

Perry Rhodan 128 Killers From Hyperspace 1/ FINDERS WEEPERS If Vicheline had been of humanoid abstraction he might have rubbed his hands satisfaction. However, since he was a Trox, as thin and as a transparent as a spiderweb, he expressed himself with a low sing-song noise that was somewhere just above his quintuple stomach. By the standards of his own race, Vicheline was an aristocrat, whereas a Terran might have called him a thief or a pirate. The Springers on board Tus II saw in him a valuable support for their more or less legitimate enterprise. At the moment, Vicheline's frail form hung from the ceiling like a delicate soap bubble that the slightest gust of wind might have blown away. "There it is!" shouted Tusnetze excitedly, and he gave his son a resound whack on the shoulder. Although the patriarch was advanced in years he still possessed a considerable physical strength. In recent times, however, his clan had fallen upon misfortune, having failed to do business while losing one ship after another. The Tus II was the pitiful remainder of a once proud squadron consisting of a dozen magnificent longships. The vessel was even older than the patriarch himself and whenever it laboured its way from transition to transition it creaked and groaned and produced other sounds which often brought the sweat to the worried brows of Tusnetze's people. It had been three years since the Tus I had been lost. Tusnetze's elder nephew had taken off with it along with irreplaceable trade goods and the patriarch's youngest daughter, Tringars. Tusnetze raved about it for weeks, he had suffered a nervous breakdown, thrashed his wife four times a day, and had shaved off his beard, swearing that he would only let it grow out again when his clan broke its evil streak of misfortune. As for the remaining clansmen on board the Tus II, they could lay claim to a rugged set of nerves because in addition to putting up with the patriarch's black moods they had to live through the constant fear of a final collapse of the almost derelict ship. So it was no wonder that this reduced remnant of Tusnetze's forces was prepared to do anything to put an end to this shameful situation. Aside from Tusnetze himself they were chiefly egged on to a solution by Farosto the head mechanic. This may have been due to the fact that Farosto was in the best position to judge the state of deterioration of the cylindrical ship, and it caused him to urgently stress the importance of transacting a good piece of business somehow. In the mean time he had been thrown out of the Control Central at least six times by Tusnetze, who said that he'd kill anybody with his bare hands who dared to disturb his accustomed routine. The only one who was spared from Tusnetze's fits of temper was Vicheline, the Trox. Ever since this pitiful-looking creature been on board, Tusnetze had seemed to be hoping for a miracle. The Trox had promised to lead the Springer to a place where he might take over an unmanned robot ship that had once been under control of the now destroyed Regent. Like every other Galactic Trader, Tusnetze knew that there were still a few thousand of these ships adrift in free fall or plying unknown courses through the galaxy, which were only waiting to be discovered by the right man. Tusnetze considered himself to be that man, and when Vicheline presented him with the simple plan he had adopted it immediately. The Trox had met Tusnetze at the trading post on Vallord where the patriarch had been thrown out of a bar in a drunken stupor and had landed right in front of Vicheline's spindly legs. "Help me up!" Tusnetze had stammered. Since the Trox hardly weighed much more than 10 pounds against Tusnetze's more than 250 pounds, his efforts to bring the Springer up from the muck of the street were doomed to failure from the start. So Vicheline had squatted down beside him. He began in his soft sing-song voice to say something but finally waited until Tusnetze was capable of muttering more than unintelligible syllables. Actually it was several hours before the Springer stood up. He was getting ready to turn his wobbling legs toward the bar again, where he said he wanted to drink over a deal. But at that moment Vicheline had turned his single red eye toward him and wore such a forlorn expression that the patriarch was momentarily sobered by it. "What the devil do you want?" he asked. The Trox, not having a firm balance because of a lack of backbone,

kept bobbing up and down in front of him. "I want to leave Vallord, big man. Take me with you!" he pleaded. Tusnetze's roar of laughter caused the Trox to back away in alarm. But then from a safe distance he revealed that he had gotten the course coordinates of the robot ship from a secret source. Since Tusnetze's latest debauch had brought him closer than ever to the brink of financial ruin, he was ready to grasp at straws such as this one that was offered to him now, and so he had taken the Trox on board the longship with him. To the astonishment of the crew he had treated his strange guest with the most preferential courtesy. In fact, Vicheline often crouched on the patriarch's shoulder, howling his senseless song while gazing about at the shabby equipment of the Control Central with his perpetually red eye. At present the Tus II was poking its way about on the outer fringes of star cluster M-13 and its search for the robot ship had come to an end. "There it is!" shouted Tusnetze again. There was an awed silence in the Control Central because nobody could actually believe that the clan's streak of bad luck had ended. And yet such viewscreens of the space surveillance system as were working revealed a clear image of the spherical vessel. The Arkonide ship hovered there in the empty void, alone and deserted. "You were right, Vicheline," said Tusnetze in a grateful undertone. "We've found the robot ship!" The Trox interrupted his singsong humming and drifted slowly to the floor. "It is yours, big man," he whispered. "You only have to take it." The patriarch watched almost devoutly as the longship in this critical moment was guided closer to the robot ship by Farosto, who was serving as the pilot. The bad luck had ended! The value of the Arkonide vessel was tremendous. The sale price would be enough to obtain two or three longships with first-class equipment. Tusnetze secretly hoped that his sons, nephews and daughters who had left him would return penitently to him now when they heard of this unprecedented windfall. But Tusnetze was more of a businessman than a dreamer and visionary. When he analyzed his possibilities he had to confess that he'd face a number of problems before he sold the robot ship. The main difficulty was that the Terrans had their agents everywhere and they considered themselves to be the rightful heirs to the Regent's missing ships. However, he was confident that he could avoid such snags once he had hooked this spherical spacer. The rising murmur of conversation in the room was suddenly silenced as Farosto heaved a sigh of frustration. The chief mechanic scratched his beard desperately but at this moment not even Tusnetze dared to distract him with a question. The answer would have been nothing but a bombardment of complaints over the condition of the Tus II. Farosto's feet scraped restlessly on the deck as he bent over the controls and audibly gnashed his teeth. It was inconceivable that the Tus II should finally fail them at a time like this. Tusnetze simply refused to think of such a possibility. He watched the Trox thoughtfully as the creature weaved back and forth like a weed in the wind. The Arkonide ship was a heavy cruiser which according to the Trox was registered by the name, Hat-Lete. Farosto ventured a low-voiced suggestion. "It would be better first to send over a prize crew in one of the shuttle boats," he said. "I think it's too risky to try the magnetic cables." With a disgruntled expression, Tusnetze turned on the ship's intercom system and made contact with the hangar. He glanced once more at his chief mechanic who looked back helplessly. "Sayan, this is the Patriarch," Tusnetze called into the microphone. "How many of our smallboats are usable?" The loudspeaker made a garbled reproduction of Sayan's voice as the words were almost drowned in a continuous scratching of static. "You know very well what condition we left Vallord in!" complained Sayan, and the defective speaker made him sound more woebegone than he was already. Tusnetze frowned and his face reddened. "I asked you a question, Sayan," he reminded him threateningly. The Springer's reply sounded crestfallen. "None of the lifeboats or shuttlecraft is exactly in shape enough to make anybody want to go for a spin in one of them, Patriarch." "Shut up!" rumbled Tusnetze. He growled so menacingly that Vicheline moved back from him in fright. "I'm not talking about a joy-ride, Sayan. Is it possible to repair any of them so that it could carry 5 men a

short distance in outer space?" Farosto waved his arms like a madman to convince the leader that he should give a more realistic description of the distance between the Tus II and the robot ship. "Number three could possibly make such a flight," replied Sayan hesitantly. Tusnetze's face broke into a wide grin. The Trox hovered like a feather over the map table and his red eye gleamed with excitement. "Good!" said the patriarch. "Farosto and four men will fly over to the Hat-Lete." Farosto cut in the auto-pilot and got up from the flight controls, his eyes aflame with protest. "Nobody can ask me to do that!" he exclaimed. "That junkheap can die on me at any moment and then we'd be sitting in the soup! The Tus II is dangerous enough for me without sticking my neck out farther!" Tusnetze appeared not to have heard him at all. "One of the men to go with you will naturally be myself," he announced. "I'd like to see this fish at close range because after all it's our chance for a new beginning." If Farosto continued to refuse now he would have been expelled from the clan as a coward. "I always hoped that as an old man I'd die on board a fine longship, surrounded by my clansmen," he said woefully. "Instead of that I'll be ending my days in a lousy shuttle tub." Tusnetze did not seem to be moved by the pathos of the other. He knew that only Farosto could manage to operate the crippled smallboat. As a pilot the chief mechanic's skill was unexcelled except that his negative outlook and fearfulness got in the way of his capabilities. But Tusnetze was not about to spoil his one chance in a lifetime because of the fears of one man. The patriarch knew he was up to his neck. He would really lose face now if this deal went wrong. He congratulated himself, however, for knowing this foolish Trox who hadn't once demanded any monies for being a partner in the venture. Tusnetze smiled quietly to himself. Now he had disproved the contention of the clansmen who had left him, that he was cursed with bad luck and that he had gotten old and decrepit, incapable of accomplishing anything. Well, they'd soon be coming back to get a slice of the fat catch that he would be landing in not too long a time. He pushed the past from his mind. Now he would think only of the future. He was so busy building his air castles that he was only vaguely aware of the orders Farosto issued to the hangar. It was only when the pilot shook his arm that his thoughts came back to the present. "It's all set," said Farosto sourly. "Who's going with us?" "Beschan, Gensor and Vicheline," Tusnetze decided. Farosto stared at him incredulously. "The Trox?" "Maybe you know somebody else on board with that name?" said Tusnetze angrily. "Or do you have another one of your ridiculous objections to make? Since the Trox has been with us we've been lucky. You can't argue the fact we might need an extra bit of luck to get back here on board again." "Alright, Patriarch take your talisman with you," said Farosto resignedly. "After all it makes no difference who gets to die with us." Tusnetze snapped his finger and Vicheline glided over to him. "You will stay by me," said the patriarch. The red eye half closed confidently and a thin voice whispered: "We'll make it yet, big man..." When the Springer was first sighted by the Frisco's scanners, Maj. Reja Teluf decided to avoid any unnecessary bloodshed. After all the Trader ship was operating alone in this sector and besides it didn't appear to be a very up-to-date model. Teluf proposed to make a kind of sport of his chase after the Galactic Trader, a game where of course he drove the opponent into a corner but would not destroy him. The Springer's target was undoubtedly the Hat-Lete, the robot ship that the Terrans had also tracked down. Teluf could well imagine that the patriarch on board the longship was already counting his profits he would be able to get from this illegal action. Politically or in terms of galactic jurisdiction, the robot ship belonged to Atlan's fleet but like everybody else Teluf knew that the Emperor would never be the complete master of his hereditary possessions. The giant brain had been destroyed, and without its assistance it was impossible to encompass the endless reaches of the galaxy. The Frisco was a light cruiser of the City class which was only distinguished from the fast cruisers of the State class by its linear spacedrive and its heavier armaments. Under protection of its libration zone the Terran ship could make an unobserved approach to the Springer, whose attention was most likely

focussed on the robot ship anyway. Teluf knew the trend of thinking of the Springer patriarch. He would regard the Hat-Lete as "cosmic flotsam" and feel he had clear rights of salvage. The Springer mentality had a way of stretching the meaning of "business" to include such unsavoury activities as piracy, theft, smuggling, ambush and general corruption. In a Trader's vocabulary, "business" stood for anything that offered the promise of profit. Reja Teluf was a fairly tolerant man, which was partially due to his own nature and partially to special training that he had taken in the Terran Space Academy. During his courses Teluf had been instructed in the customs and habits of other races and had been given as clear as possible an understanding of extraterrestrial mentalities. Teluf had been trained by top experts in their fields and had passed his examinations in cosmopsychology with honours. Now a major and commander in the Space Fleet, Teluf was a man of medium build with dark hair, a sense of humour and a generally jovial manner. "They're sending out a boarding crew," announced Toss Galahad, who was the Frisco's 1st officer. "What shall we do, sir?" The small shuttlecraft appeared on the scanner screens as a tiny blip. The sensitive mass indicators quivered slightly in response. Teluf held up his hand. "Let's wait a little longer, Toss," he said. Galahad was a very nervous type. His left eyelid was always half closed as if he were short sighted in that one eye. In his cabin he kept a bottle of wine concealed, assuming that the crew knew nothing about it. But whenever he appeared in the Control Central with a flushed face everybody knew that Toss had "tossed one down" again. Even the major was aware of it but generously overlooked it since his First Officer was conscientious in his duties and was a man of extensive experience. The distance between the Frisco and the Trader's longship lessened rapidly since the latter had matched its velocity to that of the robot ship. Teluf called into a microphone: "Attention—fire control! Forward guns on standby. As soon as we come out of semi-space, open fire on the Trader ship. Brightman I hold you responsible. Keep the Springer's damages to a minimum. We want to give him a chance to escape." "Very good, sir," replied Lt. Brightman over the intercom. "You can depend on us." A faint smile touched Teluf's lips. "All set, Toss. Drop us back into Einstein space and decelerate to relative zero." Galahad took over the main flight controls of the light cruiser. It would be just a matter of moments now until the Springer would be driven off. The 1st officer nodded to his commander and reached for certain keys on his panel. Three seconds later the Frisco broke out of its libration zone and the sound of the mighty converters was stilled. Vicheline was crouched behind Tusnetze's narrow seat and now and again he blinked anxiously ahead over the Springer's broad shoulder. Farosto was guiding the small spaceboat with a sure hand in spite of his steady stream of curses. Beschau was sitting at the instrument panel although it was very doubtful that they were even operable. Only Gensor was idle, if one were to discount his activity of interlacing his fingers nervously. Gensor was afraid. He was more concerned with the danger of their situation than he would have admitted. After all, they were only separated from airless space by walls that were only centimetres in thickness. "How are we getting on?" asked Tusnetze impatiently. "Well, I could still give this coffin a worse beating," suggested the chief, mechanic grimly. "That will help to shorten our life expectancy..." Tusnetze felt it was best not to agitate Farosto just now. Anyway he was struggling as best he could. "I feel sick," said Gensor. "Just keep it in your gullet!" ordered the patriarch crossly. He turned to the Trox who had broken out with his monotonous sing-song humming. "Be still, Vicheline!" Vicheline's delicate little arms were around Tusnetze's neck and his one eye, which was disproportionately large for his body, seemed to flicker as if charged with electricity. Tusnetze growled his dissatisfaction and the Trox continued his low-toned humming. The shuttlecraft gave a jerk and Farosto let out a warning cry. "Uneven power feed," he explained. "Let's hope that doesn't get worse!" Tusnetze had turned pale and he stared uncertainly at his pilot. A strange feeling was causing his stomach to churn and he began to wonder if after all they weren't taking too

big a chance. He could have given an order to turn around but his pride wouldn't allow it. The small craft bucked again. Gensor's lips were two bloodless slits in a face flushed red with anxiety. Beschan just sat silently at the indicators and didn't let them out of his sight. "What can we do?" asked Tusnetze. "Nothing," retorted Farosto. "We keep on going." The patriarch knew that the road to riches was paved with stones that all had to be cleared out of the way. He pushed Vicheline's arms away from his neck and leaned closer to the mechanic. "I think we'll make it," he said confidently. Farosto made no answer but in another minute the shuttlecraft pulled in alongside one of the Hat-Lete's outer locks. The engine stopped and Farosto stood up. "We're here," he said curtly. "I only wish we were back on board the Tus II." Tusnetze resolved to hire himself a new mechanic at the first opportunity—one that was less pessimistic. As soon as he had money... The patriarch shook his head in vexation. They hadn't won this game yet. "How do we get inside this thing?" he asked Farosto. "Maybe the hangar lock is open," suggested Beschan. "This one is a heavy cruiser, you know, and it certainly must have lifeboats and auxiliary craft." Farosto looked at his companions, one after another, and then his gaze drifted suggestively to the spacesuit in its rack behind the pilot's seat. "Oh no!" exclaimed Gensor and Beschan simultaneously. "I got you here," said Farosto sarcastically. "Now you do the rest. Somebody has to put on the suit and try to get into the robot ship. After that he can open an outer lock." Tusnetze harumphed. "I thought all functions of these Arkonide ships were fully automatic and positronically controlled. How is anyone going to open a lock?" "These things can also be manually operated," said Farosto. "I suggest we have Beschan make a try he has the most experience with spaceships." Beschan retorted hoarsely. "Your compliment is so touching, Farosto!" They all fell silent and the stillness was only broken by Vicheline's quiet sing-song. After a while, Beschan got up and took the spacesuit from its rack without a word. Gensor breathed a sigh of relief. Tusnetze wondered if this was bravery on Beschan's part or if it was just because he wished he could finally be part of a clan that had more to show for itself than the old, broken-down Tus II. The patriarch didn't voice the question. He watched silently until the Springer was ready. When Beschan went out through the smallboat's airlock, Farosto took over the other's position at the instrument console. "Maybe the spacecom's working," he said hopefully. He turned on the short-range radio and spoke into the microphone. "Beschan! Do you read me? This is Farosto." When there was no reply, the chief mechanic struck the panel with his fist. "Defective—like everything else on board!" he growled. "I often wonder how we still go on at all!" Tusnetze's thoughts were with Beschan, the stocky little man who had never spoken much in his life. Beschan was one of the few who had remained a faithful and uncomplaining member of the clan. One day the patriarch hoped he would be able to reward such followers. He then regarded the Trox with interest. What was behind Vicheline's way of doing things? It was impossible to follow such a creature's pattern of reasoning. Among each other these Trox were always bickering and fighting although they were basically not demanding and there was seldom anything that interested them. Their altercations never took the form of pitched battles or warfare, but rather their differences of opinion were expressed by words alone. The Trox were spread out through a large part of the galaxy but they did not have any space fleet of their own. Nobody knew their native planet—not even they themselves. Every now and again they would find a ship that would give them transportation somewhere else. The Trox were well informed and usually they gave valuable tips to commanders who gave them a lift. It was completely a matter of indifference to them as to which planet they were to visit next because their main objective was to get away from their quarrelsome fellow creatures. In many cases, however, they would encounter their own kind on the next world and the bickering would start all over again. So the Trox had become a strictly nomadic breed, always fleeing from each other. Out of this attitude these threadlike entities had built up a curious type of caste system. They judged the merit of any member of their

race on the basis of how many planets he had already visited. Any Trox who had seen more than 20 worlds could consider himself to be of the aristocracy. Such noblemen contended only with their own class and it would be unthinkable for him to enter into an argument with a common drifter who had not yet landed on at least 20 worlds. Naturally there were some of these spindly nomads whose score exceeded more than 100 planets. These were the Trox kings who had an astonishing bag of tricks by which they hooked their space rides. The kings—and this was the strange part—could fight and argue with drifters and noblemen alike, simply because there were so few of their number that they might have to wait years before running into another one. So far Vicheline had visited 48 worlds, which was almost half the quota necessary to become a king. With the help of the Springers Trox wanted to reach at least 5 more planets. Tusnetze scratched reflectively at the stubble on his shorn chin. In his view these creatures were a kooky race having little intelligence. How could anybody have any brains if he played such a crazy game as that? The Trox had no civilization, they adapted themselves simply to any kind of environment and found no problem in making use of whatever the worlds had to offer where they happened to alight. They lived off the proceeds of various odd tasks they carried out here and there. With their particular physical makeup and very light weight they were suitable for various kinds of special work. Once in a while they also received a bonus from some grateful commander to whom they may have given a good piece of information. The patriarch had resolved to give Vicheline a part of the forthcoming profits of the present venture. "Watch out!" warned Farosto. "We're casting off from the robot ship. I want to look at all the locks. Maybe Beschlan has already succeeded in opening one of them." He glanced at Gensor. "Turn on the bow searchlights." They started circling the heavy cruiser until suddenly Farosto slowed down. "Over there!" he said. Tusnetze slapped his thigh and laughed triumphantly. "Beschlan made it!" he shouted. "Bring us inside, Farosto!" . Tonrim cursed the day when he decided to go against the old kings' advice and enter a Terran ship. But Tonrim hadn't been able to resist the temptation when the Frisco had landed for a few days on Plusol, and so he had made contact with the commander. The Terran had listened to him calmly while he told him about the flight coordinates he had obtained concerning one of the vanished robot ships. Finally he had nodded his agreement and permitted Tonrim to come on board. The old kings had told him: "Once you get on board a Terran ship all you'll be is a drifter." So far Tonrim had scored 14 planets. Plusol was a desolate world that was very seldom visited by spaceships, so Tonrim had thought himself lucky that the Frisco had landed there. He couldn't recall whether or not any Trox before him had ever done any space-travelling with Terrans. Meanwhile he had been forced to accept the fact that he would be tied up for months on the Frisco because it didn't look as if the warship would be going to any planets in the near future. Moreover, Maj. Teluf had made it clear that after tracking down the Arkonide robot ship he'd simply inform the salvage section of the Solar Fleet about it. And apparently the sudden discovery of the Springers wasn't going to change anything. When the libration field was extinguished and the Frisco fell back into the normal universe, Tonrim was standing close behind Maj. Teluf and also watched the view screens. Grudgingly he had to admit that the equipment of the Terran ship was about the best he had ever seen. Before he could think anything else the forward gun position fired off a raybeam shot at the Trader ship. "A hit, sir!" called Galahad. As intended, it was a light blow but the Springer was not showing any reaction. The Traders appeared to recognize the fact that they were no match for the light cruiser. In their minds it might have seemed like suicide to get into a space battle with the Terran ship. Maj. Teluf spoke into the microphone. "Attention—fire control!" he said calmly. "Hold your fire but remain in combat readiness." Galahad turned to look at the commander. "What do you have in mind, sir?" "We'll give them a chance to retrieve their boarding crew and to get out of this area," Teluf explained. "I have no desire to take any of those lousy characters on board as prisoners." Bored by these

proceedings, Tonrim drifted away. Everything had gone according to plan. It was mere child's play for the Terrans to take care of their opponent. The Trox was irritated over the fact that Teluf hadn't seemed to consider it necessary to thank him for the good tip he had given him. If it hadn't been for him, the Traders would have snatched the robot ship right out from under the Terrans' noses. It was true after all the old kings had been right. Tonrim closed his eye and waited while humming softly to himself. He would have preferred singing louder but the Terrans complained when he didn't keep his volume under control. Tonrim had no way of knowing what the coming hours held in store for him... . In this terrible moment Tusnetze's only wish was that he had the ability to simply turn off his thoughts. He knew he was a beaten man, and all his vitality and pride could not overcome this fact. He was ruined, destroyed, smashed to the ground, and no miracle would ever allow him to recover. "They've ceased fire," said Farosto gloomily. "They're giving us a chance," put in Gensor. "If we retreat we can save our lives!" Tusnetze shouted in rage. "Why don't our guns return the fire!?" Meanwhile, Beschán had returned to the shuttlecraft and now he and Farosto exchanged glances. Farosto tried to get his clan leader to take his seat again. "They know that the Terrans have the edge on us, Patriarch. Any counter-offence would be suicide. We have to get out of here before they change their minds and take us prisoner." Tusnetze's head sagged. A wild battle raged within him. "It's all been in vain," he said finally. "We can't take over the Hat-Lete and the Tus II is half destroyed. This is the end." He looked up angrily. "Vicheline!" he shouted. "Where is he?" When they looked around they discovered that the Trox had disappeared. "He must have stayed inside the robot ship," said Gensor. "Then we'll leave him here," Tusnetze decided. The smallboat flew out of the hangar lock and headed for the Tus II. From another direction the Terran ship was seen to be approaching at a leisurely pace. The time had finally come to disband Tusnetze's clan. By the unwritten code of the Galactic Traders the patriarch no longer had any right to bind his large family to himself. Tusnetze had lost all of his ships except for this one battered derelict, which perhaps only a genius like Farosto could nurse back to the nearest spaceport. Tusnetze had never dreamed that things could come to such a sorry state. His streak of bad luck had driven him into deeper misfortune. Now at the low point of his downward course he couldn't understand his situation. It almost seemed as if this had not befallen him directly but rather it had happened to a stranger—to some anonymous identity who would soon vanish from Tusnetze's life. The facts were absorbed only slowly into the patriarch's consciousness. His frightful rage finally yielded to a dull sense of resignation. He waited calmly until the shuttlecraft had gotten back to the Tus II. He heard a sigh of relief from Farosto. "I never believed we'd make it back here," said the pilot as they landed safely in the hangar. The single airlock of the smallboat opened and the Springers got out. Tusnetze was last and when he stepped into the hangar he saw that a reception party was waiting for him. His youngest son, Boruz, was standing there surrounded by 10 other men. The patriarch came to a stop when he realized that Boruz was aiming a weapon at him. For a moment the father and son stared at each other, oblivious to their surroundings. Then the older man straightened up. "I assume this is some kind of revolution," he said. "You could have spared yourselves the trouble, Boruz. I'm stepping down — the clan is free." The youngster's weapon hand started to waver. Boruz glanced uncertainly at his companions as if expecting support from them. Nobody moved. Tusnetze saw that he still had the authority here he was still the patriarch and the leader of the clan. But he was too weary now to use his power. "Our ship is badly damaged!" shouted Boruz in a shrill tone of voice. "What do we have left besides this broken old crate and our debts on Vallord?" Tusnetze went to him and took the ray weapon out of his hand. "Nothing," he said quietly. "We have nothing." Boruz's shoulders slumped helplessly. "We could have picked up a freight contract. True, it wouldn't have brought in very much but it would have been a lot safer than this adventure." Farosto broke into the conversation. "I'll try to get

the Tus II under way" he said. "No need to test the patience of those Terrans." With an apologetic smile he left the hangar, happy to exchange this sorry scene for his pilot's seat. Without a word, Gensor and Beschau followed the chief mechanic. "A freight contract would have only prolonged the end, Boruz," said Tusnetze. "It wouldn't have prevented it. You know as well as I do that this was our last chance." "If only you had never met that Trox!" complained Boruz. The patriarch laughed grimly. "The Trox? In my first burst of anger I, too, was ready to shove the blame onto him for all this. The fact is, we've lost in a tussle with fate. You're still young, Boruz You can found your own clan." "What will you do?" asked Boruz. It almost seemed as if Tusnetze was not going to answer this question but then an old gleam returned to his eyes and he said, "Find some more deals I can make what else?" He walked past his astonished son, an old and broken man with no illusions. But then Boruz heard him shouting suddenly in his old accustomed volume. "Why the devil are we still here!? I'll let that Farosto have it if he hasn't taken us out of here in another minute!" Boruz turned around to look at his companions, just as they all began to move back to their prescribed stations to await the orders of the patriarch. . By the time the Terran ship had appeared and opened fire on the Tus II, Vicheline had already made his decision. The Trox quickly realized that the robot ship must be very interesting to the Terrans if they were prepared to go into a space battle for it. Logically then, the earthmen would board the Hat-lete sooner or later to have a look around. Anyway the Tus II hadn't been a very safe vessel and after that raybeam hit there would be more danger than ever that its engines might fail. Vicheline had two choices: either he could risk his life and return to the Trader ship or he could wait for the Terrans in order to take passage on their ship—in spite of the advice of the olden kings. So the Trox had decided in favour of the Frisco because he knew that life among the Terrans was preferable to dying with the Springers. Surely the Terran commander wouldn't be inhuman enough to refuse him. If Vicheline had been gifted with the ability to see into the future he would have regretted his decision and wished to be back, with the Springers. But he could not guess that it would not be the Terrans who would be the first to enter the Hat-Lete. . Maj. Reja Teluf was watching the Trader ship which had just taken its smallboat on board. The Springers were smart enough not to try any counter-offensive, And Teluf was disinclined to use the battered longship for target practice. Where he was concerned he wanted to secure the robot ship, and this he had achieved. "Sir, the Springer ship is getting under way," announced Galahad. His restless nature drove him on to other tasks but he could hardly wait until Teluf gave the order to launch a boarding crew. Yet the major still stood there waiting before the indicators. The Trox had withdrawn into a corner, humming lightly to himself. Galahad's attitude toward the Trox was one of slight distrust. It was a mystery to him—and not only to him alone—how the Trox could get hold of such important information. No one in the Solar Fleet had known what course the Hat-Lete was following through the void, until this Trox had popped up to report the position to Teluf. Galahad didn't know much about the Trox except that in general it was said that they avoided Terran ships. So how come Tonrim had boarded the Frisco? Before he could find a satisfactory answer to this question he was interrupted by the commander's voice. "I don't think they'll try to come back now, Toss," said Teluf. "We can start putting a prize crew together." That was typical of Teluf, thought Galahad moodily. The Major avoided all possible risks, and he had even considered the possibility that the Springers might change their minds and come back shooting. "I'm volunteering, sir," he said aloud. "I'll take charge of the boarding party." "No, Toss," the major contradicted. "Lt. Bottischer will take over. I need you here on board." "Of course, sir," rasped Galahad, without making much effort to conceal his anger. Just now he would have preferred visiting his cabin for a quick bracer of his special wine but he couldn't leave the Control Central. Teluf issued further orders and the Frisco continued to approach the robot ship. Everything went along quietly and smoothly, so that there was no

indication that within an hour the Frisco was to become a flaming wreck. 2/ THE LIFE DESTROYER Double-O pulled his plug from the energy bank, clipped it into its holder, rolled to one side and closed the main plate on his metal chest. To a certain degree this procedure was depressing to him because aside from the three controllers he was the only one on board who had to be recharged periodically. And Double-O had a suspicion that this dependence upon the energy bank had not been unintended. They had taken him on board and changed a lot of things inside of him. Although he was important everybody seemed to treat him with a certain distrust. With the three controllers it was a different situation. They could carry out their tasks correctly when they were subject to a regular and automatic control of their functions. Double-O had to admit that the system was as effective as it was simple. Each of the controllers had a certain plug-in station at the central energy bank. The latter was in contact with the highest levels of the ship, which meant that those above would - notice it immediately if one of the controllers should fail to appear for a recharge. In Double-O's case nobody had to fear that he would voluntarily absent himself from the energy bank at a recharge period. He hadn't the slightest desire to stand in a corner like a dead unit until a controller found him and took him to the energy center. This is why he always showed up promptly and submitted to a recharge. Double-O didn't know when he had begun to exist but in his estimate he was older than any other unit of the ship. This, and the recent changes made in him, was the reason why he was on board. He knew more about true and untrue life forms than the commander of the upper echelon. Double-O functioned here as a consultant-adviser but so far he hadn't been given the opportunity to prove himself. However, shortly before his latest scheduled recharge, something had happened which gave him hopes of being able to help with his knowledge. The lower echelon commander had notified the ship that three alien space vessels had been detected and located. Immediately the commander of the top echelon had cut in and given orders to proceed with a precise investigation. The results were of an extremely vexatious and repugnant nature. Two of the ships were manned by organics, a life form that still dominated a large part of this galaxy. Although the mere presence of organic substance was bad enough, the incredible fact was revealed that the two ships were fighting each other for possession of the third ship, whose crew was non-organic. Double-O shared the reaction of everyone else on board. It was for him inconceivable that members of any particular life form should fight against each other. In any case the top-echelon commander had acted as expected. Without hesitation he had issued orders to make all necessary calculations for bringing aid to the non-organic vessel as quickly as possible. It was just at this point in time that Double-O's next recharge came due. Now he was hurrying to the nearest magnetic lift shaft so that he could get to the closest information station of the lower echelon. En route he encountered one of the controllers. "Scheduled recharge completed," announced Double-O cautiously, in order not to be delayed by an unnecessary inspection. The controller slowed his pace but did not stop. Double-O continued onward and arrived at the magnetic lift. He switched into the field and crossed the threshold. When he came out on a lower level, 13 gunners of the lower echelon group hurried past him, their bright blue bodies reflecting the zoning lights. He nodded with satisfaction. The commander was getting the weapons ready. It was a good sign. He switched on his minus shield to avoid collision with the hurried gunners. The information station was only 20 meters beyond the left exit. Five dark-red phase watchers were loitering about, engaged in a discussion. For Double-O these types were completely superfluous. He had never heard of a case where a phase-transition had not functioned correctly. In his excitement he forgot to turn off his minus shield when he approached the information point and the phase watchers glided protestingly into the air. Double-O apologized, turned off the shield and pulled them back to the deck, after which he went to the information station. The commander was just speaking: "One of the organic ships has taken flight after being badly hit. So we shall only move against one ship. One

phase will be enough to bring us within firing range." Double-O switched into the transmission and said hastily. "Double-O reporting after periodic recharge for consultation." His rear lenses revealed that the phase watchers had entered the chamber to hear what he was saying. He waited for an answer. "Consultation not yet necessary," said the commander. "Will request when needed." Disappointed, Double-O withdrew from the information station. The phase watchers also vacated the place in order to maintain their surveillance of the single phase, which would be needed to reach the two alien ships. Double-O told himself that everything must be done to prevent the organics from making an attack on the unknown robot ship. He extended a roller foot and glided to a phase shelter where he waited for the hyper jump. . The smooth manner in which the takeover of the Hat-Lete had proceeded so far was somewhat disturbing to Teluf. The major was not a superstitious man but long experience had taught him that to a certain extent small problems had a way of concealing possibly larger difficulties behind them. When nothing happened, as in this case, one always waited instinctively for the unexpected. The repulsion of the Springers had been practically by the book. There was nothing to indicate that anything would change in rolling up that operation. The Frisco had matched its velocity precisely to that of the robot ship and was drifting alongside the heavy cruiser at a distance of about 10 meters. Several magnetic cables had already tied the two ships to each other so that it looked as if the considerably smaller vessel was being towed by the other. Of course this was an illusion because in the empty void it wasn't size that mattered but only the accelerative capacity of a given body. Teluf turned to Lt. Bottischer who had already put on his spacesuit and was looking expectantly at the major through his faceplate. The lieutenant was a tall, heavily built man. A lock of straw-blond hair was always dangling down on his forehead. Being the exact opposite of Galahad, he always appeared to be calm and unemotional, almost to the point of being phlegmatic. Everything he did was carried out with the most inimitable composure. "You know what you have to do," said Teluf. "You will cross over with your men and check out the robot ship. Find out if it's still capable of making its own transitions. Look for any possible damage and try to discover what the Springers were doing on board." "Yes, sir," Bottischer confirmed. He nodded to his three companions and went with them as they all exited the Control Central. Galahad watched them go, enviously. Teluf could not rid himself of a peculiar presentiment. He shook his head visibly without being aware of it. At this stage, actually nothing could go wrong. The gentle humming of the Trox penetrated his consciousness and he smiled to himself. Apparently Tonrim was waiting impatiently for a conclusion to this action so that he could soon get to another planet. The loudspeaker crackled as Bottischer's calm voice was heard. "We are going outside, sir." "Watch that first step!" said Galahad sarcastically. His hands nervously fingered the microphone. After a while, Bottischer spoke again. "Now we are across, sir." Teluf leaned over Galahad and said drily. "In with you, Lieutenant!" Later Bottischer claimed that he would have replied to the order but just as he was starting to speak he was drowned out by a loud shout from Ikaze. The Japanese operator had just taken over his post at the space scanners. "A ship!" he cried out. "A spaceship, sir!" Almost at the same instant Teluf felt the tension leave him. It evaporated like a cloud. Ikaze's round face was tense with excitement. The indicators of the mass sensors were going mad. Teluf was at the console in two steps and one glance was enough for him. "It didn't produce the slightest warp shock, sir!" blurted out the Japanese operator. "And yet there's no doubt that it came out of hyperspace!" "What a contraption!" Galahad interjected. "It looks like something from a madman's nightmare!" The form of the sudden apparition was grotesque. Outwardly it was like a tremendous cube with a countless number of protuberances. Each side measured about 2000 meters, which meant that it was a giant among the giants. Teluf's thought's raced feverishly. The approach of the alien meant that it had taken an interest in what was going on here. "There was a similar ship," he said. "Maybe the same

one that destroyed our space station, BOB 21. I remember the report very well. That's known as a fragment ship." "Do you think it will attack us, sir?" asked Ikaze. "I hope not. In any case I'm going to call back the boarding crew and we'll pull away from the Hat-Lete." A moment later he added: "Toss, put all battle stations on emergency alert." Galahad hurried away to take personal command of the defences. The major tore his gaze from the eerie-looking nemesis on the screen. His premonition had not been false here was the unforeseen incident after all. The singsong humming of the Trox had stopped. Tonrim seemed to realize that they were now in a dangerous situation. A shudder ran through Teluf when he thought that the Gargantuan ship might open fire. "Bottischer!" he called into the microphone. "Bring your men back here on the double. We have some unwelcome company." "Coming, Sir," replied the lieutenant, as unmoved as ever. It was a mystery to Teluf how the fragment ship could come out of a transition without producing the usual warp shock that was typical of standard Terran and Arkonide ships. This must be an entirely different system of hyperspace travel. A race who built such weird-looking ships might possibly use other sources of energy, and to them the conventional form of transition could be archaic or feeble. Suddenly Teluf had an idea. He turned to Tonrim who had apparently become intimidated and hovered in a corner, staring at the proceedings with one big frightened red eye. "Can you remember ever having seen such a ship, or are there any reports among your people of such a space vessel as that?" asked the major. "No, never," asserted the Trox fearfully. Teluf was inclined to believe the fragile creature because certainly the Trox would have shown less fear if he had ever been on a fragment ship. "We're back in the airlock, sir," announced Bottischer. "Is our visitor so big that we have to make a retreat?" "It looks that way," said Teluf grimly. "In any case, we're going to have to—" He didn't finish the sentence because he was lifted off his feet and slammed straight across the Control Central. The first raybeam salvo had overloaded the Frisco's absorption screens and they had collapsed. Apparently the fragment ship had fired off a full broadside. The magnetic cables between the Hat-Lete and the Terran ship were torn asunder. The light cruiser moved swiftly away from the robot ship. Teluf had struck his head against the indicator console and had to fight to retain consciousness. Suddenly the main lights gave out and only the viewscreens and oscilloscopes furnished a faint illumination in the Control Central. The major used both arms to pull himself up while his head roared with pain. Somewhere a man began to moan and he could hear some of the others crawling around on the floor. The Trox whimpered softly but in the dim light it was impossible to see his spindly form. On trembling legs, Teluf groped his way toward the emergency light switches. Another salvo like that and the Frisco would be splintered in two or more pieces. The major had never been this close to death before in his life. He had always wondered what he would feel like in such a moment as this but now that it had come he didn't have time to think about it. "Two engines gone!" shouted an excited voice. That made them practically a sitting duck because they wouldn't get far with the three remaining engines. Teluf reached the emergency lights and turned them on. Ikaze, Van Holden and Drescher were already on their feet. Galahad came storming into the room with an anxious look on his face. He helped Gerschinslij to his feet and turned to Teluf, who was taking in the scene with tight pressed lips. "We didn't have any time to answer their fire, sir," he reported. "The forward guns have been completely destroyed." It jolted Teluf out of his fog. He ascertained that the ship's inner communications hadn't been knocked out. They could try to get away with their remaining engines which might keep the enemy from continuing its fiery attack. Teluf thought fleetingly of his wife who at the time was taking a vacation on Sejatana to recuperate from the rawer climate of Earth. The Sejatans were a hardy humanoid race who carried on trade relations with the Solar Imperium. The major sighed. Before he could issue his orders the ship was shaken by an explosion somewhere in its interior. Now even the emergency lights went out and even some of the indicators ceased to function. "That

does it!" cried Galahad. Teluf was ready to make an angry retort because he did not intend to give up, but he controlled himself. As long as the Frisco still had a spark of life they would fight for their ship. He heard someone enter the Control Central and at once he heard the calm voice of Lt. Bottischer. "Sir, the ship is on fire." . The buzzer told Double-O that the phase had terminated. He emerged from the shelter. Leisurely he moved back to the information center. The commander would not give the firing order immediately. First he would thoroughly observe the two ships. Double-O recognized the urgency of their fundamental assignment to destroy all organic life. Although this form of existence had mostly been found to be incapable of offering any resistance to speak of and usually seemed to be frail and feeble, still they had repeatedly run into trouble with them. Many of these strange creatures could put up a bitter defense. In addition to that, many of these organics reproduced themselves at an unbelievable rate. Double-O reached the information station and entered it. This time the picture transmission had been turned on so that the relative positions of the other two ships could be observed. The larger of the two was the robot ship and it was a mystery why it permitted itself to be pestered like this by the organically-manned vessel. Why didn't the mechanical crew defend itself against this monstrous invasion? Double-O felt that it was urgently necessary now that he should be called quickly into consultation. In his zeal the commander was overlooking important points that he, Double-O, could bring to his attention. It almost seemed as if there were some aversion to him on board the ship because he was a recharger. He became aware of the hard voices of the gunners who were in the weapon turrets, calling out their target settings. The phase watchers had finished their work and had followed him into the information station. He regarded them distrustfully. The picture on the screen changed over to the commander who had connected himself to all communication channels. His eccentric form appeared to be lifeless and he had closed all his optics. As a precaution a number of messenger units from the lower levels had assembled around the commander so that they could take over immediately in case any of the communications lines should fail. Distractedly, Double-O observed the commander's polished breastplate. Compared to his own it was a priceless jewel. The recharger who was only an adviser glanced briefly at the dull metal plate on his own chest. Yet he felt no envy in spite of his admiration of the commander's appearance. The gunners were humming and buzzing now, which was the best sign that their energy capacities were at a bursting point of high tension. The commander was calling to the individual turrets to inquire as to their readiness. Just then the picture on the screen changed to reveal the inside of a gun tower where Double-O saw one of the bright blue gunners take his position. The commander directed a final adjustment of the target settings, and then the picture switched to the two alien ships. Double-O realized that the combined shots would have to be made with an unheard of precision in order not to damage the robot ship. One of the phase watchers shoved him slightly to one side and he reluctantly withdrew into a corner. "Attention!" called the commander, who became visible for the fraction of a second. "All manned turrets engage!" Double-O had a vivid vision of the gunners who would now throw themselves forward into their positions, their bluish bodies moving like lightning. Was there any greater perfection than this mechanical coordination? "Fire!" came the commander's voice. 28 of a total of 87 gun turrets opened fire on the much smaller opponent. The heavily-laden beams cut through the black void with a fantastic speed, making a lacework of light across the darkness. The enemy ship was hit and torn away from the robot cruiser. It drifted away helplessly without offering any counter fire. Double-O took in the spectacle with great satisfaction. Once more the superiority of the true life form was demonstrated. "Cease fire!" ordered the commander. Double-O hoped the time had come now when he would be called in for consultation. He left the information point and glided away on his roller feet. . Bottischer knew that Major Teluf didn't need advice from his subordinates to know how to handle a situation, so he had withdrawn from

the Control Central immediately after giving his report. And as expected, Teluf took action at once. Alarm sirens began to howl while the major ordered that all bulkhead doors should be sealed off. Bottischer turned on the lamp of his spacesuit, which he was still wearing and which had evidently saved his life. He had to get back to his men who were fighting the fire that had broken out. Sooner or later the flames would smother for lack of oxygen but by then it could be too late. The lieutenant ran along the cabin passageway and an irregular flicker of light passed over him as he went by the small observatory. Maybe flames were already coming up through the antigrav shaft. When he reached the shaft opening he saw the fire raging just a few meters below him. He wondered how a steel structure could continue to feed the flames. Below, through the holocaust, he could see the rest of his boarding crew. In their suits and in the flickering light they looked like distorted gnomes. Bottischer threw himself into the shaft, risking his neck in the process because it was questionable whether or not the lift was still functioning. But he was lucky and landed on the lower level all in one piece. The automatic extinguishers were in operation and the men were also battling the flames with hand extinguishers. The lieutenant realized that the lift shaft would soon have to be closed off because the draft of oxygen from lower levels was strong enough to keep fanning the fire back to life. Besides, it was senseless to continue this planless struggle. One of the filter units crashed before him from the ceiling and splintered into pieces. He shoved the fragments aside with his foot. Evidently the temperature here was deadly without the protection of a spacesuit. His helmet phone rattled. It was Teluf. "Bottischer! Where are you?" "I'm in the fire area, sir!" he answered. "It doesn't look as if we can handle it. It's best for you to close off the lower level. " "We won't be able to get out of this," called Teluf. "If that fragment ship hits us again we're goners!" "If they had that in mind, sir," said Bottischer laconically, "we'd be deadmen already." He called to his men. "Alright, everybody back!" Teluf spoke caustically. "Our opponent seems to be more interested in the robot ship." A shaft section came tumbling down toward him like a flaming torch and he had to jump quickly to save himself. It was time to get out of this inferno. The men threw away their useless hand extinguishers and made a dash for the lift. Bottischer waited until they had all vanished above him. He calmly took in the hellish spectacle around him and then followed the others. Once he had reached the upper section he called again to the commander. "Sir, you can close off all connecting passages to the lower sections now! The leak in the machine rooms is big enough. The fire should die down shortly when the oxygen blows off into space." "Alright, lieutenant. Get back into the Control Central—and keep your eyes open for wounded men." A few moments later, the lieutenant entered the Control Central of the Frisco where the battery lights were supplying a weak illumination. In the semi-darkness Teluf's face looked like a carved wooden mask. A large portion of the crew had already assembled here and nobody appeared to be seriously wounded. The ship surgeon, Dr. Gerwain, who was also an outstanding cybernetic expert, was tending to the men's burns. Tonrim had crept under the map table where all that could be seen of him was his single red eye. Bottischer experienced a twinge of sympathy for the poor Trox. No doubt the threadlike creature was wishing that he had never met a Terran in his life. "The com equipment isn't damaged," said Teluf with a note of relief. "We're going to try to make contact with the Theodorich." The Theodorich was the new flagship of the Solar Fleet, having replaced the Ironduke. The new ship was equipped with linear space drive which had been designed according to the latest data obtained from the Akons. Like almost all other Terran spacers the super battleship was spherical in shape but with a diameter of 1500 meters. Reja Teluf had been informed that the Administrator had established a picket zone at the edge of star cluster M-13 in order to be in close contact with Arkon 3. So in view of that favourable position the Theodorich was best situated to come to the Frisco's aid. Moreover, the flagship was equipped with all the most modern weapons and was the best suited of all other warships to

offer resistance to the powerful enemy. In addition, a highly trained and experienced crew was involved which had been personally selected by Perry Rhodan himself. This was the first situation that Maj. Teluf had not been able to handle on his own. It irked him, even though it was understandable considering the size of his opponent. He was burning with a desire to see the fragment ship learn a bitter lesson for its ruthless attack. Teluf had just finished running off the Springers and he considered it an unfair twist of fate that his ship should end up being mauled so badly. "I hope we contact them in time," said Galahad. "If we have another explosion, some of the sealed bulkheads could give away." "Ikaze, send out a coded distress signal," Teluf ordered. "Our enemy mustn't know we've called for help." Dr. Gerwain expressed his doubts. "I'd like to know why they are even giving us this much of a chance. We're hanging here helplessly in space and yet they seem to be only concerned with the Hat-Lete." Teluf answered him. "We can figure that out later, Doc." He turned again to Ikaze. "Make sure you mention the fragment ship in your signal." The Japanese operator nodded and got busy. The Trox ventured to come out from under the table. Singing softly he floated toward Bottischer who was the only one in whom he seemed to have a certain degree of confidence. "Is it pretty bad?" he whispered to him in Intercosmo. The lieutenant winced in slight pain as he removed his helmet and brushed back his blond hair. He stripped off his spacesuit and placed it in the rack. Then he grasped Tonrim and placed him on his shoulder. "Naw, this is just everyday routine," he said. Tonrim sighed and resignedly closed his eye. His quintuple stomach had shrunk together and it pained him. In any case he should have followed the advice of the ancient kings and avoided all Terran vessels. Now it was too late because here he was in a trap with these men, hoping only for a miracle. Three minutes later the Frisco an unmanageable derelict sent out its distress call across the endless gulfs of space and time. For the men of the 3rd planet of Sol, a new and mighty foe had appeared and had demonstrated his open hostility.

3/ WHEN TITANS CLASH

As ever before, the political and military situation in the Arkon Terran sectors of the galaxy was tense. Perry Rhodan, Administrator of the Solar Imperium, had all he could handle to more or less control the Arkonide Empire with the help of his friends. The destruction of the robot Regent had created a totally new situation, and new difficulties were always blocking attempts to master it. With its tremendous capacity the mammoth positronicon had been able to watch every corner of the Greater Imperium and to defend it if need be. This seemingly insurmountable task had for the most part been taken over by the men of the Solar Imperium. Nevertheless, Atlan had become more or less a shadow Emperor, even though Rhodan himself only directly administered earthly affairs in order to keep his friend's position intact. The Arkonide often told his Terran associate, nonetheless, that he felt like a mere figurehead in the entire picture. Of course Rhodan couldn't divert all of his energies to the support of Atlan because he had enough troubles in his own camp. For example, the invisible phantoms had shown up again, and there was that strange fragment ship that had destroyed the BOB 21. This had been sufficient provocation for stationing a great number of ships along the borders of the galaxy, who had standing orders to keep the outer regions under constant surveillance. So far, however, there hadn't been the slightest indication that another fragment ship was in the area. Almost 90% of the fleet units were needed inside the Greater Imperium. This meant that the Administrator had no other choice but to keep building armaments in order to bolster his military potentials in other areas. Along with Luna, Terra itself had become a first-line war machine. The greater part of tax revenues from the continually expanding Solar Imperium were flowing into the defense buildup. Rhodan had no other alternative if he was to guarantee the safety of humanity. So it was that in the year 2112 the Earth found itself in a situation that it had often faced before. New enemies had made an appearance in the outer reaches of the void. Their strength was an unknown factor but they would very possibly be able to strike a vital blow against their civilization. On the 29th of May of this year, Perry Rhodan

himself was on the Theodorich, which was patrolling the borders of star cluster M-13. Earth affairs were being directed by capable men who would advise Rhodan in case of the slightest emergency. Within the Fleet the Theodorich had been the subject of the wildest rumours. There was no latest improvement that the ship was not supposed to have. And it was true, as a matter of fact, that at present there was no ship to equal it in the Fleet. . Now a captain and also a 3rd officer of the watch on board the Theodorich, Brazo Alkher finished his rounds and greeted Stana Nolinov with a weary grin. The latter had also been promoted to captain. "I know," said Nolinov. "Either you've lost your shirt in a card game or the deck duty is getting you down again a terrible drag, right?" Alkher's brown eyes gazed at his friend with an expression of sadness. "I only wanted to express my condolences," he said solemnly. "As an officer of this most wearying of all duty assignments, it's your turn to take over." He frowned sternly. "You look a sorry mess. At least shove your hair out of your face." Capt. Nolinov ran a hand over his short-cropped head. "You trying to impress me with your curly locks?" he retorted. "Don't knock it, buddy. If I could pull a little ground duty—" He interrupted himself hastily as he noted Chief Engineer Major Slide Nacro sauntering toward them with an interested look on his face. Alkher and Nolinov saluted him and waited for the major to pass them. However, Nacro stopped before Alkher who was considerably taller and drew his small figure to its full height. Apparently he had overheard their conversation. "Come to think of it, Captain," he said with mock solemnity, "just who are you intending to charm with that hairdo?" Nolinov grinned craftily, enjoying Alkher's embarrassment. He folded his arms across his chest and stared at him expectantly. "Well, you see, sir—" "Top alert!" thundered the speakers suddenly. "All officers report to stations immediately!" Nacro and Alkher both started to run and bumped into each other. They disentangled and continued in separate directions. Since he was now off regular duty, Alkher followed the major to the Control Central while Nolinov took over command of the local sector of the ship. The Theodorich came to life. There was a bedlam of shouted commands and mighty machines roared into operation. Everywhere the red lights were flashing the TQP alarm status. The command from Control Central was continuously repeated over the speakers. While running after the major, Alkher was racking his brains trying to figure what had caused Commodore Claudrin to sound the alarm. This couldn't be just a drill or a test run because the Theodorich's crew was beyond all that. Even if something like a test drill were in effect, the pattern of duty assignments would have been different, at least for the officers. Nor was an, attack on the flagship in progress because in that case the alarm status would be a Condition 2. When he entered the Control Central and could look around Nacro's broad shoulders, he saw the medium-built figure of 1st Officer Reg Thomas, then noticed that the scar on Thomas' left cheek had become livid. Perry Rhodan stood behind Thomas and listened with his usual self-composure to a signal replay that had been picked up on the hypercom channel. Alkher recognized it as the typical format of a distress call from a Terran spaceship. "It's coded, sir," announced Les O'Brien who was the Com Man on duty. "I'm running it through decipher now." In a few moments the clear text came through on a readout strip, which Rhodan read carefully. He looked up at Nacro and Alkher. "We already knew that it was from the light cruiser, Frisco," he said. "It's an urgent call for help and now we know why. They have been attacked by a fragment ship." "Here come the coordinates, sir!" shouted O'Brien excitedly. The news came as a bombshell for all present in the Control Central. All their endless patrol flights had failed to discover one of these mysterious alien ships but now, unexpectedly, the enemy had struck again this time inside the galaxy. "Check out those coordinates, Commodore," he said to the Epsalian. "We won't lose any time in coming to the Frisco's aid. It's advisable to place a part of the Fleet on standby alert." Claudrin moved ponderously to get the coordinates data from O'Brien. "There's more," announced the Com Man. "A fire has broken out in a part of the ship. Cmdr.

Teluf doesn't think the Frisco can get out of the danger zone on its own power." O'Brien's tone of voice expressed heavy concern. "The incident happened when they were putting a prize crew on board the Hat-Lete. That's a heavy-cruiser class robot ship that was drifting in free fall." "The fragment ship is probably interested in the Hat-Lete," said Rhodan pensively. "They undoubtedly considered the Frisco to be a competitor for the prize." Jefe Claudrin was aflame with anger. "It looks as if these fragment ships just open fire on anything that gets in their way." "You're forgetting the Hat-Lete," Rhodan reminded him. "Why don't they take a pot-shot at that vessel also?" For the Administrator this affair was much more significant than the usual kind of incidents experienced with Springers and other races in the galaxy. To most of the known races all they were aware of was that just one such encroachment of this had occurred but even this second incident couldn't be looked at as an isolated phenomenon. The fragment ships were guided by unknown beings and there was always the danger that a whole fleet of these weird-looking warships might make an appearance. The hard school that had made Rhodan an incomparably experienced leader never let him forget that the only ones who could survive for long in the game of galactic power were those who took the least possible risks. In the great political play for rank and status in the universe there was no place for rash decisions. The only ones who remained the victors were those who made long-term plans. Now and again it could happen that somebody's sudden attack cancelled out the possibility of long deliberations but in such cases the reaction capability of the Solar Fleet had met the test often enough. So in connection with the fragment ship Perry Rhodan wasn't thinking of just the one vessel by itself. In a more strategic sense he could see that sooner or later he would be encountering a powerful alien fleet, and since their intentions would be unknown they would have to be classified at once as enemies. First of all, however, the men on the Frisco had to have help. In a few minutes now, under the sure hand of Jefe Claudrin, the Theodorich would be entering the libration zone, after which it would race toward its distant goal at many times the speed of light. "We are at half lightspeed, sir," announced the big Epsalian. Maj. Slide Nacro watched the engine indicators and nodded with satisfaction. The construction of the flagship had consumed tremendous sums of money but the expenditure had paid off in terms of top precision performance. "All engines clear, sir," he announced. The Theodorich picked up speed while the mighty converters which had first been tested in the never-to-be-forgotten Fantasy provided an almost immeasurable burst of energy. The vast space sphere was virtually catapulted into its course and on the screens the very stars appeared to reel and move from their positions. "Light speed obtained," boomed Claudrin's organ-pipe voice. The Theodorich became a shooting shadow, darting through the vacuum of space within an unanalyzable medium. Despite its incomprehensible velocity it did not diminish the immensity of the surrounding void. For everyone on board the cold glory of the universe remained what it had always been an unconquerable Infinity. And the Theodorich was hurtling into it. . Vicheline was startled by the sudden flood of lights in the room. However, he quickly calmed himself. Apparently the Terrans had arrived on board and had reconnected some broken power circuits. The Trox reminded himself that Terrans were top experts in technical areas. They could manage to put half-destroyed generators back into full operation. Vicheline tried to imagine how he would greet them in a few minutes when they came into this room. Humming contentedly to himself, he began to move about. The light was so bright that he could distinguish every detail of his surroundings now. As far as he could tell he was in some kind of control room because he saw countless indicators and meters, many viewscreens and switchboard panels. He had heard that the Arkonide robot ships were constructed so that they could be quickly converted for navigation by a live crew. Vicheline's thread-thin arms carefully touched the smooth metal of a console cabinet and he passed his little hands across it with a sense of awe. Soft sounds emerged from an opening above his multiple stomach. The Trox moved across the deck with

wraith-like steps. He heard new sounds coming from somewhere and he straightened up, drifting to the center of the room where he could observe both entrances. If everything he had heard concerning the mentality of the Terrans were true, they would politely conceal their surprise at his presence here and after a few innocuous words they would simply take him into their company. They were just another race of the usual big old bipeds, yet the thrill of newness to the adventure captured Vicheline's fancy more than he would have cared to admit to any of his own kind. Vicheline bobbed slowly up and down, a small bundle of transparent life that was filled with warmth and friendship. However strange his attitude might have appeared, nevertheless he managed a certain degree of dignity. After all, the Trox was an aristocrat among his kind, having already scored visits to 48 planets. The sounds came nearer and the Trox began to be puzzled by the crude and noisy procedure of the Terrans. Suddenly there was a shrill shrieking sound as though a metal saw were slicing quickly through steel, and Vicheline sank to the floor in fright. His delicate nerve centers contracted and swiftly expanded again, causing him physical pain. With a great effort he overcame his feeling of panic. What was happening out there? Were the Terrans taking the ship apart without bothering about this particular room? He tensed at the thought that they might overlook him and leave him here alone. A clanking and rolling sound came through the walls and Vicheline began to tremble. Was this what had caused the olden kings to have their negative opinion about the Terrans? Shaking in his frail limbs, the Trox approached one of the doors. When he was about 3 meters away from it, the hatch flew open and gave him a view of the corridor. Two brilliant blue gunners stood before the opening. Their angular bodies fairly vibrated with a tense readiness for action. Uncomprehendingly, Vicheline's red eye gazed at them. Where were the Terrans? To the gunners the Trox was merely a form of organic life which must be destroyed under all circumstances. On board a robot ship the Trox was a monstrosity. His presence was a blasphemy. They waited for the order. Uncertainly, Vicheline hovered at the hatch opening while his thin body trembled visibly. Then he gathered all the courage he had in his meagre frame and whispered: "Who are you?" Vicheline felt nothing when he died because his 10 pounds of fragile matter were simply atomized under the concentrated thermo fire of the gunners. Only for an instant it had seemed as if the delicate Trox tried to flutter away in wild retreat—but in the next instant he was nothing but a dark cloud of smoke. The gunners pressed forward into the control room, followed by several communicators whose electronically-controlled spiral tentacles curled forward eagerly. However, of Vicheline, the nobleman from the race of the Trox, there was not a trace remaining other than a vaguely unpleasant odour. . Maj. Teluf again couldn't rid himself of an uneasy feeling. Although the fragment ship only seemed to be interested in the Hat-Lete now, the commander felt as if he were sitting on a powder keg. From a military standpoint the Frisco was playing the role of a useless observer. The light cruiser's distance from the other two ships had increased considerably. It had been a relief to receive a confirmation from Perry Rhodan. Now he was counting on the appearance of the Theodorich at any moment. The enemy attack had cost two men's lives and 7 had been injured. Dr. Gerwain was treating their wounds. The lower part of the ship was completely burned out and riddled with leaks. It would have been senseless to enter that area now without spacesuits. The Frisco was travelling through space in free fall and if nobody came to their assistance they would go on like that for years endlessly until they were trapped in the gravitational field of a sun. At such time, however, no one on board the light cruiser would be left alive. Teluf rejected such thoughts. Rhodan had been alerted and he had promised to take immediate action. The major knew the fighting strength of the Theodorich and could not imagine that the fragment ship could stand up against her. In the Control Central of the Frisco there was a suspenseful silence, now and then broken only by Dr. Gerwain's calm voice. The men were waiting for the flagship of the Solar Fleet and they expected it to avenge this attack or a Terran warship. The Theodorich alone would have been enough to raise great

hopes in these spacemen but the presence of Perry Rhodan caused their confidence to soar and made the mighty ship seem to be impregnable. Teluf knew that the flagship would not appear on the scanners until it had emerged from its libration zone, and that would probably occur close to the fragment ship. Tonrim, seated on Bottischer's shoulder, appeared to have made an adjustment to the new situation. The Trox didn't seem to be any weight at all for the muscular lieutenant because he moved about apparently unencumbered. It looked as if Tonrim was contented with his new perch because every once in a while he would emit satisfied sounds. For the first time Teluf felt a certain sympathy for the spindly little creature. Weren't all the races of the universe bound together in some inexplicable manner, even if they were enemies? "For Heaven's sake, now I'm beginning to philosophize!" the major muttered. Galahad looked up suspiciously but Teluf only shook his head. Then Ikaze gave a triumphant cry. Before he could say anything the others gathered in the Control Central started shouting wildly, letting out all the tension that had been building up in them for the past few hours. On the scanner screens a bright blip had suddenly appeared, quite close to the fragment ship. The Theodorich had arrived. . Linear flight within the libration zone had the priceless advantage of permitting observation within the line of sight while the observer himself could not be seen. The officers of the Theodorich were thus able to see the Hat-Lete, the fragment ship and the heavily-battered Frisco long before either of the latter two ships were aware of their approach. The 1st Officer of the Theodorich, Reg Thomas, examined the indicators sceptically. He had replaced Hunts Krefenbac who was now commander of the former flagship, Ironduke. "Look at the shape of that thing, sir" he said. "Has somebody gone mad?" Judging by his tone of voice he had evidently not taken previous descriptions of the fragment ship seriously. From a Terran standpoint anything even remotely cubical was about the worst possible shape for a space vehicle. Yet Rhodan maintained that if a spacefaring race could come up with a superior means of propulsion the shape of their vessels wouldn't matter. However, the Administrator suspected that the cubical form of the ship had more to do with the mentality of its builders than it probably did with the propulsion system. "Shall we move in closer, sir?" interrupted Claudrin. "I'm ready for your orders." "Hold off awhile before we show ourselves to them," said Rhodan. "We're going to use the A-N guns on them so as to avoid any unnecessary bloodshed." A-N guns were officially known as anesthetizer cannons which had been standard equipment on all Terran ships for the past 3 years. They operated on a type of hyper-frequency in such a range that it could pass through any type of defense screen. These vibrations had the effect of immediately numbing the nervous reflexes of any organic life form, which produced a deep narcosis within seconds. In this way the destruction of life could be avoided. After a period of time the victims of the A-N attack awakened from their condition of unconsciousness without any harmful after effects. The fragment ship could now be seen clearly on all screens. Its position relative to the Hat-Lete seemed to indicate that it had already sent out a boarding crew. "They seem to be very interested in the robot ship," said Rhodan thoughtfully. "They must have some special motive." If he had only known who they were he might have been able to explain it easily enough but neither the design of the ship nor the actions of its crew provided the slightest clue. Rhodan hoped they would soon know more. He nodded to the stocky Epsalian who had been promoted to Commodore and Claudrin smiled broadly. Perry made contact with the Fire Control Center. "We will be reducing speed in a few seconds," he said. "At a low approach velocity we will emerge close to the fragment ship. All anesthetizer cannons on standby for action." Of course it was impossible for one man to navigate a giant like the Theodorich all by himself but Claudrin, who had taken over the flight controls, was backed up by countless automatic devices and indicators. The mighty converters thundered as he went into a retropulsion manoeuvre. In the Control Central there was no sign of the tremendous inertial forces that the men and the high-precision equipment would otherwise have been exposed

to. Then the Theodorich shed its protective shell of semispace and fell back into the Einstein continuum. The fragment ship lay within firing range next to the Hat-Lete. Rhodan coldly observed the viewscreens. He could imagine now that the tracking scanners of the cube ship would be indicating the unexpected appearance of the Theodorich. "Fire!" he called into the microphone. An invisible barrage of hyper frequencies emanated from the A-N guns and rained down on the fragment ship, unimpeded by the latter's defense screen. "Cease fire!" Rhodan ordered. The men in the Control Central watched the giant ship tensely. The Theodorich's sensitive scanners and detectors were concentrated on the alien vessel in order to pick up any reaction or change. But nothing happened. Unimpeded, the fragment ship continued to draw nearer to the Hat-Lete. Yet nobody doubted that by now its crew must be in a deep state of narcosis. "I guess that does it, sir," said Nacro drily. Rhodan didn't answer right away because he suddenly had a feeling that something wasn't as it should be. If the fragment ship had already sent over a prize crew to the Hat-Lete, it could certainly be assumed that they were in constant communication with the mother ship. Theoretically, that contact must have been broken when the Theodorich fired its anesthetizer guns. The boarding party should be showing some kind of reaction. Rhodan's mind began to race. He had an instinctive urge to order the heavy energy guns into action—yet he hesitated. "I wish we could see what's happening on board that monster," he said to Nacro. "Do you think something's gone wrong?" asked Nacro. "Yes," confessed Rhodan with out explaining more. Two seconds later the fragment ship opened fire on the Theodorich. Rhodan would never forget that moment in his life. Jefe Claudrin jumped up to yell something but then everybody was swept off his feet in a scrambled confusion of flying and sliding bodies. The generators shrieked as the absorption screens swallowed a monstrous energy load, attempting to withstand the terrible impact. The howling and screeching of the overloaded system rang in Rhodan's ears while the lights in the Control Central alternately dimmed and brightened. Then something happened that had been considered almost an impossibility. Parts of the Theodorich's supposedly impregnable defense screens collapsed. The fragment ship had become a flashing blob of destruction which mercilessly turned all its weapons on the battered Theodorich. When Rhodan got to his feet again he saw Claudrin's mighty figure standing before the flight controls. The flagship was making crackling sounds as if charged with electricity. Rhodan knew those noises from experience. If they remained here a few more seconds the screens would collapse entirely and expose the Theodorich to the full effective fire of the enemy. Claudrin knew what to do. He shoved the ship into full power acceleration so that it virtually leapt out of the danger zone and vanished into semispace. "Get back to normal right away, Jefe!" shouted Rhodan, almost without realizing it. When the Theodorich returned to normal space a few moments later they were already 1 lightyear distant from the enemy ship. Rhodan forced himself to take some calm, deep breaths while he gazed at the grim faces of his officers. "I guess that does it," he said, looking pointedly at Nacro. The major grinned in embarrassment and wiped his forehead. The Theodorich's overloaded machinery gradually settled back to normal operation again. On the men's faces was a common expression of their burning desire to immediately go back and show the fragment ship that the Terrans also had powerful weapons at their disposal. Rhodan was well aware of the spacemen's feelings but he did not intend to yield to them not yet. Reg Thomas was straightening out his twisted uniform. "They seem to have recovered from the A-N strafing alright," he said. "Or do you think maybe their counterfire was automatic?" "In a figurative sense perhaps," replied Rhodan enigmatically. Before he could say anything more, Pucky entered the Control Central and waddled over to Claudrin. "I had just dozed off in a cat nap," he said with mock dignity, "when some crazy person took over the ship controls and threw me out of my bed without a word of apology!" Claudrin's eyes narrowed. "And maybe you noticed that we were almost destroyed," he said in a rumbling tone. The mousebeaver looked at him harshly and turned to Rhodan. "What are you going to do now,

Perry?" "You could have found out by now if you hadn't interrupted our conversation," Rhodan chided him. Of course Pucky knew exactly what had been going on but he loved to use every tactic to get himself in the spotlight. Rhodan continued. "Before the anesthetizers were mounted in our ships we went through countless experiments with them. We have reason to believe that no life form exists that would not be affected by an A-N attack. So there can be only one logical explanation for the reaction of the crew on that fragment ship. Whoever is on board is not alive at least in an organic sense." "Sir, do you think they're robots?" asked Thomas. "That would of course explain a lot but at the same time it would present some new questions. It would be stretching it to talk about robots at this stage because we still have no definite information." Rhodan interlaced his sensitive hands. "First of all we have to call in a salvage tender for the Frisco. It's true that the light cruiser is out of the danger zone by now but we have to rescue the men from their uncomfortable situation." Nevertheless, Rhodan had to think and move quickly. The fragment ship had apparently won an effortless victory over the most modern ship in the Solar Fleet. If this news of a Terran defeat were to get out, it might encourage various galactic races to start new attacks against the Solar Imperium. Also he could not underestimate the effect on his own crewmen. Bringing all these dangers to a common denominator, Rhodan's decision was obvious. The fragment ship had to be attacked. Rhodan alerted more than 20 heavy units of the Fleet and ordered them to get under way immediately. They were to emerge as quickly as possible in the vicinity of the enemy marauder. Meanwhile the Administrator had another plan in mind which was risky but nevertheless gave promise of success. He called teleporters Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta into the Control Central. This caused Pucky to brighten up because he suspected that he would now be ordered into action. "We're going to try to settle accounts for the slap in the face they gave us back there," said Rhodan decisively. "I suggest that we send out Ras, Tako and Pucky in a 3-man destroyer. It will be their springboard for teleporting into the fragment ship and finding out what's going on inside. I realize that this mission is almost unfeasible and that's why I'll leave it to the decision of the mutants, as to whether they want to undertake it." "Of course we'll undertake it, Perry," chirped Pucky hastily. "Very well, sir," said Tschubai, and Kakuta nodded his agreement. "You have to choose exactly the right moment," warned Rhodan. "That little destroyer is going to be ripped to atoms by the guns of the cube ship." "We'll work it out," said Kakuta confidently. "Hopefully. We'll get in as close as possible to the fragment ship, depending on how much fire power we can bring to bear. Then we'll launch the destroyer and the rest will be up to you." It was a wild plan but Rhodan was counting on the experience of the teleporters which they had gained from countless missions. Tschubai and Kakuta were level-headed men who took no unnecessary risks. Only Pucky had a tendency for fool hardiness but he was especially endowed with other paranormal gifts which had helped him survive many dangers before. Rhodan contacted the hangar and the mutants prepared themselves. The 3-man destroyer was checked out. The teleporters provided themselves with weapons and then left the Control Central to take over the destroyer. "We're flying them straight into Hell," said Thomas. . It was the end of the legend. The Theodorich, considered to be invincible, had only been able to escape complete destruction by means of instant flight. The stunning shock of this fact was hard to swallow for Major Reja Teluf. Heretofore the ship crews of the Solar Fleet had always gone into their missions with the confident thought that the mighty helper was behind them but now? The major didn't have to search the faces of his men to know the mood they were in. Teluf's own pessimism had nothing to do with the fear for his own life. He was asking himself what might happen if a whole squadron of these fragment ships were to attack the Earth. So far they had shown up singly, and perhaps their present enemy was the same one who had destroyed the space station, BOB 21. If that were the case it only proved that the dangers of just one ship could not be underestimated. Still more puzzling than their

origin was their goal or purpose. Their attack on the BOB 21 had not been launched directly against the Terrans but had been aimed instead at the mysterious invisible aliens. Unexpectedly the Earth had gotten involved in the middle of a conflict between two unknown powers. And now here was the fragment ship concentrating its interest on a pilotless robot ship, whereas the two Terran ships had merely been swept aside as a sort of "incidental" action. Certainly no definite conclusions could be drawn from such inexplicable circumstances. And what was the real meaning of the strange symbol messages that the two agents on the BOB 21 had picked up? "Are you a true life form?" Teluf bit his underlip reflectively. Every race could assume from its own standpoint that it was the only representation of the "true life form." However, behind such a self-judgment must lie certain standards which could only be based on their own behaviour. It seemed to Teluf very strange that a spacefaring race should have such an isolated attitude, and even the idea of some theoretical form of existence would not stand the test of logic. There were a number of possibilities which might shed light on the tangled mystery. In fact it was possible that the concept of "life" could be so abstract in some alien mentalities that it could only fit a specific pattern. Such beings would have to be operating on the basis of an unorthodox system of logic that was strictly adhered to. Like robots—thought Teluf. Besides, the idea was not to be rejected that the symbol messages were only sent out in order to confuse the opposition. Whatever was hidden behind the giant cube ship would not be known until the first Terran set foot inside of it. Bottischer was the first one to find his voice again. "If I know Rhodan," he said, "he'll soon be back." Teluf looked at him doubtfully. "You think so, lieutenant? The Administrator isn't about to take such a risk again. My guess is that the next thing we'll see is about half the Solar Fleet showing up." "In the meantime the fragment ship could have disappeared already, sir," argued Bottischer. "I'm sure Rhodan will think of something." Ikaze called from the still functioning scanner console. "He's right, sir! There's the Theodorich again!" The giant flagship was only visible on the screens for a few moments before it went back into the protective realm of semispace. Teluf's eyes narrowed. "They've sent out a 3-man destroyer but that's insane! One shot will blow it to atoms." The men in the Control Central of the Frisco gathered close behind the major. "Maybe it's supposed to be a trap," suggested Galahad. Almost breathlessly, Major Teluf followed the flight of the destroyer. With a boldness bordering on impudence the tiny interceptor shot toward its Gargantuan foe. Teluf could only hope that it was unmanned and under automatic guidance. It almost seemed as if the fragment ship had failed to detect its insignificant attacker because the destroyer was making a dangerously close approach. The picture became blurred and Ikaze leapt to the dials, scolding under his breath. "These instruments are awfully sensitive, sir," he explained. "The beating we took must have shaken them up." Then the scanners and opticals both went out entirely, and only the mass sensors revealed a slight reading. But that was due to the presence of the fragment ship and the Hat-Lete, whose much superior mass blanked out any possible detection of the tinier ship. "Of all times for that to happen!" complained Galahad nervously. Even Teluf had a hard time to suppress an urge to shove Ikaze out of the way and handle the controls himself. But the Japanese operator was a top expert and if he couldn't manage the problem any other attempts would be useless. Suddenly the two larger ships became visible again but the destroyer had disappeared. "It's gone, sir!" said Ikaze, perplexed. At that moment the energy sensors reacted sharply and at once everybody knew what had happened. A single shot had vaporized the Terran fighter. The sudden energy burst had taken a few seconds to be registered by the Frisco's instruments because the light cruiser had moved still farther away from the other vessels. "That was a useless sacrifice," commented Teluf bitterly. He turned and silently sat down in his flight seat. 12 hours later the Frisco received a radio call from the heavy cruiser, Malaya. The latter vessel's commander advised that he would be starting rescue operations within a few minutes. It was during those 12

hours in which Teluf and his men had been holding out that the battle against the fragment ship entered its decisive phase. . It was no use trying to convince himself that this mission was no more difficult than all the others he had come through successfully. It didn't help to relieve his tension. Ras Tschubai's dark hands clutched the destroyer's flight-control column tightly. On the viewscreen all he could see was the dark surface of the closed hangar door. "Rhodan to destroyer," said the Administrator over the panel speaker. "All clear on board?" Ras glanced at Kakuta and Pucky as he answered: "All clear, sir," "We'll just dip into normal space for a few moments," Rhodan advised. "As soon as the lock opens you have to launch at once." Tschubai's lips parted to reveal gleaming white teeth. His swarthy face widened into a smile. "Right on, sir!" "Good luck!" returned Rhodan as he broke the contact. From the rear seat, Pucky craned his neck to look past Kakuta. "I feel unusual forces building up inside of me," he announced. "Just keep them under control till we get into that fragment ship," ordered Tschubai sarcastically. "This is Nolinov!" came a new voice. "I'm directing this launch." "We're ready, Captain," said Tschubai evenly while he strove to conceal his inner uneasiness. The lock door opened. Stana Nolinov intoned the short countdown calmly and then the 3-man destroyer was catapulted into outer space where Tschubai instantly cut in the full power of his own propulsion. The small ship raced away from the Theodorich. Behind the destroyer the flagship immediately sought coverage within the libration zone. Kakuta seemed to be brooding over what lay ahead of them. "So far that fragment ship has cost the Solar Fleet a space station, one light cruiser, and now a 3-man destroyer." He spoke as if he were certain they would be attacked. "But not a single mousebeaver," boasted Pucky. "Considering present company no wonder!" retorted Tschubai mockingly. "Class speaks for itself," said Pucky philosophically. Kakuta spoke imploringly. "Come on—we have to shape up before we make our jumps! I wouldn't want an explosion to do it for us!" "Let's just sneak up a little bit closer," suggested Pucky. "We're doing alright." Tschubai watched his indicators. Then he cut in the auto-pilot and stood up. "Now!" "Just don't get pushy," Pucky cautioned the African. Almost in the same breath he said to Kakuta: "OK, let's go!" He dematerialized and the two Terrans glanced at each other knowingly. Pucky always had to be the first, no matter what the danger. Tschubai and his Japanese companion jumped almost simultaneously. For a few more moments the destroyer darted forward without its crew, and then the ray weapons of the gunners wiped it out of existence. 4/ THE SHIP OF NIGHTMARES Ras Tschubai materialized on the side of a pyramid-shaped object whose angular edges were about 5 meters high. Sliding down the steep surface he reached the floor and found himself standing on a silvery band of metal. The bright strip wound its way through a low passage where the pyramid shapes were spaced out at even intervals. It gave Tschubai the impression of being in a surrealistic forest of some kind. There was no sign of Pucky or Kakuta. He felt it best to remain under cover of the angular cone until he had oriented himself. About 10 steps farther on the ceiling of the passage was interrupted by what appeared to be a shaft that led upward. The mutant was surrounded by a ghostly silence. Pulling out his short-barrelled disintegrator, he went around the pyramid. The silvery band shimmered as if a thousand eyes were looking up at him. He avoided looking down at it and instead concentrated his attention on the passage before him. Suddenly his foot struck against an obstacle and it startled him. He had almost tripped on the metallic strip, which was raised a few centimetres off the deck. Under the strange illumination here it appeared to form a parallel plane above the floor. The African didn't bother to investigate the silvery strip any closer. With his weapon held in front of him, he went to the next angle cone. By now he had almost reached the place where the shaft intersected the ceiling. The opening was dark and he couldn't see where it led. Tschubai concentrated to see if he could pick up any telepathic impulses from Pucky but the mousebeaver made no contact with him. It was not possible for him to call Pucky mentally because he had no telepathic gifts to speak of. A buzzing

sound caused Ras to whirl around. The shimmering of the metal strip seemed to increase and he thought he could detect a movement of some kind farther back in the passage. The coldness of the metal he was leaning against penetrated his uniform. His hand was steady as he raised his weapon in readiness. He risked casting a glance behind him. The nearest pyramid was not far away and he might be able to reach it without being seen. At any rate he would be farther away from the shaft, from which he could easily be attacked. He drew back slowly but just when he was beneath the shaft he felt a sudden absence of gravity and he was drawn upward irresistibly. He suppressed a temptation to make a short teleport jump. While he floated upward he saw something approaching beneath him on the metal strip. Before he could look closer he was swept up into the shaft itself and it was lost to view. Within a few seconds it was completely dark around him. He could have turned on his helmet lamp but thought it would be too dangerous. Thus he drifted in emptiness and listened. If need be the teleporter was capable of an iron like self-command. He was not concerned that the gravity might suddenly return and plunge him downward again because he knew he could save himself quickly enough by teleporting. He had no reason to believe yet that he had been discovered. It was probable that he had just chanced to wander into the field of an antigrav shaft. He heard a noise. It came from below and sounded like two hollow metal bodies striking together. His thoughts raced wildly. He had to exert all his will power in order not to turn on his helmet lamp. Then the same sound came again but nearer to him. He felt a prickly sensation run down his back. He didn't dare to move because he was afraid the slightest sound would betray his position. Something was floating with him in the shaft. He tensed suddenly when the bell sound occurred again because he sensed that it was right next to him. Otherwise nothing could be heard although the mutant strained his senses to the limit. Thus a period of time passed which could have been seconds or minutes but Tschubai had no way of knowing. He presumed that his upward motion was extremely slow because even considering the fragment ship's huge dimensions the shaft couldn't be endless. When nothing more seemed to be stirring around him he reasoned that the unseen party must have passed him, although there was no good explanation of why he should have done so. Tschubai had almost decided to switch on his lamp when something grasped him out of the darkness and began to tear at his suit with brutal strength. His first reaction was purely instinctive and without deliberation. He struck about him with the disintegrator and hit something hard. The grip of his unknown assailant increased to the point where it almost cut off the African's breath. Under these conditions a shot from the disintegrator would have been tantamount to suicide. Tschubai swiftly shoved the weapon into his belt and reached out his arms. His right hand was sprained when it collided with hard metal. Apparently the entity he was struggling with was wearing armour plate covering. The mutant struggled for breath and expanded his chest. The worst part of this contest was that he didn't have the slightest idea of who or what his opponent was. Tschubai was knocked against the shaft wall and the impact served to loosen the merciless grip of his assailant slightly. He swung his fists again and almost broke his hand. Was this enemy completely invulnerable? Then he was pressed against the wall and was helpless in the other's powerful embrace. He fought desperately for more room but it was useless. He realized now that it had been a mistake to holster his disintegrator because in spite of the danger he should have risked a shot. Now it was too late because his arms couldn't move against the massive body that held him. For the first time it dawned on Tschubai that his antagonist might be a robot. The pressure on him increased until he feared all his ribs would be broken. He moaned in pain, scarcely able to breathe, still resisting in his benumbed confusion. Yet the more he strained the more ruthlessly he was pressed against the wall. Ras tried one last strategy. He suddenly went limp and hung there motionlessly. The robot or whatever it was let loose of him and disappeared in the darkness. Tschubai was just about to heave a sigh of relief when something hooked into his collar, snapped on and quickly tugged at him. They were hoisting him some

where, he thought. He might have escaped in a single transporter jump but he had to find out what they wanted with him, so he did not resist. There was a humming sound and Tschubai could feel that he was gliding upward at an increased speed. Soon the darkness yielded to a pale gray light and for the first time he could see the thing he'd been fighting with. Its outline was triangular-shaped except at the apex where a beak-like arrangement protruded and from which metallic fibres extended. Out of the thing's body protruded countless spiral arms which were constantly twisting and moving. A robot, he thought—but the strangest he had ever seen. The mutant was attached to the robot by means of a movable rod and clamp. The flexible extension held him presently at a distance of about 10 feet, which made the robot about as tall as a medium sized phone booth and at least half as wide. Theoretically the African was a prisoner of the strange contraption and was being toughly handled accordingly. The robot reached the upper end of the shaft and settled down on its edge. Tschubai felt that he was being sharply observed although he could see nothing on the robot that looked like eyes or which could be recognized as optical equipment. As he came up to the thing in a horizontal position, two spiral arms gripped him and jerked him out of the antigrav field. Tschubai landed on his back on the deck and looked up at the robot, still somewhat dazed. When he moved as if to sit up he received a shove that made him lie down again. He tried to reach unobtrusively for his disintegrator but the robot seemed to anticipate the move and immediately knocked the weapon out of his hand. Ruefully, Tschubai watched the gun slide away over the smooth surface of the deck. The robot detached the flexible tow-cord from Tschubai's collar and collapsed it, stowing it in a receptacle in his body. The mutant felt himself lifted up and the machine started moving away with him. Tschubai submitted without resistance because he knew that this was the quickest way to get to the leaders on board this ship. He failed to realize that he was already among them. . Tako Kakuta landed in a huge hall that stretched out before him like a deserted ballroom. The Japanese mutant looked about him but saw no traces of living creatures or even any technical equipment. What could be the purpose of such a gigantic chamber? As he started walking his footsteps echoed hollowly from the distant walls. Neither Pucky nor Ras were anywhere in the vicinity. Kakuta was just about to teleport elsewhere when something came rolling into the hall that was as big as a large writing desk. The mutant hesitated. The intruder was obviously made of metal and it moved forward on many individually extended wheels. The practicality of the arrangement was demonstrated in the celerity with which it changed its direction suddenly and shot toward Kakuta. The Terran drew his weapon and cautiously observed this mysterious approach. The contraption was squarely built and covered with inexplicable appendages of some kind. It came to a stop within about 10 paces of him. "Brrrks! Brrrks!" the thing said. "I don't understand any part of that," replied Kakuta suspiciously. A small door opened on the side of the "writing desk" and spewed out a countless number of small objects which spread out and came swirling across the floor toward Kakuta. Tako involuntarily stepped back. The ball-shaped things rolled after him. Meanwhile the "desk" had snapped open another compartment from which more of the small spheres poured and at once charged in his direction. The mutant aimed carefully at the nearest of the balls and fired a light charge from his weapon. The thing exploded with a green flash and emitted a nauseous odour. Unimpressed, the other spheres continued their approach. Tako realized that it would be impossible to pick off the things one by one, since the "desk" creature was spewing out more of them tirelessly, and now a whole army of the small white spheres was advancing toward him. He made a short teleport jump and materialized about 20 meters away. The spheres moved about in sudden confusion, appearing to be a living metal mosaic. Unexpectedly they turned on a secret command from the robot box and returned to disappear in its interior. As if nothing had happened, the crate-shaped thing set off in the direction Kakuta had taken. To make things worse, two other machines entered the hall, appearing to be considerably larger than the "writing desk." One of them made

a terrific uproar, clattering and rumbling, whistling and hammering as if any moment it were going to fall apart. Its lower extremity was fairly broad but it narrowed upward to a point that waved back and forth. The other newcomer could not be heard at all but this was probably because whatever sounds it made were drowned out in the bedlam. Kakuta made out a flat-looking shape that struggled forward in a hopping movement while flooding its surroundings in a purplish light. Meanwhile the travelling desk had again approached Tako to the point where it must have been time to unload its mysterious crew. Within seconds the little spheres were swarming across the floor. The machine that was making the indescribable noises had suddenly extended three or more fibre-like objects which shot out toward Kakuta like oversized chameleon tongues. The purple-lighted robot illuminated the scene so that the white spheres suddenly seemed to be red like rolling drops of blood. Never in his life had the Japanese mutant seen anything so fantastic, and the whole scene held him momentarily spellbound in fascination. For a human it was impossible to make any sense out of these infernal goings on, yet Kakuta had a presentiment that everything he saw was linked to some fixed principle of operation and served some definitely outlined plan. One of the outflung metallic fibre tongues caught Kakuta's sleeve and with a jolt he was thrown to the floor. As though riding on a feather he slipped across the smooth surface of the deck. This dragged him straight through the army of little spheres, and every time he contacted one of them he received a painful electric shock. When a second flying tongue whipped around his legs he fired off a wild shot with his weapon but only hit the flat-shaped apparatus. With a horrible crackling sound it hopped away in retreat while its weird illumination grew dimmer. The third tongue gripped the teleporter around his chest and jerked him closer to the conical robot. The "writing desk" gathered in its spheroids and seemed to consider its task accomplished. With a satisfied-sounding "Brrrks! Brrrks!" it rolled away. The metallic cone lifted Tako Kakuta from the floor. It grasped him tightly and rumbled away with him out of the hall. . Double-O disconnected his roller feet from the guide strip and lifted up into the magnetic shaft. He asked himself if the present situation would have developed if the upper level commander had not rejected his consultation so rigorously. Now it was too late. Something monstrous had occurred. Life forms of an organic nature had penetrated the ship by an unknown means. The lower level commander had shown his lack of deliberation by immediately alerting the gunners and ordering them to kill the three aliens. This had only been prevented by Double-O's Swift intervention. The adviser had gone immediately to the nearest information station and spoken to the upper level commander. He had warned him against a heedless killing of the repulsive creatures because the only way they could find out the method they had used to get on board was to catch them alive. Double-O had argued impressively and the commander had agreed with him. He had pulled back the gunners who were already on their way and assigned other units in their place. According to Double-O's information, the aliens were now being pursued by two fliers, one beamer, the three controllers, one shock spawner and one alien expert. Much to his regret, Double-O had not been able to follow the operation because he had to be recharged and had thus missed a part of the chase. Now he was on his way up to the commander of the upper echelon in order to serve him with his indispensable advice. When he got to the upper end of the shaft and came out he saw one of the controllers flit past him without even noticing him. The adviser watched him go with a feeling of contempt. Now the time had come for him to show these types what he had in him. He thought almost pleasurably of the distinction between himself and the phase watchers, those useless machines that loafed around in the ship. Double-O hurried on his roller feet along the passage and activated his shield in order not to make a common field of tension with others passing by. He reached the top level central and beamed out his identity signal. The commander told him to enter. Until now Double-O had only observed the center from the information booths, and as he came in he was surprised by the complexity of the furnishings and equipment here. The

commander had connected himself with all the communicators. "We've caught two of them already," said this one. Double-O could not escape a sense of regret. He would have been only too happy to have taken part in the capture of any organic life form. But the commander's next words were some consolation. "The third one is presenting us with many problems," the consultant was informed. "So far he's escaped every attack. We are going to have to kill him." "There are still other alternatives," Double-O reminded him, although he gathered the impression that the commander had already decided. Of course the leader's attention was taken up entirely by the communicators, so his silence didn't necessarily signify a rejection. 13 of the 47 communicator tie-ins faded out and the commander took time to swiftly ask: "What do you suggest?" To his disgust Double-O saw one of the useless phase watchers come in and importantly check over the main indicators. The recharger could have sworn that the phase watcher had only made an appearance because of his interest in the conversation, probably because it wasn't being conducted by means of an information station. "Our experience has shown that organic life can easily be affected by the paralysis beams," he said reluctantly. "Why don't we try them out?" "The commander of the lower level has had some misgivings in that regard because the aliens have used a similar weapon on us. He fears that they may also have a corresponding means of defense." "Nevertheless we should try it," said Double-O. The phase watcher couldn't remain any longer in the center without being conspicuous and he withdrew ceremoniously. The commander appeared not to have even noted his presence. "Very well," he said to the adviser. "I shall give the necessary orders." The recharger thought that he had done everything in his power for the ship. He had proved that he was an important factor on board. It only depended now on whether or not his plan would work. . Four metal clamps imprisoned his body and Ras Tschubai suspected that it was the will of his keepers that he should remain in this place for the time being. They had brought him into a small room that contained a number of storage racks. The robot that had handled him so roughly in the antigrav shaft had since disappeared but in its place was a sort of sentinel contraption. This guard was a flying cone with a large lens covering the front of it. The thing kept watching Ras with a mechanical persistence. The mutant was hanging in a rack at an odd angle to the floor and the clamps around him hindered his slightest movement. He could have easily freed himself by means of teleportation but he still wanted to find out what they were intending to do with him. His guard hovered in front of him, slowly bobbing up and down with apparent indifference. Ras was careful not to pay any attention to it because he wanted any chance remote observers to think that he wasn't aware of the purpose of the camera robot. The next living creature he saw was none other than Tako Kakuta. Of course he didn't come of his own free will, as was evidenced by the extremely noisy robot that brought him in. "Greetings!" said Tako with a grin while still struggling in the spidery arms of his captor. "I figured sooner or later I'd be having some company," quipped Tschubai. "They have very comfortable accommodations here." "I can do without the comforts of home just now," replied the Japanese mutant grimly. His next words were cut off as the rattling robot tipped him over like a puppet and hung him on one of the racks. Kakuta was facing downward. Tschubai watched him with interest. "You making a floor survey, Tako?" he inquired mockingly. "Look who's talking!" retorted Kakuta spitefully. He shifted as best he could so that he was finally in the same situation as Tschubai. The robot withdrew with a loud rattling sound and their single guard began to hover back and forth between the two Terrans as though perplexed. Kakuta realized at a glance what the purpose of the flying robot was. "They've got us under remote observation," he said to Ras. The African nodded and craned his neck to have a better view of his companion. "I'm anxious to see what's next." "Pucky," said Tako drily. "I imagine they're underestimating our little friend's tenacity by a wide margin," commented Tschubai. "He'll cause plenty of confusion on board. It doesn't look as if we're very welcome here. So far all I've seen is robots of all shapes and forms, as you've probably

noticed." "Yes, I ran into the same thing," Kakuta reported. "The actual masters of this ship seem to be extremely uncommunicative." "When I think of the failure of our anesthetizers," said Ras, "it makes me wonder if maybe there are only robots on board this fragment ship. And that reminds me of something else." "Mechanica!" "Yes but with one difference: here there's a countless number of different kinds of robots, and each one seems to work independently of the others." Tschubai tried to scratch his chin reflectively but was reminded of his clamps. "Everything points to Mechanica and yet it's all different. Sounds paradoxical, doesn't it?" "I suppose so," said Kakuta, "but how long are we going to put up with this game? I move that we get out of these meat-hangers and go look for Pucky. He's no doubt waging his own private war somewhere against some unlucky robots." Tschubai could well understand the non-typical agitation of the Asiatic. Ever since they had penetrated the fragment ship they had been fighting robots without coming one step closer to their objective. It was time for them to do something more decisive. Nevertheless the African had an instinctive sense of warning. The robots they had encountered so far did not appear to be outspokenly hostile but Tschubai suspected that this was not their real attitude. There was something about this ship that was cold and evil. He didn't know what was behind this presentiment but it had haunted him like a shadow ever since he arrived. Even this seeing-eye sentinel over their heads with its glowing big ox-eye of a camera lens, seemed to exude an almost palpable hatred, although Tschubai kept telling himself that was impossible. A robot couldn't hate or show any other emotion; it could only respond to its positronic or other kinds of circuitry and programming. Yet even these thoughts were not able to dispel the mutant's suspicions. A glance at Kakuta told him that his companion was on the same wavelength with him. Both of them sensed the lurking menace of the ship without being able to actually define it. It was a situation that left Tschubai undecided. "Let's wait a bit longer," he said to Kakuta. "We don't want to show our trump cards too soon." As if it had understood the meaning of these words, their guardian sank about a half meter lower. . Any objective observer would have said that Pucky had landed in one of the most dangerous areas of the ship. He materialized right in one of the turrets that was manned by three gunners. In contrast to the robots he was prepared for such an encounter, and as the brilliant blue machines jerked around and fired the mousebeaver was already on the ceiling where he neutralized the gunner's weapons by means of telekinesis. The robots leapt from their seats like blue bolts of lightning, even as they received a command from the upper lever commander to become quiescent. They had been removed from firing status, which of course Pucky couldn't know. For the mousebeaver the rest was child's play, and when he left the gun turret there were three less robot fighters on board. Pucky told himself that he had now given them cause for the proper amount of respect. From here on they'd be approaching him with much more caution. Next to the turret was a chamber which was occupied by a messenger robot. This one merely blinked at Pucky and remained quiet. The mousebeaver looked at the onion-shaped thing undecidedly. His inborn revulsion against robots of any kind urged him to attack the weird contraption but his mind told him that in this case it would be better to hold back. But at this moment the messenger was making contact with the lower level commander, and suddenly he got up from his station. Its movements seemed at first to be so clumsy and heavy that Pucky was taken by surprise as it shot past him out of the room with unexpected speed. "Hey, not so fast!" Pucky called after it. "I'm just a peaceloving little old mousebeaver!" The messenger seemed to be of another opinion because when Pucky stepped into the outer passage the robot raced around the next curve out of sight. Wonderingly, Pucky exposed his gleaming incisor tooth. This did not seem to make him any more attractive, however, because three approaching fliers took advantage of his hesitation and swiftly attacked. They came from behind him and simply fell on top of him. Lt. Puck of the Solar Fleet fell face forward and was forced to rescue himself by means of short-range teleportation. In a rage he materialized 20 meters away. The

robots were busy scrabbling about, searching among each other's limbs for the creature who had vanished so suddenly. Pucky took advantage of their confusion by slamming them back against a sidewall. Unexpectedly they recovered swiftly from this kind of treatment and set out in pursuit of their now visible victim. Again, Pucky brought his psychokinetic powers into play. In a very unprogrammed manner the robot in the rear accelerated unaccountably and rammed against the machines hovering in front of it. That appeared to do the job because they soon retreated, badly damaged. Pucky stretched out his head threateningly. He'd show these characters that they couldn't mess around with him so easily. For some seconds he concentrated his telepathic extra senses until he picked up the faint thought threads of Tschubai and Kakuta. He knew it was time to join forces with the other teleporters so he oriented himself toward their thought source and jumped. He materialized in a fair-sized room where he saw Kakuta and Tschubai bound and "stored" in a most peculiar fashion. With a grin at his friends he regarded them with folded arms. Before he could make any wisecracks, however, the floating sentinel glided over them. Without too much exertion the mousebeaver smashed the thing to the floor where it burst into pieces. "That wasn't very smart, little buddy," said Tschubai in some vexation. "Here we've been playing it cool the whole time so that our hosts could observe us in peace and now you come in and run berserk!" Pucky attempted to look crushed with dismay and remorse. "It's useless for us to stay here any longer," said Kakuta. "After Pucky's exhibitions they may be able to guess how we got on board." Using telekinesis, the mousebeaver released the other two from their clamps. Tschubai got down and kicked the remains of the observer robot out of the way. "There's one of them who's out of business," he said grimly. Kakuta looked around uneasily. "It's time for us to get out of here," he said. "Pucky, have you found out where the leaders of the ship are and where the Control Central is located?" The former inhabitant of Vagabond looked at him sharply. "I'm no wonder worker," he complained. "All I did was keep those robots off my neck, which you can see by the fact I didn't get caught!" "I don't feel right," said Tschubai suddenly. Kakuta also felt weighed down by a depressed feeling, and Pucky sniffed about suspiciously. Tschubai suddenly sensed that his limbs were getting heavy and he began to be alarmed. "Strange," said Kakuta laboriously. His lips moved with an unnatural slowness. "We're being hit with a paralysis beam!" yelled Pucky. "Scram out of here!" They gripped each other's hands and jumped. When they materialized in a brightly lighted corridor they found that the sensation had not subsided in fact it was stronger. It seemed that the invisible frequencies were everywhere. "We have to get off of the ship," said Kakuta with an effort. Tschubai laughed humorlessly. "Where would you suggest, Tako?" The African sensed that his growing weakness was getting the better of him. It would be only a question of time before he wouldn't be able to make a teleport jump. "The Theodorich is still too far away." Pucky's voice was laboured. "But there's another ship that's fairly safe." "The Frisco?" asked Kakuta. "She's gone!" Pucky swayed slightly as if he were under a heavy load. "No!" he cried out with his last burst of strength. "I mean the Hat-Lete!" Three seconds later the three figures dissolved as if they had never existed. They jumped on board the Arkonide robot ship, which was swarming with robots from the fragment ship. But they only found it out when they arrived.

5/ THE SUICIDE SQUAD There were some spacefaring races who maintained that if you threw a Terran out your front door he'd soon come in the back way, and that he would continue his efforts until you either killed him or gave in to his stubbornness. The authors of this story nevertheless added with some vexation that the cases in which the Terrans had succeeded by far out numbered those in which they had failed. It was only one of a number of stories that were told concerning earthmen but such rumours would have gained new support if there had been any witnesses to Rhodan's repeated attempt to approach the fragment ship in the Theodorich. Since the only ones involved, however, were Terrans and robots, the historians of Earth were restricted to merely setting down in sober prose the fact that the First

Administrator of the Solar Imperium had again launched an attack against the fragment ship. The reality of the situation, however, was much more dangerous. The rash undertaking began when Rhodan glanced at the ship's chronometer. "It's time to go pick up the teleporters," he said to Claudrin. "This time we'll have to come in closer, sir," the commander warned him. "I know, Jefe. But this time we're prepared for an attack and can do some dodging. Besides, our own weapons are going to do some talking." Claudrin wasn't exactly overjoyed at the prospect of battling the fragment ship but he did not reveal the fact. "As soon as we're out of the libration zone we'll open fire," Rhodan ordered. "This time with the heavy rayguns. Commodore, get set for a breakneck evasion manoeuvre." "I'll take her through a dozen hells and out again if I have to," Claudrin confirmed. When he looked like this, short but wide and powerfully determined, his words did not seem to be exaggerated. Of course the husky Epsalian had a crew at his disposal who were unexcelled in terms of experience and special training. These men faced every situation with a cool composure, and as long as they could still move they carried out the orders given to them. Even the lowest ranking man on board the flagship was a well-trained expert of above-average intelligence and capability. The whole crew was a well-coordinated team who could handle every type of situation. Rhodan contacted Fire Control on the intercom and ordered the responsible officer to stand by and be ready for action. The Theodorich picked up speed and raced toward its goal. In the Control Central the top officers, stood before the panob screen. The fragment ship reacted even faster than on the flagship's first approach. The Theodorich had hardly broken out of semispace before the countless gun turrets of the cube ship spewed out their murderous fire. But this time Claudrin was prepared and the mighty ship swept out of the impact area. Rhodan followed the action with glaring eyes. He gave Fire Control the order to open a counter-barrage. The impulse cannons of the Theodorich fired incessantly but the fragment ship did not seem to be affected by it. "Those characters must have super-powerful defense screens," commented Reg Thomas, and nobody doubted his word. The first enemy fire struck the Theodorich and rattled it to its frame, although the screens this time absorbed the energy impact. Claudrin changed course and hurtled on a breakneck return path toward the alien giant. A concentrated salvo of deadly beams whipped past the Solar Fleet's flagship. The Epsalian made another twisting course change just as the Terran gun turrets flashed lightnings or retaliation. This time the barrage was more powerful than before but the fragment ship simply swallowed it up. Its defense screens revealed no signs of weakening but on the other hand the force of its answering attacks increased against the Theodorich. The ship lights dimmed somewhat and Rhodan glanced significantly at his commodore. The flagship was racing past the other two vessels within only a few miles. "Why don't the teleporters jump back, sir?" called Slide Nacro anxiously. "Let's hope nothing's happened to them but we can't stay around here much longer!" Claudrin thundered out a war whoop and pulled the Theodorich into another tight turn. It wasn't enough to avoid several more enemy hits, although the screens still held up under the beating. John Marshall, the telepathic chief of the Mutant Corps, entered the Control Central and beckoned to Rhodan. The Administrator left his place and went over to him. "Troubles, sir," he said in his succinct manner. "A few minutes ago I picked up a telepathic signal from Pucky. At present the teleporters are on board the Hat-Lete. They were attacked with paralysis beams and are still too weak to get back to us. Pucky reported that a large force of robots have boarded the Arkonide vessel from the fragment ship and they're giving them trouble. He's afraid that still more of them are coming over." Rhodan had listened without interrupting but was feverishly arriving at decisions even while Marshall was speaking. The three teleporters had to be helped. They were valuable helpers of humanity and had decided the outcome of numberless other battles in favour of Terra. "We have to do something for them," he said quietly. Marshall remained silent but watched the Administrator gravely. He knew that Rhodan would leave nothing untried in his

attempts to save the teleporters. Rhodan returned to his observation position and reported to his staff: "Pucky, Ras and Tako are stuck in the Arkonide ship. We have to think of something to get them out of there." Jefe Claudrin turned his massive head around. "We can't get any closer, sir. If we take more chances the hit ratio will double on us. Our screens could go." The other fleet units should be here soon," commented Thomas. "We can't wait for that," decided Rhodan. "We have to depend on ourselves." With slow deliberation, Dr. Riebsam asked a question. "Sir, have you thought of a plan already?" A smile touched Rhodan's lips when he realized that the mathematician had read his intention and was letting him know that he was in agreement. "Yes—I'm asking myself why we installed the fictive transmitter on board the Theodorich." He saw himself surrounded by a group of astonished men. Slide Nacro closed his gaping mouth but soon found his voice again. "Sir—you want some of us to be transmitted on board the Hat-Lete?" he asked. "Yes, as a backup for the mutants." For a moment Claudrin forgot to concentrate on what he was doing and the Theodorich took a violent salvo impact that shook the massive ship like an earthquake. Rhodan directed Fire Control to keep up a continuous bombardment. "We want to keep them occupied," he said. "Meanwhile, Capt. Brazo Alkher will collect a 10-man volunteer commando team to accompany him on board the Arkonide ship." Like an angry flying hornet's nest the Theodorich darted around the fragment ship without being able to damage it. On the other hand the flagship took a well-aimed hit now and again. "Of course you may refuse the assignment, Captain," Rhodan added. Some of the gentleness went out of Alkher's brown eyes. "I'll get busy and select my men, sir," he answered, and he withdrew from the Control Central. "He won't have it easy, sir," said Thomas after Alkher was out of hearing range. "I can imagine they'll give him a hot reception." Rhodan nodded. "I'm sure of that—but we have to try to give the mutants support until the fleet formation gets here." . Corporal Gallik sat daydreaming and tried not to hear the hits that the Theodorich was receiving. He was sitting with his chair tipped back against the wall of the small cabin he shared with Sgt. Oaliason when the door opened and Capt. Alkher entered. "Hello, Gallik," said the captain pleasantly. "Chick" Gallik gathered himself together and stared suspiciously at his guest. "What's happened, sir?" he asked. Alkher raised a brow at him in mock surprise. "I thought you already knew about your offer to be a volunteer." Gallik sensed an alarm signal in his brain. It shot him to his feet. "You—you must be confusing me with Sgt. Oaliason," he said hopefully. "I don't remember having volunteered for anything." "I'm sorry, there isn't much time," said Alkher. "In 10 minutes we have to be on board the Hat-Lete—so it's time you checked your weapons." Gallik scratched his head in desperation. "With your permission, sir," he said peevishly, "this is a strange way to drum up volunteers." Alkher chuckled softly. "The others are already standing by," he announced. "But I'd like to have you with us." Chick Gallik pulled on his uniform jacket and followed the captain out of the cabin. "Where are you taking me, Captain?" "To the fictive transmitter. We're going to shoot over to the Arkonide ship." Alkher winked at Gallik. "How does that grab you?" Gallik thought a moment before answering. Finally he said, "Oh that's terrific, sir! It fills my heart with rapture." It was a sentiment that the corporal did not quite demonstrate, however, as he shuffled along sullenly behind his leader. Yet it was this same Chick Gallik who had penetrated the headquarters of the Forghs on Klotor with only three combat robots and had blown it up, preventing them from turning against the Terran colony there. . As Perry Rhodan looked at the small group of brave men before him, he wished secretly that he could go with them. He knew that he could rely on every one of them, that each one would fight for the lives of the three teleporters as though he were fighting for himself. Brazo Alkher stepped forward. "We're ready, sir." Rhodan recalled to mind the slender youth who had once been shipwrecked with him on board the Fantasy. What had become of his carefree youthfulness now? Alkher had turned into an experience hardened man who accomplished his assignments with a strict attention to duty. Only once in a while the captain's eyes

betrayed a flash of the earlier brightness and swift-handed ease with which he had performed his work in the Fire Control Central. A dry humour remained from those days which often bordered on sarcasm. Rhodan brought himself back to the present. These men had been moulded by life in outer space. He himself was a prime example of the results. There was nothing about it that would ever change. "Each of you knows why it's necessary to carry out this dangerous mission," he said to them. "The success of it will depend on a number of circumstances but the main thing right now is for you to change the odds on board the Hat-Lete as quickly as possible." Dr. Riebsam had taken over the controls of the transmitter, and now he signalled to Rhodan. The adjustments had been made. "Good luck!" said Rhodan. The commandos filed into the transmitter and Rhodan waited until they had all vanished. "There they go to an unknown fate," commented the mathematician. A new hit shook the Theodorich and Rhodan had to find support to stay on his feet. The uncertainty of fate, he thought, was something they all shared in common at the moment. 6/ DEATH TRAP

Chick Gallik saw Solensky, the little Pole, appear beside him, and then came Alkher, Owesian and Leggert. Behind Solensky appeared Mesenhohl, Gunnarson, Pearson and Tannert. The last one through was Stumpy Heffner, his wrinkled face set in an expression of almost fanatic resolve. They had materialized in a cargo hold which was unoccupied at the moment. "We'll separate into two groups," ordered Alkher. "This room has two entrances. Chick, you take Heffner, Owesian, Solensky and Gunnarson over there—the rest of you follow me." Gallik was a big man with fleshy muscles and a large round head. His face had the appearance of being flabby and flushed. He nodded to the captain and Alkher beckoned his own men. At the head of his small detail, Gallik charged toward the exit. The corporal was 38 years old. In two years he would be promoted to sergeant and after that he would retire from the Fleet. For years he had harboured a secret dream of which he had told no one. With his small savings he would set up a small bar and stand behind the counter and wash and dry glasses. His patrons would be former members of the Fleet and they would sit on long-legged stools at the counter where they would converse about their old adventures together. Gallik knew that at this moment he was farther from realizing his plan than ever before. Just before he reached the exit he turned to see Alkher and the other men leave the cargo room through the opposite door. Gallik was determined to get through this mission alive. He looked into Heffner's wrinkled face and saw no sign of emotion other than his dumb look of fanaticism. Stumpy was always like that in every battle. Then there was Solensky who always had to fight down his fear and keep his face muscles from twitching. Gallik cursed softly. What kind of men were these to be with in a setup like this? What were their own dreams? What would they be doing now if they weren't stuck in those uniforms? Gunnarson reminded Gallik of a car mechanic with a yen for tinkering around old-style models, and the dark-skinned Owesian looked like a born butler. They left the cargo room and came into a corridor that led in two directions. As they entered it they saw Tako Kakuta coming toward them from one side, and from the other direction six metal monstrosities were approaching. The Japanese mutant was limping and he was bleeding on one side of his face. He let out a cry when he saw the Terrans and signalled to them with his weapon. Momentarily the six robots appeared to be confused because the situation had been changed by the unexpected reinforcements their single quarry had received. Stumpy Heffner was the first to react. He raised his energy rifle and opened fire against the machines, whose defense screens glowed with a bluish light under the impact. Gallik ran past the other men to Kakuta who was leaning against the wall, very weak. Now Solensky, Gunnarson and Owesian were also firing and the corridor glared blindly under the brilliant flashes. Fiery rivulets crept across the deck and there was a crackling of reflected energy. Within a minute the temperature had risen 10 degrees. Gallik gripped Kakuta by an arm and drew him into the cargo room. Solensky staggered in after them, white as a sheet. "We separated," gasped Kakuta. "We wanted to break up the robots' concentration. We're still too weak

to teleport. New robot reinforcements keep coming from the fragment ship." Solensky peered out the doorway into the passage and immediately ducked back inside. "Owesian's down on the deck," he said, "but he's still moving. There's only three robots left out there that I can see." "Take care of the teleporter," ordered Gallik, and he sprang out into the corridor. He heard Owesian shout something even as a cascade of light hissed over him and melted a glowing hole in the wall. Heffner hopped like a crazy man toward the robots while holding his energy rifle at his hip, sweeping its beam back and forth. Gallik thought he would perish from the heat and his eyes burned as if filled with acid. Gunnarson was kneeling by Owesian, taking careful aim before he fired. The robot shots were not concentrated and were widely scattered. Glowing metal dropped from the ceiling like molten wax, splattering on the floor with loud hissing noises. Gallik ran after Heffner to stop him but just then one of the robots caved in and sank with an odd slowness to the deck, its tentacles waving about helplessly. Heffner's shout of triumph was broken by a wild clattering sound and four more machines rolled into view. They were larger and wider than their predecessors and their appearance sent a shudder down Gallik's spine. He shouted after Heffner but Stumpy charged on ahead like a Sgt. York. When he looked back he saw Gunnarson trying to drag the badly wounded Owesian into the cargo room. He wondered why Solensky wasn't helping him but just then the little Pole came dashing out. He grasped the Afro-Terran by the shoulders and helped Gunnarson to drag the wounded man out of the passage. Gallik whirled around and was astonished to see that Heffner was still in one piece. "Get back, Stumpy!" he yelled. Heffner was swept by a glancing shot and was knocked to one side. As the trooper whirled around, Gallik thought he saw him laughing. He didn't know what was more uncanny, the attacking robots or Heffner. At least five raybeams zipped past Stumpy. Gallik fired like a madman while behind him he heard Gunnarson come back into the fray. A series of brilliant flashes scattered past on both sides and a wave of heat came over him. He felt as if he had been hit and fell backwards. Even as he fell he saw the robots coming closer. They simply ignored Heffner who lay motionlessly on the floor. Gallik thought he heard Heffner yelling but in the deafening commotion it was difficult to differentiate individual sounds. In Gallik's mind's eye arose a vision of his dreamed-of little bar, and that lent him superhuman strength, just as Gunnarson fell gasping and coughing beside him. Gallik's clouded vision cleared and he saw that Gunnarson's uniform was on fire. He rolled over him in order to smother the flames and the Swede muttered something unintelligible. He glanced behind him and saw Solensky and Kakuta. Both of them were firing at the robots. Owesian came crawling on all fours from the cargo room and seemed to smile in this odd moment as he nodded to him. One of the robots exploded with a dull roar and its fragments flew over the heads of Gallik and the Swede. The machine behind it burst into flames and came rolling toward the men like a glowing torch. It finally crashed against a wall and collapsed. Then suddenly the passage before them was free except for some smoke and fire and the remains of shattered robots. Gallik trembled in his weariness and there was a salt taste of blood in his mouth. He saw Gunnarson rise up and tear off part of his smouldering uniform just as Heffner came staggering out of the smoke. Solensky came to Gallik and helped him get up. "They'll be back here soon!" cried Kakuta. "We have to get out of here!" Gallik looked at his battered and wounded group of men. "Into the cargo hold," he said quietly. His idea about the bar seemed to recede from him at this moment because he knew that whenever a spaceman would sit down at the counter he would have a vision of Owesian, badly wounded yet crawling through Hell to aid his companions. They dragged themselves into the hold and closed the hatch. That was when Stumpy Heffner collapsed into unconsciousness and Gunnarson had to lay him down beside Owesian. Gallik was incredibly weary yet he felt relieved that they were all still alive. "It's time we figured something out," said Kakuta. "We won't be safe here for a minute. The robots are after us like mad. If most of them weren't so busy repairing the Hat-Lete

we'd be totally outnumbered." "Repairing the Hat-Lete?" queried Gallik in some surprise. "I wonder what that means." "I don't know," said the mutant. "It almost seems as if the robots from the fragment ship were taking care of their own kind around here. At any rate they're very concerned about this Arkonide robot cruiser." Gallik didn't understand much about robots and he was at present in no condition to think too much about them but he had never heard that a robot could be concerned about anything, or that such machines could have any emotions at all. "Then you think maybe we're still alive because the robots were going easy on the ship instead of on us? I mean—because they didn't want to damage the Hat-Lete more than they had to?" "Looks that way," said the Japanese teleporter. "Our rattling friends from the fragment ship seem to have characteristics that you wouldn't normally expect to find in robots." Heffner came to and grinned weakly. "I'm not badly hurt," he said painfully "Just hard to breathe..." Gallik, could tell at a glance that Stumpy would need medical treatment as quickly as possible. For that matter, Owesian wasn't much better, not considering the lesser injuries of Solensky, Kakuta and himself. With the exception of his ruined uniform, Gunnarson appeared to be the only one who had come through unscathed. Just as Gallik was about to have a closer look at Heffner the Hat-Lete began to vibrate and a faint humming sound became audible. Gallik paused. "What's that?" he half-whispered. "The engines," replied Kakuta almost tonelessly. "They're bringing the old crate back to life." As the men stared at each other there was an expression of growing alarm on their faces. . Ras Tschubai realized that he owed his life to a sheer coincidence—namely, that he had happened to take cover by the main converter in the power room. The robots from the fragment ship hesitated to shoot at the Terran because it seemed they wanted to keep the converter intact at all costs. So all the African had to be careful about was that none of the strange machines came too close to him. He himself was free to fire at will and he had thus knocked out four robots already since they had merely come rolling toward him without shooting. Now the alien things had become more cautious and resorted to merely keeping Tschubai under constant observation. Somewhere in the machine room a number of robot's were working with a sheer fanatic fervour. Tschubai got the impression that the cube ship's crew was very eager to correct every last defect of the Hat-Lete. It almost seemed as if the robots wanted to awaken their positronic colleagues of Arkon to a new mechanical life. Tschubai finally gave up trying to figure it out. He began to wonder how Pucky and Kakuta were faring. Tako and the mousebeaver were still too weak to be able to make use of their paranormal functions. For Pucky especially this would be a handicap. Not only was he at present unable to teleport but also it was doubtful that he could generate any psychokinetic forces. And his telepathy wasn't going to get him very far in this kind of combat. Tschubai looked past the curved surface of the converter into the combination power and engine room. He noted that the robots were beginning to construct a strange-looking apparatus. He wasn't interested in what the thing was supposed to do as long as it didn't mean some kind of new trouble for himself. When he took another look around the converter he saw Capt. Brazo Alkher come into the large chamber with drawn weapon. Ras had to blink his eyes several times to make sure he wasn't having hallucinations. Behind Alkher came Mesenhohl, Leggert, Tannert and Pearson. "Watch out!" yelled Tschubai, and he sprang into view from behind his covering. The robots attacked almost in the same instant that Alkher and his men threw themselves on the floor. Tschubai opened fire and the robots realized they were being attacked from two sides. Alkher took cover behind the heavy generators and with a daring leap Leggert landed between two blowers. Pearson retreated back through the bulkhead doorway while keeping up a steady fire, whereas Mesenhohl and Tannert took refuge between some control cabinets. Tschubai smiled grimly and drew back to his former position. Alkher called out to him. "We have to get out of here, Ras! If these things get reinforcements we'll be blocked in!" Of course the captain had a point but between Tschubai and the 5 men were no less than 15 robots who were watching

every movement of their opponents. "When we open fire on them, start running," yelled Alkher. The barrel of his weapon emerged like a snake from behind the generator. Leggert's unhandsome face appeared above the blowers, and Pearson was lurking in readiness at the open hatchway. "Fire!" shouted Alkher. Tschubai started his sprint without waiting for the others to start shooting. He heard the hissing of ray guns and felt the rising heat. Running in a crouch he started across a narrow catwalk that bridged over a giant engine casing. The far end was blocked by two robots but at the moment their attention was riveted on Pearson and they kept firing at the bulkhead doorway. Tschubai thought quickly as one of the machines turned and stared at him out of its expressionless lenses. In a single movement the mutant went over the railing and suspended himself by his hands from the edge of the catwalk. He heard the robot coming along the metallic plates of the runway. He grasped one of the railing supports and pulled himself up high enough to scan the engine room. One of Alkher's men hit the contraption that was approaching him. As it exploded, one of its tentacles shot toward the African. With a yell he let go of the catwalk and fell into the depths. He struck the engine casing heavily and started to slide down the side. A robot leaned over from the catwalk and fired at him but missed. "Ras!" yelled Alkher from above. "Where are you?" Tschubai tried desperately to hold on to the smooth surface but he slid down to the deeper rim of the engine housing. Although it flooded him with the pain of his exertions he managed to reach one of the catwalk supports. He shoved his weapon into his belt and began to climb up the metal beam. Above him the battle was raging with unabated fury. Suddenly the upper half of a robot toppled off the catwalk and came shooting downward where it smashed against the engine cowling. Tschubai kept climbing. He was hoping soon to reach his goal when somebody unseen began to fire at the upper end of the support beam. The slender girder became glowing hot and began to sag. Stubbornly, the African hung on to his section. Then the rod-like support melted away from its upper anchorage and Tschubai was left swinging on it like a pole vaulter at the peak of his arc. The now elastic upright swayed out from the catwalk, causing the teleporter to swing in another direction. Desperately he sought a way of rescuing himself. The metal pole bent farther until it almost touched the wall of the engine well. Ras was like a bug waving on the upper end of a straw in the wind. He shoved away from the wall with both legs and the support rod swung back toward the catwalk. He thought he wouldn't reach a high enough arc but suddenly the slim girder tipped to the other side and Ras hurtled with increased speed toward the narrow bridge. He stretched out both arms and managed to grasp the catwalk's edge. Simultaneously he let loose of the rod with his legs and without his weight it sprang back like a spring. Tschubai breathed a sigh of relief but then the rod whipped back and gave him a blow that almost knocked him out—yet it also seemed to give him the impetus he needed to scramble up blindly onto the catwalk. "Over here, Ras!" somebody shouted. Tschubai got up and staggered somehow in the direction of the voice. He crashed against an incapacitated robot and then he felt somebody pulling him to the deck. When his vision began to focus again he saw Leggert's bulldog face staring down at him. "I really thought you wouldn't make it!" said Leggert hoarsely. Tschubai grinned weakly at the spaceman. "I'm half dead." Each movement he made shot a pain through his back that almost made him pass out. Pearson stuck his head in through the bulkhead opening. "I think our friends are getting reinforcements," he said drily. Alkher signalled to them from the generator area. "We have to pull back," he ordered. "Leggert, look after the teleporter." Almost effortlessly, Leggert brought the African to his feet and supported him. Ras clapped his teeth together and limped along after the others, with his left arm over Leggert's shoulder. Tannert and Mesenhohl covered their retreat while firing back at seven of the robots who were still operative. When they had all exited the great machine room, Alkher called a halt. "We have to try to get in touch with the others," he said. "Maybe they've found Pucky and Kakuta." Tschubai was about to say something but suddenly a rising rumble caused him to stop. A slight tremor ran through the

Hat-Lete, but quickly it subsided. "That was a strange sound," said Pearson uncertainly. "It's the ship," said Alkher. "They're getting it under way!" . It was clear to Pucky that he couldn't hide from the robots. They seemed to have some kind of mental tracing equipment that betrayed the presence of any organic life. Thus after his jump to the Hat-Lete the mousebeaver had been kept in continuous flight. Thanks to his telepathy he had been able to track down the location of Tako and Ras. It had been a relief to him to detect the arrival of Alkher's small detachment, and now he was in the process of fighting his way through to the men. Without his teleporting ability, Pucky was a bit awkward in his movements and couldn't move as swiftly as humans. He had to use the same trick that Tschubai had hit upon in the machine room. Whenever he was next to any valuable equipment he noted that the robots were hesitant about firing at him. Between these momentary points of safety and his goal was an open stretch he had to traverse and he knew that here he'd have to rely on his luck and craftiness. Pucky's native optimism began to waver, however, when the Hat-Lete's engines began to operate and the Arkonide ship that had been a derelict for six years started to accelerate. 7/ POSITRONIC HARI-KARI John Marshall lay back in the comfortable form chair and listened with his fullest concentration to the telepathic message that Pucky was sending him. Perry Rhodan waited patiently for the end of the paranormal conversation, a part of which he could understand. The Theodorich had once more withdrawn from the range of the fragment ship's fire in order to wait out the results of Alkher's commando mission. Finally Marshall straightened up and looked at Rhodan. "The teleporters are still too weak to jump back to the Theodorich," he reported. "Pucky claims the fragment ship is completely manned by robots. There is no organic life on board, and their main peculiarity is that. they seem determined to attack anything that isn't a mechanical form of existence. The positronic crew of the alien ship is determined to repair the Hat-lete's equipment. One could almost assume that these contraptions have a sort of abstract emotional capability because they show such concern for their own kind." Rhodan and Thomas glanced at each other doubtfully when Marshall told them this. "So that's the root of our problem," said Rhodan. "And one more," announced Jefe Claudrin from the flight controls. "The Hat-Lete and the fragment ship are both getting under way!" "The Hat-Lete?" asked Rhodan in surprise. In two steps he was at the screens of the space scanners. "How is that possible?" "Apparently the robots from the fragment ship have put the Arkonide cruiser back in operation," said Dr. Riebsam. "They must have known how to activate the ship's central brain in a hurry." Rhodan's face was grim. "Our men are still on board the Hat-Lete and the teleporters can't jump. If we don't do something they'll simply disappear into hyperspace." "What are we going to do, sir?" asked Claudrin. "We have to attack again and try to stop them," Rhodan answered, but it was in the tone of a command. All present knew that if the two robot ships reached half the speed of light there would be no further chance of rescuing the others. At such velocities it was very unfeasible to carry on a space battle. . The Theodorich picked up speed and raced after the fragment ship as Rhodan again made contact with Fire Control. "We're making another try," he said. "Open up with everything we've got!" Space seemed to explode as the Theodorich once again opened fire on the monster cube ship. The ravenous bursts of energy created iridescent force fields in the void. Claudrin flew through a breakneck manoeuvre and navigated close to the fleeing enemy. It almost seemed as if the fragment ship's defense screens were ready to collapse, but when the robots' answering fire came the Epsalian had to change course abruptly and the attack was broken off. "The robot ships are continuing to accelerate," announced Slide Nacro. Rhodan glared desperately at the panob screen. Was there nothing they could do against this weird Behemoth? He couldn't permit three teleporters and ten of his best commandos to be simply kidnapped. "What now, sir?" inquired Claudrin resignedly. "We can't stop them, Jefe," Rhodan confessed. "The scanners, sir!" shouted Nacro excitedly. There they were! Rhodan almost let out a cry

of relief when he saw the 22 heavy warships of the Solar Fleet emerge from semispace and take up waiting positions. It was the squadron Rhodan had alerted and which he had been waiting for so anxiously. "Make contact immediately, Major!" Rhodan ordered crisply. Now only a lightning operation would save the situation. Rhodan's orders came in a flood yet all were in well-ordered sequence and carefully thought out. "All ships in close formation!" he concluded. "We'll attack the fragment ship in a solid phalanx!" 22 Terran fighting ships closed ranks and raced toward the fleeing enemy. On the panoramic screen Rhodan could observe the precise manoeuvres of his commanders as they tightened their positions. "This time we'll surprise them," said Rhodan confidently. . Double-O realized that he had committed an unforgivable error. The three organic creatures had transferred themselves to the alien robot ship where they were putting up a stubborn resistance, and their method of transfer was unknown to him. Immediately after this was known the upper level commander had ordered Double-O out of the command center and indicated to him that he would soon be placed under ship's restriction—which meant that he would be prevented from being recharged again. In other words, for Double-O this was the same as a death sentence. When it came from an upper level commander, a ship restriction order was followed, in nine cases out of ten. Since in the entire ship everybody regarded him with suspicion because of his incredible age, the judgment against him could be considered as final already. Double-O stood dejectedly in the information center. He was thankful that the phase watchers weren't around since they had to monitor the pending phase transition. Being alone, he could watch events on the screen without being disturbed. He had witnessed the repeated attack of the organics' warship and had noted with pride how they had been effortlessly repulsed. The mechanics had repaired the alien robot ship so that it could accompany them when they left this scene of action. As for the repulsive organic creatures on board the other ship, sooner or later they would be destroyed. Now Double-O realized that they should have attacked without mercy from the beginning, as the lower level commander had ordered. The gunners had even been on their way to handle the situation but now through his intervention the organics had been able to gain a respite, during which time they would no doubt destroy many true life units. As seen objectively the adviser had earned the penalty of an energy cutoff because with his erroneous consultation he had become an accessory to the enemy's crimes. Due to such unfavourable circumstances he had come to this end. Suddenly the viewscreen changed and Double-O could see 23 spaceships pursuing their own ship. At once the voice of the announcer was heard: "The crews of the new ships consist of organic life. They seem to be trying to rescue our prisoners. The defense screens are on. All gun positions are manned and ready." The image of the upper level commander appeared. He had connected his eccentric body to all communication lines and the load had caused him to lean slightly backwards. Double-O didn't dare now to offer his advice. He heard a messenger rush into the station but paid little attention to him. The messenger tapped into the information bank and went away again. The screen changed and Double-O could see that the alien warships were swiftly approaching. The mechanics didn't seem to be quite finished with their work. Otherwise the mother ship might have been able to accelerate faster. The commander was showing consideration for the allied robot ship. Double-O had heard the wildest rumours about the crew of the strange robot vessel. One of the controllers had commented that these robots were completely helpless. They were dependent upon another control center which in turn was subordinate to a still greater center, but no one knew anything about its whereabouts. One of the commander's joints appeared on the screen as a change was made. Shortly thereafter, Double-O saw the enemy ships again. His roller foot moved about uneasily. In less than 30 seconds the enemy would open fire. . Compared to the dimensions of the galaxy the energy blast resulting from the Terra fleet's concerted fire was no more than the flickering of a match in a forest fire but in the relatively constricted space where the titanic forces were expended, the barrage from the gun turrets of the Terra ships had the effect of a

bursting inferno. The area surrounding the fragment ship made it look like a minor nova in its, glaring halo of flames. The cube ship's screens performed the incredible because they even stood up against this stupendous impact. Rhodan felt his back muscles tense. "We mustn't let up," he said emphatically. The Terra ships encircled the fragment ship like a flock of hawks and kept it under heavy fire. And then, just as Rhodan was beginning to give up hope of any success, the enemy's defense screens began to flicker. Wide structural fissures appeared in the energy envelope. "Now we've got him, sir!" shouted Thomas triumphantly. "Stay with it," Rhodan ordered. "Don't let up. We can't give the robots any time!" The fragment ship did not bother any longer about the Hat-Lete, and it shot away at full power. "They're running, Chief!" boomed Claudrin, also in triumph. Rhodan's commands snapped out at once. "Take up pursuit!" he told the squadron commanders. "The Theodorich will take care of the Hat-Lete." The 22 ships raced after the fragment ship without being able to overtake it. Before another combined salvo could be fired at the enemy he escaped his pursuers by disappearing into hyperspace. No warp shock was measurable in this case, and thus any further pursuit was out of the question. "He got away from us!" exclaimed Thomas angrily. Rhodan recalled the squadron. The fragment ship had slipped away from them and that couldn't be changed. At any rate the vessel had proved itself to be vulnerable. The concentrated fire of the squadron had given it serious trouble. It was a great relief to Rhodan to know that his opponent was not invincible. "Now we won't have much chance of learning about these robots," commented Dr. Riebsam. This was the disappointment of a scientist who had seen what he thought to be a certain success disappear in the last moment. Rhodan merely smiled. "You forget the Hat-Lete, Doc," he said. "The fragment ship has left a part of its crew there for us. All we have to do now is capture them and look them over." Dr. Riebsam's face lit up. "You're right," he agreed. The Hat-Lete was drifting again in free fall. After the fragment ship disappeared, evidently the robots had given up their plan to take the Arkonide ship with them. The Terran fleet formation now surrounded the former Regent's heavy cruiser. Rhodan placed a hand on the mathematician's shoulder. "I'm sure you'd like to come along with me, Doc," he said pleasantly. The scientist's eyes flashed with new interest. "I certainly would, Chief. I'm champing at the bit to have a look at those robots." "I can well imagine." Rhodan turned to Marshall. "John, I'd like to see you join us, too." "Of course, Chief." Marshall rose to his feet. "We'll take over a full brigade of several hundred men in the shuttle boats," Rhodan explained. "We'll need them because the robots left behind in the Hat-Lete are bound to put up some heavy resistance. John, try to get in touch with Pucky. You can tell him we'll soon be moving in. "The Administrator made contact with the hangar and gave orders for preparation of the necessary personnel carriers. . It wasn't difficult for Chick Gallik to figure out the meaning of the sounds he heard on the other side of the closed hatch door. A gang of robots were trying to break through into the cargo room to carry on with their attack. Kakuta pressed an ear against the metal and listened. He spoke in low tones to Gallik so that the wounded men couldn't hear him. "We have to get out of here." The corporal agreed with him but the question was how they were going to transport Heffner and Owesian who were badly wounded. It wouldn't be possible for Gunnarson to lug both men with him. Heffner coughed restrainedly. He spoke with an effort. "I've got an idea." Gallik supported him so that he could breathe better. "Owesian and I can stay here while you go look for the others. When the robots break in we can hold them off for a while." "Be quiet, Stumpy," Gallik snapped angrily. Suddenly a dark red spot appeared in the middle of the hatch door. It widened swiftly. Gunnarson yelled. "They're burning a hole through the metal!" Other hot spots appeared and it became obvious to the Terrans that in a few minutes the steel plate wouldn't be holding the robots back. Gallik looked around. Projecting from the wall were several vacuum disposal stations which had been used for getting rid of trash and packing refuse. They offered the only cover. Gallik nodded to Gunnarson. "Over there with the wounded," he

ordered. The Swede picked up Heffner carefully and carried him. Stumpy moaned softly. Gallik tried not to hear it. The first hole had broken through in the hatch door and Gallik thought he saw a flash of movement behind it. Gunnarson came back and picked up Owesian. Solensky lost control and fired a shot at the smouldering door. Gallik quickly shoved the other's weapon down and shook his head. The Swede signalled that he had brought the wounded men under cover. "We need you over here, Sven!" called Gallik. He heard a murmur of protest from Owesian but ignored it. Gunnarson came running over and Gallik signalled him to take up a position close to the door. He and Solensky posted themselves on the opposite side. "Better join the other wounded men," Gallik told Kakuta. "It's too dangerous for you here." "You think I'm going to let you do my fighting for me?" retorted the Japanese mutant angrily. He joined Gunnarson just as the last fragments of the door plate melted and dripped to the deck. Either the robots hadn't expected any more resistance or they must have thought their human enemies had retreated. The first machine rolled into the room and only came to a stop after moving 10 feet. Gallik and Kakuta fired and the robot melted under the concentrated blast. The next robot was more cautious. Its weapon arm extended through the opening briefly but didn't draw back quickly enough because Gunnarson's practised eye found its target. Gallik knew that so far they were just lucky but they wouldn't be able to hold out for long in this position. But at that moment the opposite door opened and Capt. Brazo Alkher stormed into the room at the head of his small group. Gallik let out a genuine Indian warhoop but forgot to watch his own door. Four robots entered simultaneously. Their weirdly-shaped forms seemed to move awkwardly across the floor. Then something strange happened. Apparently ignoring the Terrans completely, they simply moved into the center of the cargo hold. Gallik observed them in disbelief. Alkher and his companions had come to a halt and were also watching the bizarre spectacle. Other robots kept coming in but they made no move to attack the men. "What the heck's going on?" Gallik asked the teleporter. Kakuta raised his weapon. "Maybe we should ask less questions and do more shooting," he said. "If they're all going to come in here at once it isn't going to be good for our health!" By now at least 30 robots had assembled but still more followed them. They were all shapes and sizes, Gallik noted. Practically no two were alike. Just then, Pucky came waddling in through the opposite door and raised his little arms triumphantly. "Perry's arrived with ten boats full of troops!" he chirped. "He'll be here in a few minutes." Gallik swallowed hard and thought: could this explain the strange actions of the robots? Were they trying to show that they were ready to surrender? Almost 50 robots had pressed into a compact group in the center of the hold. Gunnarson wanted to approach them but something told Gallik to hold him back. "Take it easy, Sven," he warned. "We still don't know what this is all about." Owesian had pulled himself up beside one of the disposal units and he waved to Alkher. Even Heffner had gotten onto his elbows to look at the uncanny spectacle. Now all available robots appeared to be present because no more were coming in. "Now Perry's on board!" called Pucky. Then it started! Gallik couldn't have said which robot had begun to generate the change but he was sure it came from the middle of the mechanical dogpile. The metal bodies of the robots began to take on a reddish glow as if they were on fire inside. Which was more or less what was happening. Gallik's eyes widened as he watched the process. It reminded him of a junk yard going up in smoke. Individual units melted until they were unrecognizable and finally the entire group collapsed in a common mass of molten wreckage. "That's crazy!" groaned Gunnarson. "They're destroying themselves!" The robots had collected en masse to commit a form of positronic hari-kari. They had apparently decided to destroy themselves when they detected that the Terran troop boats were getting ready to transfer their fighters to the Hat-Lete. There seemed to be only one explanation: the robots wanted to keep anything from falling into enemy hands that they could learn something from. As Gallik stared at the pile of smouldering hot metal he wondered what kind of robots these were. It was a sure bet they were not at

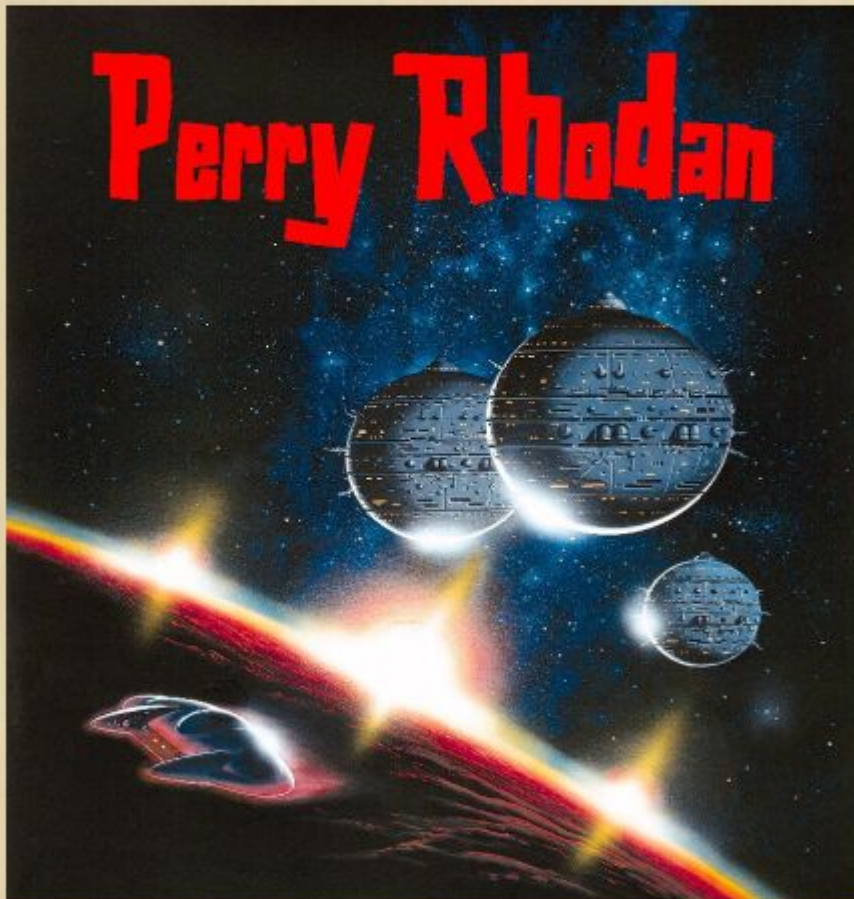
all like their Arkonide and Terran counterparts. There was something about them that made them different—something definitely different. There would be many questions left unanswered. Where had these weird entities come from? What was their purpose? Gallik knew that he couldn't answer such questions. The heat from the melted mass finally reached him and he drew back involuntarily. Then something happened that Gallik would never forget in his life. Through the shattered hatch opening came a half-wrecked robot. The machine seemed to move clumsily and with a special effort, now and then tending to wander and change direction. But it kept correcting its course toward its sole objective: the pile of robots in the center of the hold. Solensky raised his weapon but Gallik held him back. "Let him go," he ordered. The robot finally reached the smoking clump of wreckage. For some time it merely stood there facing the remains of its own kind. Then it too followed their example and melted itself down. The sight made Gallik shudder. "That was the last of them," said Gunnarson brusquely. Marching footsteps were heard outside in the corridor. There were shouted commands and suddenly a number of neatly uniformed figures appeared. And all of a sudden Gallik felt unutterably weary. A tall, slender figure stepped through the hatchway and came up to him. It took him a moment to recognize who it was. "Sir!" Gallik exclaimed. Rhodan looked at him gravely. Then he glanced over at Kakuta who was leaning slumped against the wall. He sensed the weariness of these men. He could see it in their eyes—the traces of almost superhuman effort they had expended, the terrors they had gone through in the face of the incomprehensible. Alkher approached him followed by Leggert and Pearson who were supporting Ras Tschubai between them, and Pucky came waddling behind them. Rhodan felt a surge of relief when he realized that no lives had been forfeited here. "If there are no objections, sir," said Gallik quietly, "we'd like to pull out of here." "Of course, Corporal," Rhodan agreed. Gallik left the cargo room with out even looking to see if anybody was following him. Medical orderlies hurried past him with stretchers for the wounded. Gallik staggered onward. Somebody said something to him but he simply kept on going until he reached the locks. He entered a personnel carrier and collapsed into the first seat he could find. . Dr. Carl Riebsam pressed his fingertips together and gazed thoughtfully at those who were assembled in the Control Central of the Theodorich. "After making a probability analysis," he said, "It appears that the robots of the fragment ship could only have originated from Mechanica. We can assume that they are machines that have perfected themselves in the course of many thousands of years and even made further improvements." He smiled at Rhodan. "Of course that doesn't clear up any of our questions. We are aware of their original home world, but from what point are they conducting their present operations? What seems more important in my view is another question: what's behind their despotic expansion and their vicious attacks?" The Hat-Lete had long since been taken to Earth by a salvage ship of the Solar Fleet so that the Arkonide vessel could be given a thorough inspection. The crew of the Theodorich was still concerned with the problem of the fragment ship. John Marshall cleared his throat and seemed to choose his words carefully as he spoke. "After thinking this over, following a talk I had with Pucky, I've decided to tell you about something that I thought at first was a hallucination. I can confirm that Pucky got the same impression that I did." Rhodan leaned forward tensely in his chair. "Tell us, John," he urged the mutant chief. "It must have been when the robots were destroying themselves," Marshall recalled. "We had just boarded the Hat-Lete when I sensed an impulse of remorse from somewhere but it vanished immediately and was replaced by soundless laughter" "That's right," interjected Pucky. "I detected the laughter, too, and it came from no human!" Rhodan looked pensively at Dr. Riebsam. "But it's impossible that such an impulse could have come from the robots," he said. "Nobody's saying that," replied Marshall, "but anyway you can be sure that both of us heard it." Rhodan stroked his forehead. He had to accept the mutants' testimony. The enemy had destroyed itself to avoid any experimental investigation but at the same time there had

been this mocking laughter. Who could manage to laugh in the face of death? A human? Never! Only madmen could laugh in such a situation. Rhodan recalled the molten clump of metal that had been all that remained of the robots. Somehow the shadow of death loomed above and beyond that cargo hold. The End



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