

Perry Rhodan 086 Power Key #78 1/ ATLAN HEADS HOME THE ALIEN was tall, slim and well developed. The reddish brown skin of his thin face indicated that he was a Zalite: a descendant of those Arkonides who many thousands of years ago emigrated to the planetary system of the red star Voga, only 3.14 light-years from Arkon, and settled on the fourth planet. As time passed, the skin and hair colour of the Zalites had changed but they had nonetheless remained purebred Arkonides. "Breheb-Toor...!" called the tall man with a penetrating, commanding voice. 200 colonial Arkonides, Zalites like the officer up front, seemed to have become electrified. The turning of so many bodies was so exact and precise that it seemed to be the result of electronic steering with the most sophisticated automatic equipment. The commanding officer turned. Stiffly and with short steps, he came towards me. On the breast of his blue-grey uniform shone the emblem of the Great Imperium: three planets circling a shining star. The dark face was half-covered by the broad equatorial rim of the regulation service communications helmet he wore. I saw only the grey eyes, the narrow nose and the firm mouth. He stopped exactly three steps away from me. His report followed, given in pure Arkonese, although the light Zalitish accent was not to be overlooked. During the report he held his balled right fist pressed against the left chest where it joined the shoulder. There was nothing to be seen that would have betrayed to an observer that this space officer was in reality a Terran. No one-not even the 50 genuine Zalites within the ranks of our commando team-could conclude that the First Officer of the brand new Arkonide battleship Kon-Velete, and Perry Rhodan, First Administrator of the Solar Imperium, were one and the same. Those individuals aware of the situation were also well aware of the necessity to hold their tongues about it. In accordance with the ancient custom, I also pressed my right hand against my left chest and thanked the officer. Behind the men lined up in their ranks, the huge spherical body of the 800-meter spacer Kon-Velete rose high into the sparsely cloud-flecked sky of Naator. The sole satellite of the fifth world of the Arkon System, it had been selected to temporarily serve as the site for the tactical education of space crews recruited by the Robot Regent. Rhodan's stiff bearing, assumed in deference to protocol, relaxed. He threw me another warning glance before returning to formation with those ridiculously short steps. He conformed in every detail to Zalitish regulations. I pulled my cape tighter over my chest. An icy wind blew over the wide plain, whose former aspect-that of a rocky desert-had been starkly altered by the laying of a meter-thick layer of steel-plastic. The thus-created spaceport bore the name NA-4. Just 24 hours (standard time) before, I had received the order to move the Kon-Velete onto this field. With that we knew that takeoff could not be very far away. I turned around and saluted to the two thoroughly frozen Arkonide officers. They sat in an open impact-field glider and were busy inspecting the lined-up crews of the many spaceships. In my capacity as commander of the new battleship, I beamed the all-ready signal by way of the sender built into my helmet. The older man raised his hand in salute. He was Admiral Semekho. Thin and seeming very fragile and weak, he sat next to the robot driver. Yet he belonged to the small number of Arkonides who still had enough energy and initiative to serve as commanding officer of a forward fleet base. "I wish you much luck, Capt. Ighur," he said, his voice coming from the speakers in my helmet. "You will carry the glory that is Arkon into the depths of space. You are to take off with the squadron of heavy units. Wait for the takeoff signal. Again I wish you much luck." The younger officer at Semekho's side waved apathetically to me and checked off the name of my ship on the list he carried. Lightly humming, the glider went on. With bitter feelings I watched the vehicle until it stopped before the next ship down the row, a battlecruiser direct from the robot production line. I was to 'carry the glory that is Arkon into the depths of space,' the old and worn-out man had said. "The glory that is Arkon"! He, who must have been about 10,000 years younger than I, had no idea that long before him I had been an admiral and commanding officer of a

squadron of Arkonide ships. Then, when the methane breathers were attacking our interstellar empire, 'glory' was an appropriate term to apply to Arkon. At that time we did not find it necessary to man the units of our fleet with subject races. Twenty billion Arkonides, each man a highly trained specialist in his own area, stood at our disposal. Not one of us would have tolerated a robot or an alien intelligence in our control rooms or command posts. Even suggesting to the youngest apprentice technician that he might have to obey the orders of a non-Arkonide would have led to mutiny. And now-how did it look now? Angry and at the same time painfully touched, I looked over at the crew of robots, marked with different colours, that had lined up behind the ranks of the men of my ship. Each of the special machines had a specific assignment to carry out on board the ship, and programming the emotionless creations for all the different tasks had been a time-consuming and troublesome chore. In contrast to the other and pitiable commanders I at least had 200 genuinely living men on board with whom I could speak, laugh and, if necessary, curse. 150 of them were dynamic men of action from the ranks of the Solar Space Patrol. They were space travellers with whom one could go into missions no matter how dangerous without having to fear that chaos would ensue the first time the ship was hit by enemy fire. None of them were prone to shellshock; none of them would desert their posts in fear. Besides these 150 men were 50 authentic Zalites, who had been assigned to me some weeks before. The new battleship was to be manned by at least 200 thinking beings, since past experience at the blockade front near the Druuf discharge zone had shown that robot crews alone were no longer enough. Neither Perry Rhodan nor I had been happy about having to take the Zalites on board. Naturally we would have to be careful from now on that we did not make any serious mistakes. Even one English word might excite surprise and suspicion. Still vivid in everyone's memories were the mysterious attacks, although we had successfully seen to it that our men had come through the medical and psychological examinations in good shape. To round out our bad luck, among the fifty Zalites were two officers with whom I had to trust leadership posts. Since we were supposedly Zalites ourselves, I could not find any plausible reason to simply reject two competent-rated men. I found it difficult to shake off my worries. We were in an alien environment and among bitter enemies who would have mercilessly struck with even the slightest hint of our true origin. The gigantic Robot Brain on Arkon 3 had recently added a new subject to the general fleet training program: 'Studies in Terran Battle Tactics'! When I heard of that for the first time I grew weak in the knees. According to the course description, the Regent was preparing for the conquest of the Solar System even though it still did not know where the Earth even was. In a few months, the Druuf threat would come to an end by itself, for the discharge zone was once more approaching an unstable state. This time, however, the aliens from the other time-plane would no longer have any possibility of invading Einstein Space. If they knew that their opportunity would last for only a few more months, then the Robot Regent would have to be ready for anything. Already it was clear that the Druufs were attacking with enormous fleets. Once the Druufs ceased their attacks, the Regent would turn its attention to the gradually increasing irritant named Earth. Then the discovery of our galactic position would be only a matter of time. Such knowledge led us to the decision to put the Regent out of action once and for all, assuming it could be so simply turned off or blown up. At the moment it looked as though Rhodan's plan, carried out so far at great effort and expense, was doomed to failure. The date was March 18, 2044, Terran time. On January 21 we had taken off in the Drusus and the fast cruiser California after making the most basic preparations. An open attack against the Robot Regent would have been senseless. At this time the Robot had almost 60,000 warships standing by in the vicinity of the discharge zone. If we were going to render the Regent harmless, we had no choice but to resort to subterfuge. So the 150 men of the commando team had been converted into Zalites even while they were still on Earth. I too had been given the typical

reddish brown skin and the long copper-coloured hair which, when the light shone just right, shimmered greenishly. I heard a slight cough in my earphones. Rhodan, standing near the front of the lined-up men, gave me a warning glance. I came out of my brooding and resumed playing my role in the ceremony. I saluted again to the formation and ordered over the communicator: "Let the crew go on board, Maj. Sesete!" Rhodan turned around. His orders resounded over the wide plain. 200 identically uniformed men marched towards the open ground hatches of the battleship. More than 1,000 robots followed behind them. Among the robots were also the new battle machines designed for ground operations. They were steel giants with built-in swivel-guns and four multi-jointed arms. Almost three meters tall, they towered far above the other robots. I stood near one of the ship's telescopic landing legs and watched the troop of men board. They seemed well disciplined: we had expended every effort to learn Zalitish formalities. We had landed on Voga 4 with the help of a matter transmitter secretly installed there. The cosmic agent Jeremy Toffner had slipped us into the capital city of Tagnor where he found a prepared base of operations waiting for us in the catacombs beneath an arena. From then on, our mission had grown more dangerous. Months before, an Arkonide space admiral named Calus had landed on Zalit, his task as assigned to him by the Robot Regent to recruit Zalitish spacemen for service in the Arkonide fleet. For all practical purposes, Calus was the personality on Voga 4, which was why we went to the trouble of putting one of our men in his place. After wearisome preparations by our scientific team, we succeeded in putting the slender Sgt. Roger Osega, disguised as Calus, in the governmental palace of Tagnor. The genuine Calus was our prisoner. After that, it was easier for the 150 disguised Terrans to pass as Zalites. We were provided with flawless identification papers that finally enabled us to deceive the Arkonide impressment squad. Halfway through February 2044, we were at length brought in fleet transport to the huge moon of the planet Naat, where our difficulties began anew. The Robot Regent had given the galactic physicians the assignment problem to deceive the Aras and smuggle false data about each individual in our group into the automatic crew register. Even that was successful. It was only weeks later that things almost came to a catastrophe. On the distant planet Zalit, 3.14 light-years from the Arkon System, Zalitish resistance fighters had successfully carried out an assassination plot against the Arkonide commanding officer, Admiral Calus. But it was our Sgt. Osega who was killed. At the last moment, our mutants and scientists left behind on Zalit removed Osega's body. If it had been found, someone unquestionably would have realized that instead of Calus a thorough alien had fallen victim to the senseless attack. Once again we had escaped disaster but the event served to show us just how unpredictable fate could be. When we had landed on Zalit, we assumed that in a few weeks we would reach Arkon 3 and there act according to plan. Not one of our expectations had been confirmed! Mountains of difficulty had, risen before us. Again and again compromise solutions had been necessary. With each passing day things happened that were not part of our original plans at all. We were tied down for weeks on the huge moon. Shortly after our arrival we had been assigned a factory-new battleship of the Imperium Fleet. I was named commander, since I had been fitted out on Zalit with papers attesting to my qualifications for such a rank. If we had thought that events would continue in so smooth a manner, we had only deceived ourselves again. Training flight after training flight followed. We practiced all possible kinds of squadron manoeuvres and, not only that, we had to take care that the 50 genuine Zalites didn't hear any unconsidered words. Programming the robots had occupied our specialists for 14 days. In our efforts to fulfil our duties exactly and satisfactorily, we did not find any opportunities for carefully thinking through our plans. Strongly hoping that everything would still succeed, we entered our service with the Arkonide Fleet. Discipline was strict and punishment was harsh. The Arkonides had long known how to deal with crews made up of subject races pressed into service more or less against their will. It was quite natural that such people would not be especially zealous. And

now today I had received the order to take the battleship along with its trained crew to Arkon, where it would probably undergo further tests. I shuddered when I thought of the dangers connected with the move. The Solar Imperium's most important men were on board a spaceship that was flying directly into the lion's den. I was now very glad that we had left the mousebeaver Pucky, the two-headed mutant Goratschin and the female mutants behind at the base on Zalit. We would probably have run into immeasurable difficulties if we had taken these individuals along into the final action. Certainly we could not have disguised Pucky and Goratschin as Zalitish natives, even with the most determined of efforts. The last of the robot troops marched past me. These were the special machines of the leak security corps, marked by red circles on their metallic chests. Perry Rhodan stood at the foot of the extended entrance ramp. The Kon-Velete was a new and battle-worthy ship but it did not possess the slightest comfort. Even the commander's cabin was spartan simple in its furnishings, and the sanitary installations were by our standards more than insufficient. The Robot Regent evidently did not think it necessary to reconvert the gigantic assembly lines on Arkon 3 simply because the new spaceships were suddenly to be manned by living beings. When the last robot had disappeared, I glanced upwards. The open hatch of the airlock lay 22 meters above us. There the curve of the lower pole cap began. The 800-meter colossus was in any case a ship a commander could be enthusiastic about. I had long given up hope of ever being able to stand in the control room of an Arkonide spacer again. My long wandering through the history of the Earth was at an end. Now a new epoch was beginning. Right in front of me stood the man who in merely the space of a few decades had transformed the once so primitive Earth into a planet of galactic importance. Before Rhodan spoke to me, he touched the switch of his helmet radio, checking it. Were we ever to leave the units on during an incriminating discussion, it could mean our ruin. I also checked my radio. It was switched off. Three guards appeared in the airlock. The men belonged to our group. Everything was in order. Lt. Olavson waved at us reassuringly. I looked around carefully once more. To the left and right of our landing place stood the battlecruisers of the fourth group. Each had received a crew of only 50 men: far too few for the ships which were, after all, 500 meters in diameter. Their battle-worthiness was considerably impaired by their lack of men. As a result of the total degeneration of my people on Arkon, the ruling robot suffered a chronic manpower shortage. The Regent tried to make up for what it lacked in fighting ability due to insufficient crews by substituting quantity. "Takeoff in 32 minutes", I said lowly to Rhodan. The sharp wind drove into my open mouth, making my teeth ache. Perry only nodded. He had long given up rehashing matters that had already been discussed a thousand times. Now the important thing was finally transporting our group of men to where we could carry out our plans. We had done everything that was within our power. Now we could only throw ourselves on the mercy of fate. What would happen from now on was out of our hands. "Three more Zalites are sick," Rhodan informed me. "Bell just got the report. They can't tolerate the climate here. How do you feel?" He looked at me closely. I knew that my face was showing signs of tension. "I'm alright," I told him evasively. "Don't forget to salute again when I enter the control room after you." I could still hear his imprecation as I stood on the slowly upwards-gliding steps of the entrance ramp. The three guards snapped to attention. Olavson's loud voice made me wince. He could not accustom himself to reporting in a normal tone of voice. It was just as well, for Zalitish regulations required such loudness. I thanked him, then entered the axial lift in front of Rhodan. The lift took us up through the centre of the ship, stopping automatically at the anteroom just outside the control centre. Perry went ahead, opened the massive hatch and once again reported. Only then could I go in. The constant ceremony was gradually becoming irritating. The Zalites had adopted it from old Arkonide military protocol but as time went by it had grown so exaggerated that even I did not feel comfortable with it. Besides our men there were also two

'authentics' present. Thanks to the enormous class differences in effect on Vega 4, they regarded me almost as a superior being. Lt. Kecc, the communications-radar officer on duty, stood by his swivel chair almost as though petrified long after the Terrans had sat down again. Rhodan glanced angrily at the narrow-chested man with the thin face. The second Zalite sat at the control board of the antigravitation system. He could not wreak any havoc there because the ship's positronicon would eventually automatically correct any errors, even without his participation. I looked around attentively, seeing long familiar faces which more or less showed that the men had had quite enough of the game of deception they had been playing for weeks. I knew the psychological difficulties too well not to know the pressure under which they laboured. So I said with more than one meaning: "The Great Cöordinator of Arkon has just informed me that we are to land on Arkon 3 in a few hours. There our final tactical training will begin. In at most four weeks we'll be sent to the front. Long live the Great Imperium!" The two Zalites repeated the last sentence loudly. The Terrans seemed less enthusiastic. Those were the only small details that might have alerted a very observant onlooker to the fact something suspicious was going on. Luckily for us, the 'authentics' were not quite so fanatic as that. I knew that at least 40 of the Zalites aboard had been impressed into service. John Marshall, chief of the Solar Mutant Corps, nodded to me in a barely noticeable manner. He had checked the Zalites' thought impulses. Everything seemed to be in order with them. Rhodan stood before me to receive the order for takeoff. I gave it tersely and loudly while he looked at me as icily as though I were personally responsible for the fact we had not yet reached Arkon. This operation was hardly a cakewalk Dow. It was based strictly on a suspicion that months before had still seemed to me an absolute certainty. By now, however, we had already suffered such difficulties that the calculations and conclusions made and reached then themselves seemed questionable to me. When I thought of that I almost became ill. So I constantly made an effort to let no one suspect that I no longer trusted my own original evaluations. It was clear that we could not defeat the Regent by direct means. It was just as clear that the time was past in which an admittedly dangerous but still possible flight into the system of Arkon's white sun could be undertaken. The Regent had hermetically sealed off that sector of space. So there was only one way in which the Robot Brain, growing gradually all-powerful, could be destroyed. We had to slip in as inconspicuously as possible, strike, and then wait to see what happened next. During the planning I had made it perfectly clear to Rhodan that escaping from Arkon was no longer possible. He had done it once but that was at a time when the Regent had not yet completed its preparations. Now the situation was entirely different. The Arkonide scientist Khrest and I had been of the opinion that our venerable ancestors would not have neglected to install a flawlessly functioning failsafe system during the construction of the Robot Brain. In other words, there must be an overriding emergency circuit that would erase the Brain's entire programming as soon as the machinery ceased to function dependably and in the manner intended by its Arkonide builders. Such a situation was now unquestionably in effect. The Regent seemed to be almost short-circuited and its actions were of such a contradictory nature that the failsafe system envisioned by Khrest and myself should have long since been activated. Why that had so far failed to happen we could not guess. We had undertaken this mission simply because we had told ourselves that there must be a way. That was how we had arrived in our current situation. For my part I felt that the men in the Terran commando squad no longer trusted me 100%. Everything had happened just the opposite of the way we had imagined it would. Now we had to convincingly play the role of the loyal and submissive colonial crew of a spaceship and since there were only 150 of us we were hardly capable of effectively manning that ship. We were on the verge of either flying to our doom or to our triumph. There was no longer any third alternative. We still could have withdrawn and given up during the preparations on Zalit but now it was too late for that. I was troubled all the

more by doubts about the arguments that had formerly sounded so convincing. Rhodan seemed to have already noticed something, for otherwise he would not have constantly asked me about the state of my health. I was ripped out of my self-torturing musings by a penetrating crack that made the control room shake. Three red lights lit up in control section 18. I overheard Bell's Zalitish curses and I also saw Rhodan's angrily flashing eyes. The remorseful face of a Zalite technician appeared on an intercom telescreen. "You don't need to tell me a damned thing!" Bell cried out in anger. "See to it that the machinery gets going again. Look, how many times do I have to tell you how to run antigrav projectors? Not all at once, you sleepyhead! We recorded here during the peak shock a load of about 8000 amperes. Let's go-start up the machinery. "The safety blocks have been activated," answered the Zalite, trembling. Bell was practically beside himself while Rhodan and I fought to retain our composure. It was always the same story with these people, who the gods only knew should have had enough experience to avoid such things. All the power plants aboard the new battleship were running at highest possible voltage so that the amperage could be kept low. That was something Zalite engineers never seemed to understand. They barged ahead as if we only had 10,000 volts with accordingly high amperage. "Shut the safety devices off by hand," Rhodan ordered sharply. "Send some technicians down and have two engineers there to supervise them. Hurry up! Report back to me as soon as we're in space." The Zalite claimed in a fearful voice that there had been two power failures only the day before, and that was true. Nonetheless, the safety blocks had to be manually deactivated. Only then would they react to remote control. Just two minutes before takeoff the ready signal came in. Before that the fuses had still popped three times, which was unmistakable proof that overloads occurred repeatedly in circuit sector 18. If the problem had not been corrected by that point, the automatic fuse bank would have finally shut down altogether. Were such things to happen during a battle, they could mean the end of the ship. Ever since we had begun to fly with a partially Zalite crew, we suspected we knew why the Robot Regent's blockade fleet had suffered such heavy losses. The Druufs were fewer in number but they had vastly better crews. Our natures being what they were, the Terrans and I wanted to constantly correct the incompetent Zalites. We were trying to show them that such mistakes did not have to happen. The technicians of our team had looked at me in surprise when I told them several days before how little the more or less good training of the Arkonide colonists meant to us: it was riot our concern. Even Rhodan had only hesitantly accepted the logic of my words. It was simply not his way of doing things to continually tolerate the same old incompetence. The thoroughness and drive for perfection of my friends from the Solar Imperium were slowly becoming irksome. They could fly into terrific rages when a Zalite could not or would not understand something. But this was the way of the human race. Whatever they'd undertake nearly always was done with precision and efficiency. I had to consider that undeniable fact while two battlecruisers of the fourth group took off to the left and to the right of our position. I listened to the engines, roar that, despite our functioning noise absorber, was almost unbearable. One giant after the other shot through the thin layer of air covering the moon until it was our turn to go. I sat in the high-backed commander's seat of the Kon-Velete. The main controls had been installed in front of it. If it were necessary, I could shut down the battleship's most important systems with one flick of a switch. Rhodan sat to my right and Bell to the left. Their job was flying the steel spherical colossus, or at least to the extent it was not done for them by the automatic controls. A vidscreen lit up and the wrinkled face of Admiral Semekho, appeared. "You have permission for take off," he announced. "Group in sector 3 and assume course in formation. Follow the instructions given by the flagship. I wish you much luck. Over and out." Rhodan looked at me and I nodded to him. The order to fly in formation was unpleasant but it would have been illusory to hope for some other possibility. We could never reach Arkon alone. Ten seconds later our engines began to roar. With an

antigrav-compensation value of 100% of Naator's gravitation, we lifted off. Rhodan held the tips of his fingers on the manual controls since we had determined that the automated synchronizers that had to coordinate the individual yields of thrust were not working as precisely as they should. During the earlier test flights deviations of up to 1.85° had occurred and as yet the problem had not been corrected. That showed us once again that the product of the Regent's mammoth factories was not necessarily perfect. The automatic assembly lines seemed about due for an overhaul. We went into space at only a low velocity and joined the waiting squadron near Naat Spaceport #5. Our Kon-Velete was the lead ship of the fourth battlecruiser group. That convinced me that a commodore would be sent on board by the time of our arrival on Arkon at the latest. There was little ground for hoping that I would be named squadron leader. Bitter feelings and dark thoughts of hatred welled up within me. Ten thousand years before I had flown out of that solar system to carry out the order of the Great Council. I was only to stop on the distant Earth and find out why the colonists there were broadcasting constant calls for help. What was to have been a routine flight became instead an eternal exile. Now I was coming home after all those millenniums but the old Arkon no longer existed. My venerable ancestors had long since passed on and I felt like a useless leftover whose hopes and longings had become impossible to fulfil. A robot ruled the interstellar empire. That being the situation, there would be little point in proudly and arrogantly announcing myself as Atlan of the ruling Gonozal family. My family had probably been long forgotten. No one would remember now that we had once picked the Imperators. My high rank as Crystal Prince of the Realm could no longer be of any influence, just like my rank of Admiral of the Imperium Fleet. So I had no other choice than to hope that I would not be assigned a stupid, arrogant officer with overly-refined upbringing and decadent and unfit patterns of thought as my superior. Since such a danger was indeed a very real one, I now tried to prepare for the inevitable. I grasped instinctively at my chest where, beneath the thin fibre of the Zalite uniform, my cell vibration activator pulsed. I had my relative immortality because of it but I still did not know how it functioned. The only thing I had been able to learn in the long time since it had been given to me was that an advanced collective being had felt threatened by the same intelligent creatures that were also my enemies. While halting my natural process by a mysterious microdevice, it had also named me a representative of its interests. I pulled myself together in an effort not to lose myself in thought once again. Rhodan's examining look shamed me, He seemed to know exactly what was going on in my mind. "It won't be long now!" he said lowly. There was so much meaning in those few words that I shuddered. What would come of my theories? Was there really an overriding failsafe mechanism in the unknown interior of the largest robot brain in the Milky Way? If so, when would it be activated and what did one have to do to deactivate it? There were many questions for which we had no answers. We were only certain of one thing: once we were on Arkon, there could be no going back! The squadron continued to form up. When all 68 units had assembled, we received the final departure order. We set out at a speed of only 100 km/sec². Till now we had not been able to maintain a well-ordered form-and true robots were more reliable than the Zalites. Bell's sarcastic laugh did not please me. These Terrans should not get the idea that they were vastly superior to everyone else. Of course, each individual Terran was of more value than 50 trained colonists but that did not allow us to hope that we would be able to solve our problem just like that. So far, we had been lucky-that was all! Someone had always been able to handle each suddenly recognized danger. In that our mutants had played the chief role. Without their parasensory abilities our endeavour would not have been possible at all. Now the question was how well they would stand up under the final tests of fitness on Arkon 3. Because of the pressing circumstances, Pucky and Goratschin had already been dropped from our team. Betty Toufry and Ishy Matsu had also been required to stay behind in the catacombs beneath the Zalite

arena. The situation no longer looked as hopeful as Bell probably still assumed. Rhodan switched the controls to the automatic pilot. He leaned back comfortably in his seat, glanced at the shining vidscreens of the panoramic gallery with an all-encompassing eye and then turned his face to me. "It really looks gorgeous out there, doesn't it?" he commented. His eyes were expressionless and I had the feeling they saw right through me. Yes, Globular Cluster M-13 was indeed gorgeous! Here the stars were much closer together than in other sectors of the galaxy. By Arkonide standards, M-13 was the hub of the universe, even though it lay on the outermost edges of the known galaxy. Here was the germ cell of the Great Imperium; here the conquest, colonization and also the subjugation had begun. It was my home. Now the question was how I would be received. I was more helpless than a prodigal son for here there, was no one left who could remember me. 2/ NINE MONTHS TILL ANNIHILATION? We were treated like tramps who might have chanced to wander in and who ought to be glad not to have been immediately arrested. All the lovely memories I had of Arkon were increasingly driven out of my mind to make room for a dull anger. The logic sector of my extra-brain no longer spoke up at all. Instead, the section for photographic memory was heard from more and more often and in more urgent tones. Eminent Arkonides whose brains had been activated with the permission of the medical council could forget nothing. So it happened that the bleak steel expanses of Arkon 3 struck me as oddly familiar. Nothing had changed on the world that my ancestors had moved into position with powerful gravo-fields in order to make of it an entire planet devoted to the purpose of war. It was the largest of the three planets orbiting the huge white star in the form of an isosceles triangle. The first planet, the Crystal World, served as before for residential purposes. No. 2 still functioned as the most important trading centre of the Imperium. There landed the spaceships of all known races. However, we were prevented from taking a look at the planet-girdling trade and freightways. Sorrowfully and filled with an insistent pain, I remembered the full silos and storage warehouses in which the goods of the known galaxy were piled. Now all that seemed to be over. The Robot Regent limited itself to the most essential trading activity, its first priority the matter of obtaining vital raw materials. Arkon 3, the world of the Fleet and the vast shipyards, required titanic amounts of material to satiate the eternally hungry assembly lines. The home of the Arkonides had been and remained even now a galactic wonder. No other race had been able to move two heavenly bodies of a solar system out of their naturally determined orbits and set them exactly according to plan into a new position. Ever since my forefathers had accomplished that scientific miracle, our then-pressing need for more room had been at an end. Then the time of the great emigration had come and the interstellar empire began. The nearby star of Voga had been our first goal but just 500 years after it had first been settled, the colonists' descendants no longer counted as pure Arkonides. The environment there had had an effect on body and spirit, as was to happen virtually everywhere else. The exact number of Arkonide descendants was unknown but we estimated the number of living intelligent beings scattered through space at about 50,000 times a billion individuals. They had grown alien to Arkon. The majority were no longer aware of their true heritage and the result was bitter colonial wars in which ownership claims and stormily demanded rights of independence were fought over. This was what we were treated to now! For the first time I experienced firsthand what it is like to be dealt with as a member of an underdeveloped race. If among those mocking us had been some Arkonides with advanced mental faculties, my being there would not have been quite so unbearable an experience. Unfortunately, there were only mindless fools there whose burned-out brains were suited only for carrying out the work dictated to them by the Robot Regent as quickly and as conveniently as possible. The commodore of the fourth action group for whom I was waiting arrived on board the Kon-Velete two hours after our landing on Arkon 3. The still-young man with the empty, occasionally dreamy seeming eyes and the expressionless face seemed

to consider himself a demigod. If he had ever understood anything of modern spaceflight, he seemed to have forgotten it completely by this time. At first I had hated him but then I grew to pity him. His first act was to have a portable simulator device brought on board. I had to put my foot down to keep him from setting up that apparatus for showing crazy light-reflection compositions in the control room. Never will I forget his devastating look and I would remember again and again Rhodan's ashen face and clenched fists. That degenerate servant of a huge computer now commanded the fourth group, a squadron of 17 battleworthy ships. He called himself Gailos but I had never heard of his family before. I was ashamed in front of the Terrans who saw in that man so clearly what had become of my people. Yet Gailos evidently belonged to the most active members of the Arkonide race or otherwise the Regent would have never appointed him a commodore. For 14 days, standard time, we had to conduct flight manoeuvres in combat-simulating conditions under his command. For the first time we had to press the weapon buttons and fly feint attacks against robot-piloted fleet ships. The results of that were such that here and there Terrans were unwisely breaking out into suppressed and muffled laughter. When Rhodan saw just how capable our new commodore was, he had risked that which we had not dared to do for weeks. During the hopeless confusion resulting from a badly directed attack, Rhodan abruptly switched on the hytrans system while his men watched in breathless silence. Without a doubt he intended to try a short transition just to see if the new battleship could be depended on. He probably would have later tried to shift the blame for the 'inadvertent' transition to Gailos' shoulders. However, it did not come to that. The Kon-Velete could not go into transition at all. The structural field converter had not stirred and the instrument dials had not even lit up. Then we knew just how careful the Robot Regent was! Now we were to land on Arkon 3 for the 11th time. The 14th day had passed and we had still found no way of carrying out our actual intentions—simply because we hadn't been given a vacation. Our quarters lay deep under the steel surface of Spaceport A-R-145. When we landed we had to leave the ship immediately and disappear into the depths of the war planet. Since the surface of Arkon 3 had become too small with the passage of time, my early forefathers had already begun to hollow the world out. And so the most important control stations, power plants and command centres lay in part up to 6,000 meters beneath the ground. In reality, Arkon 3 was a planetary body honeycombed with millions of holes and tunnels bored through it, a world on which everything existed solely to serve naked purpose. At first their stay in the underground cities had been a terrible experience for the Terrans but they finally accepted the inevitable and tried to get some enjoyment out of it despite their prison-like surroundings. Even though the environment seemed unnatural and hardly cheerful to my friends, it did not lack a certain amount of interest. Arkon 3 was now prepared for attack from space. Beneath its surface, Rhodan and his men had seen for the first time how a perfectly normal planet could be transformed into a galactic fortress of the first rank. We breathed a sigh of relief when Gailos, after making an exhausted-sounding transmission to the commanders of the other ships, ordered the end of the combat exercises and decided to make a landing. Reginald Bell, second officer of the Kon-Velete, conspicuously inflated his red cheeks and threw a glance at our new commodore that made my heart beat faster. I looked at him so sharply that he sullenly turned away and balled his broad hands into fists. Bell, after Rhodan probably the man with the most steel-like nerves in the Solar Fleet even though he often tried to conceal the fact, was on the edge of a nervous breakdown. The failure of the hytrans mechanism had given him as well as other men a shock. Formerly we had still hoped that in case of danger we could disappear into hyperspace with the Kon-Velete. Now even that way out was blocked. The Regent would probably unlock the structure converter only when a Dew ship was actually flying into action. It did not seem to trust allies any too far, even when they were Zalites and close neighbours. We had long accustomed ourselves to avoiding the making of remarks or even carrying on conversations that could

be overheard in the presence of aliens. Rhodan himself had urgently warned that robot surveillance was probably taking place. If the Robot Brain was so distrustful, thanks to its ancient programming, that it would arrange for hyperengines to be disconnected even during important manoeuvres, then other security measures could be expected as well. I was glad that Bell kept a grip on himself. He had most likely been on the point of directing a biting remark at Gailos. Once again Rhodan sat as though frozen in the First Officer's seat. He seemed to be interested only in the control dials with a direct bearing on the task at hand. I watched him unobtrusively until the engine control centre called over the videophone. The chief engineer, also a disguised Terran, announced that the consumption of radioactive material at high-relativistic velocity was 6.85% greater than normal. I acknowledged the important announcement and looked around at Gailos. The commodore lay comfortably back in his reclining seat, his face showing a bored expression. Sighing, he turned his head as I stood at attention before him, following regulations, and repeated the report. The old custom of the Arkonides required me to address him as Your Eminence, the title accorded to the leader of a squadron. He in turn spoke to us in quite familiar fashion and with obvious condescension. My blood boiled once more as I saw his puffy face so close to me. During my long wanderings on Earth I had bowed my head before barbarian kings and ignorant nobles whom any Arkonide boy could have humbled with just two or three questions from his general education. I had smiled over the pompous customs of these people and nevertheless bowed my head to mouth the same empty phrases to other men, always fully conscious of my own boundless superiority. It had not bothered me to be treated one time as a slave and another with ludicrous contempt as a disreputable character of low caste. But now things were different! It seemed hardly possible to me that I could be standing before a man of my race whose sole concern in life was insuring his personal wellbeing and chattering in the Crystal Planet's palaces about incomprehensible 'works of art'. The least important soldier aboard my former flagship was worth more than a hundred parasites of Gailos' type. I repeated my report concerning the too high consumption of radioactive material. "We'll have our stores replenished," the commodore said sleepily. "Your Eminence, we won't have that option if we're sent to the front." His forehead wrinkled. Again I heard the very deep sigh. "All right, all right Ighur, I'm sure we'll be lucky. Has too much really been consumed? But what I really want to say is this: have the microtapes with Askor's new masterwork that I ordered come in yet?" "No, Your Eminence." "Disgraceful," Gailos grumbled, and his thin, transparent hands clutched the seat-arms. "I shall have to complain. By the way, it smells badly here in the control room. Where is that odour coming from? I shan't tolerate it another moment." I closed my eyes for a second, trying to retain my self-control. If only my old teacher TARTH had been here to see this! He too had been an Arkonide-but what an Arkonide! "That is the normal smell of a control room, Your Eminence. The many machines, the warm-running vidscreens and the heated insulation have their own typical odour." "Disgusting, simply disgusting. Help me up." He stretched out his hand and I pulled him out of the reclining seat. Standing in front of me, he seemed thinner and even more fragile, although he was my height. He rubbed his left wrist angrily. "It seems to me that they don't know how to treat Arkonides on Zalit!" he said with a trace of sharpness. I looked down at his arm, which I had only very gently grasped. "I beg your forgiveness, Your Eminence." He sized me up in quickly subsiding anger. Then, with a gesture of condescension, he turned to go. Without looking around, he strutted out. The two heavy combat robots, specially detailed to serve as the commodore's bodyguards, followed him out. Not another word was said about the important radioactive material problem. The Zalite at the antigrav control device looked at me pale with terror. The man next to him repressed a grin but he was a Terran. Characters were so different on board this battleship I swung wordlessly into the commander's seat at the main controls and called the machine room. When I told him about the problem of replenishing our fuel at the front and what Gailos

had said about it, the chief engineer's eyes went wide but he retained his composure and simply nodded. Meanwhile, the fourth battlecruiser group sped on towards Arkon 3. Just before the landing, Rhodan switched on the automatic enlarger for the outside cameras. Sections of the planet's surface appeared on the sector vidscreens. However we saw only gigantic spaceports and unmistakable complexes of buildings so close together there was hardly any space between them. The War World was a single, solid city in which no plant grew and no clear brook relieved the eye. Arkon 3 was a desolate wasteland of steel and technology beyond any comparison. If the planet were cut off from its supply lines, the stores of raw materials for the mammoth factories would be exhausted within four weeks at the most. Knowledge of that fact had in early times led again and again to blockades but even that could not defeat the Great Imperium. I still remember well the convoys we had sent out at the time of the Nopoleter Uprising, defending Arkon's lifelines. Our enemies had never succeeded in effectively closing the system off for even an hour. Now that was no longer at all possible. About 28,000 light-years away, a non-Arkonide enemy threatened the humanoid races of the galaxy. The Regent had used the situation to send all the rebels against the might of the Imperium to the front. That impressed unit of former opponents was reason enough for Perry Rhodan to undertake a move against the Regent at this time. But what had we really accomplished? We had risked our life so we might be allowed to practice manoeuvres with one of the Robot Brain's battleships. If Bell had had his way, we would have overpowered the 50 authentic Zalites and tried to destroy the energy dome over the Regent with the Kon-Velete's weapons. It had taken some time and the help of some appropriate examples to convince him that not even 10,000 battleships manned by topnotch crews could have done that. Now Bell looked longingly once more at the shining vidscreens. The many spaceports swarmed with fighting ships of all kinds. Arkon's production was running at full speed. Since Commodore Gailos was no longer making himself heard from, I took over command of the small squadron. I turned on the hypercom system and checked the automatic fine-tuning of our group frequency just as relay station A-R-145 called. This was an auxiliary system of the great Brain. Each port of Arkon 3 possessed such a subordinate computer which passed on to the local commander the orders and decisions of lesser importance. The deep-red triangular pattern appeared on the vidscreen. I leaped up and stood at attention in accordance with protocol. Now spoke the Imperium's actual ruler! "Capt. Ighur, Regent," I announced. The Robot Brain's substation avoided asking about the commodore. Evidently it knew very well what Arkonides of his sort tended to do. "Squadron order 12345," rang the unmodulated voice from the large loudspeakers of the special receiver. The red triangular pattern, the symbol for relay station A-R-145, remained on the vidscreen. Rhodan pressed the switch for the automatic recorder. Squadron orders had to be on file in the ship's records. "Ready to record, Regent," I announced. "Training manoeuvres have come to an end. The fourth battlecruiser squadron will remove to Spaceport A-3 and remain in the dockyards for 60 hours. The crew will leave the ship; a furlough of 50 hours will be allowed. The areas approved for Zalites may be entered and observed. The orders of the robot officers are to be carried out." I made an effort not to let my rapidly surging hope show. "Commodore Gailos has not been heard from, Regent. Shall I take over the squadron for the time being?" "Granted. His Eminence is resting. Over and out." The identification symbol faded from the screen. Relay station A-R-145 had switched off. I decided not to look around in triumph. My joy was probably premature, too, although this was the first furlough we had been given since going aboard the Kon-Velete. It could mean everything or nothing at all. The commanders of the other 16 units had listened in on the squadron order. They readily accepted my command over them. We advanced into Arkon's thick atmosphere, passed the atmospheric defence stations and at a height of 80 kilometres our ship was taken over by the remote control of command station A-3. A commander was not allowed to ever make a landing on his own: a further security provision on the part of the

Robot Brain. As the responsibility for the ship was thus taken from my shoulders, I noticed the tense expression on Rhodan's face. His shoulders were slightly drawn back, looking to me as though he were about to make a leap. While the outside microphones were broadcasting into the control room the whistling and howling of the tortured air molecules ravaged by our rapid descent, he turned his head. His eyes had that frozen look that indicated considerable inner excitement. I raised my eyebrows questioningly but he said nothing. Bell had also become disquiet. The telepath John Marshall looked over at us attentively. He seemed to sense that Rhodan's thoughts had grown hectic. I motioned barely perceptibly at the shining vidscreen of the special receiver. It would not have been a good idea to have said anything incriminating during the remote control landing. Command station A-3 was unquestionably listening in. I waited impatiently for the noise of the landing legs striking the ground, which always sounded as though the entire ship were being shaken apart. After just 5 minutes the red lamps lit up. The telescopic legs had been automatically extended. With a last roar of the equatorial rim engines, the Kon-Velete set down. Rhodan's bearing had not changed, only now a puzzling smile played at his lips. From then on I suspected that he had noticed something that had escaped me. But what could it have been? The final systems check took us about 15 minutes. Station after station announced itself shut down. At last even the emergency power unit, which in case of disaster would supply power to the control room and which had been running at a zero setting, died away and silence settled over the steel colossus named Kon-Velete. I stood up from my seat and stepped before the vidscreens. Command station A-3 used bright green wave lines as its identification symbol. "Capt. Ighur, Regent," I reported. "Ship ready for entering the dockyards." The station replied at once: "The Zalite crew will disembark. Personal weapons may not be taken along. Over and out." That was all I was told in the typically brief message. Naturally a robot squad was probably already waiting outside to escort us beneath the surface. Discharging the crew was the concern of the First Officer. Rhodan went into action at once, although I had the feeling it was only with difficulty that he could tear himself out of his pondering. I listened for a moment to his excessively loud orders, then called Commodore Gailos over the videophone. The busy signal lit up on the direct connection vidscreen. Evidently Gailos did not feel it worth his time to support the Regent's command by taking any action himself. Besides, I considered, a squadron leader did not have to be concerned with such things. It was the commander's business to see to order in his ship. Hoarsely, Bell shouted: "Attention!" Saluting only briefly, I stepped through the rear hatchway where my personal servant-robot was already waiting. I instructed it to pack up my few belongings so that they could later be brought to our as yet unknown quarters. At the entrance to the central axial lift, a sentry squad commanded by Lt. David Stern was waiting. The young officer's face was pale and growing more so. I passed him closely and as I did, he quickly whispered: "Gailos has already gone, sir. I'm worried because of our special equipment. If we aren't allowed to take any personal weapons along-isn't it possible that we'll be searched again? Maybe they'll want to make sure the order is being carried out?" I glanced swiftly at the nearest videophone camera. The glistening lens system could possibly be in operation. It was said that when a ship landed on Arkon 3, the walls grew eyes and ears. I began with a conscientious inspection of the lift's antigrav controls. Loudly and grumblingly I complained that the control board's coverplate was not tightly screwed on. During this decoy manoeuvre I whispered a few words to Stern. It would have been dangerous to have said any more aboard the battleship. "Have your men removed the things from their hiding places again?" "Right after the order to land. We're carrying everything on us. Sir, if we're searched..." He was quiet then and his face grew even paler. The three other men of the watch looked at me with burning eyes. For my part, I felt that the decision was coming closer with giant steps. "Wait here for Rhodan," I said lowly. "Tell

him your apprehensions, too. I'll see what I can do about any eventual searching. The mutants should disperse among the men so that they can intervene everywhere if they have to. Be quiet now." I leaped into the flickering antigrav field and plummeted. Once I had arrived at the bottom, I determined that the 50 authentic Zalites had already left the ship. With that Rhodan had given his men the chance to check out the hiding places of their special equipment one more time. My disquiet increased even more when I considered what the 150 daring men of the commando team were carrying on their persons. I had been present when the high capacity laboratories of the Earth had begun the production of miniaturized equipment. The most capable microtechnicians of the galaxy, the Swoons, had played a not inconsiderable role in that. Rhodan had made possible what had seemed impossible to me. So much was hidden in our men's special uniforms that they could have defeated an entire conventional army. Naturally we could not have entered into this mission without effective weapons. Nevertheless I felt a clammy sense of foreboding when I tried to imagine what would happen if the equipment were to be discovered. I waited by the large ground hatch until the battleship's crew had arrived. Rhodan gave the report. His face was composed and mask-like, Commodore Gailos was not to be seen. He had apparently already disappeared in his quarters. After just two minutes the open transport vehicles came up. They had large truck-beds with plastic seats and were remote-controlled. I received the next orders of the command station over my helmet radio. We were to simply climb aboard the transports and wait for what happened next. A special transport stood ready for the Kon-Velete's officers. Rhodan sent his men to the larger transport vehicle. Some meaningful glances were enough to put me into that feeling of numbness that always took over during moments of critical danger. The time had come! I followed Bell aboard the flat vehicle gliding on an energetic impact field. In contrast to the larger vehicles, this one had a robot for a driver. It would still be too much of a risk to discuss the situation. When Rhodan came on, he bent over closely to me, and as he did I noticed that his impulse beamer had been placed beneath his uniform, ready to be withdrawn at any time. "How do you recognize spaceships with functioning hyperengines?" he asked softly. I looked around. Spaceport A-3 was just as large and thus just as poorly arranged as others of its kind. Everywhere stood large and small units of the Arkonide Fleet but how one could tell which were ready for hyperflight and which were not I couldn't say. I shrugged regretfully. Rhodan sat down on the pneumatic bench next to me and stretched his legs out. Bell's tightly closed mouth told me that he was expecting anything to happen. From then on, I looked only at the bluish fluorescing energy dome filling the horizon on the other side of the landing field, rising high into the blue, heat-shimmering sky of Arkon 3. It was the largest defence screen I had ever seen in my life and beneath it was concealed the Robot Regent of Arkon. Rhodan's measurements, which he had obtained much earlier, showed that the dome covered a surface area of about 10,000 square kilometres. A square covering such an area would have measurements of 100 kilometres on each side. If in spite of Arkonide microtechnology the Brain still required such a large area for housing, then it was questionable whether it could be destroyed at all. We could never know where the weak points were and what we had to do to reach the important sections with our attack. Apart from that, all our speculations were pointless as long as we did not know how we could get an effective weapon of destruction inside the energy dome. I was convinced that the detonation of a bomb outside the screen would be useless. My entire hope rested on the two teleporters among our mutants. If these men were not able to quickly and inconspicuously penetrate the dome, we would have to find some other way. For weeks I had been concerned with the problem of energy supply, since it was within the area of my scientific specialty. It was quite clear that a robot brain of such magnitude would require more than one power station to supply the enormous amount of energy it needed. If I had my forefathers rightly estimated, they had also certainly arranged for an emergency power unit that would automatically switch on in

case of danger. The Regent's capacity for existence hung solely from a flawlessly functioning energy supply. How that was provided, none of us could know. Our vehicle moved on. Right behind us followed the four large transports, each with 50 men. Rhodan had seen to it that the 50 authentic Zalites had been given their own transport. Our men thus had the chance for a rapid exchange of opinions. Rhodan's slight telepathic ability was enough to pick up messages from the mutants, thanks to a limited brainwave modulation courtesy of Harno back on Zalit. At least we were not confined to radio traffic for our communication, which would have been impossible anyway since we were in the immediate area of numerous radio surveillance stations. We glided past the also-landed superbattleships of a newly formed fleet squadron. The 1500-meter giants were also manned by colonial crews. How effective they would be in combat with a trained opponent was somewhat unclear to me. In spite of the confused situation, I tried to think clearly and logically. The most important thing was not to be deterred by my conflicting feelings, which insisted again and again that the total destruction of the Robot Regent could mean the downfall of the galaxy. What would happen if we were really to succeed in putting the Brain out of action? What would be the position of the numerous colonial races and the till now suppressed alien races who were now fighting at the front in the interest of the Imperium with more or less good spaceships? What would by necessity take place if all the communications systems directed by the gigantic robot suddenly collapsed? What would be the result if the supply lines, all remotely controlled, no longer operated? Finally: would the billions of alien intelligences obey the orders of an Arkonide who by all rights should have been long dead? What sort of means should I use to force obedience in such a case? With Zalite crews on board the battleships? I needed only to look back at our Zalite sleepyheads to know that this was not possible. I could never supply the billions of robots, which had been constructed in about 10,000 different types, with their appropriate programs. That would not have been possible for a scientific team of 100,000 men. My reason told me that the destruction of the Regent was a kind of suicide. But if we did not destroy it, the Earth and the entire Sol system would be destroyed in at most 9 months. I glanced at Rhodan from the side. He seemed to be thinking only of the possibilities for an eventual escape and was wondering which ships were ready for hyperflight. He had probably not wanted to face the fact that escaping from Arkon in that manner was no longer possible. He had been able to do it once, about 65 years before, but then other conditions had prevailed. I tried to put aside the weighty thoughts over the sense and nonsense of our undertaking. I held instead to the original idea, which very simply and logically stated that my venerable forefathers would not have neglected to supply such a large robot brain with a failsafe circuit. We only had to find out when and under what conditions it went into effect to turn the Regent off and then our problems solved themselves. I gave a start. Some hundred meters ahead a vaulting, steel dome became visible, rising seamlessly out of the spaceport's metaloplastic covering. If there was going to be an inspection, then it would be only in the rayproof and pressure-secure airlocks of the entrances to the subterranean living areas. I felt inconspicuously for my thigh where my weapon was hidden in an inner pocket that conformed exactly to the shape of my body. Terran scientists had done such a good job that discovery of pieces of equipment by simply feeling was next to impossible. In that, they had worked from a human point of view. They had thought like Earthly police who searched a suspicious person only once and only with the natural tools nature had given them: their hands! They had overlooked the fact that on a 99% automated world there was no one there who had any possibility of using such methods. If things of that nature were to be determined on Arkon 3, then one was simply and rationally sent through an X-ray chamber! If that happened, then the question was whether the X-ray opaque inner lining of our pockets and holders would function. The screening would hold up under a simple X-ray treatment but only if the inevitable shadows showing up on the screen were not properly

interpreted. Rhodan's forehead was suddenly covered with a fine layer of perspiration, which oddly stabilized my formerly weakening self-control. Calm and collected, I looked over at the meter-thick steel doors opening up to let us in. The surface entrance was one of many. If it had an X-ray chamber, then it was still questionable whether the built-in devices were in operation. The robot driver stopped just in front of the dome, which was only a few meters high. I climbed out and waited for the rest of the men. Rhodan and Bell, except for me the highest ranking officers of the battleship, placed themselves behind me. I looked questioningly at the numerous camera lenses installed in the wall surfaces to the open doors. I rubbed my forehead involuntarily, blinked up at the mercilessly shining sun of Arkon and then firmly pulled down the switch of my helmet radio. "Capt. Ighur, to Regent!" I said with obvious sharpness. "The treaty I made with Admiral Calus over sending aid does not contain any point which obligates me to stand for hours at a time in blazing sunshine. I request immediate entry and quartering in climatically suitable rooms or otherwise I feel released from my responsibilities. Someone seems to forget that we are not accustomed to such temperatures. My men are showing signs of exhaustion. Out." Bell looked at me with wide eyes. Rhodan coughed in surprise then realized what was going on. We had to find a reason for getting through the hatch as quickly as possible. The men of the commando team had heard, too. They seemed to be holding their breath. The 50 genuine Zalites looked at me in awe. By their standards I had risked too much but they were truly suffering in the heat. Some seconds went by before the Brain answered. "Begin with the admission procedure. Your remark relative to refusing orders has been registered." "That's all the same to me," I said, still angrier. "I have no intention of prematurely ruining our health. I appeal to the Regent's logic sector. Do you want rested and battleworthy crews or feverish and exhausted soldiers?" "Enter," answered Substation A-3. Nothing more was said about refusing to carry out orders, something which I had only hinted at. "Disembark from the transports and form up in loose march order, double time through the hatch!" Rhodan shouted, loudly enough to make me step quickly to one side. "Occupants of the forward transport first! Double time, I said!" The 50 true Zalites ran as though they had the devil himself on their tail. Behind them came our men. Seconds later they were crowding around an entranceway about three meters wide in such confusion than an orderly X-ray procedure was almost out of the question. My heart beat hollowly and slowly. It seemed to me as though my blood was running much more heavily through my veins. I stood near the entrance, held my commander's cape closely over my steel-plastic helmet and turned my back to the sun. If the Terrans here and there seemed to have gone mad... well, they were good actors! Rhodan and Bell's shouting was an extra impetus for the men to even more wildly force their way forward. I noted with satisfaction that some strong men had fished 8 or 10 genuine Zalites out of the crowd so that the in fact unarmed individuals could be used, so to speak, as decoys. When our men had passed through the clearly visible X-ray device, they pushed the Zalites back where the oncoming Terrans caught them and used them for the same purpose. Rhodan, Bell and I acted at the right moment. Men the entrance was almost free, only 9 remaining Zalites still stood in front of the X-ray barrier. I motioned to Bell. The Zalites would have to serve for our cover as well. Bell's rough voice now really made my ears hurt. I had never before heard the stocky man shout like that. He turned himself loose on the pitiable Zalites, giving them a reprimand that made me smile in spite of the seriousness of the situation. "Stop right there!" he raged. "Who told you to go into the airlock first? Well, who? A little bird maybe? The First Officer told you, that's who, understand? Don't stand around like that-attention! Turn your faces to me. What kind of bearing is that? Now listen to me..." Bell's body stiffened as I stepped majestically through the entrance. The nine Zalites stood like stone idols precisely between me and the X-ray machine. Rhodan was so close behind me that he painfully trod on my heels. Bell screamed some more Zalitish

curses, then turned and quickly followed us. Only then did the natives of Voga 4 come in their turn. They looked like they had just been flayed and seemingly did not quite know what had happened to them. Well, they didn't know the Terrans very well! Our men already stood ranked up in the expansive hall beyond the entrance. Here and there someone swayed. Then, according to plan, a largely built sergeant fell to the floor and four other men tore off their helmets, moaning and rolling their eyes. "Water! Where is some cool water?" I cried. "We were out under that blasted sun too long. Major Sesete, look after the sick men. Or are they only faking?" Rhodan's posture, while standing at attention, was magnificent. The sweat ran in clear streams beneath the protruding helmet edge. "These men come from the cool mountain regions of Takotre, Captain," he announced. "They'll recover in a few moments." I glanced quickly at the Regent's camera lenses. The scene was impressive and, besides that, looked authentic. A mechanical brain which replaced human feelings with pure logic was easy to deceive in that manner. I expected a call from the Regent and it came at once, only it came over the large loudspeakers of a public address system. The metallic voice seemed to come out of the naked steel wall. "Is treatment of those suffering from the heat necessary, Capt. Ighur, "If the Regent had waited another minute longer it would be!" I exclaimed angrily. "Now it might not be. After we've been settled in our quarters, I'll make a health report. Where should we go?" "Floor 14, Block C-436-8. Use the lift," droned the loudspeakers. Then the communication was terminated. I took a deep breath. According to my experience, no more inspections or examinations were to be expected. I slipped a glance at the nine Zalites our men had so skilfully used as decoys. Seemingly they did not yet understand at all why Bell was still remonstrating them. Evidently they thought it was a mistake. Marshall the telepath winked at me reassuringly. He had been given the order to monitor the thoughts of our unwanted fellow crewmembers. Farther on, the wide doors of a large lift opened up. Entrance stations of this sort did not have any antigrav shafts. "Go in by groups," I ordered. "Sesete, see to that. Roake, stay topside until the last man is in the elevator." Rhodan and Bell became active again. The other officers of the ship followed me into the large basket, which was flanked on either side of the entrance by automatically directed ray weapons. Anyone wanting to make his way into the subterranean complex of Arkon 3 had to first make contact with the nearest control station. Otherwise there was no one to be seen. Not even a robot had been sent up. Behind us the steel doors of the lock had long since closed once again and with that we were almost as cut off from the open terrain of the spaceport as we would have been were we on another planet. We said nothing during our rapid descent. It was against all Arkonide custom for the ship's officers to carry on conversations in the commander's presence. Even more unthinkable was speaking directly to the captain. There were an infinite number of details that we had to take into account. The slightest error could lead to our discovery. Naturally it was very difficult for the Terrans to hold to these regulations. We had more than once found ourselves in acute danger during the first weeks of our mission out of sheer inattention to detail. The luminous number plates of various floors whisked past in rapid succession. Our speed slowed as the 14th floor approached. With a violent jolt, the magnetically supported basket came to a stop. The sliding doors opened up. I stepped first into the bright light. Blinded, I looked up at the white atomic sun, whose hard ultra-violet rays had been adjusted according to the amount given off by the natural star. It frequently happened that alien intelligences not accustomed to it were surprised with sunburns. My Terran friends too had to first get used to the idea that even deep beneath the surface of Arkon 3 they would have to protect their skin. It was unusual. But then, what was normal on the three planets that were the birthplace of the Great Imperium? Farther ahead I noticed an older Arkonide in the violet cape of a scientist. He lay sluggishly back in a reclining armchair and seemed to be bored. When the elevator bell sounded once again and the men entered the airlock hall, he turned his head with evident effort. I looked into languidly

blinking eyes. Just in front of the reclining man stood a portable Simultan receiver on whose screen differently coloured patterns appeared in confusing numbers. The old man seemed to have been occupied by the for-me-mysterious game. He seemed only now to see us. Reginald Bell arrived, leading the second group. The loud orders of my 'Second Officer' seemed to disturb the Arkonide. His face twisted in disgust. Then he threw me such a reproachful look it was as if we had said something treasonous in public. "Be quiet!" I exclaimed to Bell. "His Eminence is resting. Conduct yourself properly!" This time the look from the reddish one was a little more pleasant. Smiling, stepping on tiptoe, I walked closer and silently placed my hand against my chest in greeting. He nodded tiredly. "Must this be, Captain?" he said weakly. "Capt. Ighur, Your Eminence, commander of His Regency's Battleship Kon-Velete. I beg forgiveness for my impoliteness, Your Eminence. However, I received the order to report to Floor 14 with my men." The combat robots posted around us did not move. Evidently they stood under the old scientist's command. Meanwhile Rhodan had also appeared. His slight cough told me plainly that he was surprised at the presence of the Arkonide. Since when had the Regent started manning key posts with genuinely living persons? I had been expecting a robot squad instead. The wrinkled face of the thin old man showed a trace of interest. "Have you had a good training, Ighur?" he inquired. I bent my head slightly. My conduct was showing its first results. "I dare to think so, Your Eminence." "Which school?" "Galactonautic Academy of Iprasa, Your Eminence," I lied, hoping this famous and ancient university still existed. "Oh, Iprasa! That explains your so pleasing behaviour. When we have a chance, we must discuss Testro's philosophic principles." I knew that we would never get around to it. Besides, I had never heard of this Testro. "It would be an honour for me, Your Eminence. May I now ask for the assignment to our quarters? My men are suffering under the heat." "Heat?" said the old man in surprise. "Oh, these barbarians. Heat, he says! Where is that device?" He tapped without looking on the broad arms of the chair where the control board was built in and as he did he stared in renewed fascination at the new patterns appearing on the Simultan screen. "This young Osker is simply wonderful," he sighed, enraptured. "The idea of the shadowless design in the floating ball of ice is magnificent. He'll make a name for himself, don't you think?" I nodded my most vociferous agreement. His gaze mellowed. "Well now," he said, "take your men into the air-conditioned section. Heat, he says? It's dreadfully chilly in here!" Before he could re-immense himself in his artistic contemplation, reception station A-3 took a hand. The watch robots suddenly moved. The Arkonide did not even notice that his authority had been usurped. "Follow me," came a rasping voice from the speaker slit of a heavy battle machine. It was more dangerous than a thousand Arkonides of the scientist's sort. Our men made an effort to leave through the security hatch of Floor 14 as quietly as possible. Bell looked at my degenerated compatriot in such a way that I blushed in shame. I bitterly resolved to do everything in my power to change the condition of my people. There was no second stop for inspection or admission. In front of the hatch rose the gigantic domed chamber of an underground city. There had been no attempt to construct buildings in the traditional Arkonide conical style. The architecture served only as a means to an end and was therefore timeless. There were wide avenues with connecting transport bands and so many illuminated directional signs that one could be completely confused by them. The vaulting ceiling of the vast hall had been coloured to resemble the natural sky and even here a harsh white atomic sun radiated light, heat and the unavoidable ultraviolet rays in extravagant amount. I saw intelligent beings from all parts of the galaxy colonized by us. Even so, it seemed that only oxygen-breathing creatures were quartered here. Large signs clearly told us that here an artificial gravitation of .95 Gravos was in effect. That would seem to indicate that the Regent had done everything to provide the subject peoples on Floor 14 with living conditions approximating those they were used to. I knew that each level had been constructed to fit the needs of the occupants. We 'Zalites'

evidently belonged to the group of intelligent beings classed as '.95g' and 'oxygen-helium mixture'. I felt dizzy when I thought of trying to oversee the enormous number of different tasks necessary to keep the Arkon 3 complex alone in operation without the help of the Robot Brain. It simply could not be done. It took awhile for it to penetrate but I eventually became aware of a monotonous, all-pervading noise. It was a dull roar that seemed to force its way from every nook and cranny of the underground city, seeming to fill the colossal cavernous chamber with a presence that was almost palpable. I stopped for a moment to listen. Rhodan too had bent his head and our men were becoming restless. The source of the droning noise was not apparent. The more one tried to listen to it, the more it was lost in the chaos of loudspeaker messages and conversations of the crowds of non-Arkonides who also seemed to be having a furlough. The combat robots pushed a group of three-eyed Naats out of the way. Spoiling for a fight, the Naats watched our men march past in formation and threw curses and insults after us. I was happy that it had not come to a confrontation with these constantly nervous beings from the triclopidean planet Naat. I made another attempt to find out the cause of the monotonous droning and then the logic sector of my extra brain, activated so many thousands of years ago, spoke up. Power plants... typical noise of thermal converters! Spaceport A-3 is one of the 6 plazas surrounding the Brain's energy dome in ray formation. I gave an involuntary start. Only now did I realize that with every step we were drawing closer to the mysterious regions of the Regent's immediate vicinity. On Floor 14 we were roughly 1800 meters beneath the surface. If the rumours were correct, the Regent's most important control elements reached even deeper than that. That meant we were probably entering the area where the power stations had been installed. Rhodan seemed to have come to the same conclusion and hastened his steps to catch up with me. Here there was no danger of being overheard. For a long time we'd had no way of being able to talk openly with one another. The combat robots marched inexorably onwards. We were nearing a shimmering, pale blue and completely transparent energy curtain. Behind that, different living conditions were in effect than those in this part of the super-Arkonide city. "Are you certain that these underground cities are situated in a ring around the Regent?" It was more of a statement of fact than a question. I nodded. Rhodan's narrow face remained as expressionless as before. Since his wife had died, he seemed no longer able to laugh. "OK, I only wanted to make sure. We'll talk about it later. I suggest that we brief the men." "Our quarters will certainly be under surveillance!" "My specialists will find a way to put the pickup equipment out of commission. Unobtrusively, of course. We've been given a 50-hour furlough. Two hours of that have already gone by. We'll strike at once." I looked around quickly. The faces of our men showed determination. Bell waved to me. Since our landing his fleshy cheeks had looked tighter and tenser. It seemed to me that he was ready for any risks. "Terran rashness!" I said vehemently. "Patience is not one of your characteristics." "Only 50 hours furlough," Rhodan said, not changing his opinion. "If we haven't succeeded by the time it's over, we'll be put back aboard the ship and sent to the Druuf front. Then we'll be back where we started. I'm convinced that the 60-hour stay in the dockyards for the Kon-Velete is for the purpose of putting her hyper-engines in order. This is our opportunity. We're now as close to the Regent as we're likely to get. Now or never!" He was right, although I did not yet want to admit it to myself. I shuddered in the fact of what was to come—not because of the danger connected with it but because of the probable disastrous consequences that the destruction of the Brain would bring with it. I said nothing about that. Rhodan's nerves had been strained enough. As a Terran, he did not have the carefully considered caution of men of my kind. A section of the energy curtain we had seen before opened up. We marched through and from there on the temperature was suddenly cooler. The first Zalites came into view. A little later, we saw more and more uniformed people, all originating on Voga 4. This seemed to be the area reserved for Zalite crews. The atomic sun circling the

artificial sky burned less harshly here than in the forward section of the city. We went through a broad tunnel and came out into a second hall of equally gigantic proportions. Men and officers saluted in respectful manner. The lead robot seemed to have received new orders from its control station. It suddenly stopped, stood at attention in front of me and announced: "Block C-436 can be reached by Roll-band 5, Commander. You are advised to seek out your quarters and prepare a health report." I saluted and said aloud: "Maj. Sesete, see that this is done. Robot, where do I find the officer's mess?" "It is connected to Block C-436, Commander. The automatic controls in your quarters have been programmed. You have the right to allow your crewmembers to do as they wish and to leave their quarters. Special identification papers are at your disposal. You are asked to outfit each individual taking leave with a pass which must include his name, ship, serial number and length of his leave in Arkon Standard Time." More I did not want to know. The eyes of a soldier standing nearby suddenly began to shine. It was astonishing but it seemed to me as if the man had all at once developed the ability to reflect the light falling on him. Bell pursed his lips and whistled in his usual meaningful way. The battle machine walked away. People moved out of its path unwillingly but fearfully. Some distance away, the Zalite commander of another ship saluted over to me. I bent my head with a smile and raised my right hand in greeting. I hoped I would not be forced into social responsibilities. Among the officers of the Zalite fleet there was a peculiar system of friendship in effect, originating in the final analysis from an exaggerated class-consciousness. It was only because of that that I had used such unsubtle words in addressing Control Station A-3. The Regent unquestionably was well aware of the fact Zalite space officers came closest to authentic Arkonides. Rhodan gave the necessary orders. Meanwhile I strolled down the wide avenue, which at this point was flanked on either side by automatic shops. Here one could buy anything one's heart desired. A large sign over a weapons store made me chuckle to myself. Yes, you could buy the best and artistically most valuable products of Arkonide technology-but you were given the gun you had chosen only when you had gone back up to the surface again. I stopped for a moment in front of the plastic shop window and looked at the selection of wares. In that moment I suddenly regained my internal peace and serenity. I stood as though paralysed. At length and with pedantic care, I tried to plumb the depths of my psyche. My memory sector did not desert me this time, either. It was as though I had been plunged 10,000 years of Terran time into the dim reaches of the past. Yes, at that time, shortly before my first takeoff with the Arkonide elite squadron, I had stood as a young admiral in front of the same store, only then there had not been any special conditions of sale. One was attended and advised by scientifically trained specialists. Now two plastic-covered robots with smiles permanently engraved on their faces stood before the showcases. As I stared at them, I noticed my inner transformation. It was as though a 10,000-year-old straitjacket fell away from me, a straitjacket created by 10,000 years of distress, disappointments, humiliations and burning homesickness for my own world. Once more I looked down at the showpiece of the display: a very expensive thermo-beamer with an extremely thin butt and an attached infrared gunsight. I had acquired such a weapon before my takeoff. Today it rested at the bottom of a terrestrial ocean where I had lost it during my flight into the underground steel dome. With heavy heart I turned. Slowly I followed our men, who-probably at Rhodan's order-suddenly became very exuberant and unrestrained. They stood on the slow transport band and called out to passing Zalites remarks that brought a smile to my lips. They were rough but honest men. I had already known their early forefathers, who were in no way any different. The ancients had only known less, that was all. If we should succeed in destroying the Robot Regent, I was committed, for better or for worse, to helping the Terrans. I was firmly determined to be a good and loyal friend to them for they were still in need of help. Together, Arkon and Terra must form an all but invincible team. He will be suspicious! announced my

logic sector without my consulting it. I felt my eyes growing wet in excitement. Naturally, my extra-brain had analysed the situation in harsh-sounding-and so all the more logical-form. When I took over from the Regent-what would Rhodan think? I knew the Earth's position; yes, I knew the many weaknesses and strengths of mankind better than any other person. Wouldn't he have to reach the conclusion that I intended to subjugate him-and with him the Solar Imperium? Or at least make sure in various ways that Terrans would not become too presumptuous? With rare clarity of vision I realized that one day things would come to a head between Rhodan and me. I pushed the problem away as being one of only secondary importance. If the Robot Regent were not put out of commission, such pondering was ultimately useless. As I jumped aboard the medium-speed transport band, I glanced back at the gunshop. When I had gone into that shop the first time I had been attended by a young Arkonide girl. I smiled to myself for I could remember how I had sought for an excuse to meet her again, just before my departure. What must have become of her? Where were her mortal remains resting now? She had only been a few years younger than I. With crystal clarity I saw her face appear before my mind's eye. She had held her breath when I came into the shop, for the symbol on the chest of my uniform identified me as the Crystal Prince and future ruler of the stellar empire. Someone jostled me. A Zalite officer, having fallen on the band, apologized disconcertedly. I nodded absentmindedly to him and he went off with quick, uncertain steps. Never before had I so strongly felt how old, how terribly old and forgotten I was. I was an oddity: a young looking being with smooth checks, firm muscles and a tall, exercise-steeled body. Only internally was I an old man. My lifetime of experience ill-matched my appearance of blooming youth. I had seen great peoples and cultures come and go. I had stood at the cradle and the grave of the Eastern Roman Empire and I had desperately tried to save the lives of Christian martyrs until I realized that they had not needed me. Tired and internally spent, I had come home, but now my feeling for life was changing in the storm of countless memories. Greedily and with the fear of advanced age of missing out on the last and the best, I reached for the life that for me was called Arkon. I was ready to end the shameful situation of a robot regime by any and all means. Perry Rhodan, the young, energetic and never-failing man from Terra, had shown me the right way. I did not dare give up. I looked at my watch. Three hours of our precious furlough had already gone by. It was high time to do something. On my chest throbbed the mysterious cell activator. It gave me strength and determination as it had all the thousands of years before. A young Zalite lieutenant moved away from me, staring at me-fearfully. Then I knew that my face showed my feelings. I had probably looked at him with merciless hardness.

3/ MARCH INTO UNCERTAINTY

Our quarters were designed to serve their purpose and nothing else; they were not pretty. We saw clearly that Floor 14 served only as a layover station for crews whose ships were in the docks being made ready for hyperflight. I was the only one who had been given a room to himself. The crews occupied large, bare barrack-rooms and the other officers had been settled four to a room. It was all right with us. I had been able to separate the genuine Zalites surprisingly well from our commando team. They were also the first ones to whom I gave passes and sent on their way, just an hour after our arrival. They left joyfully and at least we had some peace to ourselves. Room 18-B contained 60 stacks of pneumobeds. The air-conditioning equipment made such a noise that one could hardly hear himself speak. We were not able to find any devices for secret surveillance anywhere. Just the same, we were suspicious as before. When we carried on discussions of a confidential nature, the quickly appointed 'cover noise squad' was given a sign. Sgt. Huster, a red-haired Irish giant with a voice to match, then began with a Zalite battle-song that made my ears ache. Rhodan had been able to smile again for the last hour. Written in his face was relief in the fact we now stood so close to our goal. The mutants had reported their readiness to go into action. Tanaka Seiko, the slender and now 'red-haired'

Japanese, had listened in on all frequencies in use, exercising his ability as a radiopath, and determined that the watch robots posted in the entrance hall of Block C-436 had not been given any special instructions. We were not under suspicion and we had heard nothing of the unsuccessful attempt at X-ray inspection that had taken place at the entrance to the underground complex, either. I had finally sent in the quickly written health report and the control station called in response to it. I was told with laconic terseness not to allow those suffering the effects of the heat to have passes. Sgt. Huster, who in the upper airlock chamber had so artistically feigned unconsciousness, cursed like an old Turk. He was the leader of the third platoon and not only that he was a specialist in the construction of the hidden reaction bomb. So he had to come along. 10 minutes before, the two teleporters Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta had returned from their first special action on Arkon 3. With Pucky's departure from our group the two men were the last teleporters we had available. We found ourselves in Room 18-B. A man long ago chosen as a double sat in my room. He wore my uniform and I had put on his. Rhodan, Bell and several other officers had also assumed other identities. We were now simple crewmembers whose presence in Crew Barracks 18-B would not be suspicious even if we were being observed by camera. We had done everything to follow our plan exactly. We sat at one of the low, six-cornered tables and played the part of angry soldiers who because of the stubbornness of their commanding officer had not been allowed to leave their quarters. This was the first opportunity we'd had in days for a serious briefing. Rhodan was noticeably thoughtful. I also saw that he lacked the nervousness that he should have felt so close to an important event. My auxiliary brain reminded me of the odd smile he had shown on board the Kon-Velete just before the landing. I asked the cause of it. Behind us, the men of the commando team sang a song whose lyrics told of the vastness of space and of a crash-landing on an alien world. Huster's booming voice drowned out our brief but meaningful discussion. Rhodan looked around cautiously before announcing: "Your theory's correct, Atlan!" I became more attentive. What had Rhodan discovered? "Which theory?" "The business of the failsafe circuit. When we got the order to land from Control Station A-R-145, it referred to the sleepy-headed behaviour of Commodore Gailos with only the words- 'His Eminence is resting'. That shows that the Robot Regent's attitude towards an authentic Arkonide changed." "Changed?" I echoed in surprise. "How?" "You weren't with me when I landed on Arkon for the first time almost 70 years ago. At that time, even high-ranking Arkonides were brusquely treated. The Emperor himself on the Crystal World was ordered around. At that time, not one inhabitant of Arkon occupied a key position as Gailos now more or less does. Such a mild and restrained explanation of an officer's ship-endangering conduct would have been impossible then. The Regent would never have allowed itself to simply report: 'His Eminence is resting'. Is the difference clear to you?" I quickly glanced over to Bell. He bit his forehead with his palm and said in a choked voice: "I remember! He's right! The Regent was subjugating every Arkonide. Thora and Khrest were treated like tramps." Rhodan gave a barely perceptible start at the mention of his late wife's name. Bell guiltily lowered his eyes. Huster swung into another song. I thought quickly. "You conclude from these facts that the Regent has been given new instructions concerning the treatment of educated Arkonides?" "Yes, exactly!" "From whom did it receive them?" He looked at me ironically. His glance at his watch did not go unnoticed by me, either. "From your famous failsafe circuit in the heart of the Brain. A special programming must have gone into effect, forcing the Regent to be polite and restrained." I was familiar with Rhodan's clear logic. With its help he had built the Solar Imperium. I was by no means disinclined to accept his theory; in fact, it would have reassured me considerably. Nevertheless, there seemed to be something he was overlooking. "We still have another quarter hour," I said. "I'd lay less credence to the idea of an activated overriding circuit and more in the Regent's mechanical logic. The Brain has realized that brute tyranny

alone is not enough. Moreover, there's the Druuf menace and numerous subject races are manning the Imperium's ships. They submit to the authority of the usual commanding robots only involuntarily. So the Brain realized that it would have to fall back on genuine Arkonides." "Even though it knows about their decadence?" "Yes! The Regent is grasping at straws. Thus its restraint in the case of Gailos." "It's a moot point," John Marshall put in thoughtfully. "It could be one or the other. I've tried to investigate the contents of the minds of the Arkonides present here. They don't know either why they're suddenly being trusted again with important posts. Not only that, the aren't enthusiastic about it." Lt. David Stern, the orderly officer then on duty, entered the quarters. We quickly stood up and saluted. He returned the salute idly. Huster went on with his battle song. I watched the young lieutenant, who strolled slowly through the corridors and looked around as though on an inspection. Two men assigned to the watch followed him. He played his part well. Here and there he stopped and reprimanded the men. He came slowly towards our group. When he was directly beside us, he said lowly: "We're ready, sir." "Hand out the passes," Rhodan answered without turning his head. "Have you talked with Ras Tschubai?" "Yes sir, everything's all set. We've been briefed." "We march out in 5 minutes. Give the men a short talk outside. Orient yourself following Marshall, though: he'll be in constant telepathic communication with me. If something goes wrong, act according to the plan." Stern went on and disappeared through the room's second door. I knew that there was no turning back now. The two teleporters had found out the source of the continuous droning and rumbling. A few kilometres north of our quarters, the vast cavernous chamber burned out of the rock came to an end at naked stone walls. Only two sealed armour-plated doors allowed entrance into the complex of rooms beyond. In all probability, only special robots had entered those rooms for thousands of years. Powerful current-generators were running in that labyrinth, which lay, according to our calculations, directly beneath the edge of the energy dome on the surface. That fact alone would not have convinced me that these were the Brain's power plants if the off-limits cavern rooms were not also defended by auxiliary energy screens. I knew very well that this was not the normal practice. The current supply for the many shipyards and roll-bands came from a centrally located power station. It had never been a matter of sealed armour plate doors or even of defence screens there. That meant the machinery complex discovered by Tschubai and Kakuta must have some special importance. Since we had found no other way of knocking out the Robot Regent, we had decided to strike directly at its mainspring. Three minutes later Lt. David Stern came back into the room. A soldier of the watch shouted for quiet. We got up and stood at attention. Stern announced loudly: "Leaves are granted for part of the crew. Step forward as I call your names, and pick up your passes!" Rhodan, Bell and I were called first. We marched to the front, took the luminous plaques (signed by me beforehand) and hung them according to instructions from the thin cords around our necks. The numerous robots in the vast quartering area sensed the impulses from the plaques. A man wearing one would never be troubled by a robot, assuming the code-programmed data was in order. I had obtained the small encoding device from a robot when we first entered our quarters. As far as I could see, everything was running smoothly. Ten men finally stood in front of the lieutenant, the mutants Tschubai, Kakuta, Seiko and Okura among them. Sgt. Huster's platoon was there as well. There would not have been any point in attempting to undertake the operation with more than 10 men. After all, we had to get inside the power plants. Stern walked around us, inspecting us critically. Threateningly he said, "I must insist that you behave yourselves outside. No fighting, understand? Be back here in 8 hours. Follow me." He turned abruptly and went out. "How come you guys are getting passes and we aren't?" grumbled one of the crewmen. "Hey, bring something back for us." I chose not to answer. Bell and Huster had already taken care of that. We reached the large entrance hall and took the lift down to where we had to pass a robot watch station. Stern was waiting for us. He had us fall in, then explained to us one more time how

we were to behave. "I don't want to hear any complaints," he concluded. "Now be off with you." We passed through the robot-guarded hatch without being stopped. I noticed at length that the machines' identification sensors moved to point themselves directly at our ID plaques, which were clearly visible from a distance. Outside we were met by the noise of the sub-Arkonide city. Other Zalite crews streamed out of the surrounding barrack complexes. The first conversations could be heard. People were trying to orient themselves. We mixed unobtrusively in with the crowds. I noticed Rhodan's seemingly frozen face and realized he was in contact with the mutant John Marshall, who had stayed behind. Even though Rhodan's telepathic gifts were only weakly developed, he seemed able to communicate with Marshall without any difficulty. Of course, Marshall's powers were much stronger. "OK," Rhodan said, "everything's ready in the building. Let's get started. Ras, go ahead." The tall African, now just as red-skinned as we were, looked around quickly. There were hardly any cars or other vehicles to be seen here. Only Arkonides were permitted the use of gliders. We were directed to the numerous transport bands, which were just as good for getting around. I even preferred them to vehicles, since the transport bands allowed us to move that much more inconspicuously. Ras gave us a wave. The march into uncertainty had begun.

4/ BATTLE IN THE REACTOR HALL

There could be no mistake about the meaning of the large signs. They were not covered with words as such but any relatively intelligent being would have known at once that the symbols painted on them meant: glaring red lightning bolts. On the far distant Earth, similar symbols had come into use with similar meaning. The sub-Arkonide city ended here. The last building reared up 100 meters behind us. Our position was now dangerous already. If anyone got the idea of asking what we were doing, standing so close to the seamless rock wall which reached to the vaulted ceiling, we would have been hard-pressed to explain. Rhodan and Bell had both vanished with the two mutants. Through rigorous training over the years, Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta had developed their abilities so that they could transport even large foreign objects. Their extrasensory power must have developed into something enormous. We pressed ourselves closer into the narrow niche formed by an air-conditioning pipeline making a right angle turn. One by one, we crept into safe teleporting range so that we would not strain the mutants. Each of them had four men in all to transport. Huster had drawn his beamer. Together with the two weapons specialists, he stood on one of the pipeline support columns and watched the area behind us. "Everything's quiet, sir," he reported in a low voice. "Actually, it's too quiet. I don't like it." I could barely suppress a nervous laugh. With his remark Huster had hit the nail on the head. Why wasn't the rock wall with its two clearly visible entrance hatches being watched? Why were the authorities content with the signs, which certainly were meaningful enough? I found no satisfactory solution and the feeling of threatening danger grew stronger. Directly in front of me the air began to shimmer. Kakuta's slim body emerged from the luminosity until he stood in tangible form before me. I still found it hard to really grasp the astounding abilities of these people which enabled them solely through the power of their mutated brains to function as organic matter transmitters. Seconds later, Ras Tschubai arrived. He and Kakuta had become the two most important men in the operation. I pushed my gun back in my belt and asked quickly: "How are things over there? Everything alright?" "It's just as it was during our reconnaissance spring, sir. There's not a living being in sight. There aren't even any robots." Tschubai noticed the distrust shining in my eyes. He shrugged uncertainly. "It's really so, sir. The Chief is waiting. Shall we go?" I stepped behind Tschubai and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. Before I could ready myself any further for the improbable, I felt a sharp but bearable pain: the pain of dematerialising. It was a fifth-dimensional dissolution field, which this man could create just like any structural converter. I had no time to pay any attention to the short twinges in my limbs. It grew light once more and it was as if nothing had ever happened. "OK," someone said, "now go back at once." I looked

around in confusion. My first move was to put my hand on my weapon. Then I heard the hollow roaring, much louder here behind the barrier. Bell stood watchfully behind the huge plastic-armoured base of a high-tension transformer. Close behind us howled the turbine of a cooling unit. Farther ahead, the first of the fusion reactors, set in rows, were to be seen. They were units of extremely modern design with directly connected thermal converters in which liberated heat energy was transformed into current. I was as familiar with the eye-hurting blue-white light of the uncountable energy conductors as I was with the deep rumbling of the converters. A shining artificial sun hung from the ceiling far above us. The roof was supported by more than 20 huge, massive columns of Arkon-steel in the vast chamber. "Fantastic, isn't it?" Rhodan called to me. "The most advanced power plant I've ever seen. About two million kilowatts per reactor. Well installed, neatly arranged, equipped with excellent safety devices. Where does all this energy go?" Bell went to the first reactor, holding his impulse-beamer at ready. No one was to be seen, however. I looked up at the ceiling once more, where the energy field projectors had evidently been installed. The reddish shining screen stretched along the walls and stopped at the invisible poles of the ground. Behind the screen, the closed armoured doors of the two entrances could be seen. The rock wall separating us from the underground city was probably about 100 meters thick. We would never have made it through without the help of the two teleporters. We had penetrated the solid matter with no problem as impulses of hyperenergy. Before I could say anything to Rhodan, the mutants reappeared. This time they brought Sgt. Huster and Tanaka Seiko with them. "Just in time, sir," said Huster. "It was getting dangerous out there. A robot squad was coming—a routine patrol, I think." We were silent until the last two men of our small group had been brought inside. They had not been discovered. "What are we waiting for?" I gave a start. Rhodan's voice had sounded icy. Huster nodded. The microbomb, intended for the destruction of the power plant control room, was divided into six parts, and the men who wore them concealed on their person were now told to produce them. Huster did not pay any more attention to us. With unbelievable calmness he began the assembly of the ultra-thermal bomb, which would release its energy solely in the form of heat. It was based on a catalytic carbon cycle process, which would create an artificial sun in the machine hall. I had to consider once more the chaos that would ensue by the destruction of the Robot Regent. The mutants Seiko and Okura listened with their incomprehensible senses to things we could never perceive. I, on the other hand, weighed the question of whether we should risk detonating the bomb or not. Rhodan stared at me stonily. Almost without moving his lips, he said: "It has to be, my friend! Or do you want to tolerate the Regent's rule even longer?" My smile was tortured. Of course he would think of the Earth first. I responded in a low voice. "We'll be allowing all hell to break loose—not only here in these underground chambers but throughout the entire galaxy. When the Regent has been destroyed, I wouldn't care to be the one who has to put the galaxy back together." I realized that he had long been aware of my fears. It would have been surprising indeed if this intelligent man had not drawn the necessary conclusions. "It has to happen sooner or later. Your reason should tell you that the inevitable turmoil that'll break out is better now than waiting a few years and having to deal with it then. Now I can support you with Terra's power. If we wait too long, you might have to face it alone." I felt his hot breath in my face. "Power? Did you say power? Little Terran, you may be immortal, but you've never known real power. For that you lack a few centuries of constant development. Have you forgotten the blows you've already suffered these last few months? How do you propose to settle the chaos that will ensue? With your few big fighting ships?" I shook my head despondently. It suddenly seemed completely senseless to me to destroy the Regent. Not a muscle twitched in Rhodan's face. "That will be your job, Arkonide! If you'll protect the secret of Terra's position, we'll be your fire department. I can offer you something you don't have: trained crews with the best of abilities. Is that

nothing?" "It's a great deal," I admitted, "but not enough. Besides, as we used to say during the Middle Ages, we're dividing the bearskin before we've caught the bear." "I'll be ready in 15 minutes, sir," Sgt. Huster put in matter-of-factly. For him the matter was already settled. "Would you tell me where I'm going to set the bomb off?" He looked at me appraisingly. On his lips lay a small smile. Bell waved to me. He stood legs apart, in the wide connecting corridor between the reactors. "Well?" asked Rhodan. His power of decision frightened me. After a long look in his cold eyes, I turned away. Slowly I took hold of my thermobeamer and walked towards Bell. Rhodan followed. At that point Tanaka Seiko spoke up. "Sir, I'm picking up some odd vibrations. I have no idea what they are. I stopped. Rhodan turned hastily around. Directly in front of me rumbled the first reactor's transformer bank. Huster did not allow himself to be disturbed. The microbomb, constructed on Earth and successfully tested on an uninhabited asteroid, was gradually taking shape. "What kind of vibrations, Tanaka?" Rhodan asked slowly. The mutant whose ability consisted of being able to perceive energy radiations, regardless of type and origin, like a mechanically built special receiver, moved his delicately fingered hands uncertainly. "Short waves, sir, and only barely perceptible. It's something that remains constant. They aren't radio signals, although the frequency is the same as a hypersender's." He looked for help in the direction of Son Okura, our 'frequency seer', but Okura could only shrug. Rhodan's bearing evidenced a suddenly developing nervousness. Bell came nearer, holding his beamer loosely in his hand. "What's wrong? What are we waiting for? The hall is very long and there must be others beyond it. In my opinion there isn't any danger for us here. Should we look around?" That was the question of a practical-thinking man. When he saw Rhodan's face, his eyes narrowed. "Having trouble?" "Tanaka reports an unknown energy source." "So? The foremost control stations of the Brain are right above us. Who knows what kind of energy is being used up there?" "It can't be that simple," I interrupted. "Our undertaking, which seemed so difficult to us, is emerging as nothing more dangerous than a walk in the park. Don't underestimate my forefathers! The men who built the Robot Brain must have also done something to insure its security. Something here is illogical through and through." "Didn't we have to penetrate a defence screen behind a thick rock wall?" Bell inquired with some emphasis. "Yes, we did, but those don't seem to me like adequate defensive precautions. The screen is relatively weak. I could neutralize it with a medium-power ray-cannon." "Assuming you had one down here," Rhodan considered aloud. I recall that we weren't even allowed to take our relatively harmless service weapons along. Officially, anyway." "That wasn't always the case, although the Brain existed then, or at least a part of it. Sgt. Huster, wait a moment. Let's look around first. Come with me!" I waved to the mutants and pulled my gun out again. I suspected that Rhodan was on the point of asking who was giving orders here. Huster looked over to Rhodan. When he silently nodded, the sergeant, his face expressionless, laid the ultra-bomb to the side. Still, he could not resist announcing, "Ready for timed detonation, sir. I have only to screw on the timer." Seconds later, we threw ourselves into a hectic activity that was a stark contrast to our previous behaviour. Something had been discovered that we could not explain. We quickly made our way between the rows of enormous reactors. Far above us the discharge arcs flashed at regular intervals into the spherical accumulators from where in turn the stored energy would flow into the power network in case of an overload demand. The machinery was controlled completely automatically. A few non-operating reactors showed that the energy needs of the user were not very high at the moment. We ran through the corridors. The vast hall had a slightly elliptical form and was at least 2000 meters long; with that even the massive support columns could be explained. All in all, this power plant had a capacity that would have easily been enough to supply an industrial planet the size of Earth with electrical current. Rows upon rows of reactors. Farther beyond, I saw monstrous machines that dwarfed even those in the engine rooms of the new

superbattleships. They delivered an estimated 12 million-kilohertz. The connected converters were hunchbacked giants and the reophores blazed in harsh violet flame. About 5% of the total power production was necessary for the creation of the screening isolation-tubular fields. This percentage of the total yield had been determined empirically and at the same time was also a compromise of the high-energy engineers. Even in my time we had tolerated higher losses of energy in order to be able to avoid using the antiquated cable conductors. The farther we went, the more the rumbling grew. We were nearing a transformer station whose closely spaced transformers were isolated from one another by narrow energy fields. Gasping from the long run, we came to a stop. Only Sgt. Huster and the two other weapons specialists had remained behind. Beyond the sector containing the monstrous transformers, the great hall narrowed to a tunnel no higher than a house and which evidently led to the next rock vault. The passageway was sealed off with neither steel doors nor an energy screen. We had to shout if we wanted to make ourselves understood to each other. Now almost all the converters were transferring their surplus energy into the gigantic condensers; a sign indicated that more and more reactors were being shut down. Was this only a coincidence? Desperately I began to think. Bell had now become nervous too. Had he met the violent resistance of a robot cadre while carrying out our self-imposed mission, he probably would not have thought twice about it. But not an organic living being was in sight nor could any robots be seen either. Yet I could not shake myself of the feeling that we had long since been discovered. Why was the gigantic power plant shutting down more and more? "I have a question!" I shouted to Rhodan, pointing to a reactor that was shutting down. "If this is the Brain's main power station and if it can't function without it, how can it afford to shut down one atomic pile after the other and transfer the leftover energy into the condensers?" Rhodan's face paled. He looked around frantically. He had probably been asking himself the same question. The reactors that were stopping simply did not bear out the theory that the Robot Regent could not survive without his power plant. Why, then, should we destroy it? Bell whirled about and sprang for cover but the three figures rushing up were only Sgt. Huster and the two specialists. Breathing heavily, they came to a stop by us and Huster cried out: "Sir, the defence screen along the rock wall is taking on an intensive blue colour. I'm afraid someone is watching us on a surveillance vidscreen." Without a word, Bell ran over to the entrance of the tunnel, not very far away. We followed him, since it did not matter to our teleporters from what point in the power plant hall they took us into safety. Our plans called for our being returned to a selected location, which meanwhile was being readied by a squad led by Lt. Stepan Potkin for an inconspicuous arrival of our party. So we ran the few hundred meters to the tunnel, following directly after Bell, until we could see inside. It was higher and wider than we had thought. Also, its walls were jacketed in an enormously resistant metal-plastic and in its exact middle flickered a grid-like energy apparition, whose colour and structure were something I was unfamiliar with. The defence screen looked as though it consisted of a system of silvery shimmering, 12-cornered honeycombs which could be seen only when the light was right. The entrance to the passageway was vaulted, about 30 meters high and just as wide. We could not see what lay behind the strange defence screen because the tunnel made a turn. "This is it!" said the tracker, Tanaka Seiko. His face was distorted and glistened with streams of perspiration. "Sir, the mysterious vibrations I sensed earlier are coming from there. It's something monstrous. I feel pain boring into my skull. Sir, I can't hold out much longer." At that moment, my never-failing logic sector made itself heard: "Superimposed energy screen of a newly-developed type unknown to you. Beyond it begins the Robot's sector." "Bell, stay here!" I shouted to the man walking off. "Bell, no one can get through. We've deceived ourselves! The power plant behind us is a diversion! My forefathers did think to provide the Regent with effective security. We've got to get back or well be in the trap. Listen-the last reactors are running down. When

they've all stopped, the power plant will be dead and then things will be getting serious. Bell, come back!" Rhodan stood with balled fists, trembling in subconscious anger in the tunnel entrance. He had understood completely that I was right. The light defence screen behind the forward rock wall was a diversionary manoeuvre. The power plant as such was probably unimportant to the Brain. No one could know where the energy generated there was normally used but most likely it was directed to some gigantic factory making spaceships or other machinery. The last rumbling died. It became eerily silent in the formerly noise-filled cavern. Rhodan's voice sounded painfully loud. "Sergeant, set the bomb timer at 5 minutes and activate the detonator. Tako, you'll take the bomb through the honeycomb curtain. Put the bomb down someplace in one of the rooms lying behind the barrier and come back at once. Now let's get going!" I stared at the tall man, shocked. Didn't he know what he was doing? Huster did not lose any of his astounding cool for even a second. He adjusted the timer-detonator with a turn of his special key. "The five minutes are running," he said quietly. The teleporter Tako Kakuta did not say a word. He knew that we had no time to lose. Something had to happen now. The surveillance control had probably delayed its attack only for as long as it took to shut down the last reactor and drain the injection conduits empty of the last bit of catalytic reaction mass. Otherwise a horrible atomic fireworks display could have developed out of a battle in the power plant, for the easily ignitable reaction material began the fusion process at just 4,000° Celsius. It had been arranged cleverly. Fiendishly cleverly. Now I understood why the formerly so weak energy screen along the forward rock wall had suddenly begun to glow. Someone who could not know that the intensity of an energy barrier meant nothing to our teleporters, wanted to block our way back. That was our only chance but Rhodan was in the process of exploiting it to its dangerous utmost. Tako pressed the bomb, a hollow body about 50 centimetres long, close to him. No one would have guessed the magnitude of the bomb's explosive potential by merely looking at it from outside. The mutant's eyes were trained unseeing at the clearly visible honeycomb screen. Mysterious, silvery shining, and here and there flashing a bluish glint, it blocked our way. I laboured desperately, trying to dig out of my otherwise infallible memory an answer to the mystery of the energy screen. A Terran would have no doubt got a headache. It was no use. I had never seen such a form of energy. The screen was probably developed by the last of my people's still-spiritually-alive top scientists at a time when I had been given up as missing and dead for thousands of years. I could not even guess what had been developed or created then. Tako's body disappeared as suddenly and as completely as though he had never been standing only two meters away from me. Rhodan looked at his watch. "OK!" he said with a smile that struck me as malicious but he did not explain any further. We were startled by inhuman screams of pain. Disturbed, we looked around but there was no one to be seen who had shattered the stillness with his cries of unspeakable torture. Yet it could not have been anything other than a living being. The cries escalated into a shrill, outstretched shriek until, in the place where the teleporter had dematerialised, a spiral of light shining like a will-o'-the-wisp appeared. It seemed to be rotating at an incredible speed-and from it came the terrible sounds. "Tako!" Rhodan exclaimed. He wanted to run to the pale concentration of energy but I grabbed him roughly by the shoulders and pulled him back. He stumbled and fell at my feet. Entranced, we watched the incomprehensible thing taking place before our eyes until Tako's body gradually took shape in the bright vortex, The cries of pain grew weaker as his outlines became more solid. Then the teleporter lay before us. His slender face was twisted and the knowledge of mysterious things was written in his eyes. When we stood him up he cried out again but now he seemed to be making an effort to not let his distress show all too plainly. Moaning, his entire body trembling, he leaned back against the rock wall. The dangerous bomb was still there; nothing about it seemed to have been changed at all. Tako suddenly quieted. Only his agitated eyes seemed to be still

alive. "What happened in there, Tako?" Rhodan asked, pale. Sgt. Huster leaped forward recklessly. He fell heavily on the ground but in his hands he had the bomb. With two moves of his hand he had deactivated the running timer-detonator. His forehead was covered with sweat. He had evidently acted in the last second. But he said nothing. The teleporter gasped for breath, then spoke. "It was terrible. Something grabbed me, played with me, started me spinning and threw me back. I feel... I feel... Sir, I'm not doing that again," Groaning, he slid to the ground, trying to dig his fingers into the armourplastic covering. Rhodan's face was grey. He stared at me, eyes wide. He wanted an explanation. And I had one! "A stable structural field with probably a hyper-gravitational base. A form of energy which repels the superimposed pulse streams of a dematerialised body in the same manner as an ionized gas cloud is repelled by a normal magnetic field. Perry, we'll never get through that! Now I know how my ancestors safeguarded the Brain. This screen is probably my race's last scientific development. It's beyond my experience and knowledge entirely. The Regent can't be attacked." Tako slowly calmed. Exhausted, he rested in Huster's arms. Ras Tschubai stood silently in front of his comrade. When he looked at the honeycomb screen, so near and looking so harmless, a glint of fear showed in his eyes. Three seconds later, there was a new rumbling in the vast reactor hall. The stamping tread of purposefully marching robots interrupted the silence that had gathered. "They're coming," Bell commended in all calmness. "They're probably swarming out of all possible holes and hidden niches. I give us five minutes more!" Rhodan awakened from his paralysis. While Bell was pronouncing useless words, the grey-eyed Terran had already acted. I recalled that in earlier times the psychologists had called Rhodan a man capable of instantaneous adjustments. "Marshall has been notified. The reception squad is waiting. Ras, take Huster and his two men out first. We'll hold out here. Hurry-get going, and for God's sake move faster than you've ever moved before!" Huster stood up and all but leaped on the mutant's back. In the same moment Ras and his human cargo disappeared. "Bell, Atlan, Okura, Seiko, we're going behind the transformers for cover. You stay with Tako. Tako, can you teleport yet?" The teleporter answered in a desperate voice in the negative. We asked no more questions. As we ran off, Ras Tschubai appeared once more. He was working at an unheard-of rate of speed. "I'm taking two men at once," he called after us. I can do it." Rhodan only waved. As I dived for cover behind the huge armourplastic base of a transformer, the first combat robots appeared up ahead. Thanks to the cone-like narrowing of the giant hall, we had the better position. Right behind us began the relatively narrow tunnel and before us lay only two wide corridors which merged into one just in front of the last row of transformers. I waited until I could clearly see the first combat robots. My impulse blaster had been adjusted in intensity to setting #3. I saw Rhodan raise his arm. Almost simultaneously, we pressed our firing buttons. I had narrowed my eyes to no more than slits. Even so, I was blinded painfully by the harsh atomic glare. A raging, finger-thick energy beam shot forward, striking the broad breastplate of an on-charging robot. A tenth of a second later, all hell had broken loose. We opened up our fire from five effective thermo weapons and the result was the rapidly climbing temperature. Communication was no longer possible amid the crackling and roaring of firing weapons and the whip-crack noise of air rushing to replace that disintegrated in the path of the thermo-beams. We shot at every recognizable target until just 100 meters away molten metal had flowed together into a river. The liquid metal was even turning into gas to some extent. Bright spots of light flashed out again and again, each a senselessly charging robot exploding. What happened was what had to happen. The heat grew unbearable after a few salvos. A house-sized transformer leaned slowly and gravely to one side and finally fell into the boiling steel amid spray and hissing. Other transformers exploded amid roaring thunderclaps. When Rhodan at length began firing at the energy storage units hanging above the transformers, the chaos was complete. I screamed at him to stop the madness but he didn't hear me.

Storage unit after storage unit detonated and the discharges were so terrible that I felt a prickling all over my body. My last two shots were directed at the intersection of the corridors. The wide-ranging energy beams struck the metal-plastic and transformed it into a soft, flowing, lava-like goo that gave off poisonous steam. A last shockwave hurtled toward us. I was whirled out of my cover and it was then that I noticed the glowing air attacking my all but unprotected body. Desperately I forced my way back behind the cover of the transformer base. Then it was suddenly quiet. Nothing more was to be seen of attacking robots and the rear portion of the transformer station resembled a pile of rubble. I realized that the guiding Positronicon required a certain amount of time to assimilate the implications of such a violent resistance but no more than a few minutes would go by before the combat robots received new instructions. I looked over at Rhodan through the corrosive smoke. Just then he prodded Son Okura and pointed behind him. I followed his indication. Ras Tschubai had reappeared. Huster's weapon experts had disappeared and from Tschubai's back hung the bent figure of our misfortune-struck teleporter, Tako Kakuta. When Okura came up to Ras, he put his arms around him and suddenly the three bodies vanished in a glow of light. Now there were only four of us. Ras would have to spring twice more to bring all of us to safety. Rhodan waved to me. I refused with a vigorous hand movement, pointing to Bell and the tracker Tanaka Seiko. I wanted them to leave the danger zone the next trip. Some moments went by before Ras appeared again. He had probably never worked so fast in his life. I saw that Bell's lips were moving. He was certainly not agreeable to our letting him get to safety first. Again I noticed the iridescent luminosity. Before us, the floor was boiling. A transformer stricken by the heat gave up the ghost in its fight against gravity and fell into the only slowly hardening molten metal. From then on I was alone with Rhodan. He turned his head, showing me his sweat-covered face. At the moment we did not dare leave our positions; certainly not with the smoke rising as it was. The poisonous gases given off by the molten metal-plastic would have left us unconscious after a few breaths. The seconds stretched into eternities. The mouths of our guns were pointed ahead. I saw a glaring flash in the thick haze between the surviving transformers. The beam slammed into the armourplastic base and the liberated energy knocked me off the floor. I fell back heavily. I knew that I had been shot at with a shockweapon. This was our only chance. If the guiding Brain was making an effort to preserve its valuable power plant, then it would not allow the robots to use thermo-weapons. Rhodan fired again. His energy-burst disappeared in the thick smoke, emerging far away to strike the ceiling in a spray of sparks. I looked around. Tschubai had as yet not come back. A glance at my watch told me that only 20 seconds had passed since his last appearance and he needed at least 30. It was also questionable whether he would hold up or not. Teleporters like him were extremely sensitive and psychically susceptible to strain. If Tschubai managed to leap even this last hurdle, we could write him off for at least the next 15 hours as any sort of effective help. Rhodan called something to me. I didn't understand the words but I could grasp the situation with my eyes. A monstrous robot surrounded by a bluish shining defence field stepped slowly and deliberately through the pool of molten metal. Other robots of the same kind followed. This, then, was the end. I fired three quick shots at the foremost attacker. I succeeded only in raising the temperature, which was becoming unbearable. My uniform was beginning to singe. A nauseous burned stench assaulted my nose and mouth. I was shaken by an attack of coughing which brought tears to my eyes and made my gunhand uncertain. I shot again, then saw Rhodan make his move. He practically threw himself over the ground, keeping his head low to avoid the thick masses of vapour hanging in the air. I followed him at once. Ras Tschubai had appeared directly in front of the mysterious defence screen in the tunnel. We came up to the teleporter just as the first of the energy-screen protected robots reached our former cover and stopped there. Rhodan had put his arms around Tschubai's neck. I embraced him from

behind. In so doing, I saw the mutant's face, twisted by the strain of exerting himself to the utmost. He had apparently reached the limits of his capabilities by transporting two men at once several times in rapid succession. When I felt first the brief pain of dematerialisation and then a wonderfully cool stream of air immediately afterwards, I knew that we were temporarily safe. I lay on the ground, coughing and fighting against an attack of choking. Someone called me. It was Lt. Stepan Potkin, who with the help of the hypno Andre Noir had cleared the small backroom of one of the numerous pubs of unwanted guests so that we would have a reception station. "Sir, everything's OK. Everyone's here. How do you feel?" I heard Rhodan's croaking voice. He had evidently breathed all manner of poisonous gas into his lungs. "New uniforms, quick! Ours are half burnt. What's the story here? Has an alarm been sounded?" "No sir, no one seems to be aware of what happened on the other side of the wall. In my opinion, though-" We were never to learn Potkin's views on the situation. Arkonide alarm whistles, shrill and high-pitched, drowned out his voice as well as every other noise. More than 40,000 furloughing Zalites were startled throughout the vast quartering hall. Heads turned and widely opened eyes stared to the walls and up to the ceiling where the alarm devices were installed. We looked at each other significantly and Bell said loudly: "Aha! They've just noticed we aren't there any more. This is getting interesting!" Rubbing his forehead, he looked around. The alarm whistles were still shrieking. It was a noise that left its impression on any person who ever heard it, cutting him to the quick. I slowly sat up. My coughing fit was subsiding. 5/ ARKON MUST DIE! If the giant Robot Regent of Arkon had been human, the measures it took could have been termed bestial. However, we were dealing with a machine which had never had such concepts programmed into its memory bank. The Regent did what seemed logical on the basis of the situation and thus appropriate. We were able to reach our common quarters in Block C-436-8 in good order even in the incredible confusion ensuing shortly after the sounding of the alarm. The loudspeakers had ordered every furloughing Zalite to leave the stores, pubs and wide avenues at once and report to the robots guarding the doors of his assigned quarters. The 40,000 inhabitants of Voga 4 were given 15 minutes in which to do it. Naturally it was impossible for all the many people to return 'home' in so short a time. A few seconds before the time ran out, Rhodan and I stormed into our building and, thanks to our proper pass-plaques, were allowed to go on in without challenge. We noticed, however, that our arrival had been registered. My foot was still on the wrong side of the heavy door when the combat robots marching outside began to shoot. In my ears was the roaring of the heavy energy weapons; more than 100 Zalites fell dead in the atomic hurricane. If we had not reached our quarters in the last second, we would have unquestionably suffered the same fate. The Regent was showing no more mercy. Anyone who had not left the streets in the time allotted him was shot. I had seen many gruesome massacres in my life but this one was especially depressing for me. A machine built by my venerable forefathers had instigated mass murder and in the final analysis I was indirectly responsible for it. All feeling within me seemed to have died out as I quickly took off my crew uniform and replaced it with the commander's uniform my double had been wearing. Rhodan and Bell were also in the midst of changing their uniforms. Our 'stand-ins' disappeared and we once more assumed our proper places. Meanwhile the men of Potkin's receiving troop had made their report. From mouth to mouth went the whispered, apprehension-raising news. Tako Kakuta, still too weak to even stand on his own two legs, had received the first injections from our medics. His condition was still poor. Outside, energy beams were still being fired. The last of the Zalites, driven by stark fear to seek out hiding places, were tracked down by the robots and killed. I left my private room to seek out the officers' quarters. There was such a confusion of voices in the entire housing complex that we could risk a short conference. His face grim, Sgt. Huster was in the process of dismantling his ultra-thermobomb. Our men had surrounded him in a circle and were discussing

the situation in a lively manner, so Sgt. Huster was well covered as he sat on the smooth floor and took the dangerous bomb apart. I glanced only fleetingly into Room 18-B, where our 150 men had assembled according to the instructions. Only 18 of the 50 genuine Zalites had returned. Lt. Kecc, the radar technician, had been shot with the rest, according to report. I directed the trembling Zalites back into their quarters and called for strictest quiet. Minutes later, I met with the officers of Rhodan's general staff. Perry stood, legs apart, against the bare plastic wall of the four-man room. As I entered, he saluted only briefly. Bell looked at me out of dully shining eyes and John Marshall was desperately trying to pick up some thought impulses. "Don't trouble yourself, John," said Rhodan with an oddly toneless voice. "There are only robots here and they don't think. The few Arkonides in the other quartering halls don't know anything. The death order came direct from the Regent." Marshall gave up. A man reported the complete dismantling of the bomb. Rhodan nodded absentmindedly. As he looked at us, one after the other, he seemed to me extremely cool and collected. "Do you know what that means? We disappeared from the power plant in a mysterious fashion, yet the Regent has determined that the only place we could have gone is this military settlement here. So it had the streets cleared in order to begin as quickly as possible a painstaking search for us. The order to fire is a kind of positronic panic action that was without a doubt issued by the Robot's self-preservation sector. It knows now that there are dangerous weapons down here and it's going to have a search made for them." "Well have to separate ourselves from them, sir!" Marshall put in excitedly. "Ras Tschubai can take them off to some isolated spot with just a few springs. Even if they're discovered, the Regent could never guess who had carried them." The thought was thoroughly logical, except for one error. I knew how Rhodan's clear mind would react to that. "Wrong, John! The Regent never forgets anything. It will remember in a second the activities of our mutants about 70 years ago and draw the appropriate conclusions. By now it must have decided beyond all doubt that the sudden disappearance of the power plant intruders was nothing normal. It possesses enough information concerning our earlier activities in the realm of the Imperium to add to that. It knows that it's dealing with Terrans. That means it will have everyone occupying this sector of the city examined. Hiding our weapons wouldn't help us any." "It's a far-fetched theory!" Bell warned. "It isn't far-fetched at all. I know this machine. It will draw just the conclusions I've already mentioned. What's your opinion, Atlan?" I nodded, even though it seemed to me that my neck muscles were stiffening. "You're quite right. Even if Terra didn't occur to the Regent, it still wouldn't forego the examination. Unfortunately we can't disguise our human or Arkonide brain frequencies. When they take a close look at us, we'll be found out. Even our Zalite disguises won't help us then." Rhodan stroked his long hair. His smile did not seem authentic. "In that case, it might be better to keep our weapons with us. I wouldn't like to be entirely defenceless when they find us out. Or does anyone see a possibility of forcing our way topside?" Potkin gave a short laugh at that and shook his head. "Hopeless," I said, trying to keep my own voice calm and collected. "In this sector there's only the one entrance, the one we're already familiar with. We can't get to the shipyards anymore. Besides that, an attempt to do so would be senseless. The ships are taken below by way of enormous antigrav shafts. We'd never be able to get up to the surface there." Several more suggestions were made, none of them promising any great amount of success. In fact, not one held even the slightest trace of a chance for escaping. Rhodan sat down on the simple pneumo-couch. He knew that we had gambled and lost. If our so-carefully-planned offence had succeeded, everything would have been different. We would have undoubtedly found a way in the ensuing chaos to reach the surface, for the Regent would have no longer existed. Now, however, the Regent was striking back with all its ruthlessness. Not everything was lost yet: there was still a certain limited possibility. I mentioned it hesitantly. "You must realize that we're going to be discovered. An armed resistance to

the last man would not only be stupid, it would be wrong. if we announce ourselves at once, the Robot will take us prisoner. It needs Terra's help. It's probable that we'd come out of this relatively unscathed. But this is only an idea!" Rhodan's eyes sparkled in the diagonally falling light. "Is that your opinion, Arkonide? You don't believe it yourself! The Regent will take us in and interrogate us painstakingly. It will learn the Earth's galactic position and attack at once. That's all it has wanted to do for years. You can just forget about that idea, my friend." Bell looked at me through half-closed eyes. His attitude was too casual to have a reassuring effect on me. Hot anger boiled up inside me. Our situation was desperate enough as it was but now added to that was the distrust of the Terrans. "Then do what you want, you mighty heroes!" I said, my voice hot with fury. "Go down with flags flying and hands playing for all I care! You fools will never learn! You understand shooting and running stupidly to meet your death but you don't have any idea of real politics. There might be a way to deceive the Regent." "No!" "No!" The word stood in the small room as though it had become solidified. Rhodan had made his decision. I looked at him wildly, clenching my fists until my knuckles turned white. No one said a word. Instead, I was being virtually dissected by several pairs of cold eyes. I forced a mocking smile to my lips and turned. Then came the sharp calls after me that I had already been expecting. They would never change, these somewhat too-quickly elevated barbarians! "Where are you going, Arkonide?" I turned my head. Rhodan was tensed, ready to leap after me, convincing me that he no longer trusted me. "To the mess," I answered ironically. "Why are you so nervous, immortal? Aren't you hungry?" Bell grinned and Rhodan relaxed. "You're being rather peevish, aren't you?" he asked pointedly. "Only outwardly. I'm afraid that my wonderful cell activator won't be of much use to me in the very near future. Since accidental death affects the body from without and is not a result of any organic process, the cell activator is helpless in coping with the damage. If you consider being hit by a beamer blast as an accident, then you know what lies before us. You should reconsider the idea of capitulation. If I know the Brain, it will be undertaking some new move before long. For now, all the Zalites have been shut up in their quarters and the Regent has thereby brought all activity that might be a threat to it to a halt. That was the first move in a train of brilliantly clear logic. The next move will be much less pleasant." I touched the edge of my radio helmet with my fingertips in salute but before I could reach the door the large loudspeakers of the general address system outside began to roar. This time the Regent himself was speaking. I stopped, listening. Rhodan sprang to my side and pushed the door open with his foot. The message was too loud to go unheard, however. "Regent to all Zalite commanders," the voice resounded through all the vast corridors and halls. "You are directed to have your crews fall in, ready for march. You will be called according to ship and transported to the surface. The furlough has been cancelled, effective immediately. The crews will be escorted by combat robots. You are not to ask me any questions." We looked at each other in surprise. Now what was this supposed to mean? Were these orders also a part of mechanical logic? If yes, what did the Robot hope to accomplish by evacuating us? Why did it not undertake the examination of each individual down here, a tactic which would have certainly been successful? The answer came from the auxiliary brain. As I became conscious of the answer and turned it over in my mind, I did something I was to bitterly regret seconds later. I turned to Rhodan and quickly explained what I had just found out. "The Regent has drawn his conclusions. The Brain isn't risking the examination of the people in the city because it's probably found out that we penetrated the power plant with a bomb. Otherwise, it would have been senseless, since we could never have seriously threatened the Regent with our hand-beamers alone, even if we had been standing in the middle of his own mechanical insides." "It sounds plausible! Go on!" Rhodan urged. "The Regent is now trying to get everyone out of the area in which more damage can be done with the proper means than above on the spaceport. That's why there

won't be any more examination. It would cost time, and time is something the Regent won't let anyone have. Things are really going to get hot for us up on the spaceport." The expression on Rhodan's face made me silent. A death mask could not have been more frozen and expressionless. He needed exactly three seconds to reach his decision. A decision that made me pale. "Sgt. Huster!" The weapons expert had been standing outside in the corridor. He was leading the so-called withdrawal squad. Silently, he stood at attention. "Perry...!" I said, agitated. My throat felt as though there was a lump in it. "Perry...!" He didn't pay any attention to me. His voice was toneless. "Sgt. Huster, in the interests of mankind you are accordingly being given the order to assemble the Arkon Bomb from the separate pieces that have been brought along. Make it ready for activation and install the timer-detonator. Report back to me as soon as it's done." Huster saluted. He was already gone before I could say anything. Our 150 men crowded around unobtrusively. The Arkon Bomb, most dangerous weapon of destruction that my race possessed for use against solid targets like planets or other heavenly bodies, was Rhodan's last resort. Since the bomb was large and heavy when constructed, even despite its superlative miniaturisation, we had needed 62 men to conceal the separate pieces. Huster could not be finished in less than an hour. I ran into the corridor and glanced hastily into Room 18-B. Huster was already lost in the crowd of men, probably even now being given hastily produced bomb parts. I felt sick. I knew that the bomb would trigger an inextinguishable atomic fire affecting all elements with an atomic number above 10. The major components of the atmosphere would not be attacked but that was not necessary. We had only recently experienced the destruction of an entire planet by Arkon Bombs. The planet Grautier, formerly a Solar Imperium fleet base, had been turned into a slowly fading sun in a matter of hours. Now Rhodan planned the same fate for Arkon 3—for that ancient planetary body that had been the foundation for the power of the Arkonide realm and still kept it on its feet. Without Arkon 3, the Great Imperium was like a tree without roots. It must not happen! When I came back into the small officers' room, the Regent was just then issuing the first evacuation instructions. I heard that the commanders of 10 ships were told to lead their crews out of their quarters and proceed in good march formation to destinations indicated by robots. With that it was clear that the Robot was acting very quickly. It could be our turn at any moment. No one knew which crew would be giving its marching orders next. I only hoped that Sgt. Huster would not have enough time to finish the construction of the Arkon Bomb. I stormed back into the room only half-thinking, not suspecting what was waiting for me there. I probably should have realized correctly what would happen beforehand but I was agitated beyond all bounds. After all, I had known mankind for 10,000 years. The mouth of Rhodan's beamer was aimed directly at my chest. Three other weapons threatened me as well. I stopped and looked down in confusion at the reddish fluorescing beamed rays of energy. Then I raised my head. "I'm sorry," said Rhodan in a regretful voice. "We're assuming that my last order might incite you to doing something irrational. We'll keep our eye on you until we get our marching orders. I hope you have nothing against that?" The cold irony of his words shocked me. I pushed back my senseless anger and made an effort requiring all the strength of my will to stay calm. "No, tricks, please," Bell added in a friendly tone. "We know each other, don't we?" I laughed bitterly. Yes, we knew each other! It took awhile before I could speak. "So you want to destroy the war planet, eh? I hope you're also aware that this means a revolt in the galaxy. If you destroy Arkon's ship-building potential, the Imperium will be like a warrior with his sword hand chopped off." "I'm aware of that." "More than 50,000 colonial worlds will realize at once that the stellar empire no longer exists. It will lead to chaos and, besides that, there's the Druuf menace. Do I have to argue with you anymore, you irresponsible upstart?" Rhodan was not offended, even though I had meant it earnestly this time. He regarded me coolly. His self-control was perfect. "I'm sorry. The Druuf menace will come to an end in

a few months of its own accord, thanks to the continuing instability of the overlapping zone. We'll take care of the revolts in the Arkonide colonial sectors. "For Terra's benefit!" I scoffed, not far from sobbing. "For Terra's benefit, Arkonide. I'm giving you the chance to create a new empire together with us. Here, you're fighting for a lost cause. Or have you forgotten what the people of your race are like? With them you would never be able to put down any internal rebellion. You must realize that the destruction of this mammoth war world is the only solution. Not even the Regent will be able to withstand the atomic fire. His super-defence screens will collapse and the planet will begin to seethe. Beforehand, we will have found ample opportunity to escape in a ready-to-go spaceship. There are several hundred thousand units here, any one of which would be suitable. No one would be killed. The bomb is only a small one and would require hours for the fire to spread out over the entire planet. Everyone would have been able to get into open space by then. The only unfortunate one having to remain behind would be the Regent, solidly anchored in rock. And then our goal is accomplished." "You're destroying the Imperium," I said haltingly. "You're wiping out everything we've done and built in 20,000 years. I won't stand for it! What do you know of the countless races who are waiting only for this moment? They will fall upon us like wolves. The non-humanoid races will have the time and opportunity to make their influence felt." "We will have to deal with it. However, Atlan, you won't change anything." I noticed that the mutant hypno, André Noir, was trying to influence me with his unusual power. I felt a weak twinge of pain in my neck. It vanished at once when my extra brain automatically strengthened my mono-screen. The hypno could not penetrate my mental defence block. I laughed mockingly in his face and, disconcerted, he stepped back. Rhodan gestured warningly to him, then said, very much in self control, "Atlan, we'll overcome even this barrier in the way of our friendship. Calm yourself now and try to understand the facts logically. The Regent must be put out of commission." "But not this way!" I cried out, beside myself. Marshall wanted to clap his hand over my mouth. I knocked him down with one blow. He went down on his knees with a groan, falling with his back against the wall. "Better men than you have tried that," I said, chokingly. "Don't do it again, John!" From then on we were silent. I decided it was pointless to try to continue pressing Rhodan, now that his motivations were fully clear to me. To be completely candid, Arkon's rulership did not interest him at all. For him the realm was merely a decayed system of government without any right to exist. Looked at from a standpoint of strict logic, he was even right. My people were no longer able to rule a galactic empire. Still, it was terrible for me to have to look on as the original source of our power was condemned to total destruction. Exhausted and spiritually drained, I sat down on my pneumo-bed. "Very nice, Arkonide!" I looked at Rhodan searchingly. He sensed the hate that suddenly rose up within me. My lips chapped and dry, I whispered: "I should have driven that sword in the Venus museum into your throat, you fool! If Arkon 3 is destroyed, horrible tides and quakes will ensue on the other two planets in the triple system. What do you know of the carefully calculated system of opposing gravitational stabilization?" I looked at him imploringly. Wouldn't he understand? His grey eyes were expressionless and his lips were a razor-sharp line. He was thinking of Terra, of course! One of the crewmen looked in hastily. "We'll be ready in 30 minutes, sir," he announced. I was inwardly growing desperate. Why hadn't any watch robots appeared? They should be showing up in the corridors at any moment. Bell blocked the door. I knew that if I attempted to escape, he would shoot. 6/ DESTINY APPOINTS ATLAN "Faster, faster!" ordered the three-meter-tall combat robot with the maximum loudness of its biomechanical speech organs. We had been running for 10 minutes now. We had even been required to trot on the express roll-band, even though that means of mass transportation glided along its invisible cylindrical rollers at 40 kilometres an hour. Now we were running towards the iridescently lit entrance of a giant antigrav shaft. I had already suspected that the Regent would not

have us taken up to the surface by the way we were familiar with but that it could decide to send the many crews up through the huge spaceship lifts in the adjacent underground dockyards had surprised me. Even so, the Robot had been careful enough to barricade the wide passages between the fully automatic bandways with combat robots. We ran a gauntlet of threateningly raised weapon arms which could discharge their deadly energies at any moment. Rhodan, Bell and Marshall were staying behind me. They had not given me any chance to reveal the fact that the Arkon Bomb had been set. In my current state of mind I probably couldn't have done it anyway, although I would have done everything I could to prevent Arkon's destruction two hours before. Now I was too weak for that. I didn't risk anything more. Deep inside, I was even coming to the conclusion that Rhodan was only justified. We would probably be able to suppress the revolts in the colonial sectors of the galaxy later. I was the fifth man to leap into the antigrav shaft. Behind me came the Terrans, determined to do anything. I noticed that Rhodan glanced quickly at his watch. Then looked shocked over to Sgt. Huster, who only gestured uncomfortably. Then I knew that the moment in which the bomb would automatically go off had gone by. I supported myself by holding tight to the wall, trying not to be whirled away in spite of the weightless situation. Not all our men had assembled yet. We had been ordered to float upwards only in a group. "Huster, what's going on?" Rhodan called to the massively built man. His face was tense. "Sir, it ought to have gone off by now," the weapons expert moaned. Someone cursed frightfully. I could not tell who it was. Behind us came some combat robots into the shaft, which measured more than 200 meters in diameter. Then we were given a burst of compressed air which shoved us upwards and not very gently at that. The huge shaft led straight up through the rock. I pushed off from the broad shoulders of a soldier and floated over to Rhodan. His weapon had long disappeared. He looked at me, seeming no longer quite so cold and unfeeling. If anything, he impressed me as being desperate. I put my arms around his shoulders, which had the effect of spinning us. "Where did you have the teleporters plant the bomb?" I asked quickly. "Now tell me-where?" "Right in front of the rock wall of the power plant. Under the bend the air-conditioning pipeline makes." "Right where the surveillance systems would be strongest, you mean! Why didn't you fools simply leave the bomb behind in our quarters? An Arkon Bomb operates on the basis of a high-energy detonation. It's obvious that the bomb was detected and rendered harmless right after the timer-detonator was activated. "Impossible-it was shielded against energy detection," he answered, dismayed. "What do you know of the options open to the Great Brain? When the stimulation process began in the bomb's deflector field, it resembled a radiant ball of energy. That alone would make it stand out from its surroundings and it was immediately detected. A robot troop has probably long since deactivated the bomb." "No, no...!" "I'll bet anything that's what happened. What now? Why has nothing taken place that indicates a successful total detonation? Perry, think about it. They'll be waiting for us up there." The following events happened so quickly that we were hardly able to keep up with them. We were drawn upwards at a considerable speed. Suddenly the armourplated mouth of the shaft opened up and harsh sunlight blinded our eyes. Our fall was stopped by the receiving station's impact field and the gravity returned. Above us vaulted a gigantic dome of Arkon steel. Only five men out of the crew brought up just before were still to be seen. They were in the process of marching in rank and file through a high-tension barrier, behind which a portable energy sensor had been set up. That meant it was no longer possible to carry our weapons, which operated on an energy basis, on our bodies. The sensor would probably register when we had approached it to within 30-40 paces. It was just as I had suspected. Rhodan said something that I could not quite understand. The men of the commando team, also landing alongside, immediately made a circle around him and then Perry reached into his pocket. He had simply put the micro-atombomb in his pocket without considering the dangers of such an action. The bomb had the flat form of a

jewellery case but in explosive power it was the equivalent of 500 tons of TNT. With a move of the hand, Huster pushed the tiny rod-shaped solid fuel rocket engine on the connecting flange of the bomb and snapped the thin aluminium handle down. With that, the flat shape became a flight-ready microrocket that could be launched straight to its target with the guide rail of the handle. Rhodan bent over the opening, his feet held by two men, and stretched his right hand straight down. The loud hissing of the chemical fuel was drowned in the noise of our voices. I noticed only the blinding stream of gas shooting past Rhodan's turned head. As he straightened up with a jerk and jumped back, the unusual missile was already on its way. When it struck, 1,800 meters lower down, there would have to be a devastating explosion. The few combat robots were still in the shaft. They had waited until we had reached the top. I saw our 150 men leap. They ran like madmen to the most distant point in the dome, threw themselves flat on the ground and at the same time pulled their guns out of inner pockets of their uniforms. I followed, throwing myself to the ground as well but then I was surrounded by an atomic storm. The bomb must have reached the bottom by this time but evidently it had a delayed action fuse. Rhodan's men were firing at the now-emerging combat robots, shooting them down so quickly that they did not have a chance to resist. Our next target was the high-tension barrier with the portable sensing device. It exploded in a bright burst of flame and the robots standing next to it were knocked off balance by the shockwave. Before they could regain their equilibrium, they had been turned into glowing piles of scrap. Suddenly there seemed to be no more threat. The entrance lay open before us. I noticed some Zalites fleeing in terror; they had belonged to the crew that had preceded us. "Stay down," Rhodan yelled. "It'll go off any moment now. What 'it' was, was obvious to me. I wrapped my arms around one of the struts supporting the dome overhead and pressed my face against the ground. Then the ground shook amid a terrible explosion. But only a surprisingly weak column of fire burst from the wide shaft. However, the ground tremors were so strong that I was ripped from my protection and sent whirling across the metal-plastic ground covering. The shockwave boiling out of the shaft demolished the dome roof and dumped on us glowing hot pieces of rubble that had evidently been raised from the depths. There seemed to be no end to the fearful thundering. Again we were caught by a shockwave, and a second, this time considerably more intense, pillar of fire shot out of the shaft, looking as though it had been shot from a gigantic cannon barrel, which the shaft resembled. This was to our benefit and Rhodan seemed to have been counting on it. Besides, the effects of the explosion were slight here in comparison to down below where it had taken place: the liberated energy had naturally expanded into the huge caverns far beneath us. We were only getting a taste of it, so to speak, but even that was violent enough for me to be quite satisfied. The edges of the shaft collapsed. The last pieces of debris came flying out of the rumbling depths. The dome was a mass of rubble. Wide openings had appeared in the walls. Rhodan was the first to get to his feet. He sprang up to one of the openings and looked out. From now on, then, we were playing with all our cards on the table. "Ships!" he cried. "There are lots of ships out there! We'll try to reach the nearest one. No matter what happens, no one must let himself be caught!" It was a very heroic thing to say but in spite of the desperate situation it made my laugh. Who else but a Terran could have said it so close to inevitable destruction? We all knew that despite our momentary success we had no more chances. Even if we could take off in a ship, our fate would catch up with us even before we were fairly off the ground. It was all so useless and yet we ran anyway. I leaped out into the bright glare of Arkon's sun and then I thought my blood would freeze. Just one kilometre away rose the huge energy dome of the Regent into the cloudless sky. The dock shaft we had just destroyed led upwards somewhat too closely to the defence screen. 150 madmen ran as they had never run before in their lives. The genuine Zalites remained behind, thoroughly confused. They understood nothing more. I followed Rhodan, since for better or for worse I

had no choice. When we were just 100 meters from the ship we coveted so much—a light cruiser of the Fleet—its engines came to life. It rose from the ground, impulse waves roaring and glowing white hot from its jets. Rhodan's legs suddenly seemed to give way. They slowly folded up and Rhodan sank to the ground where he lay as though paralysed. Through dull eyes he watched the cruiser flying away. The other ships were also starting to take off. The hollow roar of engines sounded like our death march. Rhodan was still lying in the same place. His mouth was wide open. He was breathing heavily. The flickering wall of the gigantic energy dome was just 500 meters away. The robotships taking off gave us an increasingly more open view until we stood alone before the horizon-filling wall. The men of the commando team had also stopped running. Gasping, they looked around and then they noticed what I had long since discovered. Far to the rear, perhaps still three kilometres away, dark figures were welling up out of the armoured doors that we had used not many hours before as our entranceway into the sub-Arkonide cities. From a distance they looked like angry ants spewing out of their hill. The thick stream split up and soon we knew that the on-marching robots had formed a skirmish line. It was silent, oppressively silent. The thunder of engines had died away and the vast spaceport suddenly seemed to be deserted. We could not yet hear the stamping tread of the robots but by the time we were able to perceive it, we would be done for in any case. Bell looked around. Then he pointed over to the defence screen. "That's a kind of rampart over there. It probably constitutes the first danger zone and beyond it things get unpleasant. Let's get ourselves some cover." He went over to Rhodan, grasped him under the shoulders and raised him to his feet. Rhodan shook his head vigorously, as though he had to divest himself of some burden. "Why didn't the robotships shoot at us, in heaven's name? They would have wiped us out in one salvo." "They want us alive, my friend," I answered. "Remember that. The battlerobots will probably use only shock weapons. He looked at me wildly. Finally he managed a tortured smile. "OK, let them come. Do you see any avenue of escape?" "We should give ourselves up. Why do you want to sacrifice your men?" His bearing stiffened. "No one will reveal Terra's galactic position!" I shrugged. That was a convincing argument, of course. "You'll have to shoot your own soldiers and then yourself! If the robots limit themselves to shockweapons, you won't have any other choice. If you don't do it, you'll end up a prisoner of the Regent." It became quiet again. The situation was noteworthy in that no one was seriously attacking us. We simply stood there with the impenetrable energy screen before us and a phalanx of robots behind us. The purpose of this measure was quite clear. Rhodan acted as though he had not heard my last words. Most likely, he hesitated to have to take such a final step. Perhaps he also hoped that the approaching robots would fire on us with deadly weapons. We ran about 150 meters farther, leaped over an armourplastic wall which was painted a bright red and was about man-high, and sought cover behind it. Just 50 meters behind us began the actual danger zone. It was not wise to go within 300 meters of the gigantic and doubtless high-tension energy screen. We lay there for a while until Ras Tschubai came up to us. He saluted Rhodan and explained simply that: "Sir, I'd like to try to spring through the screen with some hand bombs. I might be able to do it." Rhodan regarded him in silence. Just as silently he handed the teleporter five of the flat fusion bombs, which he had previously wrapped together with a strip of tape. We waited until Ras had concentrated. As he sprang there was the usual luminosity but then immediately afterwards he heard again the ghastly scream that we had heard a few hours before. A long time went by before the rotating energy spiral dissolved and let free Tschubai's slowly-rematerialising body. He was still screaming when the two medics in our group were giving him his first pain-killing injections. "A honeycomb defence screen," John Marshall said tonelessly. "Is it always there or does the Brain only turn it on when it's especially threatened?" Rhodan did not reply. I was looking at him from the side and startled with sudden fear as he issued some orders. The flat microbombs appeared from the so-inconspicuously-arranged

inner pockets of the uniforms. Pistol stocks with short rocket-launchers and rod-shaped solid fuel rocket engines with opened stabilizing fins were assembled. Except for the men who had utilized their inner pockets for transporting the 62 separate parts of the Arkon Bomb, we had one microbomb per man. Bell and Rhodan took aim, adjusted the primitive-looking dioptric screws for the distance and pulled the trigger. Hissing, the small objects soared off in a wide parabola. They struck the ground precisely in front of the tight line of robots and exploded in sun-bright atomic reactions. It was a radiation-free fusion process and so we had only the liberated thermal energy and the shockwaves to fear. The glowing hot hurricane howled over our heads and the dark mushroom clouds climbed into the sky above the landscape. Pieces of rubble rained down and then it grew slowly quiet. We looked over the wall, an ideal fixture for such a situation, and scouted ahead. Two shallow, molten craters gaped in the armourplastic layer of the plaza. A great many battlemachines had probably been destroyed but to the left and right of the craters the other robots marched on with mechanical calmness. They knew no fear of destruction. Rhodan's face hardened. From then on we shot bomb after bomb until the spaceport resembled a boiling hell. The shockwaves raged across the wide plaza and the falling rubble became so dangerous for us that we finally had to call off the bombardment. At that point the robots were still about one kilometre away. They went around the impact areas of the warheads, only 500 tons of TNT strong, and continued their attack. From then on we did not dare work with heavy weapons. Our targets were now too close. Bell had hidden his face in his folded arms. Only his shaking shoulders showed that this man had feelings, too. I turned to Rhodan. He was drawing his impulse beamer in order to continue the senseless resistance. "Will you bring yourself to murdering your own men so that they can't say anything about Terra's position?" I demanded. "Murder?" he repeated, shocked. "Did I ever use that word? We're going to defend ourselves. Let things happen as they will. Each of us has a hypnoblock that will become effective during a psycho-interrogation. You can block yourself off on your own accord. If the Regent resorts to purely physical torture, we'll all certainly experience some unpleasant hours." "So why are you ever afraid of anyone saying something that could damage Terra?" He lowered his head. Lowly, he answered, "I don't trust the hypnoblocks completely. If the Regent puts the galactic physicians to work-!" I understood completely. Rhodan was being buffeted about by his own feelings. He knew that we had gambled and lost. Moments later, his men began to shoot. I listened for some time to the uninterrupted crackling of the energy weapons until I saw the Hashing ray bursts were being deflected by the battle-robots' body-screens. Then we were fired at ourselves. The enemy fired relatively harmless shockweapons, as I had already anticipated. The Brain wanted us alive and alive it would get us. One after another, I looked at the doggedly fighting men. Here and there, a shock burst would hit one of them. I watched the men fall and lie still, their limbs rigid and hard. They would recover in two hours but by then it would be too late. Then I acted. I was tired; terribly tired. The burden of millenniums suddenly seemed unbearably heavy to me. Once more I felt how old I was. I was an Arkonide fossil, a thinking and feeling creature who was all of a sudden tired of not being allowed by a technological masterpiece to die. I clapped Rhodan on the shoulder and stood up. The rampart was high enough to protect me from the weapons fire. Only when one climbed up on it to fight could he get hit. I picked up my microbomb with my left hand and walked in the direction of the defence screen. "Atlan! Atlan, my friend, Atlan!" He called my name three times. Then he let me go. I no longer looked back although I knew they were all watching me. It had suddenly grown still. They had ceased their fire for a moment. "Atlan! The screen is deadly!" That time it was Bell who cried out. I paid no attention. Slowly, I went on. A little later, they began to shoot again. I had turned the switch of my helmet radio to the left and adjusted it to the frequency on which I had communicated with the Regent shortly after the landing. All feeling had died within me. I did not even

feel any fear: only a death-like numbness that allowed no further clear thinking. I came ever closer to the red ring of the danger zone. I felt only that death was waiting for me there. I was no longer capable of any actual feeling. I was like a deeply religious man waiting for his death calmly and serenely. Oddly enough, the self-confidence of my age came into expression in a form I had not expected. I wanted to give up but I also wanted to show who I was, where I came from and how vastly superior I was to any object built by men of my sort. I wanted to insult and humiliate a machine, to scourge it with words and the sharpness of my intellect, even though there was nothing at all to scourge. A robot cannot be moved by such means. Nevertheless, I began to speak as though I had a living, thinking being before me. It was crazy but that was something I was only dimly aware of in the background of my consciousness. "Regent, this is the commander of the battleship Kon-Velete speaking. You know me under the name of Ighur, which by the way is just as false as our judgment of the situation. Through my knowledge and experience I have brought a troop of Terrans to Arkon 3, for I was no longer willing to tolerate the tyrannical regime of one of my servants." I stopped for a moment and savoured the pleasure of using the expression 'one of my servants'. It was fun for me to use the vocabulary of my eminent ancestors. I continued, speaking in the best Arkonese: "I am Atlan, Crystal Prince of the Realm, member of the ruling family from the house of Gonozal, nephew and heir of His Eminence, Emperor Gonozal VII, Admiral of the Imperium Fleet, Chief of the 18th Wing under the command of Admiral Sakal, victor of 27 battles near the Nebula Sector and subjugator of the Maahk System in the Region of Dark Clouds, Member of the Great Council of Arkon, Receiver of Brain Activation following the decision of the High Board, Discoverer and Deliverer of a weapon with which the Methane War was decided. I demand subordination and obedience as is fitting for a machine built by my descendants." I stopped once more. My body shook in a crazy attack of laughter. I bent forward, rested my hands on my knees and forewent further arguments. With what remained of my logically functioning reason, I knew that I had lost my self-control. In a hard, cold and commanding voice, I went on: "I said, 'built by my descendants' because I, Admiral Atlan, was held by adverse circumstances in the Terrans' solar system. A certain device guaranteed my immortality. I have now returned home to demand obedience. You are to terminate at once all hostile actions being conducted against me and the Terrans, open up the defence screen for me and turn over your programming central to me. I declare you incapable of guiding the destiny of the realm. You are now to stop all official actions, issue an order to wait to the spaceship commanders at the Druuf Front and forbid any more ships from flying into the Arkon system for the time being. Have you understood, you short-circuited servant of my people?" As I finished the last words, I was still two meters from the red line. At that moment my mental fog lifted and I realized in full clarity what kind of nonsense I had pronounced. I had fallen into a senseless frenzy, a frenzy of words and ridiculous phrases that were grammatical nonsense. I waited for the crashing blow of energy to strike me down. I had already come too close to the energy screen. I was ashamed before my friends who had probably heard my stammering over the radio. They would pity me and that pained me. I wanted no pity. I went slowly onwards, ever closer to the deadly energy dome. When I stood just in front of it, a loud crackling sounded in my helmet loudspeakers. A deep, full-toned voice spoke. "This is Failsafe Circuit A-1 speaking, your Eminence. Your statements have been checked against the old memory banks and found accurate. Your measured brain frequency matches the data stored therein. I recognize you as the Crystal Prince of the Realm and future ruler of the Great Imperium. I have switched off the robot automatic which you call the Regent. Its sections concerned with the security of the realm continue to function. The attacks against your subjects have been terminated. I have taken these measures on the basis of failsafe circuit 'Senekha', which requires me to turn absolute power over to a pure-blooded Arkonide, should one appear with fire in his eye who is as capable and pure as the ancients and is animated by the deepest concern for

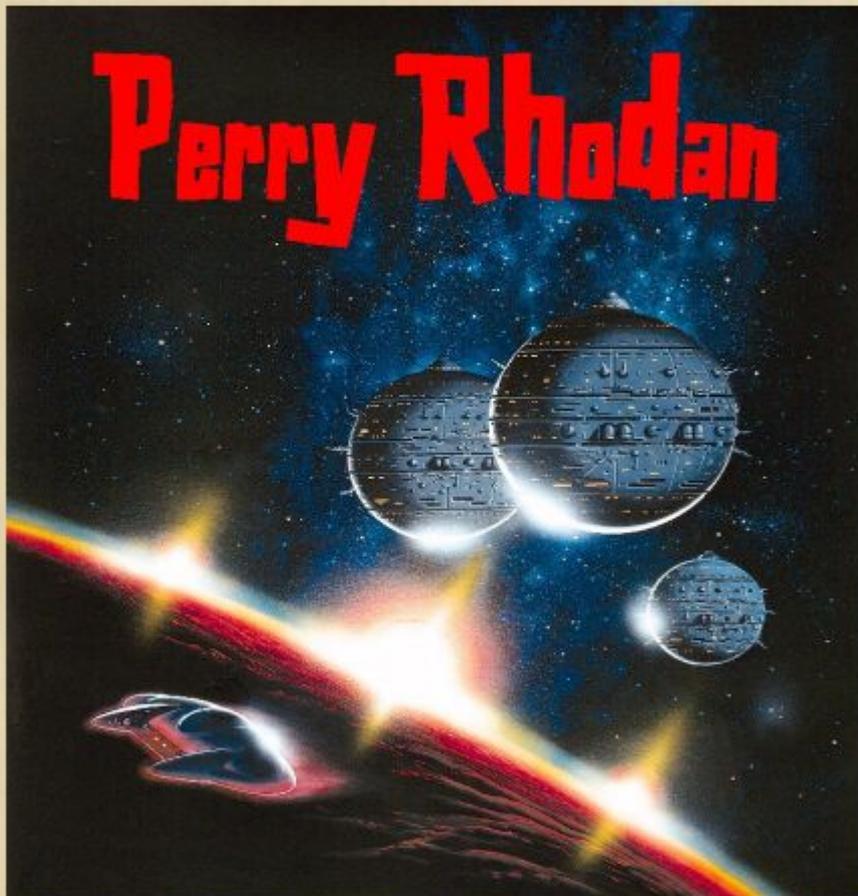
the continued existence of the realm. These conditions have been fulfilled. The service of the Robot has come to an end. I await your instructions, your Eminence." I stumbled a few steps ahead. The energy screen opened up before me. I stopped numbly just on the other side of it. I was still not quite clear as to what the voice had said. Your Eminence...? Wasn't that the title for the Emperor? Failsafe Circuit A-1, powerful enough to turn the entire giant Brain off by just closing a connection? I had to be dreaming; I must still be crazy and had heard my previously spoken, high-sounding prattle come back to me as a peculiar echo. I stared in surprise at the approaching vehicle. Two robots climbed out and snapped to attention. Behind me, it had suddenly grown quiet. No one was shooting anymore. "You are exhausted, your Eminence," said one robot subserviently. "May we touch you?" I stammered an affirmative. They took me by their steel arms, put me in the impact-field glider and took off with me. A steel dome opened up. Five special machines from the Arkonide medical sector were waiting for me. They were magnificently constructed robots with humble smiles on their plastic faces. Robots had always looked like that in my time. I had never known any different. Even the so-called Regent was only a robot, in spite of its colossal size. "Wait," I said with difficulty. They stepped back at once. I knew that I was in the Robot Brain. It could not be a dream. Loud calls were reaching me, coming from my helmet radio. Rhodan called in utmost excitement. "Atlan! Atlan, can you hear me? The attack has stopped and I'm being asked over the radio to enter the zone behind the defence screen. Atlan, what's going on over there? Is this some kind of a trick? Answer me, Atlan. Atlan...!" That made me certain that I had not gone mad. My mind was active, my senses were functioning and in front of me stood several special robots in respectful deference. Slowly I sat up. They had placed me in a stretcher which I was now getting out of, my strength returning. "Failsafe Circuit A-1, I wish for the weak radio impulses of my helmet sender to be augmented and beamed out to my friends." I waited breathlessly for the answer. It came at once. "It is done, your Eminence. The augments are in operation." I walked past the robots, speaking into my helmet microphone. "Atlan to Perry Rhodan. This is no trick! I repeat-this is no trick! Bring your men into the zone and wait for further instructions. I have given the order for all hostile action to be halted at once. Are the robots staying quiet?" Someone breathed loudly and quickly. Then I heard a brief groan. "Are... are you going crazy?" Rhodan asked. "Have they taken you captive and forced you to try to get us to-" "No one has done anything but declare their obedience to the Crystal Prince of the Realm," I interrupted. I now felt inwardly calmed. Everything had suddenly become clear to me. "Atlan, you're dreaming. Something doesn't sound right!" "Everything's alright; it was just that our actions weren't in accord with the facts. The failsafe circuit existed as we had thought. Arkon's top scientists would have never failed to put one in. Circuit A-1 has been activated. The Regent no longer exists, as we knew it. It is now just a simple robot brain which obeys my orders just like the smallest machine. I'm going to cancel the long out-of-date programming and readjust the Brain's unquestionably overwhelming potential so that it is more in accord with the times. From now on, an Arkonide will be standing behind the scenes." "I'm going crazy!" someone said gruffly. That could only have been Reginald Bell. "I'd thought that of myself," I answered with a smile that seemed to set free all the worries and problems of the past. The cell activator beat on my chest. I felt the stream of refreshing stimulus-impulses in every nerve fibre. "What did we do wrong, Atlan?" Rhodan asked. "Everything we did. Everything was for nothing-all the exertions, dangers and efforts. I needed do no more than climb out of the ship after we landed and walk up to the energy screen. The failsafe circuit, which has been operating for the last 5000 years, would have immediately recognized from a remote pickup of my brain frequency that I was no degenerate Arkonide but instead one of those who had founded the realm and built the Robot Brain. It would have been that simple, Terran! I could have even flown in unmolested with a small ship if I had called the Regent beforehand and announced my

identity. Since the failsafe circuit kept watch over every incoming radio message, I would have been recognized in that undangerous manner. Perry, you should thank your lucky stars that your Arkon Bomb was discovered in time." He was silent for a long time. Meanwhile, I asked A-1 if the assumptions I had voiced were correct. A clear "Yes, your Eminence" came in reply. "Come inside and wait just beyond the screen," I said, suddenly growing somewhat tired again. "Relax. I'll arrange for food and drink. As soon as I've taken care of the necessary things, I'll call you again." "What do you mean, necessary things, Atlan?" "Don't become suspicious again, barbarian. You'll never learn. Or do you now have the idea I want to get rid of you as fast as I can?" He laughed somewhat uncertainly. Moments later, I learned from the promptly functioning equipment that the Terrans had marched inside. I had the screen closed at once, which immediately resulted in an excited call to me. "Calm yourself, Perry," I sighed. "This robot brain is worth too much for me to let it go unprotected. Pull yourself together and please try to do something to calm your excitement a little." I switched off and told a robot to lead me to the failsafe circuit central. As I walked through the vast rooms with the unimaginably complicated equipment, I was filled with joy and pride. This engineering masterwork, which could fail only due to long-antiquated programming, had been created by men and women of my race. I had only to take it over. For me there was no more 'Regent' but for other intelligences he would continue to exist at least in appearance. There was no need yet for the galaxy to know that the Robot Brain was now being purposefully directed. All my problems had been solved by themselves. I now needed no longer to worry myself over supplying the fleet with goods of all sorts and the operation of all the dockyards and industrial complexes, nor even about the numerous affairs of administration. The Brain would take care of all that. Plans, great plans, were hatching in my mind before I had even reached the failsafe control-room. I entered a programming room with large vidscreens on the walls. "Welcome, your Eminence," said the same full-toned voice. The face of an Arkonide scientist appeared on one of the vidscreens. "This is an audio-video recording in connection with Failsafe Circuit 'Senekha'. When you hear me, I will probably have been long dead. My vocal frequencies are however available to Circuit A-1. I am Epetran, First Scientist of the Council. Our instruction to A-1 consists of turning over power to an active-remaining Arkonide with an intelligence level of at least 50 Lerc. We are of the hope that the beginning decay will one day come to an end. Should the spiritual decline surpass the danger level, the great Robot Brain will guide the destiny of the realm until someone comes who resembles the ancients. In that case, A-1 will take on my voice and speak in the sense of its programming. This is happening as of now. Again, I bid you welcome, your Eminence." The image faded. I knew that it had only been the circuit speaking to me but it had been a clever decision of the ancients in the Great Imperium to add the visual impact of a film during the explanation. I sat down exhaustedly in an armchair. In front of me hummed the main controls with which the Gigantic Robot Brain could be guided. My ancestors had thought of everything-or no, really they had been my descendants! It is difficult for an immortal to accurately make such fine distinctions! The End



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