satisfactory son. A delightful daughter with her mother's emerald eyes. But the emerald emanations had faded from those flashing eyes, now. Laughter would no longer spring from the smooth soft throat. The magnetic thrill of her accidental electric touch had died. Auris was dead, her spirit fled from the holocaust of the conflagration loosed in the last moments of the disintegrating cruiser. Well... Perry would have to find his inner peace in his own time and in his own way. In the meantime, I was deeply relieved when I heard one piece of good news: the

time-converter had been destroyed by the fatal hit. At least the uncanny machine would never be employed again. The commander of forces landing on Arkon 1 advised over intercom that the mad Emperor Carba had fallen in the battle with the robot guards of the Crystal Palace. I hardly paid any attention to this news. The heatwaves emerging from the Sotala, singed my hair. We waited a long time until the chief of the rescue troops came and regretfully shrugged his shoulders. There was no trace to be found of Auris and the Akons. I went with Perry to the Ironduke. We were only accompanied by John Marshall. I had briefly given him the basic import of Epetran's message to us but he had only nodded in silence. Jefe Claudr{was waiting for us at the ground lock. Reginald Bell had already taken off with a fleet unit, intent upon taking over the patrol cruisers of the Arkonide Home Fleet. From now on Terra would be strong-stronger than ever before. For the time being I refrained from asking what position I was to hold in the future. Probably I would have to take over the teetering Empire. I didn't want to think of the impending revolts on the colonial planets. Time alone would tell whether or not Terra and Arkon could be welded together into a single entity. Rhodan withdrew to his cabin. blarshall and I remained standing under the mammoth hull of the Ironduke. Major Heintz came and joined us. I made no reproaches for his attack on the fleeing Akons. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "is there anything you want to know?" "Yes. When did you get the order to move your location?" "About 40 minutes after you'd gone on the mission. We were flanked by 2 battleships. An antigrav tender towed us to the other end of the field. It would have been senseless to shut off the time-phaser. We didn't know if you had planted the bomb yet or not." "Thanks. That's all I wanted to know. You'd better get yourself to a doctor." He saluted and went away. I looked once more at the vast spaceport. More than 500,000 Terrans had come in the transports. Now they were taking over the ships of the Imperium. Who would have imagined this in the late 20th century when a man named Perry Rhodan flew to Earth's moon in a primitive rocket? I also went to my cabin. It was time to surrender to my need for sleep. As I closed my eyes I thought of the great councillor Epetran. He had saved the Imperium-not I... The End



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