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## **1/ "THE MOST DANGEROUS RACE IN THE UNIVERSE"**

AN EARTHLIKE PLANET circled the blue-white giant sun. Its gravitation measured 1.1 G; it had a dense oxygen atmosphere and an unusual light-blue sky. The continents showed unmistakable signs of settlements by an intelligent race with a high level of technology.

Not only was the sun blue and the sky of the 5th planet tinged with the same peculiar hue but the entire system was surrounded by the shimmering bluish shell of a transparent energy screen. The effect caused Perry Rhodan to name it Blue System when he discovered the homeworld of the Akons.

He called the mysterious planet Sphinx. Sphinx had 2 moons. One was small and of no importance but the other—about the size of Mercury—took the place of an entire spacefleet with its matter-transmitter installations. This moon was, fundamentally, nothing but a gigantic transmitter station. From there the Akons were in a position to transfer goods and materials, as well as themselves and their weapons to any point in the Milky Way, provided there existed a matching receiver station.

If, for example, they were able to set up such a receiver station on Earth without being noticed, there

would be nothing to prevent them from launching an invasion without deploying a single spaceship.

This they had already tried to do once before, ravaging Terra with a monstrous plasma that brought humanity to the brink of an abyss. Rhodan was certain they would not be satisfied with their first attempt and he realized that a mere defence was not the best way to counter the insidious attack of the Akons. On the contrary, it was necessary to lure the ancestors of the Arkonides from their well-protected Blue System.

More than 3 dozen light and heavy cruisers patrolled the outside of the blue screen of shimmering energy, attempting to find a gap. But there was no gap. Therefore it was also impossible for the Terrans to learn anything about the events taking place on Sphinx or its moon. At least there was no sign to indicate that anything of an alarming nature was in process. On Terra and its Moon hundreds of spaceships lifted off every day and nobody attached special significance to this fact.

By contrast the Akons possessed only a few ships because they handled their traffic of goods and passengers by means of transmitters. Ships were only required when a new transmitter station had to be established on a hitherto unknown or undeveloped celestial body.

A ship was preparing to be launched from the moon of the 5th planet. It was not a very large vessel. Its spherical shape was characteristic for the Arkonides and pre-Arkonides but both poles were considerably flattened. Technicians performed the final inspections and they seemed to work more painstakingly than Terrestrial engineers. But this was rather deceptive because the ship was prepared for a special mission which required extraordinary care. The ship was no run-of-the-mill vessel but a secret and unique construction.

The crew of the Akonian craft was assembled on Sphinx to receive their final instructions. The mission was explained once more, the importance of success pointed out and the effectiveness of complete surprise stressed. This attack on Arkon—and thus directed also against Terra—was more than an experiment, the speaker emphasized, stretching his arms toward the sky so that his palms were turned against the blue sun. It was an ingenious combination of technology and psychological speculation which could be grasped by an opponent only after it was too late.

Then they formed a column and marched past the members of the government and the scientists toward a brightly shimmering forcefield, a flaming arch of light—the entrance to a huge matter-transmitter. When the first row of Akons reached the arch of light it simply disappeared. It was as if they had been swallowed by a void. The second row followed the third and all the others until the entire column had left the planet Sphinx in this strange and almost incomprehensible manner.

Almost simultaneously the same column materialized again on the moon. The first row emerged from a nearly identical arch. It had traversed the distance from the planet to its moon by a single step in less than a second. Then the column approached the ship with the flattened poles. The officers reported their presence. A scintillating antigrav-field was generated between the open entrance hatch and the ground and the crew boarded the ship.

20 or 30 light-hours away the Terran warships continued their patrol. Even their most sensitive instruments were unable to register what happened on Sphinx and its moon. They did not react either to the start of the fairly small spherical vessel which zoomed with increasing acceleration toward the borders of the Blue System and applied its unknown technique to brake to the presumably impenetrable wall of energy at the precise location.

This was the moment for which the Terrans had vaguely hoped. If it was possible to pierce the energy

wall from the inside it, probably could also be done in the opposite direction.

The observation screens of 3 warships cruising in the vicinity caught the shadow of the Akonian craft as it sped by. Before its course could be determined and an effective pursuit initiated, the mysterious spaceship surpassed the speed of light and slipped into semispace, rendering it invisible to the Terran observers. Any further pursuit was out of the question because a transition craft could never find or catch up in paraspace with a vessel equipped with linear drive.

The incident was duly reported by hyperradio to Terra but it was not treated with the urgency it deserved. Nobody suspected that the attack had begun—an attack as never had occurred before.

A team of Akons had taken off to shake a stellar empire to its foundations. An invisible fist reached from the past into the present and struck with a vengeance.

Thousands of years shrank to nothing.

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"They consider us to be no more than a pest," Reginald Bell, Rhodan's deputy, observed sarcastically. "The contempt with which the old Arkonides treated us when we first met them on the Moon is mild compared with the Akons."

Solar Marshall Freyt nodded his head in assent but said nothing. He left it to Rhodan who sat at the head of the table. Behind him was the big window which presented almost a full view of Terrania. The capital of Terra and the Solar Imperium had grown even more and its outskirts stretched far into the old Gobi Desert which now was fertile land.

"True," Perry Rhodan agreed, "they despise us and want to squash us like bothersome vermin. Isn't this proof enough of their stupid arrogance? Anybody who underestimates his opponent is dumb. Moreover they are intolerant because they don't want to put up with our presence although they know us as little as we know them. And intolerance, my friends, is also identical with stupidity."

Freyt said: "We're ready, Perry. Our fleet is ready anytime an attack occurs. The Akons know the galactic position of Terra—at least we must assume that much."

"I wish they would attack us," Rhodan sighed, "openly and honourably with their ships! But I'm afraid their next move will be as sneaky as their first. They fear war but they don't shrink from murder. Is the *Drusus* ready to start, Reggie?"

"Of course," the red-haired Bell grunted. "As always!"

"How about the Mutant Corps?"

"They're already on board."

"And Deringhouse?"

"He can be reached instantly. After all, he's the commander."

"Very good," Rhodan replied. "Then we can take some action very soon. If the Akons haven't made up their minds yet we can force the issue." He hesitated a moment. "One more question, Freyt: how much progress have you made with the installation of the linear drive? Are those ships ready for service?"

"Some of them are already undergoing flight tests. The shipyards on the Moon are working full time. If necessary we can request a vessel with ultralight drive at a moment's notice."

"Thank you. That's all I wanted to know." Rhodan looked at Bell, Freyt and the other officers. "Any more questions today?"

A General rose. "Sir, do you plan to take off today?"

Rhodan smiled. "No. But I must stress instant readiness. Our plans are not definite as yet but you'll be informed in time. Anything else?"

Later, at Rhodan's home, he, Bell and a few other friends were gathered. The mousebeaver Pucky curled up on a couch and seemed to be asleep. If he could only get in on the action...!

John Marshall, the task leader of the Mutant Corps, sat next to Rhodan and Ras Tschubai, the African teleporter, made himself comfortable in a chair beside the Japanese girl Ishy Matsu. Soft music played in the background.

"It's almost like the days when we confronted the Arkonides," Bell said. "But I liked them much better. At least we knew whom we were up against and where they could be found."

"Exactly," Marshall concurred. "This time we're groping too much in the dark. These forebears of the Arkonides, the Akons, are even more mysterious and arrogant than their descendants—but unfortunately not as weak and decadent. We're going to have a lot of trouble with them."

"As if we didn't have enough worries already," Bell muttered. He got up and sat down next to Pucky, who blinked at him with sleepy eyes and stretched himself in pleasure as his bosom friend began to scratch his furry neck. "We simply ought to ignore them."

"A danger can't be averted by ignoring it," Rhodan tried to set him straight. "On the contrary, it can only be made worse that way."

"What do you intend to do about it, chief?" Ras Tschubai asked frankly.

Rhodan smiled with amusement. "You always speak directly to the point, Ras, don't you? But you'll get your answer. The day after tomorrow or sooner we'll go into transition to get to the base of the Blue System. There are already 200 units waiting out there and we want to make an effort to penetrate the shield with our coordinated forces. Perhaps we can accomplish something if all our ships perform their transitions simultaneously."

Bell stopped stroking Pucky. "What do you mean—simultaneous transitions? You couldn't..."

"Precisely!" Rhodan replied calmly although he was assailed by doubts. "The force of the shock should make the energy barrier collapse. If not..." He did not say what would happen then.

Bell looked pale as he gasped: "It's a hell of a risk, Perry!"

"You won't be affected, Reggie, because you'll have to stay behind this time. I want you to keep your eyes open during my absence. I have a vague feeling that something very unpleasant is about to happen here."

"An attack by the Akons?"

"Yes. Perhaps even an invasion."

They fell silent. Each was occupied with his own thoughts. Bell realized that he couldn't think of a good argument to protest his assignment and so he kept his mouth shut as he scratched the red-brown fur of the mousebeaver.

In the silence the interruption of the music sounded like a signal. There was a click. Somebody had interfered with the line. Rhodan looked at the videophone on the desk standing in a corner of the room but the picture screen remained dark.

"Attention! Calling Perry Rhodan! Urgent! Hyper-radio call from Arkon! Please answer at once! Hyper-radio call from..."

Rhodan jumped up and rushed to the seefone. He pushed the button which connected him directly to the Communication Centre of Terrania. Then he switched over to the hyperradio station. A face appeared on the screen and the voice matched the one he just had heard on the radio. "I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't know if you were at home—but the message is urgent. That's why I had to make a public announcement on the broadcasting system."

"Oh well," Rhodan replied, a little annoyed, "connect me with the hyper-transmitter. I'll take the call right here."

The man nodded and disappeared from the picture screen. Only a few seconds later the face of Atlan, Gonozal VIII, Imperator of Arkon, emerged on the viewer. The familiar features of the immortal Arkonide showed stark dismay and confusion. He searched Rhodan's eyes—from a distance of 34,000 light-years.

"What happened?" Rhodan asked. "You can speak openly. The people who are here with me are my closest friends."

"What happened...? If I only knew! Something terrible and incomprehensible occurred. Somebody has intruded into Arkon and landed on Arkon #3, the military planet, after breaking through the ring of fortifications. Nobody was able to stop him. The automatic guns did not fire a single shot! There was no alarm signal!"

Rhodan stared at Atlan in utter consternation. What the Imperator described was pure madness! The ship that could pierce Arkon's planetary ring of fortifications didn't exist! It was obviously impossible. Atlan must have been mistaken. He let his face betray his thoughts.

"You don't believe me?" Atlan became stern. "You must take my word for it, Perry! Time is as great an enemy as the invaders who have taken over Arkon 3 where all our spaceship installations and military headquarters are located—as well as the Robot Brain! The Robot Brain! Perry, if it falls into the hands of strangers and is damaged... I know what you're going to say. It can take care of itself. But can it really?"

Consider that the strangers have penetrated the defence ring and not a gun was fired! If they can do that, they know how to handle the Robot Brain too."

"What about your ships guarding the outer atmosphere? Didn't they notice the intruder?"

"Certainly—but the pursuit was useless. They could only watch the stranger land on Arkon 3. There he vanished. When our ships moved in closer they were taken under fire. From our own guns, mind you!"

It took a few moments before Rhodan replied. "I'll leave for Arkon with the *Drusus* and 10 other units. Please arrange for us to pass through your blockade without being challenged."

Atlan's face relaxed in relief. "Thank you, Perry. Perhaps we can find a solution together. Do you know the stranger?"

"What did his ship look like?"

"A big sphere but both poles were rather flat. The drive..."

"Thank you. That's all I need to know. The Akons again! They have already tried to cripple Terra and now it's your turn. There isn't a more dangerous race in the universe. Contact me if anything else suspicious happens. The transceiver of the *Drusus* will be transmitting on your private frequency so that you can reach me anytime."

"Thanks again. Akons—You'll have to tell me more about them."

"As much as I know, Atlan. Meanwhile, keep Arkon under close observation, especially the military planet. You should concentrate all your available warships in the orbit of Arkon 3 and seal it off. Try to destroy the enemy ship if you can as soon as it is ready to leave again."

"I'll call you the minute I have more news," Atlan promised. Then his picture faded and the connection was terminated.

Rhodan returned to his seat. He gazed at his silent friends. Pucky was wide-awake and looked at him expectantly. Bell did not look too happy. He knew that the takeoff of the *Drusus* had to take place sooner. "Today?" he inquired.

"Immediately," Rhodan replied with a sigh. "The Akons are moving in on Arkon—their colony. At least that's what it must have been 15,000 years ago. I wonder if they are aware of the alliance we have formed with Atlan?"

Bell squirmed in his seat. "What am I supposed to do here at Terrania? The Akons won't invade Arkon and Terra at the same time. I'm superfluous here..."

"And where aren't you...?" the mousebeaver Pucky peeped ungratefully. He seemed to have forgotten that Bell had scratched his neck, which happened rarely enough. "Whether here or aboard the *Drusus* ..."

"Shut your mouth!" Rhodan said in an unfriendly tone. Pucky was flabbergasted. It was even rarer that Rhodan rebuked him so sharply. In a huff he dematerialised and vanished from the sight of his perplexed friends. He teleported himself to the *Drusus*, where he could relieve his anger by the satisfaction of being the first to report the sensational news.

Rhodan paid little attention to Pucky's disappearance. "We'll lift off in an hour," he advised Bell. "You, my friend, are going to stay put right here. I have no intention of leaving Earth without my authorized agent. And mark my words—something is going to pop while I'm gone."

Perry Rhodan was unable to foretell the future but his premonition would prove to be well justified.

## 2/ S.O.S. FROM SALEX 4

The *Drusus* rematerialised after the 2nd transition in the vicinity of an Arkonide base 20,000 light-years from Earth. Before the Chief Navigator, Maj. Gorm Nordmann, could begin his calculations for the 3rd transition the hyperradio receiver picked up a call. Lt. Fred Jenner, the radio officer of the *Drusus*, notified Rhodan at once.

Rhodan, who naturally assumed that it was a message from Atlan, rushed quickly to the radio room. He was in for a surprise. The picture screen did not show the familiar face of the Arkonide but that of an unknown person. He was, without doubt, also an Arkonide. The white hair, the high forehead, the reddish eyes and the arrogant expression made this quite clear.

After requesting a 2-way connection so that the caller could see and hear him as well, Rhodan answered tersely: "Battleship *Drusus* of the Solar Imperium. Commander Perry Rhodan, Terra, speaking. Did you call us?"

It became obvious that the Arkonide did not have the faintest idea whom he had contacted. First his face showed disappointment, then relief. Rhodan had trouble figuring out his reaction.

"Base Commander Geral Khor, planet Salex #4. I have lost my radio contact with Arkon. Could you relay an important message to the Imperator for me?"

Rhodan scrutinized the Arkonide. "Your hyper-transmitter is in working condition, otherwise you could not have reached me. We're 3 light-months, Terra time, away from you."

"I'm using my reserve energy, which is all I have available. It was enough to register your transition, to locate and call you. The distance to Arkon, however, exceeds its range."

"What happened?"

The Arkonide hesitated. "I don't know if I'm allowed to inform you of it," he confessed quite frankly. "It's a military secret."

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders. "And how do you plan to prevent my finding out about it if I'm supposed to pass on a report of the situation to Arkon?"

"I would send the message in code."

"That wouldn't help you much because I'm in possession of the key to the secret code of the Imperator."

I can decipher all your messages and read them."

For the first time something like a smile flitted across the features of Geral Khor. "I guessed as much but I wanted to hear you confirm it. Well then, I might as well acquaint you with the facts. Could you touch down here?"

"I don't have much time. The Emperor is waiting for me."

"It's important, Terran. Of the utmost importance!"

Rhodan looked at Gen. Deringhouse, who had entered the radio room to check the calculations. He had heard the conversation and looked dubious.

"Alright," Rhodan said finally. "We'll land after a short transition of 3 light-months and we expect to see you shortly. Please let us know the exact coördinates so that we can save time."

20 minutes later they raced with flaming engines and maximum deceleration toward the 4th planet of the sun Salex. It was a small bleak world with a breathable atmosphere and sparse vegetation. The installations of the base were built underground and Rhodan was aware that the hangars could accommodate a whole fleet of battleships.

They passed several guard ships which circled the planet in a fixed path and failed to answer their radio signal. Deringhouse identified them as robot units.

The only building on the surface was a semi-circular low fortification at the periphery of the spacefield. The spherical hyperantenna glistened in the reddish light of the sinking sun. As the *Drusus* slowly descended with whining engines and activated, antigrav fields and finally gently touched down on the meter-thick concrete deck a lone man emerged from the flat building and stood at the edge of the field. The magnification of the observation screen revealed that it was Geral Khor.

Rhodan narrowed his eyes. "Isn't this odd?" he murmured. "He appears to be all alone."

Deringhouse made no reply. He was too busy with the landing operation. Following strict procedures he shut down all engine sections, checked the controls and left the antigrav field turned on because he did not know whether the concrete deck could carry the enormous weight of the *Drusus* —a sphere with a diameter of 1½ kilometres. After he had finished his job he answered Rhodan's half-rhetorical question. "Alone? It's impossible for one man to run a big installation like this."

"Why not?" Rhodan asked. He obviously was of a different opinion. "Arkonides who remain vigorous are rare and Atlan has to choose their distribution very prudently. This base is one of many which are run automatically. They are all controlled by the Robot Brain on Arkon. And so is the fleet. Only humans can never be completely replaced by robots. That's why Atlan has assigned Arkonide commanders at all crucial stations. Therefore I wouldn't be a bit surprised if our good fellow Geral Khor were all alone."

The air samples were satisfactory and the temperature was bearable without heat-control suits. Rhodan stuck his pocket blaster into his belt and instructed the teleporter/telepath Pucky to watch him for a signal in case of an emergency. Then he left the *Drusus* through the lower exit hatch together with the telepath John Marshall. He switched on the tiny radio-transceiver at his wrist, thus maintaining constant contact with Deringhouse.

John Marshall stretched his limbs, took a deep breath and observed appreciatively: "It's amazing how

such a desert gets so much fresh air. You wouldn't think it's possible."

"This planet also has enough oceans and regions of dense vegetation, although it has mostly deserts and bare mountains."

They walked across the smooth seamless concrete, leaving the *Drusus* behind. The lone figure slowly approached them from the low building.

"What's he thinking?" Rhodan inquired.

"He's happy that we came. That's all I can make out. His thoughts are also occupied in a vague manner with some catastrophe as if he didn't know exactly the source. At any rate he seems worried and is afraid."

"H'm. Strange," Rhodan said, glancing at the clear cloudless evening sky. The planet rotated very slowly. A day on Salex 4 lasted 50 hours although the planet was smaller than Mars.

Geral Khor stopped as they met 500 meters from the building. He wore the uniform of a high Arkonide officer and carried an energy weapon in his belt. When Rhodan looked at him he impulsively offered his hand to the Terran. "I consider myself fortunate that you complied with my request and did not refuse to make a detour. I believe it is extremely important that Gonozal VIII learn what has taken place here."

Rhodan did not require the telepath Marshall to find out all the details. He preferred to let Geral Khor describe the events in his own words. He shook Khor's hand, introduced Marshall and said: "Would you like to come aboard or..."

"May I ask you to be my guests?" the Arkonide smiled. "Believe me, I seldom receive guests—and when I do they're usually robots, fleet commanders. But now..."

He paused, shrugged his shoulders and began to walk in the direction of the building. Marshall looked worried and cast a quick glance at Rhodan. He seemed to have already learned part of the truth.

They engaged in some small talk and Rhodan had occasion again to admire the patience of Arkonides. A Terran would have blurted out the news—if there was news.

"This way, please." Geral Khor showed his visitors into a comfortably furnished room. The large low window faced the spaceport where the *Drusus* stood in the rosy light of the sinking sun, a sight that was highly reassuring. The colours of the sky became darker. They sat down.

"Now, shoot!" Rhodan requested the Arkonide and, seeing his astonished face, added: "It's just an expression. It means only to begin your report."

Geral Khor mustered a faint smile. "Are you destined directly for Arkon?"

"Gonozal VIII has requested my presence without delay."

"Excellent. Then notify him that the base Salex 4 is inoperable. The robot fleet is paralysed because we no longer receive any command impulses from the Robot Brain on Arkon. Without the Robot Brain these autoguided vessels are for all practical purposes a heap of scrap. Those ships that were in the hangar are still there but unable to move. The hatches are closed and can't be opened. The units that happened to be out on patrol are still circling the planet as if they were waiting for something. Waiting for what, Perry

Rhodan?"

Rhodan had little data to form anything but vague speculations. A robot fleet had become disabled—such incidents could occur but it did not mean that similar failures took place at other spots in the Imperium. It could be no more than an accident. Perhaps a relay in the command receiver had become defective. "What about the work robots?"

"The work robots...? They're under the direct control of the Robot Brain on Arkon. They stopped where they stood and nothing can make them take another step. I'm the only one in this place who doesn't stay in a fixed position. But then I'm no robot."

The picture gradually took shape in Rhodan's mind and it was not very reassuring. On the contrary. Atlan's radio message and the events on Salex 4 suddenly seemed to fall into place. It was high time to inform the Emperor. "I suggest, GERAL Khor, that you report personally to Gonozal from aboard my ship. That way you can receive at the same time your instructions how to cope with the situation and what countermeasures to adopt. I assume that the Emperor will give you his orders himself."

"A good idea," the Arkonide agreed. "I've thought of it myself but I didn't want to inconvenience you, also I know that Terra and Arkon are partners of an alliance."

Rhodan smiled. "I'd like to take a look at your ships. I take it that the entrances to the subterranean installations are not blocked."

"Fortunately they can be operated manually. Otherwise..."

Suddenly a slight hum sounded in the room. Rhodan perked up, raised his arm and said: "Deringhouse? It's alright to talk."

The general's voice was low but easy to understand. "Hyper-radio call, sir. Atlan wishes to talk to you. It sounds urgent."

"Tell him to hold on. I'll be back in a few minutes." He looked at GERAL Khor. "You'll get your connection with the Emperor quicker than we supposed. Let's go. I'm afraid we don't have a moment to lose."

If the commander of the support base was surprised, he failed to show it. He immediately got up and walked to the door to open it. Since they had no car which could be used, they walked across the landing field to the *Drusus* as fast as they could and took the elevator up to the radio room where Fred Jenner maintained the radio contact with Arkon. It took less than 3 minutes. Atlan waited for him with an impatient face. "I understand that you stopped in Salex 4, Perry. What's the reason?"

Rhodan explained it to him in a few words and realized that Atlan was greatly disturbed. "That's what I thought!" he exclaimed. "The catastrophe is taking on even greater dimensions. At first I believed it was an accident that affected merely a region of a few light-years. But the explanation is simple. The hyperradio system also broke down and the alarm failed to reach me."

"What happened?" Rhodan interrupted him.

Atlan reported. "Our connection with the Robot Brain on Arkon 3 was broken off. It no longer answers our calls. At the same time all robotships under its command stopped functioning, including the combat and work-robots, as well as other related installations and shipyards. The administration of Arkon faces a

total collapse since all work is performed by robots as directed by the Brain. The perfect system of automation seems to be a disadvantage now. The entire service for the units of the fleet commanded by Arkonides is discontinued. It is as if the Robot Brain had never existed. In general, all radio—or direct—communications with stations on Arkon have been silenced. The whole military planet has been shielded by an unknown and highly mysterious energy field of a tremendous magnitude. Nothing can penetrate it, neither radio waves nor matter. The Robot Brain is completely isolated and the consequences are disastrous."

Geral Khor had turned pale. He stared uncomprehendingly at his Imperator and dropped into a chair as if his legs could no longer support him. He was stunned beyond words.

Rhodan was grim as he spoke: "The Akons have struck. They are a power that uses methods which are unknown to us. They have incapacitated the Arkonide Imperium with a single vessel and they now occupy the centre of the Imperium, safe and unassailable. What shall we do?"

A frown creased Atlan's brow and his steel-hard eyes stared straight into the viewscreen. "That's what I wanted to ask you! I am at my wits end," Atlan admitted reluctantly.

Rhodan pondered the situation for a few seconds and said: "There's nothing we can do on Salex 4 anymore. Is Geral Khor permitted to accompany us or do you wish to let him wait here?"

Atlan replied without hesitating: "He may return to Arkon. If the Robot Brain resumes its functions again, the base can exist and be operated without the presence of an Arkonide. Geral Khor can go back to Salex later on.

"Thank you, Your August Highness," Geral Khor stammered with relief. The thought of being left alone with all those dead machines had shaken him.

Rhodan said in conclusion: "You can expect me to join you in a few hours, Atlan. I hope that your ring of fortifications remains neutral. This will only be the case if the Akon's efforts to seize control of the Robot Brain continue to be unsuccessful. So far they only managed to shield its effects. That doesn't mean that they have taken over control. Therefore the situation is not yet desperate, Atlan. We still have some hope."

"But slim at best," Atlan replied.

"Hope is hope," Rhodan contradicted him vigorously. "Don't forget that we have always mastered the worst situations."

"But nothing as dreadful as this," Atlan uttered glumly—and Rhodan knew only too well that his immortal friend was right this time.

After the picture screen went blank, Rhodan inquired: "An inspection of the robotships is now superfluous, Geral Khor. Can we take off or do you have to pick something up? I mean personal things or..."

"If the existence of the Imperium is at stake, all private matters have ceased to be important," Geral Khor replied with great dignity and had no further comment.

Rhodan looked at him with high respect and walked over to him. "As long as Imperator Gonozal has officers like you to back him up, the Imperium won't be lost," he said and shook the hand of the

Arkonide. "John Marshall will show you to a cabin."

Then he rushed to the Command Centre, where Deringhouse was busy feeding his calculations into the computer.

10 minutes later the *Drusus* lifted off with howling jets and ascended toward the nocturnal sky of Salex 4. It shot past the senselessly circling patrolships and went half an hour later into a transition.

### 3/ ACCIDENTAL INVASION

The little robot brain at the Institute for Cosmic Retraining in Terrania pierced a new card with tiny rectangular holes. The card was blue and was pushed by a sorter on a belt and carried to a card file.

A certain Col. Ludwig Rammbuggl, officer in charge of the institute, held the card in his hand half an hour later. "Well, well," he murmured after perusing the data of the card. "A Maj. Heinrich Bellefjord is eligible for retraining. At last another officer who serves in the fleet!" He looked sternly at his secretary. "Pierre! Bring me the record of this officer at once! Hurry up! We need smoothly working crews to man the new experimental ships with linear drive. This Bellefjord—what a funny name—will be assigned to the Moon base as soon as we can let him know."

Pierre bowed and took off. Half an hour later again the colonel was informed that Bellefjord was on a mission aboard the light cruiser *Kenia*. This did not keep him from contacting the High Command in order to initiate the necessary steps. In less than 3 hours the order was transmitted by hyperradio to the front lines around the Blue System.

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In coordination with the other units of the fleet the *Kenia* patrolled the borders of the Blue System.

Preliminary attempts were made to break through the energy screen by using various technical tricks. Three heavy cruisers had performed simultaneous transitions in the hope of cracking the shield of the Akons. The attempt misfired without damage to the ships. The ships were simply hurled back by an invisible yet terrific force. That was all. The gravitational fields had absorbed the shock.

Commander Maj. Heinrich Bellefjord had no inkling at this moment that his present mission would be terminated and he had been chosen by fate—or, if you prefer, by a positronic computer brain—to play a special part in the following events.

It was better that he was still in the dark about his future or his zeal for his present job might have suffered and he might have hesitated instead of reacting with lightning speed when the little ship of the Akons suddenly emerged and vanished again in the depth of space.

With two leaps he was in the radio room. "Call Col. Kaligula! Quick!"

Before the radio technician on duty was able to answer him he was already back in the Command Centre. The pilot, an African, turned his face around to him.

"Change your course to the spot where the ship came through the energy screen, Lieutenant! If they can get through we can do it too. Did you observe the exact position?"

The pilot nodded. He was seated directly before the observation screen and rangefinder instruments. When the strange ship came into view he pushed the film button. This enabled him to record and play back the course the vanished ship had followed.

"We're on the right track now," he said after correcting his own course. "We're flying toward the same spot in the barrier."

"Very good, Lt. Omola. Distance?"

"2 light-minutes."

"Velocity?"

"0.8 speol."

"Keep going! I'll be back at once."

Bellefjord ran back to the radio room swifter than his somewhat corpulent figure would lead anyone to believe possible. "What gives, cadet? Did you make the connection?"

Gerald Rumpus jumped up and left his seat to his superior. "Col. Kaligula is waiting for you, sir."

Bellefjord squeezed himself between the, fixed chair and the viewscreen. He sat down panting. In front of him, only a few centimetres away, was the face of his superior officer on the picture screen.

"What's up, Bellefjord?"

"Sir, I request your permission to enter the Blue System."

"Permission?" Col. Kaligula's voice sounded incredulous. "We've been trying this for days and couldn't make it. And you ask my permission? How am I to understand this, major?"

"I've got an idea, sir..."

"That's nice. What is it?"

Bellefjord gasped for air in his excitement. Each second counted. "I am close to the spot where the ship of the Akons pierced the energy wall. I believe, sir, that the *Kenia* could go through the same spot in the barrier."

The colonel looked worried. "The risk would be enormous, Maj. Bellefjord. If the gap closes up again you won't be able to come back. Then we can't help you either. You would be completely on your own. H'm, I don't know if I can give you my permission without advising Terrania first..."

"We've got barely a minute, sir," Bellefjord urged. "The *Kenia* is bearing down on the hole approaching the speed of light. It's a hole, sir! The blue shimmer has faded away."

Col. Kaligula, Commander of the Cruisers at the border of the Blue System, hesitated only a second. "You have my permission, Major. But you must proceed at your own discretion and your own risk. Try to keep in radio contact!"

"Yessir! And thank you!"

He got up and darted back to the Command Centre. The picture screen went dark but contact remained unbroken as the radio operator, Rumpus, took his place again.

The *Kenia* raced through the mysterious energy screen which shrouded the secrets of the Akons and separated the system from the rest of the universe. Immediately, radio contact was lost. The *Kenia* and its crew of Terrans were cut off from the world.

Bellefjord sounded the alarm.

The First Officer came running into the Command Centre. He was Capt. Raldini, a dark-haired and lively personality, who had just been promoted from lieutenant. "Alarm, sir?" he shouted.

Bellefjord pointed to the panoramic observation screen showing the surroundings of the *Kenia*. He tersely described to Raldini what had happened and concluded: "I didn't have time to give the alarm sooner. Kaligula gave me his permission for the move. I don't know what gave me the idea that the ship of the Akons must have caused a gap in the screen as it penetrated the outer limits. At any rate, my hunch was correct and we are now inside the Blue System."

The captain walked to the intercom and issued instructions to the crew. It was his duty to conduct the defence in case of an alarm. He gave orders to man the ray-cannons and activated the protective screen. The little lifeboats were made ready to be launched in an emergency. All men had to put on their spacesuits.

"I would suggest, sir," Raldini said after switching off the intercom, "that we also slip into our spacesuits. Later we may not have any time." Bellefjord agreed.

The pilot, Lt. Wari Omola, decreased the speed of the *Kenia* and headed for the 6th planet, which was located exactly between them and the blue sun. Sphinx, the 5th planet and main world of the Akons, stood to the right of the solar disk. Bellefjord did not feel it necessary for him to meet the Akons. He merely had taken advantage of a lucky opportunity and wanted to use it in order to learn something about the screen shielding the Blue System from the Milky Way. He had no desire to be captured by the ancestors of the Arkonides.

Omola set the automatic pilot and began to evaluate the recorded data of his course. Using the small robot navigator, he determined the precise spot where they had entered. A distinctive star behind his ship was brought into focus on the rangefinder screen and used as a reference point. It stood exactly behind the 'hole'.

"The distances inside the Blue System are too small to cause more than a negligible shift of our perspective lines, sir," the pilot finally stated. "We can find the same spot any time without difficulty." He glanced at his observation screen. "Do you want me to land, sir?"

Bellefjord hesitated in answering. He knew something about the conditions in the Blue System when it was first discovered. Rhodan's report had been distributed to all fleet commanders. The Akons had treated Perry Rhodan and his men with utter disdain. Of course this did not necessarily mean they would behave the same way now. In the meantime the Akons had learned that the Terrans were not identical with the Arkonides for whom all Akons felt a deep-rooted aversion and strong contempt. Perhaps they were inclined to treat the Terrans in a different manner than the Arkonides. "Go into an orbit!" he finally ordered.

The instruments of the *Kenia* failed to detect another ship inside the blue energy mantle surrounding the entire solar system. Perhaps the little spacesphere, which had punched a hole through the shield sealing its world off from the universe, was the only ship this strange race possessed. Then there was a possibility that the Akons had no weapons to defend themselves either. This was a thought that occurred to Bellefjord for the first time "Go lower!" he said.

The *Kenia* entered the upper layers of the atmosphere and reduced engines to minimum. For a fleeting moment Bellefjord tried to picture what would happen if they were unable to find the opening in the energy screen again or if it had been closed. This held many haunting fears. A merciless hunt by the Akons if they had other ships. Or incarceration when they landed on Sphinx. In both cases there would be no return to Earth.

The *Kenia* circled the planet twice before Bellefjord ordered: "Proceed to land, Omola!"

Capt. Raldini stared anxiously at the observation screen. "What do you have in mind, sir, if I may ask? If the Akons..."

"We must take the chance, Captain. You see the energy portal over there? Next to the little squat building? I wonder where it leads?"

"A transmitter station?"

"That's my guess. I think I'll make the attempt to get in touch with the Akons after all. You take over the command of the *Kenia*. I'll have a couple men accompany me. If we don't return at a predetermined time, you take off without us. Clear?"

"Yessir. But I—"

"No buts! Try to reach Col. Kaligula. That's an order!"

The *Kenia* touched down not far from the shore of a large body of water. The curved beams of light seemed to come out of the ground at two places and joined in an arch 10 meters high, forming an illuminated gate. What lay behind the gate could not be seen. It certainly was not any terrain of the 6th planet.

Bellefjord switched on the intercom and announced his intention of going out on the surface of the unknown planet. He requested a lab report on the surface conditions. In addition he asked for 2 volunteers to join him, without hiding the fact that the mission was extremely risky.

There was no sign of the Akons who, outwardly, did not differ from Earthlings but had the skeletal structure of Arkonides. A little building stood deserted at the edge of a grassy prairie. The microphones of the *Kenia* failed to pick up a sound. Not even the slightest birdcall. There seemed to be no animals

around. The blue sun stood high in the sky and the colour of the atmosphere indicated a rather dense atmosphere.

He received the lab report. It showed that the air was breathable and contained no bacteria which could not be filtered out. Nor was there any excessive radioactivity. The outside presented no natural dangers.

Several men answered his call for volunteers. The 2 men chosen by Capt. Raldini entered the Command Centre. Bellefjord knew both of them as he kept in personal touch with the entire crew of the *Kenia*.

"Sgt. Meister and Cadet Rumpus reporting!"

"Rumpus? You?" Bellefjord wrinkled his brow. "You should stay on your job in the radio room."

"All connections have already been severed, sir. Besides, they have assigned somebody to replace me. I would like to go with you, sir, if it is alright with you."

Bellefjord raised his eyebrows. "Very well, Cadet. I know that you would like to earn your promotion to lieutenant. Perhaps our trip will give you a chance to get your wish. Did the First Officer issue weapons to you?"

"They are in the airlock, sir."

Bellefjord gave the nod to Raldini when he came back to the Command Centre. He gave him his final instructions and exited with the two men. He felt a little uneasy despite obtaining permission from Col. Kaligula because he couldn't know for certain whether or not his impulsive decision to land on the 6th planet, violated one of Perry Rhodan's orders.

The hatch slowly opened after they had put on their spacesuits. These were not heavy-duty spacesuits but light protective suits which provided heat, shielded them from rays and were equipped with airfilters.

The gravitation measured 0.9 G. Bellefjord's voice sounded grave as he said: "Let's walk over to the arch of light. We'll wait there while you investigate the building, Sergeant. Keep your weapon ready to shoot but shoot only when I give you the order. We don't want to start any rough stuff and we will use our weapons only in self-defence. Is that clear?"

Sgt. Meister confirmed it, tightly pressing his lips together. He looked as if he regretted having volunteered. But it could also be nothing but a matter of tense nerves.

By contrast, Rumpus gave a very relaxed impression. He seemed to have nothing to fear. Bellefjord quietly wondered about the change that had come over the usually eager but somewhat timid cadet. Then he remembered that the youth wanted to prove his mettle and he couldn't suppress a grin. This was probably the explanation for the show of bravery by the radio technician.

And what about himself? Bellefjord admitted to having no particular feelings as far as he could tell. He was not afraid but he did not feel too confident either. Maybe it was only curiosity that made him embark on this adventure.

They stopped at a distance of a few meters from the arch of light. Sgt. Meister kept walking and went twice around the deserted building before he entered it through a door which was slightly ajar. The unlocked door looked almost like a trap.

He was gone 10 seconds. Then he emerged again. "Nothing, sir. It looks like a waiting room. Benches, tables and a counter. Is it possible that the transmitter transports on a fixed schedule and that the passengers have to wait here?"

Bellefjord shrugged his shoulders and stared with mixed feelings into the opening under the arch. It was indeed a hole in the landscape and sky of planet 6. Instead of a continuation of the prairie he saw a greyish blue swirling of nondescript matter. Possibly it was not matter but some form of energy which had to be entered in order to transport himself. In this ease to an unknown destination, either on this planet or on another world.

He struggled with his understandable doubts and replied to the sergeant. "It's quite possible that it is a waiting room. But this transmitter is unquestionably in operation. We don't have to wait."

The *Kenia* stood about 100 meters away from his position. Bellefjord looked back and raised his left arm. This was the sign for Capt. Raldini to look at his watch and begin the wait of precisely 5 hours. Then he would have to follow his orders to leave the Blue System... if possible.

"Is this a matter-transmitter, sir?" Rumpus asked suddenly. "I've never seen one of this type. The wire cages we studied at the Research Institute at Terrania are not similar to this."

"This construction is based on different principles," Bellefjord lectured him without understanding much of the subject. "If a person enters this arch of light he will be completely transformed into energy and then transported in a timeless zone through a preset distance in hyperspace—or 5th dimension. At the receiver station he will be rematerialised in the previously existing structure pattern. It is the most ideal form of transport and will some day replace our spaceships."

Rumpus gave no reply. His hand touched the butt of the weapon he carried in his belt. Sgt. Meister studied the energy vortex in the lightgate. He seemed to wonder how a man could be sent through such a hell without getting hurt. Neutralization in an unknown form?

Bellefjord checked his watch. "We don't have any time to lose, gentlemen. Give me your hands. We'll step into the transmitter simultaneously so that we'll stay together. We must let go again as soon as we observe that we have reached our new surroundings so that we will be ready to defend ourselves. Ready?"

Meister and Rumpus nodded. Bellefjord took a deep breath. The air suddenly felt very hot and stifling. Then he took the first step. They proceeded in a straight line and vanished in the empty space of the arch. They sensed nothing of their disembodiment, their transport across an unknown distance and the subsequent restoration of their original state. They felt nothing, they saw nothing and they heard nothing.

They had taken 2 steps and the 2nd step was a step on another world.

\* \* \* \*

Capt. Raldini never let the arch of light out of his sight.

His mind was occupied by his concern and admiration for the old man without nerves. He was

astonished by the speed of the developments and the fact that the Commander simply walked into a transmitter without the slightest idea where he would come out.

Sure, but what else should he have done? When would another Terran ship get a chance to intrude into the Blue System? Perhaps never again. There had been no time for thorough investigations or precautionary measures. Who was to know how long the weak spot in the blue barrier would last. If the energy shield was stabilized again all was lost. The thought of his problematic return to his own universe made Raldini consult his watch nervously. Glord, the men had disappeared only 5 minutes earlier! Time scarcely seemed to pass at all. But little did he know how quickly it passed for the others.

\* \* \* \*

The first sensation Bellefjord noticed was a biting cold all over his skin. His instinctive reaction was to turn on the heat switch. Then he noticed that it was night. The sun was no longer visible and thousands of stars shone brightly in the sky.

The air was icy cold but breathable. At first he thought they might have landed in the night zone of planet 6 but he quickly abandoned this assumption. The gravitation was much stronger, at least 1.5 G. The oxygen content of the frigid air was less than it had been a few seconds earlier. They were on another planet.

Slowly their eyes adjusted to the sudden darkness. Rumpus' hand gripped the butt of his weapon again. Sgt. Meister let go of Bellefjord's hand in order to be free and prepared for all eventualities.

"Where are we?" Rumpus asked. His voice sounded rather thin and weak. "This can't be Sphinx."

"An outer planet or a moon," Bellefjord guessed, pointing his chin forward where the dim outlines of a building were visible against the sky. "Let's have a look."

He took the lead and his two companions followed him. Breathing was difficult. The thin air would not allow them to stay very long on this world, no more than a few hours. Maybe 5 hours...

This time the door was closed but it was easy to open. There was a light inside.

"It probably lights up automatically at night," Bellefjord surmised in an endeavour to find logical explanations for everything. "I would like to know why they keep the transmitter permanently activated if nobody uses it. What a waste of energy, not to mention the wear and tear..." He fell silent abruptly.

They had closed the door behind them and walked through a small heated corridor. A second door opened automatically.

3 fur-clad Akons gazed at them with curiosity.

Bellefjord was speechless; he gasped for air. The Akons appeared to be peaceful and looked like engineers or workers who had just ended their shift and were waiting for a train. Their eyes betrayed a mild surprise but they controlled themselves so perfectly that it was barely noticeable.

"Good evening," Cadet Rumpus stammered out of habit but instinctively speaking Intercosmo, the galactic language. "I beg your pardon..."

The 3 faces turned away. They showed no contempt, no anger nor hate. They simply looked indifferent, after the manner of people requested by a stranger to do a favour and used to denying it not by words but with a gesture.

Bellefjord looked around and saw an unoccupied bench and several chairs. It was pleasantly warm in the room. His body was still freezing and he did not want to leave before he had found out what he could learn. He was reluctant to face Col. Kaligula without bringing him some information.

"Let's sit down," he motioned his companions. "The warmth will do us good. The train doesn't seem to have arrived yet."

Sgt. Meister forced himself to grin but he held his hand close to his weapon. Cadet Rumpus meanwhile had become convinced that the Akons were harmless people and sat down.

"Are you waiting for something?" Bellefjord inquired 10 minutes later. He had taken time to study the room minutely and observed that the Akons kept looking from time to time at a small switch panel fastened high on the wall just out of their reach. It had only 2 buttons. One was yellow and pressed in, the other black and apparently in the off position. In order to reach the buttons it was necessary to step on a chair.

Only much later did the Terrans learn that this was the simplest method of safeguarding the switch panel from children and still leave it within reach of all adults. The 2 buttons switched the transmitter from shipping to receiving. Normally these operations were controlled from a central station situated on the moon of the 5th planet. However each waiting room had also a switch panel which could be used to override the transmitter station if desired.

The Akons ignored his question. One of them got up and climbed on a chair. He pushed the black button in and the yellow one jumped out. He remained standing on the chair while the two others left the room and went outside. After 2 minutes had elapsed he pushed the yellow button in again, causing the other to move out. Then he put the chair at the table and sat down with an expressionless face.

Sgt. Meister shook his head. "What's all this nonsense?" he asked in English.

Bellefjord did not know the answer but was beset by an uneasy feeling. It began to dawn on him what the purpose of the pair of buttons way up there could be. There was no point in frittering away their time. He decided to get up and approach the Akon left behind. He challenged him in a loud and clear voice: "If you prefer to treat us like savages or a nuisance, that is your business, not mine. But don't be surprised if we react the same way. Well, what shall it be? Are you going to talk to us or not?"

The expression of the Akon was so arrogant that Bellefjord almost burst a blood vessel. He had trouble controlling his temper. But when the Akon looked right through him with a contemptuous grin as if he did not exist, he grabbed him and shook him up very roughly. Then he wiped his hands on his pants and uttered succinctly: "Scum!"

Something like anger seemed to flit across the face of the Akon but it could have been deceptive. At least he thought he could detect nothing but satisfaction in his face as he continued to watch him. Satisfaction? Why?

Where were the 2 companions of this paragon of fatuity? All of a sudden Bellefjord was struck by a realization of the facts. The transmitter! They had set it to send off the other two and they had gone to bring back reinforcements! At the same time he realized a second circumstance. If it was necessary to switch over the transmitter it was impossible to use it at will to jump back and forth. It had to be set for each operation first.

"Sergeant! Cadet! Listen to me! These guys have left to get help. They want to take us by surprise." Bellefjord quickly explained his theory concerning the function of the black and yellow buttons and added: "Rumpus! Get up on the chair and push the black button in! It'll reverse the transmitter to the sender position, which is perfectly obvious because his 2 pals were dispatched in the same manner. We arrived when the yellow button was on, which means receiving. The buttons can be operated only alternately due to their interdependent spring release. Therefore the 2 functions cannot be active at the same time. If we switch the transmitter to the sending position they have no way of surprising us."

Rumpus climbed on the chair and pressed the black button. The Akon tried to get up but Sgt. Meister held him down in his chair.

Bellefjord demanded in Intercosmo, "Akno! Tell me why you have sent out that ship which left your system an hour ago? Start talking or you will force us to use drastic means. You must know something about it because you don't launch many ships from here. It must always be a special event."

The Akon scorned him with a fixed stare and a pinched mouth, unwilling to give away the secret. There was a click under the ceiling. The black button had jumped out by itself and the yellow one was back in the socket. The transmitter had been switched over by the central control station.

Rumpus failed to grasp fast enough what had happened. "I didn't do it," he muttered apologetically.

"Switch over!" Bellefjord bellowed, instantly realizing the danger. "Hurry up!"

Rumpus reached up and shoved the black button back. The incident had taken up about 10 seconds. Now they heard steps in the corridor.

"Too late!" Bellefjord exclaimed. He stepped back and drew his gun. "Go to the corners! Be ready to shoot but wait for my signal!"

Rumpus leaped with amazing agility from his chair into the corner and took up his position next to Sgt. Meister, drawing his weapon with a grim face. The Akon stood at the door with raised arms.

The door was pushed open. Without a sign of fear, five Akons burst into the room. Bellefjord knew one of them. The other four wore uniforms and were armed.

Bellefjord felt something akin to relief and astonishment when one of the uniformed men opened his mouth and began to speak with a slight accent: "You have trespassed in our system. I have orders to arrest you for your punishment. Hand over your weapons!"

6 against 3, Bellefjord contemplated. But only 4 of the Akons were armed. That made it 4 against 3. Good odds! Perhaps he could avoid a fight.

"We're not guilty of trespassing, if that is what's disturbing you," he replied, letting his right hand hang down. "Your ship broke through the border and opened an entrance for us. We simply kept flying, that's all. We have no intention of remaining here. Our arrest would be an act of injustice."

"This is not for me to decide, stranger. Give me your weapons!"

"Never! Let us go!"

The Akon thought it over for a moment before he replied: "Very well, stranger. I will make a report. You deny that you have entered our borders by force?"

"That's right."

This seemed to mollify the Akon. Bellefjord deeply pondered his ambiguous attitude during the time of waiting after one of the uniformed men was sent back on a trip via the transmitter. Apparently they were primarily concerned with maintaining their isolation. They believe that we have discovered a method of penetrating their barrier. If I can convince them that this is not the case they are willing to let us go. We are much too unimportant to them—at least they act that way out of pure conceit.

The messenger came back 10 minutes later. He whispered something to the leader of the policemen, who then turned to Bellefjord. "We give you one hour of your time to leave our system. It was a coincidence that let you breach our system. Our scientific experts have confirmed these circumstances. You may leave now!"

Bellefjord still wished to ask many questions but he gathered that any delay he would cause would only serve to put the Terrans in an unfavourable light. He had taken advantage of a stroke of luck to visit the Blue System. This was more than he could have expected and he was not allowed to ask for more.

He advised his companions to put their arms away. They were no longer needed. The Akons were much too proud to use a cheap trick to get the better of them.

They left the waiting room without being accosted and walked through the shimmering gate of the transmitter. Instantly they saw the *Kenia* again, waiting at the same spot nearby.

The light cruiser lifted off 5 minutes later and headed for the star selected for their orientation. The unstable place was still clearly visible although the gap had already lost the pale appearance of a few hours earlier. The *Kenia* blasted through losing half its speed in the process. The gap was about to close.

When Bellefjord submitted his report to Col. Kaligula he was surprised to hear that the High Command had ordered him to go to Luna. The reason was not disclosed. Kaligula instructed him to leave at once and report to the Commander of the Lunar Fleet for his new assignment. Lt. Omola performed the required computations for the first transition.

Bellefjord gazed with a heavy heart at the blue veil of the mysterious border and he began to suspect that his escapade was merely the beginning of a chain of even more perilous adventures. His initiation into a mystery of unknown dimensions began with the launching of the Akonian ship.

#### **4/ THE IMPREGNABLE PLANET**

The *Drusus* had landed on Arkon 1 without the slightest incident and without being challenged by the robot-manned guardships. The Terranian ship was not even requested to identify itself. This meant that any other ship could fly to Arkon and land unmolested.

The 2 statesmen sat in the Crystal Palace facing each other. The government building was cordoned off and guarded by faithful officers. Here they were safe.

"The situation must be considered hopeless," Atlan said in distress.

Perry Rhodan slowly shook his head, endeavouring not to let his friend's dismal attitude influence his own. It would have been easy to agree with Atlan. The Arkonide had indeed made a serious mistake by entrusting the responsibility for the affairs of the gigantic Imperium to the heretofore infallible Robot Brain. However the Robot Brain was presumably merely isolated by the Akons. If so, why didn't it defend its freedom of action?

"It's not hopeless, Atlan. We will launch a counterattack on Arkon 3. We have done it before and conquered..."

"...under completely different circumstances." Atlan was quick to remind him. "We now confront an enemy who—let's be honest—is far superior to us. If the Akons really are our ancestors they will regard us as backward colonists

"This is precisely the point where they can be hooked," Rhodan interjected. "They underestimate both of us. Their technology is definitely superior and we don't know how they put the Robot Brain out of action. But we possess something they don't have."

Atlan leaned forward. "And that is—?"

"Our mutants!" Rhodan said with a faint smile. "If we can't win with the *Drusus* then we will do it with our mutants."

"They are not supermen," Atlan said sceptically.

"But they have capabilities that are unknown to the Akons."

"When will you launch your attack?"

"Tomorrow."

They were quiet for a few seconds. Then Rhodan said: "I don't want you to take part in my operations. I'm afraid you have more than enough to do to maintain law and order in your realm. However, I suggest that you replace all robot commanders of your fleet with Arkonides. All crews of warships stationed at the most critical points should be replaced by members of the regular fleet. It's the only way to prevent further damage. As long as the hyperradio stations are functioning we can be confident."

"Thank you," Atlan replied grimly. "We'll have trouble enough."

"Let's hope for the best, my friend," Rhodan said and got up. "Could you put some more battleships at my disposal tomorrow? I want to conduct a concentrated attack by as many units as possible. We should be able to crack the defence shield."

"I wish you a lot of luck, Perry! And be careful!" The tone of Atlan's voice revealed his deepest concern and affection and Rhodan was grateful without showing his emotions. They shook hands, looked into each others' eyes and parted. Each knew what he had to do and whatever they did it was to serve a common goal, to ward off an enemy and to eliminate the terrible danger of merciless extinction.

\* \* \* \*

After the third futile attempt to ram through the mysterious energy wall around Arkon 3, Rhodan gave up and sent the battleships of the Arkonides back. He directed Deringhouse to let the *Drusus* circle around the isolated planet at a great distance. Then he called for a war council in the officers' mess.

The chief mathematician of the *Drusus*, Dr. Louis Renner, and the security officer Capt. Marquardt were asked to attend the meeting in addition to the mutants. A little later Capt. Markowski, who was responsible for the ship's arsenal, was also called in for consultation.

The mousebeaver Pucky sat quietly in the background, looking unusually modest. He anticipated the results of the meeting and entertained little desire this time to jump into such a precarious adventure. The Akons baffled and disturbed him. Maybe they frightened him a little too.

Rhodan looked serious as he opened the session in a calm voice: "As you know, we have met our master. But we have not yet deployed all our weapons. We have to break through that screen. Since we can't do it by force we will have to apply other means. Capt. Markowski, I have requested you to join us to tell us if the tele-transmitter is ready for operation."

Markowski was a slightly built man whose hair was getting sparse. The TTT was placed in his care. "It's ready, sir. You wouldn't..." He paused in astonishment. The idea was too frightening.

"Something like that," Rhodan followed his thought, "but only in case of an emergency." He looked around until he saw Ras Tschubai. "Do you consider it very dangerous to teleport to Arkon 3?"

Without batting an eyelash the African shrugged his shoulders. "Nobody knows the answer to that. I would have to try it."

The response was characteristic of Ras Tschubai. Of course he knew—or at least expected a blind jump through an energy screen of this type to be extremely hazardous. Moreover, Rhodan himself did not seem to have much faith in its success or he would not have inquired as to the readiness of the transmitter. The TTT was designed to dematerialise objects that were placed under its effect and rematerialise them again at another predetermined destination. For example, it was possible to transport an atom bomb into an enemy ship without exposing oneself to danger. Of course it could also be used to teleport a person.

"I have no right to order you to take such risks," Rhodan said slowly and then argued: "I know you do it voluntarily but the responsibility will be mine."

"We must try it anyway. How else can we find out how to get across this energy field? The question is only what are we going to do if I fail?"

"We will cross that bridge later," Rhodan replied, glancing at Pucky. "Maybe we can send a teleporter through with the aid of the transmitter. I don't know though if we can get him back."

Pucky no longer avoided Rhodan's questioning eyes. If Ras Tschubai was prepared to risk his luck he didn't want to act like a shirker. "No telepathic impulses can pass through the energy screen either," he noted. "It's as if no thinking beings existed on Arkon 3 although we know better. But even though a thought impulse is held back by the screen, a teleporter might have more luck—with or without the transmitter."

"Thank you, Pucky," Rhodan replied in a friendly tone. "But before I let you tackle this job, I want Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta to try it together."

The attempt turned out to be another failure. The 2 teleporters concentrated their minds on the jump, dematerialised and were back in the same second. They had collided with an invisible and unidentified obstacle in paraspace and were hurled back with the same force of their impact. They rematerialised again on the same spot from which they had jumped.

"Anyway," Ras Tschubai reported rather disconcertedly, "it's not painful. One simply can't get through. It's not an ordinary energy screen as we know it. It must be something else, something entirely different."

Kakuta corroborated the opinion of the African. Although he had felt no pain he showed no inclination to repeat the experiment.

Pucky, who had listened closely to their reports, sighed: "I'm afraid it's my turn. The main thing is that the transmitter is activated at the same moment I jump. This is the only way to accomplish the desired effect." He glanced at Rhodan. "I'm not raring to go, the way I feel."

Rhodan bent down to him: "I know how you feel, my little friend. Believe me, if I knew another way I would try it. But it's the only one left. You are the one who can make it work because you are a telekin, telepath' and teleporter all rolled into one. If anybody can manage to come back it is you. We won't be able to keep in contact and you will have to help yourself. Be careful and remember that our fate depends on the success of your mission." He stroked Pucky's fur and said in a soft voice: "Our thoughts will be with you and we wish you the best of luck, Pucky. And if something should happen to you..."

Everybody knew how futile Rhodan's consolation was. If anything happened to Pucky and he did not come back they could not even take revenge. Not only Arkon but Terra would be lost too and there would be no future for humanity.

Capt. Markowski stood ready at the TTT to receive the final instructions. The *Drusus* continued to circle around Arkon 3 but in a closer orbit. The inexplicable energy wall prevented a view of its surface. Arkon 3 was surrounded by a non-transparent veil.

Gen. Deringhouse announced on the intercom: "We will be at the takeoff point in exactly... 20 seconds!"

Rhodan patted Pucky. "That's it, shorty! Good luck!"

"I'll need it," the mousebeaver replied and waddled with his short legs into the active field of the transmitter. He was dressed in his special uniform and carried a small raygun in his belt. Otherwise he relied on his special gifts.

Markowski's hand touched the contact lever. Distance and energy level were set. He had only to flip the

lever to send Pucky to his destination.

"5 seconds to go!" Rhodan called out and raised his hand. "4... 3... 2... 1... now!"

3 things happened simultaneously: Rhodan's arm came down, Markowski made contact and Pucky teleported himself.

The seconds ticked away and Pucky did not return. He must have achieved the breakthrough!

## **5/ ONE SMALL STEP FOR MAN, ONE GIANT LEAP FOR A MOUSEBEAVER**

When a mutant performs a teleportation his body becomes dematerialised and he arrives at his goal as a hyper-energy impulse. There the process is reversed.

Not once in his life had Pucky been able to register any impressions or physical sensations during a jump. Whenever he jumped everything vanished around him and his environment took shape again in a fraction of a second. But it was the environment of his point of arrival. What lay in between was space- and timeless, nonexistent.

But this time it was different in the energy field of the transmitter. Although he dematerialised as usual, he retained his form and consciousness for a tiny second as he slammed against the barrier of the Akons. He was suspended in a void and he felt a peculiar tingling all over his body. Before he was able to give it much thought he succumbed in the energy field of the transmitter and materialized again.

He had made his transition.

His legs buckled and he fell to the ground. He felt weaker than ever before and a terrible desire to die—or to sleep. His memory gradually returned and his instinct for self-preservation forced him to open his eyes. Despite his feebleness he crawled a few meters farther and crouched in the shadow of an overhanging rock.

The sun of Arkon stood high in the sky and shone on a landscape on which Pucky had never laid eyes before. He had obviously landed in a region of the military planet he didn't know to exist. Arkon 3 was the arsenal and training centre of the Arkonide Imperium. Here were the huge factories which produced the gigantic battleships on assembly lines, the vast barracks and schools, the military academies for training the future officers and the medical institutes.

Pucky had rematerialised on a high flat plateau. Without leaving the protection of the rock he was able to overlook the plain stretching to the horizon. He recognized the clear outlines of a rectangular landing field for spaceships, surrounded by massive low-slung buildings. Behind them were fenced yards and long sheds where materials were stored. They were patrolled by armed guards whom Pucky was barely able to make out.

The spaceport was dotted with large and small ships, mostly of the typical spherical contours the Arkonides preferred. The scene appeared extremely busy. Transport gliders rolled in unending lines across the field, taking weapons and other supplies to the ships. Huge piles were deposited in front of the

vessels and loaded by antigrav hoists into the insatiable bellies of the enormous spacecrafts. It looked as if the entire fleet was getting ready for a major operation.

Pucky felt much too weak to perform another teleportation. Although he was not hungry he was plagued by thirst. Maybe he could find some water in the vicinity? With difficulty he crawled out from the protection of the rock after making sure that nobody was in the neighbourhood. For a moment it seemed strange to him that uncultivated land was still in existence on Arkon 3. As far as he knew such land had disappeared from the face of the planet thousands of years ago.

He found a creek less than 200 meters away. It came out of a little forest and its water was cool and refreshing. Pucky dipped his head into the water and drank till his belly threatened to burst. Then he jumped in and splashed around, which made him feel much better. Then he felt up to his task again. A little more rest and he would be able to teleport himself again. But he thought it would be better to "listen" first. Perhaps he could learn something from thoughts and conversations about the intentions of the Akons.

He waddled back to his plateau as the best vantage point. Then he concentrated his mind on monitoring any thought impulses but received nothing or only faint emissions too weak to make sense. He spent about 10 minutes in his vain efforts. Then he gave up and decided he should sleep a few hours to regain his full strength. The penetration of the energy barrier had sapped his strength to such an extent that it had impaired the telepathic powers of his brain. It was also improbable that he could perform another teleportation, not to mention telekinetic feats, without rest. He curled up under the rock and went to sleep.

He had to look at his watch to find out how long he had slept: 5 hours! First he went back to the creek again, drank his fill and returned to the rim of the plateau. The scene on the spaceport was still the same. The ships were being loaded with an endless stream of armies and war materiel. It seemed to be an undertaking of gigantic proportions.

Odd, he thought, why didn't the Arkonides pay any attention to the landing of the Akonian ship? Hadn't they even noticed that their communications with Arkon 1 had been interrupted? Or...?

It posed a question which spurred Pucky to act with utmost speed. Could it be the Akons who issued the orders? Perhaps they had directed the Arkonides to attack Arkon 1 and 2?

But why did this require such exorbitant amounts of equipment? Something was definitely wrong. Pucky abandoned any further attempt to gather information by telepathy and concentrated instead on the highest building near the landing field. It had a flat roof and numerous superstructures which would offer him convenient hiding places.

The jump went smoothly. He retreated a few steps to a safe spot where he would be protected from inquisitive eyes. But there was little likelihood that the roof of the administration building—which was where he had landed—would be watched. A few helicarcs were standing at the other end. Their construction differed somewhat from those of the Arkonides to which Pucky was used. Did the Akons...? But this was ridiculous. Why should they have brought their own helicarcs? Nevertheless—there was an undeniable difference.

It would not be easy to detect him from the field unless they were looking for him with binoculars. There were apparently hundreds of people in the building below him. It was difficult to separate the flood of thought impulses. Many of them were too confusing, as if a large crowd of people was talking in a big hall.

Finally Pucky succeeded in picking out sequences of impulses which emanated from 3 or 4 men who were engaged in a conversation. The impulses appeared to be related and seemed to come from the same room a few stories below. If necessary he could determine the location of the room and teleport himself. But why? He remained still and listened.

"...the fleet is set to start after 2 more revolutions of Arkon, my august Emperor. As we have no time to lose, I suggest that we send out the first vanguard of ships today."

"I am Emperor and I will determine when the fleet will start, Gagolk! How dare you give me instructions? You may be Commander of the Fleet but only because I appointed you. The takeoff will be in 2 days! Is that clear?"

Another man interjected: "The Emperor is right as always, Gagolk, although I am personally inclined to agree with you. Time is of the essence and the element of surprise is our best ally. But how could those upstarts on a distant world suspect that we have learned of their existence? I believe it is safe to trust Metzat III."

"Whatever you say." It was Gagolk again. "You have more experience with these underdeveloped races. I hope that the commander of the colonists' spaceship has spoken the truth. His report seemed highly confused."

"Why should he lie?" inquired Metzat III, who was called Emperor.

Emperor? Of what? Pucky pondered the question for a few seconds without coming to a conclusion. There was only one Emperor of Arkon and that was Atlan, Gonozal VIII. Anyway, it would be cleared up. Later.

"...never the reasons, my august Emperor. The reports are correct, I'll vouchsafe their accuracy. Admittedly the colonists have changed and only bear a resemblance to us but one must consider the environmental influences they have been exposed to in the course of many generations. Other examples have given proof that 5 or 6 generations are enough to produce apparently new races."

"I don't doubt the origin of the colonists," Metzat replied in an ill-tempered tone. "I merely wonder what purpose they could accomplish by lying. Well, we'll soon find out whether their claims are correct. In any case, the fleet will depart the day after tomorrow. The newly discovered race will be conquered or destroyed. Those are my orders, Gagolk!"

"They will be obeyed, my august Emperor!"

Pucky tuned himself out again from the conversation and sat down in deep thought. What he had just monitored was ostensibly a reasoned plan of action. In reality however it was utterly absurd. There was no Emperor by the name of Metzat III! Neither had any colonists landed recently who had reported a newly discovered race that had to be subdued or exterminated. Moreover Arkon 3 had been cut off by an energy screen established by the Akons. Therefore it must be the Akons who acted out this farce. But why? Besides, Pucky had determined beyond doubt that the men were Arkonides, not Akons.

What kind of a game was being played here? Where was he anyway? This was not the spaceport as he remembered it from his last visit on Arkon 3. It had been much larger and more modern. And as far as the spaceships were concerned...

Pucky began to study the vessels closer. They were of normal size and the accustomed spherical shape but now he noticed that the bulge of the equatorial ring containing the propulsion system was much smaller than that of the *Drusus*. Neither were there any recesses for retractable energy cannons. The powerful telescopic guns were constructed in an unfamiliar design. They looked much bulkier. Only at a first superficial glance could these ships be mistaken for the heavy battleships of the Arkonides.

But this realization did nothing to solve the puzzle. Before he continued his investigation he wanted to see more of Arkon 3. It was possible that he had wandered into a training camp where exercises and manoeuvres were held using older ships of a type unknown to him.

He concentrated on a jump of more than 1,000 kilometres and materialized in a fenced-in area between crates and spare parts. When he saw several armed guards he took cover between the crates and kept a watchful eye on his surroundings.

First he tuned in telepathically on the guards. He found nothing suspicious except the amazing fact that their minds were also occupied with the imminent military campaign. Arkon's empire had to be expanded. A new enemy had appeared who had to be defeated. A new people who had just begun to travel in space. The entire fleet would set out in 2 more days to invade the home planet of the people and subdue them.

Pucky shook his head in frustration. He was unable to make sense of it. What was going on around here? Was everybody insane? If there were to be a military campaign, Atlan would have been aware of it as well as Rhodan. A new people? Who were they supposed to be?

He took another jump and landed on the dark side of Arkon 3. This time he rematerialised between 2 spherical spaceships which were illuminated by floodlights and being loaded. Pucky was astonished to see that most of the work was done by Arkonides instead of the usual work robots.

By Arkonides? Since when did the Arkonides do the work instead of using help from their satellites? They always left the physical work to their robots, of whom they had an abundant supply. Had the Robot Brain ceased to function even inside the barrier?

Incidentally, where was the Robot Brain? Pucky tried to orient himself. He was on the night side and at a spaceport he had never seen before. Yet he believed that he knew Arkon 3 fairly well.

At the same moment he happened to look at the star-studded sky. Although he did not know the constellations very precisely he was familiar with certain groups of stars. They looked the same as viewed from Arkon 1. The most prominent of them was the Polar Ring. Similar to the position of Terra's North Star it was virtually at the zenith of Arkon 1. Here, seen from Arkon 3, it appeared to be just above the southern horizon. Its shape was unmistakable.

But now? Pucky was startled when he finally located the constellation. He did not know exactly why but it seemed to have changed somehow. The ring of the 5 main bright stars appeared to be tighter and, apparently, more radiant. Unfortunately he was unable to make a comparison with the other constellations since he failed to remember them well enough. But the Polar Ring itself caused him to delve into various speculations, all of them so weird and fantastic that he soon stopped trying to figure out why the appearance of those stars could have changed.

However he decided to approach his task with more scepticism than previously. He transported himself to the spot where the Robot Brain was located, relying on his memory. When he materialized again, he realized that he must have made a mistake because he was at the same place where he had first landed

coming from the *Drusus*. Nearby was the big rock under which he had slept. The fleet was still down there and in the process of being outfitted for its departure 2 days later. The sun was shining brightly as before but it had moved closer to the horizon.

Pucky concluded that he had miscalculated his teleportation because there was no sign of the positronic robot's subterranean installations. He failed to detect the protective energy screen which normally surrounded the zone. Furthermore, the spaceport below on the plain looked quite different. Its dimensions seemed to have shrunk.

And what about the plain and the plateau? There was no plateau near the Robot Brain.

Pucky began to regret that he was unable to get in touch with the *Drusus*. He had nobody he could consult or who could give him at least some information. He was left to his own resources in a situation which battled him to the extreme.

Suddenly he noticed a growing influx of thought impulses and he ducked instinctively. A shadow flitted across the rocky landscape—an airglider. It was a small craft and—as Pucky quickly determined—occupied by a single pilot.

It took Pucky no more than a second to make a decision. He concentrated his mind on the Arkonide at the controls of the craft and forced him to land. By telepathy he obtained the information about the control panel from the brain of the pilot and he succeeded, by using his telekinetic powers, in moving the arm and the hand of the pilot in accordance with his will.

The man landed without knowing why. Pucky disrupted a crucial connection in the airglider by twisting it telekinetically. Thus he prevented the Arkonide from leaving again even if he desired.

The mousebeaver waited out of sight as the pilot climbed out of his little cabin and looked helplessly at his machine from all sides. Obviously it had not penetrated his conscious mind what had caused him to land. Pucky kept in constant touch with his thoughts and verified his assumption. Moreover he learned that his reluctant guest was a high officer of the fleet.

Pucky hopped out from his hiding place and approached the startled Arkonide, who would have been a little astounded by the sight of an animal on the military planet but could not trust his eyes to see a creature dressed in uniform. His hand reached for the heavy raygun in his belt. It was a simple matter for Pucky to use one of his favourite telekinetic tricks. Before the hand of the Arkonide touched the weapon it flew through the air and hit the ground a hundred meters away between some loose rocks.

The Arkonide stared after his raygun in utter consternation. He slowly pulled his hand back. Then his face turned to Pucky with bulging eyes.

"Didn't you catch on yet?" the mousebeaver asked, convinced in his belief that everybody had heard of him. "Since when do you greet your friends with gun in hand? Oh—you are worrying about the airglider! Don't let that bother you: I'll take you back."

The Arkonide stood still in a daze. He understood every word Pucky spoke but his mind refused to recognize the mousebeaver as an intelligent being. This was so unusual as to puzzle Pucky. The Arkonides all knew him. Why didn't he?

"Now tell me what has been going on since the Akons landed on Arkon 3. Don't hold back! We want to help you. Gonozal VIII is deeply concerned about your fate ever since the connection with the military

planet was interrupted."

The Arkonide uttered: "Gonozal...?"

Pucky became suspicious. It was unheard of that an officer of the spacefleet did not know who his supreme commander was. "Gonozal, the Emperor!" Pucky prodded him.

"I don't know what you are talking about, whoever you are," the officer replied, squinting in temptation at his gun lying out of reach. "Who is Gonozal?"

Pucky's suspicion increased and took shape. Was it possible that the Akons had robbed the Arkonides stationed on Arkon 3 of their memory? Perhaps that strange energy screen produced such an effect. In that case the officer was not responsible for his strange behavior—and a few other circumstances could be explained by the same token. Pucky did not yet know how wrong he was and what a surprise was in store for him.

"Gonozal VIII is the august Emperor of Arkon," he explained cautiously. "A few days ago an alien ship landed on this planet—a spherical ship with flattened poles. Its crew set up an impenetrable energy field around the planet and since then all contact was broken off. We suspect that the Akons wanted to isolate Arkon 3. They also have prevented all functions of the Robot Brain."

"Robot Brain...?" the officer wondered out loud.

Pucky realized that the amnesia of the Arkonide was incredibly far-reaching. He even had forgotten the existence of the Robot Brain. He decided not to discuss it any further but to clear up the central core of his latest observations. "I will explain everything to you in due time but I want you to answer a few questions first. To begin with I wish to know what the objective of the military campaign you are preparing is. What is the name of the race you have recently discovered and that shall be destroyed? Where is the world they inhabit located? Do you know?"

The Arkonide hesitated. Pucky applied another useful telekinetic method. He stopped the flow of blood to the brain centre of his will control. The Arkonide was still in a position to think clearly but he now involuntarily revealed all his secrets. "The colonists who arrived in the ship with the flattened poles you mentioned informed us about a very belligerent humanoid race. Their spaceships roam as far as Arkon and they constitute a grave danger to us. We have to repulse or destroy them. The coördinates of the hostile system are unknown to me but I know that they come from the 3rd planet of a minor solar system."

This could have been a coincidence of course but an irrepressible feeling told Pucky that the Arkonide talked about Earth.

The Earth—and newly discovered. This was simply too ridiculous for words after having established contact between the Terrans and Arkonides for almost one and a half centuries. And yet...

"Who is Metzat?" Pucky inquired.

The officer bowed mechanically and replied solemnly: "Metzat III is the august Emperor of Arkon. He is a wise and just ruler. His decisions are infallible..."

"Nonsense!" Pucky interrupted him bluntly. "Gonozal VIII is the Emperor of Arkon—and nobody else."

The officer stared at him. "There can't be two Imperators," he stated.

"That's right," Pucky agreed with him. He realized that he couldn't get anywhere with the officer because he knew so little. He still failed to ask the most obvious question which would have explained everything. But it is so much easier to be smart with hindsight.

"Who are you?" the Arkonide finally asked when the mousebeaver remained silent. "To what race do you belong?"

"I am Pucky of Perry Rhodan's Mutant Corps. Ever heard of him?"

"No," the officer replied truthfully.

Pucky was now resigned. "Give me your hand. I'll take you down to the spaceport. You would get blisters if you had to walk—and your airglider doesn't fly anymore. Well, come on. Teleportation is no magic."

The Arkonide seemed to have a contrary opinion but he had at least heard something about teleportation. His thoughts were confused as Pucky found out when he seized his hand and jumped.

They rematerialised on top of the same building where Pucky had been once before. Then he located the room previously occupied by the 3 or 4 men the mousebeaver considered to be the key-persons. A second leap took them into the room, which was unfortunately empty. Those men who imagined themselves to be the Imperator Metzat and Fleet Commander Gagolk had left the room long ago.

The officer dropped Pucky's hand in panic. "The Council Chamber of the august Imperator," he panted. "Entering this room without permission is a punishable offence. I don't know..."

"What do you know?" Pucky growled, studying the huge stellar map on the wall. An ingenious system of reflecting mirrors caused it to look 3-dimensional and permitted excellent orientation in space. The Arkon system was clearly recognizable at the centre of a bright cluster of stars. Farther out there were fewer stars and space looked emptier. Pucky tried to find Terra or at least its solar system. Although he was no expert in the field of astronautics he succeeded in locating the approximate sector by identifying the outstanding features of the most familiar stellar systems. Finally he pinpointed the terrestrial sun, which he recognized by its 10 satellite planets. The 3rd planet was marked by a red arrow.

Pucky stood in front of the map, looking at Terra. The Arkonide whose brain he kept under control joined him and followed Pucky's line of sight. Suddenly he exclaimed with satisfaction as if happy to show off his knowledge for once: "That's it! That's the target of our foray. In 2 days we will have conquered its population or wiped it out."

Pucky had feared as much, yet the confirmation came as a terrible shock. The Arkonides, allies of Terra and Perry Rhodan, were out to attack their friends! And they were determined to do it without knowing what they planned. They had lost their memories and had substituted them with new and fallacious ones. Or could there be any other explanation?

He turned around and muttered: "So—that's the planet?" He realized how senseless it would be to tell the Arkonide the truth. He would be unable to comprehend it. "Can you tell me where I can find the ship of the colonists who have brought the news of that dangerous race they encountered?"

"It is in a berth of the subterranean hangar," the Arkonide informed him against his own will.

"Your name is Tanor as I can read in your thoughts." Pucky ignored the astonishment shown by the other. "Describe the hangar so that I can find it. You're coming with me!"

"It is forbidden to get close to the ship. Besides, it is protected by an energy screen."

"We are going to try it," Pucky silenced him. He became more and more obsessed with a tremendous fear that something much more horrible occurred than he had suspected. There could be no doubt that not only the Arkonides had changed but the whole planet as well. This was the place where the Robot Brain was situated! But look at it now! There were some installations of a modest spaceport which could stand no comparison with the one that should be here. "Give me your hand!"

Tanor's description had been accurate. They materialized in a huge hall more than 2000 meters below the surface. There were long rows of small and medium-sized ships in separate silos. It was plain to see that they too were being prepared for takeoff. The ceiling shafts through which they were to ascend later on into the atmosphere of Arkon 3 were still closed. Technical personnel was bustling all over and Pucky pulled Tanor into the shadow of a small spaceship.

"Where are the colonists?" the mousebeaver inquired.

"Up front—the blockade is not visible from here."

"Let's go! And if somebody stops us, you better have a good excuse ready. Tell them I am an emissary of Xerxes IV—wherever in the world he might be from. Tell them also that we are sent here by orders of the Emperor."

Tanor nodded. Pucky could read his thoughts that he had every intention of getting away from his weird visitor at the first opportunity. However this worried Pucky not at all because in the meantime he had regained his full strength and would know how to defend himself. What mattered most was that he would get to the bottom of the game being played here.

Most of the Arkonides they passed were below the rank of officer and none made an effort to stop them. They cast astonished glances at Tanor and his companion but nobody dared to challenge him since he held the rank of a Major. Unmolested they rounded a corner and reached the energy barrier of the 'colonists'.

Two men, armed with heavy rayguns, stood in front of the barrier. Pucky saw at once that they must be Akons. Although they resembled the Arkonides, they had neither their white hair nor their reddish albino eyes. Their faces expressed calm and showed a trace of contempt. In the background stood the ship behind a slightly veiled energy curtain. Its poles were unusually flat.

Pucky pushed Tanor into one of the berths from where he could observe the 2 guards without being noticed. Before he started to talk to them he wanted to study their thoughts to learn anything worthwhile.

Tanor became impatient. "They expect me to be back long ago. What if they miss me or find my airglider?"

Pucky reflected a moment. He didn't need the officer any longer. "You may leave. But it would be better if you kept my presence a secret."

Pucky let him go. He was certain he would not be betrayed by him. Satisfied that he was close to his goal, he tuned in on the thought impulses of the two Akons.

They were strong and thus easy to receive. However they were so chaotic that Pucky had trouble interpreting them for awhile. They held no high opinion of the Arkonides. They regarded them as a degenerate offshoot of their own race to be used for their own selfish purposes. One of them thought a lot about food, reminding Pucky that he had eaten his last meal more than a day earlier. Down here he would have no trouble finding a snack among the provisions but he would have to bide his time.

Pucky grew more and more impatient. Why didn't the Akons give a thought to what they had done to the Arkonides? If they were only interested in inconsequential subjects, he would have to do something even though he would have to reveal his presence. He shrugged his shoulders and decided to give it a try.

With an innocent face he waddled out of his retreat after using the telekinetic powers of his brain to keep the safety devices of their 2 guns locked so they could not be fired. Simultaneously he searched the thoughts of the two Akons who now were busy watching him. They did not conceive him to be a danger. The shimmering energy screen veiling the ship contained a narrow passage behind the position of the guards.

Pucky heard some steps—Arkonides going about their business of preparation for the launching. His hunger got worse.

He had to induce the Akons to think about themselves and their intentions, in order to learn what he came to find out. The Akons were too intelligent to be tricked by smooth talk. One word too much and they would become suspicious.

He remained at a respectful distance and said in pure Arkonide: "Maj. Tanor sent me over. He would like to know if you have any wishes."

One of the guards lowered his weapon. He looked bored and stopped paying attention to him. His thoughts revealed to Pucky that he regarded him as a servant who was employed by aristocratic Arkonides. A sort of domestic animal that was more entertaining than a robot—that was Pucky in the eyes of the Akons.

His companion shared his thoughts but he was not above giving Pucky an answer. "When we have any wishes your Major will be informed by the Imperator. Go away!"

Pucky bowed low and left. He sat down in a dark corner of the nearest berth and concentrated his mind on the thought impulses of the 2 guards. The incident had created sufficient interest to start a discussion between them. But even if they had not carried on their conversation their thoughts would not have been concealed from the mousebeaver.

In the half-hour that followed, Pucky learned the whole truth. He was so overwhelmed by the shocking facts that he sat stunned in his hiding place and forgot all about his surroundings, even his hunger. Now he finally grasped the nature of the mysterious energy barrier surrounding the planet Arkon 3. He understood the strange change which had overcome the Arkonides and their intention of invading Terra or killing all its people if they deemed it necessary.

He began to realize how magnificent a technology the Akons had developed and with what determination they pursued the goals they had set for themselves. They judged Terrans to be dangerous, therefore humanity had to be exterminated. But Pucky was unable to find out the reason they feared

Earth so much.

The ship of the Akons contained a generator which created a regulated time field. The field engulfed the selected planet and placed it in any desired era of the past. The scientists of the Akons had worked for centuries to extend the application of the invention in the future but up to now had failed to achieve it. However the past was attainable and could be influenced.

By using the time-transformer aboard their ship the Akons had set the time of the planet Arkon 3 back 15,000 years. No wonder all functions of the Robot Brain had been eliminated as it did not exist 15,000 years ago. The planet was the same as it was at that time. A military planet—but the population consisted of active and efficient Arkonides who knew only one goal: to enlarge their Imperium and to inhibit any potential opposition by force.

The basic idea was simple. At the chosen period a great warrior ruled Arkon as Emperor Metzat III. The Akons pretended to be Arkonide colonists in order to explain their different appearance. They had no trouble convincing Metzat of the dangerous nature of the Terrans, the humanoid race they had recently discovered. The Emperor decided to launch an offensive against Earth. He instructed his officers to assemble an armada and approximately 30,000 large and small units were set to encircle Terra and demand the capitulation of its inhabitants—or face a catastrophe.

Perry Rhodan had to be warned at once. But how?

The time-field around Arkon 3 affected light and matter in different ways. The sun was visible from its surface but the surface could not be seen from outer space. Nor could matter penetrate the time-field from outer space to the surface. Now the question was: how about in reverse? Could he, Pucky, teleport himself from Arkon 3 to the *Drusus*? This time he could not count on a boost by the tele-transmitter since he had no way of communicating with Rhodan. Even though impulses were intercepted by the field.

Another question Pucky contemplated was how the start of the armada was to be accomplished. Would the Akons lift the time-field for the duration and thus put the planet back in the present time? And if they didn't, how could the warships leave the planet without smashing into the barrier?

There were a thousand and more questions which could not be answered. It would be senseless to contact Metzat. How could he explain the situation to the Emperor? For Metzat the presence, his presence, was real. How would he react to the fact that he was already dead thousands of years as far as the outside was concerned?

He was also sceptical about his ability to destroy the time-transformer single-handedly. Pucky was aware that he did not have the technical know-how that would be required for such a feat. Manipulating time was more than the average untrained mind could comprehend. Furthermore, the method seemed subject to certain restrictions, otherwise the Akons could have applied it directly on Earth and turned the time back on the spot. Apparently it was necessary that the flying time-transformer land on the respective world and this was virtually impossible on Earth if it had to be done unnoticed.

Pucky finally reached a conclusion. He teleported himself to the surface and into the administration building where Metzat III resided. After searching awhile he again found the room containing the stellar map. It was locked and he felt fairly safe. If anybody came in he would have plenty of time to disappear.

He became aware of his nagging hunger again and the fact that it had been a long time since he had tasted food. He also suffered from thirst. But the problem of warning Perry Rhodan came first.

He tentatively sorted out the mass of thought impulses around him, disregarding the weaker ones whose sources were obviously too far away. The preponderant impulses, however, doubtlessly emanated from the building he was in. He had no trouble finding Maj. Tanor and identifying his conversational partner.

To Pucky's surprise, it was neither Metzat nor Gagolk but another Major, the Commander of a small long-distance reconnaissance ship. Tanor was in the process of giving him instructions and then added: "...keep in mind that time is of the utmost importance! You will start in exactly 10 hours and try to be back tomorrow night. We want a report from you whether there is such a planet with humanoids who endeavour to conquer Arkon."

"I'll make it my duty," came the reply. All further thoughts proved conclusively that he left to ready his ship for the planned takeoff.

The Akons seemed to have no objections to Metzat dispatching one of his ships to verify the existence of Earth. This was interesting. But it also made sense. Metzat's efforts would be far greater if he were shown proof of the existence of Terrans and was convinced of the necessity of his action.

Tanor had remained alone with his thoughts. Pucky concentrated on him again, then jumped.

The Arkonide officer was deadly frightened when the mousebeaver materialized before him. He reached for his weapon, then remembered that it had been discarded on the plateau.

Pucky left him no time to say anything and quickly inquired: "Why does the Emperor send out a reconnaissance ship?"

"He wants to know if the colonists are speaking the truth."

Pucky knew that Metzat could not act differently. It would be just as useless to tell Tanor the truth. It would be best for him to leave as quickly as possible. But how? The energy barrier...

Suddenly Pucky saw that he must have been blind. Here he stood racking his brain to find a solution and unable to see that a way had already presented itself!

The reconnaissance ship! What else! If it left it had to go through the barrier. Perhaps the Akons suspended the barrier for the few seconds it required? Would Perry Rhodan notice it? Would the Arkonides who simply stopped existing for a few seconds? Where were the Arkonides who lived in his own time? Pucky gave up pondering the problem. He would never be able to find the answer by himself.

He vanished before the Major recovered from his bewilderment. When Pucky rematerialised he did so inside the huge storage building for fleet provisions 100 kilometres from the location of the time-transformer.

He methodically examined the various supplies until he found some digestible concentrated food. He ate it reluctantly. He would have preferred fresh vegetables.

The *Drusus* had followed the rotation of Arkon 3 for hours, staying directly above the Robot Brain coordinates. The view itself was obstructed by the opalescent energy wall.

They had received more disquieting reports from Arkon 1. Atlan had informed Rhodan that several of the less trustworthy colonial people—and even some settlers—had used the opportunity to attack and destroy defenceless robotships. In addition many inactive security robots were demolished or rendered useless. He faced a threat of universal chaos and if nothing was done to cope...

Rhodan calmed Atlan down by telling him that he expected Pucky to be back from his intelligence mission at any moment and provide the necessary information. Then they would finally know what happened on Arkon 3 and what was responsible for the failure of the Robot Brain.

But Pucky kept them waiting. Rhodan couldn't know how fortunate this delay was. If the 2 time-planes had not run parallel, nobody could have saved Terra. Due to this coincidence it had won a short reprieve.

Gen. Deringhouse had relinquished his command to Maj. Gorm Nordmann and gone to sleep. Rhodan stayed in the Command Centre. He was worried but not tired. John Marshall sat beside him. The telepath had vainly tried to get in touch with Pucky.

"Nothing, sir, absolutely nothing!" Marshall shook his head. "It's impossible to pick up a single thought impulse from Arkon 3. The energy field blocks everything. We don't even know whether Pucky set foot there or not."

Rhodan looked at his watch. "We'll wait 30 more minutes, then we'll try again. This time we will send an automatic television camera to Arkon 3. We must know what goes on there."

Nordmann pointed excitedly at the observation screen. "A ship, sir! There! It just emerged from the energy field."

A small spherical ship was clearly discernible as it flew into space with moderate acceleration. There was no doubt that it was of Arkonide construction although minor deviations were recognizable. Rhodan was puzzled by the flatter bulge of the engine ring but this was not the time to figure it out.

"Radio identification!" he shouted to the radio operator on duty. "Hurry up!" And then to Nordmann: "Follow that ship and don't let it out of your sight! It looks as if it's trying to escape and broke through the screen. We must find out how it was done."

Nordmann changed the course of the *Drusus* but before he could take up the pursuit of the alien ship which failed to answer all radio calls, Pucky suddenly materialized in the Command Centre.

"Don't bother with him!" he panted and jumped on the couch to lean his back against the wall in a state of utter exhaustion. "You can save yourself the trouble. He's only a little fish that isn't worth catching. The big ones are all on Arkon 3—the Akons and the august Emperor Metzat III whose ambitious plans will take your breath away!"

Rhodan whirled around when he heard the mousebeaver begin to talk behind him. He furrowed his brow as he was about to surmise the significance of Pucky's words without grasping the full truth as yet. "How did you come back?"

"On that ship over there!" Pucky pointed to the observation screen where the little spacesphere grew

smaller and smaller and soon could not be distinguished from the stars. Then it was gone. "The crew took me through the barrier—although without knowing it. The barrier was not deactivated at any time. They can pass through from inside and it causes no change at all. It's amazing and I don't understand it."

"I suggest you start your report from the beginning," Rhodan said slowly. "What are you talking about? Which change do you refer to?"

Pucky glanced at the ship's clock. "I'll be brief because we have exactly 48 hours to save the Earth from destruction. In 2 days, Perry, a mighty armada will invade the Solar System—although that armada existed 15,000 years ago. The Akons have succeeded in bringing the crews and their ships back from their graves. They have reversed history. The ship you just saw on the observation screen may already have been destroyed 15,000 years earlier in a fight against some enemy. The pilot has been dead for 15,000 years—and he is about to discover the Earth."

Rhodan's eyes narrowed to slits. "Don't confuse us any longer," he interrupted sharply. "Stick to the facts—and don't waste any time!"

Pucky realized that Rhodan was serious. He presented his report after the most important members of the staff were called in.

Then there was a long silence.

Dr. Louis Renner, the chief mathematician of the *Drusus* and an expert in many other related fields, shook his head. "It sounds impossible—although I don't doubt the veracity of Pucky's report in any way. I only ask myself how the effect of the time-transformer can exceed these outer limits set by it. In other words, if a ship leaves the barrier around Arkon 3, it presumably returns to the past and thereby becomes invisible to our eyes."

"I don't know how they do it," Pucky defended his observations and the conclusions he derived at. "All I know is that they have done it. I suppose the mere existence of the time-field creates some stabilizing effect or whatever it is. Don't you think it would be better to deal with the realities than to discuss theories?"

"Do you believe that we can intercept the armada and repulse it here?" Rhodan asked. "With Atlan's help..."

"Without the Robot Brain? Never!" Pucky shook his head emphatically and with unaccustomed soberness. "We have to deal with 30,000 units. How do you want to stop all of them?"

"As long as the Robot Brain is inoperative Rhodan hesitated and then continued: "As long as it is inoperative we can't expect any help from Arkon. Atlan has his hands full with his own problems and can't do anything to help us. We have to face the fact that we can't overwhelm such a tremendous fleet. It simply takes more ships than we've got." There was another short pause, then he asked Pucky: "Didn't you say that they would first demand our capitulation?"

"Total submission of Terra—or destruction."

"Good, that will give us a little longer respite." Rhodan looked at Deringhouse. "Send a hyperradio message to Terrania. I want to talk to Marshal Freyt and Reginald Bell at once. Tell them it's urgent!"

Deringhouse immediately went to the radio room.

"We must mobilize all our forces in the defence of our Solar System," Rhodan continued. "We will remain at our present position in order to watch the launching of the ghost fleet. Perhaps we can find a way to put the time-transformer out of action..."

"But how?" Pucky broke in. "I've seen it, Perry. The Akonian ship is stationed almost 2 kilometres below the surface. It's impossible to reach it with our biggest guns. As long as the time-field surrounds the planet and closes it up tight. Even I had enough trouble to get through. If it hadn't been for the boost of the tele-transmitter—"

"We must find a way!" Rhodan said grimly. "If we don't..."

He left the rest unsaid but everybody knew what would happen. The phantom fleet from the past menaced the present. It was real, not a mere mirage. There was only one way to crush the very real menace: to send it back to the past by putting the time-transformer out of action!

Terrania responded to their hyperradio call sooner than expected. Perry Rhodan advised Freyt and Bell of the imminent peril and gave them his instructions. He left the possibility open that the problem could be overcome at the source and that a direct attack on Terra might be prevented. He insisted, however, that no risks be taken. As soon as the monitoring stations orbiting the Solar System reported the first transitions all inhabitants of Earth were to seek refuge in the atom bomb shelters. The same precautionary measures were to be observed also on Mars, Venus and Luna in anticipation of the invasion. He ordered no resistance, only delaying tactics. After talking for half an hour Rhodan finally cut the conversation short with the feeling that his instructions were still inadequate to prevent a catastrophe. He was painfully aware of his insufficient power and how weak Earth still was despite the enormous progress it had been able to make. Even his friends could not come to his assistance. He confronted a situation he didn't know how to master.

He fought a feeling of resignation. Had everything been in vain? Could long deceased Akons intrude in the present and change the future? Was the present time impotent against ghosts from an ancient past?

Pucky had fallen asleep on the couch. He was plainly exhausted. It would be irresponsible to send him to Arkon 3 again. Rhodan bit his lips as he had to face the helpless look in the eyes of his men when he returned to the Command Centre. They were waiting for a word from him, some comfort and a solution to their dilemma. If he only knew the answer!

"Maybe we can find the answer if we study the past," Marshall said without much conviction. "It's not possible that such an Emperor Metzkat actually existed without doing what he is about to do."

Rhodan sat down. "I'm afraid, John, that you fail to appreciate the infinite variants of the time paradox. If the Akons were able to develop a method of travel in time, it is quite possible that they can influence the present time by a change of the past. Of course we don't in this case have a trip through time in the strict sense. The time-transformer generates a field in whose range time is turned back. The present simply ceases to exist and the past is restored as if brought back to life—and it remains stable. Even after leaving the field itself. This is the amazing and incomprehensible aspect of this phenomenon. The question yet to be answered is whether it will still be stable after the time-transformer has been turned off or destroyed. But here, I think, we have found the chink in the armour. If the transformer becomes ineffective, the ghosts of the past who were temporarily revived will disappear again as if they never existed."

"But you did not explain it," Marshall remarked, discouraged. "What good would it do us though?"

"Quite a lot," Rhodan contended. "But you're right—I really can't explain it. However we know one thing: the Akons are way ahead of the Arkonides and ourselves. They can control the flow of time and we have nothing to counter it. At least, not yet."

"Couldn't we talk to Metzat and explain the situation to him?" Deringhouse interjected. Up to now he had attentively listened to the discussion without joining it. "He must be made to realize how senseless his plan is."

For the first time a fleeting smile appeared on Rhodan's lips although it was far from happy. "You are misjudging the situation," he said patiently, shaking his head. "Metzat doesn't even know that he lives a second time—because he is not doing it. To him it is the present. He would think we are crazy if we tried to explain to him that 15,000 years had passed in the meantime. And even if we could prove to him the parallel existence of 2 time-planes, he would naturally consider his own to be the right one. Aren't we doing the same in our minds? Ask yourself how you would react if somebody came and told you, you are living in the wrong present? No, Deringhouse, you might as well forget about it. We can't hope to find the solution that way."

"But what is the solution then?"

Rhodan gazed at the observation screen. Arkon 3 reminded him of one of those fog-shrouded planets. Behind that milky cover lay the solution. But how to get there and disrupt the time-transformer?

The door of the radio room was pushed open. "Sir—a call from Atlan!"

Rhodan got up. "I'm curious," he said to the others, "what our friend Atlan will have to say when he hears that he has a rival now."

They noticed that Rhodan's gait appeared to be slightly dragging, as if he carried an invisible load.

Pucky did not wake up from his slumber. He slept so soundly that John Marshall could take him in his arms and carry him to his cabin.

And time kept running... inexorably.

## 7/ SPACE GHOSTS

The first unannounced transition came from the proximity of Pluto. The monitor of a surveillance cruiser registered the rematerialisation of an alien ship. Since it was not followed by more observations, Marshal Freyt refrained from sounding the general alarm. He assumed correctly that they were merely being approached by a reconnaissance craft. Nonetheless he dispatched several small pursuit-spaceships to unobtrusively watch the alien.

All inhabited planets had taken the precautionary measures deemed necessary to avoid casualties. The vast cavernous atomic bomb-shelters were sunk far below the surface and would withstand any attack even if the entire surface were devastated. But Freyt hoped that it would never come to this. The

Arkonides came from the past primarily to conquer, not to destroy. His task was to put them off till Rhodan and his men—together with Atlan—could put a stop to the belligerence of the Akons.

The alien reconnaissance craft skirted the various planets and cautiously retreated each time it suspected it was in danger of being noticed. Five hours later it performed another transition. It would inform the Arkonide Emperor that the report of the 'colonists' was true and that the newly discovered race was of a peaceful nature so that it could be expected to submit without resistance to the demands of the superior Arkonides.

A hyperradio message went to the *Drusus* and then a long period began with nothing to do but wait. . .

\* \* \* \*

The following day a radio message from Rhodan was received. It was a brief order to obtain some information from the positronic Brain on Venus. In particular he requested certain historic dates going back 15,000 years. All data of Arkonide history were stored in the data bank of the Brain and it was a simple matter of requesting and retrieving it.

Bell used the opportunity to take a flight to Venus and obtain the desired information. The inactivity was hard on his nerves and drove him nearly crazy. The traffic between the planets had been reduced to a minimum and an unnatural calm reigned between the populated worlds of the Solar Imperium. They expected the enemy—the phantom fleet of the Arkonides.

Reginald Bell had a vague idea why Rhodan wanted to be enlightened about the history of the Arkonides. There was no time paradox and thus the imminent event, if it really would take place, would also have occurred 15,000 years ago. Or was it possible that Metzat had done something at that time without leaving a trace? But the Earth of his time was the same Earth as today. Was there another, a second Earth? Bell shook his head and threw up his hands.

His ship landed and he went as quickly as possible to the positronic Brain in the mountains. By recognizing his identity the Brain permitted him immediate access. Then he took a seat before the tremendous array of switches and put his questions in to be processed. He had to wait an hour before it returned all the answers. Without taking the trouble of studying them he boarded his ship and flew back to Earth where he contacted Rhodan in the communication centre to relay the information.

It was disappointing and at the same time reassuring except for one tiny detail.

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan, on the other hand, found the detail to be reassuring but not disappointing at all. However it posed still another puzzle which he was unable to solve. He faced a situation which was so unreal as to be almost grotesque. The more he thought about it the more it threatened to make him doubt his commonsense.

He needed the advice of his aides and therefore decided to call another meeting in the mess hall. All officers of the *Drusus* were summoned. Pucky, who had meanwhile fully recovered and nibbled away half his store of carrots, curled up in the lap of the mutant Betty Toufry and allowed her to scratch his fur. He already knew what Rhodan had to report and he racked his brain, trying to figure out how he would do what had to be done.

Rhodan sat at the head of the table, leafing through the hypergram of Bell's report. "Gentlemen, I'm happy that I can predict with confidence that Terra will neither be attacked nor destroyed. The study of the history of Emperor Metzkat III proves this irrefutably. And he can't have lived twice—this would be a paradox. I want to give you a short description of his life and deeds. This Arkonide was one of those active and tough men who built the Imperium. He subjugated 7 additional solar systems and demolished two. However Terra was not among them. The Imperium grew under his rule but there is no record of any unusual events. I don't want to bore you with the details since they don't deviate from the normal. The history of Metzkat is not very different from that of other Emperors. Except for one point!"

He glanced at his listeners and noticed the tense interest in their faces. Maybe they would be disappointed at first and fail to grasp the significance of the event. But when it sank in, they would be astonished. "During the era of Metzkat's reign, Arkon was attacked by a race of strangers. Not in a big battle with thousands of vessels, instead they arrived in a single ship. It descended on the military planet and flew twice around it. When it departed again, it left a huge crater 2,000 meters deep. On the same day Metzkat's fleet returned from a mission and reported that no special encounters had occurred." Rhodan looked up. "That was all, gentlemen. Metzkat remained on the throne for 50 more years before he died."

Rhodan saw the disappointment on the faces of the officers and mutants. Only Pucky grinned in amusement on Betty's lap. His gleaming incisor tooth, which he had so little occasion to bare recently, flashed openly. John Marshall, who could also read Rhodan's thoughts, caught on but he failed to understand the reasons for the connections.

"The time-transformer of the Akons is buried at a depth of 2,000 meters," Rhodan continued. "The crater mentioned in this report extends to the same depth and it was created in the same area where the Robot Brain was eventually built. This is of course the same spot where the time-transformer is standing today. Don't you see the connection? It tells us that we will destroy the time-transformer before the disaster strikes us. The big question, however, is how we can do it. And of course there is another rather theoretical question: what happens if we fail?"

His listeners stared at him, perplexed. For a fleeting moment they had breathed easier because they had learned with certainty that the time-transformer would be knocked out. Now Rhodan raised another question without giving an answer to the new problem.

"But, sir, this is impossible," said Deringhouse who was known for his sober judgment. "We can't change the past. The history of Metzkat is recorded and the facts are firmly established. The attack took place at that time—eh..."

Rhodan nodded and smiled. "Yes, at that time. And what about today or tomorrow? You seem to forget that we too will be thrown back 15,000 years the moment we cross the threshold of the energy screen or the time-field. We will be those strangers who attacked Arkon in Metzkat's time. The crater is a historic fact which nobody can doubt. Its existence is confirmed by the positronic Brain on Venus. The date has been entered for posterity 10,000 years ago. As you can see, we have a very real problem. We are forced to annihilate the time-transformer to prevent the creation of a time paradox. But I still don't know

how to go about it."

Pucky stretched his limbs. "Perhaps I can take another jump..."

"You will do no such thing!" Rhodan said firmly. "You couldn't be that lucky again. Furthermore, as history has it, it was a ship that penetrated the energy wall and circled twice around Arkon 3. Do you think you are a ship?"

Pucky gave no reply. He curled up again and appeared to have lost interest in the discussion.

John Marshall raised his hand. He wanted to say something but was interrupted by an alarm that shrilled through every department of the vessel.

Rhodan jumped up and left the mess hall, followed by Deringhouse and other officers. When they entered the Command Centre they saw Nordmann standing in front of the big observation screen. He announced without turning around: "The first units of the Arkonide fleet have taken off and are racing with maximum acceleration into space. The monitor robot has already counted 5,000 units. The first have already disappeared in transitions. They keep coming with terrific speed."

"They must have moved up their starting time," Rhodan commented, shrugging his shoulders. "What difference does it make?" He stared at the picture screen where new ships kept popping out of the milky veil of the time-field and zoomed into space without paying attention to the *Drusus*. Their radio transmitter maintained silence. They obviously assumed that everything was normal on Arkon 1 & 2. The idea that Arkon 3 possessed a time of its own did not occur to the commanders. The ring of fortresses did not yet exist at that time and they crossed it now without being challenged because it ceased to function without the Robot Brain. "Keep the *Drusus* ready for military action, Major! If one of the ghost ships attacks, it must be destroyed. However, nothing of the sort is going to happen—or we would have read something about it." He turned around. "I'll be in the radio room in case I'm needed."

Rhodan instructed the radio technician to contact Arkon 1 and carried on a long conversation with Atlan, bringing him up to date concerning the latest events. Although Atlan was swamped by his own problems, he promised to join Perry as quickly as possible. The Administrator had pointed out with great emphasis the possible consequences of a time paradox. If it occurred indeed, the very existence of Atlan could be a questionable mystery. If Atlan was never born, there could be no such person.

A total of 20,000 ships had departed by the time Atlan arrived aboard the *Drusus*. His usually composed expression appeared hectic and nervous. One could see the anxiety that assailed him so deeply and raised doubts about his future. What would happen? What had happened...?

As Rhodan greeted his friend and escorted him to his private cabin, Metzkat's first ships emerged in the Solar System.

\* \* \* \*

It was what they were waiting for.

The hostile armada effectively sealed up the entire system from the universe and slowly advanced. The

effort failed to provoke the slightest resistance. Not a single Terran spaceship attempted to leave the Solar System. The normal traffic between the planets continued as usual and the commanders ignored the hostile fleet. They acted as if it were a daily occurrence that alien spaceships paid visits to Terra.

Marshal Gagolk, the representative of the Emperor, closed in aboard his flagship and circled around the 3rd planet, which had been identified as the homeworld of the humanoids. For 3 hours he tried to make contact with these intelligent beings and space travellers but nobody paid attention to his presence. Even when he landed nobody objected. They did not appear to notice him and acted as if he were invisible.

At first Gagolk was thoroughly confounded and could not decide what to do. His orders were to conquer the humanoids or to kill them mercilessly in case of defiance. Well, there was no sign of defiance. On the other hand the space patrolships and the formidable warships stationed on the big spaceports proved clearly that they were in a position to mount a counteroffensive. Why didn't they take any action?

Gagolk became nervous. He would take too great a risk if he ordered his fleet to land and he could not give orders to open fire either as this would have violated the strictest laws. Nor was it feasible to leave his ship and start negotiating with people who ignored him.

His unknown antagonist was Bell, who did not feel much more comfortable in his role. He trusted his assumption that Gagolk was bound to follow the orders of the Emperor not to initiate a pre-emptive military action. It was essential to gain time until Rhodan had hit upon a successful strategy.

And if his endeavour failed? This was the question Bell kept asking himself but the answer eluded him. He was inside the energy dome of Terrania, which protected him against the first attack. The population had been warned. They pursued their normal activities but were ready for the alarm. At the first sign of an enemy raid they would disappear from the surface within 10 minutes.

But he could not allow the situation to deteriorate that far. If necessary Bell had to enter into negotiations with the Arkonides in order to gain precious hours or, hopefully, days.

The Solar System was blockaded by an array of 30,000 warships which kept circling its borders. More and more of them approached the Earth, putting a tight noose around it without heeding the Terran ships guarding the Solar Imperium.

The tension grew unbearable. Disaster was liable to strike any moment.

\* \* \* \*

Atlan looked pensively at Perry Rhodan. "Often the most difficult dilemmas are eliminated by the simplest solutions. Why shouldn't there be a simple answer to our problem too? All we have to do is one thing, that is to disable the time-transformer with the inevitable result that a fleet of 30,000 ships is paralysed or made to vanish. The Akons have achieved a similar feat by making the Robot Brain nonexistent. Since it is gone, its effects cease to function as well. If we succeed in doing away with the time-transformer, it will also put an end to whatever it engenders."

"I know that too," Rhodan replied despondently. "But the difficulty remains: how to penetrate the barrier. Pucky managed to do it once but I can't allow him to do it again. He was so exhausted as to be defenceless for the first few hours. And another teleporter wouldn't do a better job either. No, there's got to be another way. A ship! The history of Arkon mentions a ship that dropped the bomb on Arkon 3."

"Which means that we need a ship to do the trick," Atlan replied, suddenly narrowing his eyes. He studied Rhodan intensely as if trying to find out whether he was listening to him. "A ship! Tell me, Perry, do you really have such a short memory? It's not like you."

Rhodan was frankly astonished. "What do you mean?"

Atlan smiled. "Didn't you discover the Akons in their Blue System yourself? The Blue System was also surrounded by a protective screen which exhibited very strange properties. Isn't it thinkable that the nature of that protective field is identical with the one around Arkon 3?"

Rhodan nodded slowly. "It is thinkable although I don't believe that the Blue System is immersed in a time-field. Why should it be? No, but I imagine that 2 fields engulf Arkon 3. An energy-field of the type surrounding the blue universe and an additional time-field which might be transparent and penetrable by itself. Our trouble is to break through the energy-field..."

"...and that's exactly what you have done once before!"

Rhodan stared at Atlan in consternation. Of course he had done it but it was an accident—or was it? The plunge through the sun, the recharging in the reaction zone, the polarity of the Blue System...

The linear propulsion engine! That's what Atlan was talking about. Suddenly Rhodan grasped what his friend referred to and he wondered how he could have been so dense not to think of it himself.

The linear drive! He had crossed the border to the Blue System by using this method. He had to neutralize the barrier.

At the same instant Rhodan understood why the Akons feared Terra as their worst enemy. Rhodan had succeeded in breaching the careful isolation of the Blue System. Nobody had ever intruded before. Only the Earthlings were capable of achieving this: ergo, they had to be crushed. A clear, cold and logical conclusion which contained the answer to all questions.

"I believe that's it," Rhodan stated simply. "A ship equipped with linear drive will be able to land on Arkon 3—or at least slip through the barrier to drop its bombs."

Atlan nodded. "We will have to conform to the course of history," he mused. "There was only a single bomb and it tore a crater that was 2,000 meters deep—without causing a chain reaction. Therefore it was not an Arkon bomb! Rather an ordinary atom bomb. And the ship had to circle the planet twice before it detonated."

"Why?"

"I don't know but you will see the commander of that ship will have to act in this manner if he wants to carry out his mission. Who will it be, by the way?"

Rhodan sighed with relief because now he knew that he did not plan something that was impossible.

Instead of racking his brain over the question of how, it was now a matter of when and whether he could act fast enough. "Come with me!" he said to Atlan. "I want to talk to Terrania."

The connection was quickly established and Bell was given terse and precise instructions. Action 'Phantom Fleet' started to roll!

\* \* \* \*

Neither Maj. Heinrich Bellefjord nor his First Officer Capt. Benno Raldini had received any hint of it. They were busy learning the functions of the new linear drive. With the help of the Arkonide hypno-training they familiarized themselves within a single day with their new ship—the heavy cruiser *Ralph Torsten*.

The 200-meter sphere stood on its telescopic braces on a hardened surface of the Moon, waiting for the first order to start. The new propulsion system had only recently been installed and tested by the technicians. Everything was ready to go but nobody knew the destination of the maiden flight.

Then the arrival of the Arkonides interfered with their program. The Moon Commander ordered max alert and the crews of all ships stationed on the Moon boarded them at once, including Bellefjord and his men. None of them expected to start, under the circumstances, so great was their surprise when the Moon Commander drove up in his antigrav jeep a few hours later and asked for Bellefjord. "Are you ready to take off, Major?"

"But I thought..."

"Latest order from Terrania, I'm afraid. Rhodan requested the dispatch of a linear drive ship. At this time you are the only one with a trained crew available. All other ships equipped with the new drive are positioned at the border of the Solar Imperium and cannot be spared. These are your orders: take off in exactly 30 minutes and head directly for Arkon. Report to Rhodan, who is awaiting you there. Then you will receive further instructions. Any questions?"

Bellefjord gasped for air. "What about the fleet blockading the Solar System?"

"The Arkonides on those ships have no knowledge of the linear drive principle. They are still using the method of transitions. There is no way they can pursue you. After you start you will use maximum acceleration to reach the velocity of light. Then you will be invisible so they can't detect you with their range finders. Try to reach Arkon in the shortest possible time. Is that clear?"

Bellefjord nodded. "Yessir!"

The Moon Commander shook his hand, wished him luck and took off with his jeep. 30 minutes later the *Ralph Torsten* blasted off, accelerated and zoomed into space. It raced through the cordon of Arkonide warships and disappeared in the sea of stars.

\* \* \* \*

"What does Bell have to report?" Atlan inquired 2 hours after the momentous decision he had discussed with Rhodan. They had returned to the Command Centre of the *Drusus* and received the coded messages from Earth.

Rhodan picked up the deciphered text and read aloud: "NO CONTACT WITH ARKONIDES TO DATE. WE MAINTAIN WATCHFUL ATTITUDE. FLAGSHIP OF COMMANDER HAS LANDED BUT EVERYTHING IS QUIET. MAJ. BELLEFJORD DEPARTED ABOARD RALPH TORSTEN GOING THROUGH BLOCKADE WITHOUT INCIDENT. POPULATION MAINTAINS CALM. HOW MUCH LONGER? BELL."

"Not bad," John Marshall drawled. "I wonder whose nerves are going to crack first."

Rhodan ignored the remark and looked at Atlan. "When Bellefjord gets here I'll join him and take over control of his ship. By the way, a new idea occurred to me when I reread the report of the positronic Brain on Venus. It was something about the description of the 2,000-meter-deep crater. Its shape reminded me of craters of volcanic origin—high sidewalls, centre sharply tapered and collapsed, as well as other signs. The crater couldn't have been created by dropping a bomb."

Atlan stared expectantly at Rhodan. None of the other men in the Command Centre seemed to understand the observation.

Rhodan smiled and continued: "It gave rise to a conjecture that the strangers exploded the bomb at the bottom of the pit 15,000 years ago, either in the proximity of the time-transformer or perhaps inside. I am going to take Pucky with me. He knows the location of the Akonian vessel exactly."

"Is he aware of his lucky break?"

"He just found out. I bet he'll be here in a minute."

Rhodan was not mistaken. Pucky materialized at his side and said reproachfully: "I have to admit that you have screened your thoughts very well. It just so happened, by pure accident, that I listened to your conversation..."

"Oh... what a coincidence!" Rhodan patted the mousebeaver's back in a friendly gesture. "Well, do you consent? No objections? It will be dangerous and it won't be easy to keep the *Torsten* in one spot till you've placed the bomb and set the fuse. You'll have to jump aboard again."

Pucky grinned with delight. "And this solves the last of the puzzles," he squealed triumphantly. "Now we know why the ship had to circle twice around Arkon before it escaped. It had to keep moving to avoid being shot at. Obvious, isn't it?"

Rhodan nodded in surprise. "It's simple once you know it. History has fixed our course of action. I hope nothing will change it. But then how could it if everything has already happened?"

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Renner interjected. "What do we really know about time, its flow and the influence we can exert on it? The slightest error, sir, and we all cease to exist. I'm willing to bet on that."

"I believe you without a bet and you don't have to prove it to me," Rhodan replied with deep conviction.

"I think this is so," continued Renner who as a mathematician had often wrestled with the problem of time, "because there are various levels of probability. The one containing the greatest probability prevails. In addition to time travel, which up to now was only theoretically possible, I would consider dreams and certain types of insane delusions as giving us a view of other possible planes. However these are symptoms of subconscious nature and since they are non-physical they have no direct influence on the events taking place in our—or another plane. A trip through time, however, which leads into the past, is a physical phenomenon. It has profound influence and can cause a break in the existence of a plane. Those beings living in that region would not notice it because they were never born. I am certain that the Akons have considered the idea of letting our plane of existence disappear but the attempt is fraught with dangers. Therefore they prefer this experiment which does not change the past but merely influences the present. This poses no danger to their own environs."

Rhodan had listened attentively. He showed no sign as to whether he shared the opinion of the mathematician or not when he asked: "What we are about to do constitutes a change of the past. What is your theory in this regard?"

"It merely *appears* to us to be a change, sir, but we carry out something which has already occurred. If the report of the positronic Brain had been more complete, it would have stated that Arkon was attacked by time travellers 15,000 years ago and not simply by strangers. You see, sir, we won't cause a paradox but we would do so if we failed to destroy the time-transformer."

"Another question arises in this connection and you can perhaps answer it," Rhodan said with a faint smile on his lips. "The time-transformer shifted Arkon 3 into the past. Very well. Metzat, who lived 15,000 years earlier, is Emperor again. His contemporaries were resurrected as well. But where are the Arkonides who exist in our time? They can't have vanished in thin air."

Renner grinned as he replied without hesitation, "You forget that Arkon 3 actually exists on a different time-plane. If you want to meet the Arkonides you know, you will have to wait 15,000 years. They do not yet exist 'today'. But the moment you destroy the time-transformer they will spring back to We without having lost a second."

"This is too deep for me," Pucky complained, hopping on the couch and assuming his favourite position. "You can wake me up when you are through As for me, I prefer practice to theory. Good night." He curled up and closed his eyes.

Rhodan winked at Renner. "See what you have done! Not everybody is interested in your hypothetical speculations, which certainly have more philosophical than practical value for us. Anyway, we have to devote our time to the necessary preparations, because we will be in a hurry when the *Torsten* arrives." He motioned to Deringhouse. "Ask Markowski to come in, General. I have to talk to him."

Pucky had to be awakened 2 hours later. He stretched himself and slid off the couch. "Are we ready to go?" he inquired, glancing at Rhodan.

"Not quite, my little friend. But I want you to come with me so that I can show you something. It's vital that you pay strict attention."

The lethal bombs were stored under constant lock in the arsenal of the *Drusus*. There was a bountiful variety of bombs but Markowski passed them all up except one particular type. These bombs were stored in a special compartment in 5 rectangular boxes, 20 centimetres long and 10 deep and wide. They

were made of gleaming metal and were smooth except for a small recessed wheel with a few numbers at the top.

Markowski took one of the boxes out of the compartment and carefully locked it up again. Then he bent down, looked into Pucky's eyes and began: "This is a small scale solar bomb, Pucky. It can be set to produce a predetermined effect so that the magnitude of the destruction can be precisely limited. It does not generate any harmful radiation. Its operation is incredibly simple. Look at this little wheel. Now we are going to set and adjust the time to one minute. This means that you will have exactly one minute to get away safely. A longer pause might defeat our purpose. As soon as you deposit the bomb at the best place you only have to push the wheel in hard enough and the minute begins to run. Do you follow me?"

"Of course!" Pucky said nonchalantly, picking up the box. "Is it hard to push the wheel in?" he asked, testing it. Markowski turned pale. "Don't get jittery, I'm not yet tired of life...!"

"Be careful! Once you press it down, you can't stop it from exploding. So be absolutely sure when you do it!"

Pucky clamped the dangerous instrument under his arm and waddled out to the corridor in his typical gait. The weapons officer followed him with his eyes with mixed emotions. "Do you believe, sir...?"

"Don't worry," Rhodan assured him with a slight grin, "Pucky loves his life as much as you and I. I wouldn't know of anybody who could treat the bomb with greater circumspection than he."

10 minutes later the radio room sent a message that the *Ralph Torsten* was approaching their place of rendezvous.

## 8/ ATOMIC DECISION

The *Drusus* remained in its rotating position and the heavy cruiser *Ralph Torsten* took course toward the outer planets after Rhodan and Pucky came aboard.

"How was your flight, Major?" Rhodan inquired. Pucky sat in one of the big chairs, lamenting the lack of a couch in the Command Centre of the cruiser. The bomb, looking like a money box, lay on his furry belly. "How do you like the new drive?"

Bellefjord, who had seen Rhodan only once and then very fleetingly, forgot his initial shyness. "Beautiful!" he enthused, truly enchanted. "Quite different from a transition through hyperspace. One can see the universe and observe the parade of stars. I would never have believed that travelling in space could be so exhilarating."

"I couldn't agree more with you, Major. My first impression was very similar. I had a feeling as if blinders had been removed from my eyes." The Peacelord looked at the observation screen. "Keep flying another 5 minutes, then make a turn and head for Arkon 3 with maximum acceleration. After we cross the energy barrier we'll slow down and follow the curvature of the planet. We'll have to circle around it. Everything else depends on our little friend." He pointed to Pucky, who gnashed his incisor tooth for a moment. "He is going to teleport himself and we'll pick him up exactly 10 minutes later. Have the

necessary flight speed and altitude computed. The operation has to be coordinated to the precise second."

5 minutes were a short time but the positronicon delivered the result of Rhodan's inquiry within one minute. Pucky was briefed. Then the *Ralph Torsten* curved sharply and raced with terrific acceleration back into the Arkon system.

30 seconds later it plunged into the milky zone—and met no resistance. Almost simultaneously the deceleration became so overpowering that the antigrav field virtually drained the ship's energy. But it worked. The continents flitted across the forward observation screen, were left behind, emerged again...

Rhodan stared at the slowly passing landscape. Pucky stood at his side. He pointed to the nearly empty spaceport and the adjacent high plateau. "There it is! See you again in 3 minutes!"

Clutching the bomb tightly, he teleported himself to the surface. Rhodan motioned Bellefjord to resume more speed. He ascended to an altitude of 40 kilometres and began his roundtrip of 3 minutes.

Bellefjord sat at his controls and steered the ship with more cool deliberation than anyone would have expected. Rhodan stood next to him. His hands gripped the back of a chair and his knuckles looked white and bloodless.

3 minutes! How long could 3 minutes be?

\* \* \* \*

Those 3 minutes went much too fast for Pucky.

He materialized at the edge of the spaceport and saw 2 small pursuitships take off to chase the alien ship. They came much too late. Several automatically controlled energy cannons raised their barrels toward the sky but they were also too slow.

Pucky checked his watch. The first 30 seconds had already elapsed and he had only 150 left to keep his rendezvous. He jumped again and materialized less than 100 meters from the ship of the Akons. If he dropped the bomb on the spot it would possibly do the job, but the ship's defence screen might protect it from the heat and pressure of the atomic explosion. Better not to take a chance of failure and use the time he had left instead.

120 more seconds!

He concentrated on his chosen goal and jumped. The pain almost knocked him out. He felt that he slid down a curved obstacle until he touched solid ground again. He landed behind the pair of guards and close to the energy screen which had stopped him from penetrating to the time-transformer.

What now?

There still was a break in the flickering of the screen in back of the guards. He presumed it to be the entrance to the ship and decided to jump again.

Not a second too soon! One of the Akons had turned around and noticed the intruder. He drew his weapon but it was too late. The little creature had vanished. It simply had become invisible.

As the guards gave alarm Pucky materialized inside the Akonian ship. His first glance was directed at his watch: 40 seconds to go! He had lost precious time.

Without casting a look at the powerful generators and machines—and with regret that he had to destroy such a technical masterpiece—he deposited the bomb on the metallic floor and depressed the little wheel.

He still had 30 seconds before Rhodan returned with the *Torsten* and then another 30 seconds to the detonation of the bomb. He hoped he could make it.

Another short jump took him back to the gap in the energy dome and before the guards could aim their weapons at him he jumped through the exit and materialized 200 meters away.

10 seconds left! The next jump landed him on the surface. He noticed that the automatic energy batteries went into action again. Their barrels were pointed to the sky but there was as yet no sign of the *Ralph Torsten*. And Pucky had to see it if he wanted to jump aboard.

Now at last! A black spot appeared on the horizon where the sun stood behind the ship. Pucky jumped as the first shots flashed. When he materialized in the Command Centre next to Rhodan he could barely pant: "The thing is going to blow up in 20 seconds!"

Then he collapsed in utter exhaustion. The strain of the numerous teleportation jumps had finally become too much. Rhodan waved to Bellefjord, who reacted instantaneously and shifted into extreme acceleration. Rhodan bent down, took Pucky in his arms and carried him to his cabin.

The *Ralph Torsten* soared into the stratosphere, pushed through the still-effective energy screen and time-field and raced toward the waiting *Drusus*.

After the last 20 seconds had ticked away, a column of fire erupted from a deep abyss on Arkon 3 and hurled thousands of tons of vaporized rocks high up to the border of the stratosphere.

Simultaneously the time-field and all its effects vanished.

\* \* \* \*

And not a second too soon!

To break the deadlock, Marshal Gagolk resorted to the provocation of Terrans. An armoured car was lowered in an antigrav field. Two gunners were inside behind energy cannons, ready to shoot but waiting for the orders of the Commander, who steered the vehicle himself. They were in radio contact with the flagship and the push of a button would be enough to launch the onslaught on Terra.

Gagolk racked his brain as he drove the armoured car across the smooth spaceport and watched the lofty buildings of Terrania rising in the distance. Why had this civilized race not been discovered earlier?

They had mastered the technique of space travelling and possessed a highly developed science. They were obviously used to regular contact with other races in space or they would have reacted to the appearance of the Arkonide fleet in a different manner. But he beat his brains out without finding an answer to his questions.

Several pedestrians ignored Gagolk's approach. Taking no notice of the rolling armoured vehicle they acted as if this were a daily occurrence on Earth. But the soldiers patrolling the rim of the spaceport could not ignore his presence without causing undue suspicion.

An officer of the guard detail emerged from his underground bunker and raised his hand. Gagolk stopped. He motioned his 2 men, opened a side door and leaped to the ground. One hand on the butt of his enormous energy weapon, he walked toward the officer who felt ill, at ease despite his strict instructions. However the knowledge that his companion had already radioed for help enabled him to keep his official composure. The reinforcements were due to arrive any moment.

"Yoezi stakma?" Gagolk asked.

"Why do you want me to stop?" The young lieutenant had no trouble understanding him although the foreign Marshal spoke the Arkonide language with a noticeable accent. "Who rules this planet and its colonies?"

"If you wait a little, you can talk to his deputy," the lieutenant replied, cursing the sudden weakness he felt in his knees. If he were only allowed to take action, he would show this arrogant fellow, how to behave. But orders were orders. "I must ask you to wait for him"

"Sko (why)?"

"Because it is forbidden to enter Terrania."

Gagolk saw a ray of hope. If he succeeded in inducing this humanoid to open fire, he would be fully justified in attacking the planet. All possible complications could thereby be avoided. This highly advanced race was not likely to obey Arkon's orders peacefully.

"And who is going to stop me?" he taunted the officer.

The lieutenant began to perspire. "It would be my duty to do that, whether I like it or not."

"You would be committing suicide."

"I was ready to die when I put on this uniform."

Gagolk saw several trapdoors open on the ground not far away. Spiralled barrels emerged from the depth and pointed to him and his armoured vehicle. However he wanted to be absolutely certain so that he could later refute any conceivable reproach by the Emperor. As yet no shot had been fired against the Imperium. "Look at my wrist! This is a radio transceiver which keeps me in constant touch with the Commanders of 30,000 warships. Each one of them can hear our conversation. One word from me and all 30,000 ships will zero in on your planet. You would be wise to think twice before you commit a rash act. Your words might decide the fate of your world."

The lieutenant wanted to say something in reply but he remained silent. Above the sprawling building of the Customs Administration was a black point in the air which approached very rapidly. It was an

airglider of a type most commonly used as a very convenient means of transportation.

Gagolk had followed his eyes. "Is that the man you were talking about?"

The airglider touched down, the cabin door opened and Bell leaped out. "I am not in the habit of greeting visitors from other worlds on the landing field," he announced in pure Arkonide, "but I'll make an exception in your case."

Only now did Gagolk realize that these people spoke the Arkonide language although it was supposedly the first time they were in contact with the Arkonide Imperium. How was this possible?

"As I see you can speak my language," he exclaimed in amazement and treating him unwittingly with greater politeness than the lieutenant, "this simplifies, my mission. The Emperor of Arkon, Metzat III, has decreed that I annex your planets to the Imperium. To enforce his demand his armada is waiting at this moment..."

"What is it waiting for?" Bell wanted to know. He realized that the direct approach of the Arkonide did not allow him to gain much time. On the other hand he was aware that Rhodan had already embarked at the same moment on his sally aboard the *Torsten* to destroy the time-transformer. Perhaps 10 more minutes, maybe 20. That was all he needed. "Is it the Emperor's intention to annihilate a prosperous colonial world?"

Gagolk suddenly burst into a smile. "I take it that you are accepting our demand. Splendid! I was told by the officer of the guard that you are the deputy of the ruler of this domain. Do you have his authorization? Where is he now?"

Bell was about to lose his temper. "What do you want? War or peace? If you prefer war, I must remind you that we have thousands of warships to defend ourselves. We are not as defenceless as you seem to think."

"Does this mean that you refuse to give allegiance to the Emperor of Arkon as your colonial lord from this time forward?" Gagolk asked angrily.

The cannons of the armoured car swivelled around and pointed their barrels at the little group. Bell realized the danger of his position. He grabbed Gagolk's arm and dragged him away. He reached the entrance to the underground bunker in 3 leaps. The lieutenant followed him and pushed Gagolk into the narrow passage leading down into the bunker when hell broke loose behind them.

Fortunately the gun crew inside the bunker reacted with amazing speed. They had watched Bell's retreat on the observation screen and noticed the movement of the armoured vehicle. They acted and Gagolk's vehicle was atomized in a blinding white explosion.

The impending catastrophe could no longer be stemmed. The flagship lifted off and raced into the sky, where it disappeared in a few seconds. The phalanx of Metzat's ships formed at the border of the Solar System and was hurled against the Terran cruisers patrolling in outer space. The invaders opened fire and the protective shields of the defenders withstood the concentrated storm of energy for a few seconds. Then the Solar Fleet was forced to turn and flee.

Earth was at the mercy of a ferocious enemy. Its superiority was so overwhelming that all resistance was nipped in the bud.

The Arkonides paid no attention to the retreating patrolships. Gagolk was dead or had to be considered lost. The attempt to colonize the humanoids had apparently failed and the death machine had begun to roll.

The first torpedoes with atomic warheads were fired and shot with a speed of thousands of kilometres per hour toward Earth, whose population was still waiting for the alarm. The torpedoes were followed by the ships bent on finishing the work of destruction.

\* \* \* \*

Bell dragged Gagolk into the Command Room of the bunker. An officer spun around and recognized him.

"Connect me with the Central Command! Ask them..." Bell did not get any further.

A voice bellowed from the loudspeaker: "Alarm! Terra is under attack! Our units have barely escaped destruction. They are in the process of regrouping in the Mars sector for further action. The hostile fleet is approaching Earth. Atomic alarm!"

Bell looked pale as death. He whirled around, his face distorted by fury, and bore down on Gagolk with outstretched arms. Without uttering a word he flung himself against the Arkonide as if he could avert the imminent disaster by strangling the supreme commander.

Bell's hands touched emptiness. The Arkonide had vanished. But not like a teleporter who first became transparent before he disappeared in a shimmering swirl of air. It was different and eerie. He was simply gone in a split second as if he had never existed.

Bell staggered when his hands missed the expected support. He stumbled a few steps till he caught hold of a cabinet. Still pale, he turned around and stared at the 2 officers. "What was that? He can't..."

Marshal Freyt's voice crackled in the loudspeaker: "Calling Reginald Bell! Where are you? Please answer!"

Bell gestured to the lieutenant to return the call. He made the connection at once. "What is it?"

"Listen, Reggie! The enemy fleet..."

"I know! It's on the attack! I've tried my best to..."

"But..."

"I've seized their commander but when I wanted to strangle him, he vanished without a trace..."

"Stop ranting, Reggie, I'm trying to tell you something," Freyt snapped angrily. "Don't you know yet that the enemy fleet has vanished too? As soon as I gave the alarm it was gone. Their torpedoes were on the verge of entering the atmosphere when they disappeared all of a sudden, the same as the ships, the whole lot of them! The nightmare is over!"

Bell had listened wordlessly. He collapsed in a chair. His pale face turned a vivid red as he was overcome by a feeling of tremendous relief and sheer joy. Rhodan's daring deed had turned the tables. The phantom fleet had returned to the limbo of the past. The undertaking of the Arkons to crush the people on Earth with the help of the deceased Arkonides had been totally frustrated.

It suddenly dawned on him what a desperate risk he had taken. The human race had had only seconds to live without realizing the peril. Of course all possible precautions had been taken but they were woefully inadequate. They had failed to reckon with the psychology of the Arkonides and this sin of omission had come close to sealing the fate of humanity. Bell and Freyt had judged the situation by their own human standards. If—to illustrate the situation with an example—the conditions had been reversed and Rhodan had been captured as a negotiator, the Terran fleet would never have dared to go over to the attack. Instead they would have used diplomacy to set him free.

"Thank my lucky star!" Bell sighed with relief, staring at the spot where Gagolk had stood. "Perry was able to knock out that time-transformer."

"And at the right moment," Freyt chimed in, his voice sounding calm again. "But our ships didn't make a good show. They fled—although I can hardly hold it against the men. Their crews would have been the only survivors."

"Let's forget it," Bell growled. "After all, the better part of the fleet held its position at the bases. I don't know what I would have done, probably run like hell."

"Nobody is blaming the commanders," Freyt assured him "They were stunned by the surprise attack. But... shouldn't we inform Rhodan?"

"I'll go immediately," Bell promised. "I'll see you after my return."

"I know your penchant for springing surprises in person," Freyt replied with a contented snicker.

\* \* \* \*

After the atomic mushroom cloud had dissipated, the surface of the military planet was visible again from the *Drusus*. The energy dome of the gigantic Robot Brain shimmered in the rays of the nearby Arkon sun.

'Dissipated' was not the right word for the strange phenomenon which followed the detonation. Deringhouse had the opportunity to observe the spectacle in all details. The *Ralph Torsten* was on its way to the spaceport to rescue Pucky. As soon as he had jumped aboard, the cruiser sped away with bolts of energy flashing from the automatic batteries in its wake. Then the earth burst open, a ball of fire erupted—and ceased to exist in the same second. Only a fraction of the total matter which was hurled upward in pulverized or gaseous form penetrated the protective screen of the time-field. Then it also disappeared since it could not be sustained for 15000 years. The result of the bomb's explosion was subject to the physical laws of the time-transformer. The crater disappeared when the transformer ceased to exist. The surface of Arkon changed again and became what it had been of late. The Robot Brain was in its accustomed place. The present had returned.

The *Ralph Torsten* rejoined the *Drusus* and was anchored in a magnetic grip to the mighty spacesphere. Their hatches were lined up and Rhodan walked across. Pucky grinned as he waddled into the Command Centre of the *Drusus*, holding Rhodan's hand, but he could muster only a wan smile. His strength was obviously drained by the incessant exertions. For this reason Rhodan had resisted the temptation to take the easy way by teleporting with him.

"Call Terra!" Rhodan instructed Deringhouse, hoping that he had not been too late.

Atlan emerged from the radio room as Deringhouse went in. He opened his arms and gripped Rhodan's shoulders. "Well done!" he said with utmost simplicity "We are getting a flood of good reports. The robot fleet has started to function again. They have put down revolts and punished the insurgents. The Robot Brain is back in operation. Arkon has been saved. I thank you, my friend!"

"I can't say that I acted with pure altruism," Rhodan said with a smile. "I have saved not only your Imperium but mine as well. The Akons... we still have to go into this subject much more, Atlan. Don't believe for a moment that this blow was their last attempt. They are afraid of us because we have the linear drive. Ships of this type can't be repelled by them because the Blue System presents no obstacle to their Right. They are loath to conduct open warfare but their dagger and cloak actions are more dangerous than war. Once they attacked us by matter transmission and then by means of physical time travel. I am curious to know what they are going to think up next."

"We have been warned," Atlan replied but his tone did not sound very convincing.

Rhodan shook his head. "Warned, what does that mean? All we know is that at the hub of our Galaxy exists a gigantic empire whose founders and rulers bear us ill will—but that is all. We don't know the extent and power of their technical achievements and what surprises they have in store for us. We will have to be constantly on our toes and endeavour to recognize the coming dangers so that we can struggle to avert our doom. Or we can try to convince the Akons that they have nothing to fear from us."

"And how do you propose to accomplish this?"

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders. "I wish I knew, Atlan. But we will find a way. Leave it to me!"

Deringhouse stood at the door of the radio room. "Your call to Terrania, sir!"

"Thank you, I'm coming," Rhodan replied, nodding to Atlan.

Later both ships arrived at Arkon 1 and stood close to the edge on their telescopic supports. It was here on the crystal planet where Atlan resided and held all the strings of the mighty stellar realm together. The incoming reports reflected an unmistakable picture. The Robot Brain had resumed its activities, leaving the question open whether it had been interrupted at all at any time.

Rhodan inspected the *Ralph Torsten* together with Maj. Bellefjord and his First Officer Capt. Raldini. The heavy cruiser had been exposed for a few seconds to the flak of the energy cannons. Except for a few spots covered with a transparent glaze the hull was undamaged.

"We were lucky that everything was timed to perfection," Rhodan concluded. "You will return to Luna where the damage can be repaired, Major. It won't be long before you receive new orders. A squadron of linear drive ships will pay a visit to the Blue System."

"I wouldn't like to fly another ship anymore," Bellefjord admitted. "Some day, perhaps, we can use it to bridge the distance to the neighbouring galaxy."

Rhodan gazed at him with curiosity. "Is that what you have been thinking of?"

Bellefjord nodded. "Who wouldn't, sir? The vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean lured Columbus many hundreds of years ago to discover America. He didn't know that he would discover a new land but we are aware that a strange galaxy is waiting out there for us because we can see it. These new ships will enable us to navigate the big gap."

"Theoretically this is already possible by transitions," Rhodan smiled. "But why should we do it? We hardly know our own Galaxy, as the discovery of the Akons proved. And who knows how many other races are waiting out there for us? There could be enormous stellar empires in our Galaxy of whose existence we are as yet unaware. Moreover, the propulsion system which can stand the continuous wear and tear of a flight to Andromeda has yet to be built. By the way, would you please submit a written report about your adventure in the Blue System. I have a feeling that I can find another way to infiltrate the energy screen of the Akons. Your trip has served its purpose, Major. Tomorrow you will leave for Luna. You and your men can take a good rest till then."

"Thank you, sir."

Rhodan nodded and left. He felt the need to be alone because the future worried him greatly. The Akons had figuratively speaking—merely played a secret game and hardly exposed themselves to any danger. They had let others do the fighting for them. Although they considered the Earthlings a threat to their isolated existence they did not take them too seriously. It was more like a pest that had to be eliminated but the Akons were too proud to take care of the task themselves. They could always find others to do their bidding.

But Rhodan foresaw that some day the Terrans and the Akons would face each other eye to eye and the outcome would depend on who was better prepared. The victor would be the one who did not make the mistake of underestimating his foe.

When the chips were down, Rhodan thought with a heavy heart, it would cease to be a game. They would settle who was fit to rule the Galaxy, the arrogant Akons with their superior technology or the ambitious and ever-tenacious, indomitable Terrans...

## **ORDER OF THE ACTION**

[1/ "THE MOST DANGEROUS RACE IN THE UNIVERSE"](#)

2/ S.O.S. FROM SALEX 4

3/ ACCIDENTAL INVASION

4/ THE IMPREGNABLE PLANET

5/ ONE SMALL STEP FOR MAN, ONE GIANT LEAP FOR A MOUSEBEAVER

6/ A BLACK DAY FOR TERRA

7/ SPACE GHOSTS

8/ ATOMIC DECISION

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

PHANTOM FLEET

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## THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE 3 SERPENTS reached the tail end of the fleeing mob while the front lines were already jamming up against the cavern wall. Larry saw each of the Ever greens pick up one man apiece. Holding them over their heads they turned around and retreated with their prisoners. Everything happened so fast that he only began to understand what was going on when the Evergreens reached the rear wall of the chamber. There where no one would have suspected a door, a semi-dark opening yawned before them.

They were fetching sacrifice victims! Offerings for their bloodthirsty inhuman god!

The horror mounts in—

## THE IDOL FROM PASSA

by

Kurt Mahr