

1/ SOMEONE ALWAYS GETS IT ON THE DAWN PATROL

Shrill whistling.

Thundering reverberations.

Vain thoughts of beginning their flight under more comfortable circumstances were knocked out of their heads by the nerve-wracking jolt of the ejection, which they suffered with stoic calm.

Shooting out of the airlocks, they were dealt double blows: physical and mental.

It wasn't until they switched on the powerful pulse drive engines, shifted the tiny fighter spaceships to full thrust and set the automatic pilots for their destination that they could at last relax.

Approaching the speed of light they were hurtling in free fall through the immense planetary system of a star which, according to the reliable evidence of the astronomers, was twenty-seven light-years away from Earth.

The three astronauts weren't the sort to question too often the purpose or reason for an order. This patrol flight seemed necessary; so why worry about it?

S-7, the huge spaceship which was their base and which the formation had just left, remained in a standby position near the thirty-eighth planet of the colossal Vega sun. The docks of S-7 were wide open and the guide-beam projectors manned by dependable friends. It would be strictly routine to return to the mother ship after they'd accomplished their task, then to enjoy the pleasant regularity of a well-run service.

The team of three had been sent on a long journey. They were outstanding men who had seen the expanse of the Vega solar system close-up by an improbable accident.

Major Deringhouse acted as commander of the space pilots who had already taken part in more than fifty attacks against the odd-shaped spaceships of an alien race.

They had taken off with a certain feeling of confidence. They didn't give a thought to the dangers which they undoubtedly had to face in the vicinity of the fortieth planet. They relied on the high acceleration potential of their lightning-fast pursuit ships, on their steady nerves and - last but not least - on the pulse-energy cannons situated in the needle noses of their crafts.

They'd been stretched out for almost twelve hours in their reclining pilot seats when the automatic scanner locked onto the fortieth planet. Then they came alive.

Four of the six moons were clearly and unmistakably recognizable. The fourth moon had just begun to appear from behind the giant sphere which glowed in a reddish light. This world was in the outermost regions of the Vega system, and it was, for this reason, dying and uninhabited. It barely received any warmth from the rays of its sun, which was a mighty atomic furnace, the biggest star in the northern sky, as seen from Earth.

Calverman, the tall, black astronaut with the logical brain and instantaneous reactions of a positronic computer, had, strangely enough, noticed the danger last.

When the shrill scream uttered by Rous reached him over the telecom, Calverman's engine already resembled an atomic torch spitting bolts of lightning.

He was hanging on, jammed in his narrow cockpit filled with hot gases and steam. His space helmet, which he'd flipped back on his shoulders in order to be more comfortable, snapped shut in its magnetic collar locks with a hard click, triggered by the automatic pressure-equalization device.

Now Calverman's spacesuit was locked hermetically. Everything had begun to work perfectly, only Calverman's body failed, as did the most essential element of his space fighter, the advanced pulse-drive engine with its tremendous power. As a consequence, his heavily damaged craft gyrated crazily and drifted more and more toward the fortieth planet, already so close that its gravity began to take effect.

The automatic pilot of the machine was knocked out. The air-conditioning and emergency generator ceased to function. Only the two visiphones kept operating on separate circuits, powered by special batteries provided for such a disaster.

The temperature in Sergeant Calverman's cabin rose, a few minutes after he was struck, to 5,800°F, which was hot enough to incinerate him instantly without his special spacesuit.

However, because of his suit, he hardly noticed the heat, especially as the hull of his fighter didn't retain it long but radiated it quickly into the vacuum of space.

An inferno was raging behind the helpless astronaut.

Meanwhile, Major Deringhouse and Sergeant Rous were grimly defending themselves, trying to save their skins. As long as it was possible for them to correctly utilize the

structural advantages of their tiny, ultra-fast and extremely agile space-fighters, there was practically nothing that could happen to them except, as had been Calverman's misfortune, an accidental hit from one of the countless ray-cannons of the enemy which emerged so unexpectedly out of hyperspace.

Major Deringhouse - young, wiry and tall - sat with his back to the armour plate shield which protected him from the radiation in his engine compartment.

Basically his machine simply consisted of a long torpedo-shaped shell which contained, in addition to the small cockpit, only the powerful engine and auxiliary components. It was not built to give the lonely pilot luxurious accommodations or even sanitary comfort.

These machines were nothing more nor less than weapon-bristling, stinging space wasps which were carried on board larger spaceships to occasionally execute special tasks, the most important being reconnaissance of space sectors when unsafe for the big vessels to proceed.

Major Deringhouse no longer solely relied on the screen of his automatic radar. Wherever he looked, the area was suddenly swarming with enemy units which had leaped recklessly into the planetary system of Vega, thus achieving total surprise. Spaceships approaching in fifth-dimensional hyperspace simply couldn't be detected in time.

It was sheer coincidence that Deringhouse and his small team were at exactly the same point where the armada of the nonhuman Topides emerged from hyper-space into the normal universe.

Again and again the ray beams shot toward Deringhouse almost with the speed of light. These aliens aimed with precision, a fact which Rhodan had learned from the excellent firing equipment of previously captured enemy craft. Deringhouse had no other choice than to call off his attack immediately and to change his course with howling and flaming starboard jets.

He could see Sergeant Rous's face on the small screen of the telecom. It was white as chalk. His bloodless lips resembled two thin lines, distorted into waves by the mirror effect of the transparent visor of his space helmet.

Rous's position was about six hundred miles behind the group leader. Bright points of light emanating from the Topidian super spaceships flickered ahead, above and below.

The Topide commander seemed to consider the three space-fighters as annoying flies, even though they had already knocked out three Topidian cruisers. The burned-out Topidian wrecks, hit by pulse-energy shots, drifted like Calverman's fighter in the direction of the fortieth planet. The enormous gravitational force of the giant world was negligible for intact ships but not for units which had completely lost their propulsion motors. More-over, the velocity of such ships was much too low to compensate for the increasing gravity with the kinetic force of high speed.

Calverman's machine, too, followed this law. Naturally, it hadn't been Deringhouse's intention to rush by the moons near the speed of light, because his mission was to probe them.

Deringhouse had taken some chances. It was known that the opponent had constructed fortified bases on the six satellites of the fortieth planet. At least they'd begun to do so as was demonstrated by the reinforcements which popped out so suddenly from hyperspace.

At the moment of the hyperspatial surprise, Deringhouse knew that the news of this occurrence had to reach the waiting mother ship and the chief of its daring expedition - Perry Rhodan.

However, the major's thoughts were of necessity concentrating only on survival. The enemy knew no mercy.

Deringhouse noticed a high shrieking noise in the weak energy bubble which protected his machine.

The ray blast from a barely visible giant ship, registered in the last second, must have possessed the energy of a miniature sun.

'Too slow, much too slow,' the speaker bellowed. The faster-than-light Arkonide telecom even now transmitted perfectly and clearly. The higher order of its impulses was not affected by static or other normal disturbances.

'I'm stuck in the biggest mess you ever saw!' Rous kept shouting. 'They'll get me yet! The line of fire is getting more accurate. What now?'

Deringhouse spun his machine around again. Because of his evasion tactics he could barely get in a shot.

Rous heard his muffled groan and then his strained words:

'You better stay where you are. If you try to push out, they'll catch you. We can't accelerate at a fast enough rate to escape their accurate shooting. What's Cal doing?'

'He's in a tailspin. Going down to Number Forty. I can hardly see him anymore.'

Deringhouse looked around. The furious roaring of his generators clearly indicated the threat that the inertia forces of his wild manoeuvres could no longer be absorbed. He was sure that he'd already exceeded the performance limit a few times. If the shock-absorbing installation quit as a result of excessive loads, he'd be torn to atoms in his next evasive turn. This was a law of physics which a relatively weak organism couldn't ignore without peril.

The Topidian ships were optically recognizable on the scanner screens only when their rotating armed turrets were flashing. However, it took seconds, or even minutes, for the light to arrive. They had leaped into the Vega system at long intervals in order to minimize the danger to themselves.

The major's voice came through: 'Let's scram! Direction Vega, but not too fast. Change your course constantly and steer manually. Automatic manoeuvres could be too easily calculated. I-!'

He heard Rous scream. This time something flaming and shining which looked endless came shooting obliquely from above. It was almost as fast as light and, for this reason, could be seen only at the last moment.

The energy detector lost its usefulness under these circumstances.

Deringhouse once again pulled up his machine with his forward jets. At his moderate speed of barely three thousand miles per second, relatively tight curves of escape were still possible. Tight - for a space-fighter pilot who was used to flight curves with a radius of 120,000 miles. At still higher velocities a radius of millions of miles was common.

Here in the seemingly infinite empty space distances lost their meanings. They shrank until they became negligible at top velocity.

There was a signal from the major's sensors. The Characteristic outline of a Topidian ship appeared on the small visiscreen, no larger than a hand. It was long, pencil thin and showed a bulging ring around its centre. Deringhouse knew that the enemy, thinking in non-human terms, had installed the engines and the most important machinery in these central extrusions. Humans and the humanoid Arkonides preferred the arrangement in the aft deck. But the intelligent defendants of a reptilian race figured differently.

The positronic microbrain on board his vehicle functioned with unbelievable swiftness. The distance was measured, the velocity of the ray-beam was computed and the lead determined, all in the fraction of a second. Otherwise it would have been quite impossible for Deringhouse to find his target, since his foe also had a speed of approximately three hundred miles per second and was, moreover, flying in another plane in space.

When the green lamp blinked, Deringhouse, screaming mindlessly, doggedly pressed the firing button of the outsize pulse-energy cannon. The weapon was really much too big and powerful for his small pursuit ship.

Still screaming, he shut his eyes as they were blinded by the dazzling glare of the pulse-ray as it shot from his strange cannon with an infernal roar.

He didn't notice the lightning fast whoosh of the spontaneously released and uniformly directed atomic forces whose concentrated impact contained the heat of a sun.

The ship he'd detected was only twenty thousand miles away, a ridiculously short distance.

The violent shaking of his fighter had not yet died when his blow smashed its target with deadly precision. Deringhouse simply observed a brightly glowing point which mushroomed with breathtaking speed into a shining energy cloud.

Rous's bellowing was incomprehensible. It was the mad, hilarious screaming of a wounded man who, at the time, could think only of escape and safety.

Deringhouse skirted the fringes of the gas ball. There was nothing left to be seen of the Topidian ship except this artificial miniature sun.

A hurricane raged in his protective screen, formed by fifth-dimensional energy units.

When he passed by with blinded eyes and saw the deep, black void again, he had to dodge once more.

Sergeant Rous was behind him. Seconds later he was passing him with blasting jets. Deringhouse realized that he'd succeeded in breaking away when he scored the last hit.

With quick reflexes he pushed the lever of his pulse-drive engine full speed ahead. Only the vastly superior accelerating capability of his fighter could save him now. With an acceleration value of more than three hundred miles per square-second, he was able to reach the speed of light in about ten minutes.

He followed Rous in its crazy zigzag course. Close ahead and below to the right, the great mass of the fortieth Vega planet was shining bright and red. Earth's sun was surrounded by nine satellites, but this giant star had forty-two.

Deringhouse was engulfed in a gossamer filigree maze of blue-white thermo-rays. The adversary kept his fierce fire up, knowing that only a lucky hit could make the kill.

'What's the matter, Calverman?' Deringhouse shouted with despair into his helmet mike. 'Cal, speak up! We have to clear out!'

the speaker resounded in the cockpit of the tumbling crashing space-fighter. The major's words came clearly and distinctly through the radio in the helmet.

Seconds later the two pilots could hear Calverman gasping. Simultaneously the visiscreens of their telecoms became activated. Cal was still alive.

Deringhouse suppressed a moan when he saw the gaunt face of his friend on the screen. The transmission was three-dimensional and in colour.

Cal's dark, almost black face was covered with red blotches and streaks.

'Explosive pressure loss,' his voice came over weakly. 'My helmet was off, damn it! I have a jabbing pain in my lungs. It tore the breath out of my mouth. Get out while you can!'

The last words were hardly audible. Calverman's helmet banged against the camera so that only his dark, painfully narrowed eyes were visible.

'You're falling into the atmosphere,' Deringhouse cried desperately. 'You don't have enough speed left to get into orbit. Did your engine break down?'

Calverman managed a laugh. Although he was choking and coughing, he laughed. It meant more than words.

'Get lost! Say goodbye to the chief. There's a small Topidian fort on the third moon. Just made that out. Get back and don't try to fish me out. By the time you get here, I'll be down. Beat it!'

The last words were filled with pleading, and then he closed his eyes.

'Rous, you keep going. I'll try to pick him up. I'll get him in my cockpit somehow...'

A sudden jolt slammed Deringhouse against the wide safety belts of his upturned contour seat. The engine of his pursuit ship - already at three-quarters the speed of light - whined shortly before it quit with a rumbling noise.

Deringhouse heard the howling of the decompressor as once more he was pressed against his belts. The glittering stars in far-flung space turned into a centrifuge whirling around with frenzied speed. The visiscreens of his 360° monitors created fantastic effects of circling lights. His space-fighter was spinning madly around its axis.

The glare outside was bright red. Deringhouse believed he was beginning to feel the rising temperature inside, although his spacesuit was good for at least 900° F.

He was struck like Calverman, whom he was going to rescue, but with the difference that he didn't suffer the explosive decompression. His pressurized cabin remained tight and his air-conditioning was still functioning.

Yet his fighter had become a wreck in seconds and glowing gas particles were trailing his vehicle as it moved with incredible speed through the void.

It was some time before Deringhouse noticed the desperate shouting of Sergeant Rous.

Rous had immediately stopped his fast acceleration manoeuvre. He was now gliding through space in free fall without increasing his momentum. About six hundred miles behind him and off to one side his group leader's machine wobbled aimlessly around.

'All clear,' reported Deringhouse over the telecom. 'I'm okay. Are they still shooting?'

'No, but your machine is spinning like a top,' Rous's voice crackled from the loudspeaker. 'If they pursue us now, they'll get us at our rescue attempt. Stabilize your crate. I'll figure out my manoeuvre.'

Deringhouse made no reply. He manipulated his controls and revved up the gyroscope of the stabilizing device.

Little by little he managed to straighten out the balance of his craft. The hit didn't appear to be critical. It was a glancing blow at most with small effect inside the weak defence screen. Nevertheless it was enough to incapacitate the sensitive machinery.

Far ahead of him, and only recognizable by the fiery flashes of his directional jets,

Rous was navigating the extremely difficult approach. He had to regulate and match his speed carefully and then pull alongside the major's fighter in order to transfer the group leader to his ship.

'Cal - how is Cal?' came a whisper through the speaker in Rous's helmet. 'I wanted to get him.'

Sergeant Rous gnashed his teeth. He knew as well as Deringhouse that their friend was beyond help. Where he was, the enemy was too. The fortieth planet was steadily growing smaller in the distance.

Deringhouse waited calmly and impassively for his subordinate, who had by this time become a friend. Rous was very dependable. All that mattered now was to get a breathing spell from the Topides.

While Sergeant Rous was busy adjusting his machine's course with tiny blasts, a quickly flaming body sank into the dense poisonous atmosphere of a hostile globe millions of miles behind.

Calverman's space helmet was still leaning against the lens of his telecom. His sightless eyes were fixed on the observation screen. No longer feeling anything, his lips were eternally fixed in a smile.

2/ GALACTIC GOAL

He was called the 'Thort.' It didn't particularly matter what the name of the ruler was; the only thing that mattered to the people recently arrived on the principle planet of the Vega system was to be assured that some-one with authority was sitting at the other side of the table. And this was the case.

Perry Rhodan, former test pilot of the U.S. Space Force and pioneer on the Earth's moon, didn't lose his legendary calm and superb clear mind during the lengthy negotiations.

The erstwhile major of the U.S. Space Exploration Forces wasn't willing to compromise at all. The intelligent inhabitants of the eighth Vegan planet, Ferrol, who called themselves the Ferrons, had asked for armed assistance and had promised a trade treaty.

Now Rhodan deemed that the time had come to conclude the final deal.

They were meeting in the Hall of Decrees within the Red Palace, which was considered the most remarkable building of all times in Thorta, the Ferronian capital. The name itself derived from the tide of the ruler, Thort.

Rhodan was somewhat disappointed that the seemingly almighty Thort had brought his Council of Ministers to the conference. Evidently his hands were tied within certain limits, and the negotiations dragged out over a few Ferrol days.

The Terrestrial delegation was small. It consisted only of Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bell, the Minister of Security of the New Power, and John Marshall as observer. The latter's telepathic powers were sufficient to read the thoughts and probe the minds of the attending Ferrons. It was very easy for Marshall to determine their deliberations and to accurately pass them on directly to Rhodan, even though they were concealing their true motivations.

Rhodan was in complete control of himself. His wishes, his arguments and his expressions of concern were moderate, carefully thought out and very convincing.

He had no intention of pulling the wool over the eyes of the Ferrons. He desired instead a clean, dear and morally unobjectionable contract.

The Thort was again checking the written record, exercising his rights.

Reginald Bell was physically and temperamentally the exact opposite of his commander. Suspicion and resentment shone in his almost colourless eyes.

Only Marshall, the telepath, was concentrating deeply. There was no rest for him. He had orders from Rhodan to constantly survey the mental processes of the attending ministers. Rhodan had made sure to be fully protected in this respect.

Nobody, least of all the Ferrons, had the slightest inkling what thoughts preoccupied the mind of the tall man in the pastel green uniform of the New Power. The insignia on the left side of his chest would have appeared as unusual to ordinary people as the radio helmet resting on the table in front of him, with its movable mini-screens and the built-in micro-TV-transmitter.

None of these unparalleled features had been invented by Terran scientists and could

not be reproduced with Earthly techniques.

This fact momentarily dominated Rhodan's thoughts. There was nothing more to be said about the treaty. He was filled by forceful, unconscious impulses that would usually come over him at such moments.

Here he was, a man born on Earth, talking to the representatives of an utterly alien race, and this on a far-away planet of a giant sun which was at a distance of twenty-seven light-years from his home!

This fact alone might have been cause for concern and apprehension. With characteristic insight and highly critical self-examination Rhodan had felt with extreme discomfort from the beginning of the party that he was out of place.

Out of place, because mankind was still trying to solve the mysteries of physical laws which the Ferrons had discovered thousands of years ago and put to use with the greatest ingenuity.

How did all this come about? How was it possible that a man of his generation was suddenly sitting across from a ruler who was practically in command of a whole solar system and in possession of a huge super light-speed spacefleet and all the advanced industrial installations it required?

Rhodan had a bitter taste in his mouth as these thoughts engaged his mind again. Involuntarily his eye wandered over to Bell. The stocky man wasn't subject to such inhibitions. Just now he was objecting - speaking his broken Ferronian language - that he didn't like the third paragraph of the so-called exchange items. They listened to him with obvious respect as if he were the member of a race of highly superior intelligence.

Rhodan coughed lightly. John Marshall smiled imperceptibly; he recognized what was going on in his commander's mind. Character virtues like these had helped Rhodan's success with his fellow men. His followers worshiped him and his power on Earth was second to none.

It wasn't advisable for Rhodan to examine his past too closely if he didn't want to run the risk of failing to see his own success in its proper light.

In those days, only a few years ago, he started as a low-ranking but highly specialized major of the Space Force in the first atomic spaceship's manned flight to the moon. He was part of a team of four men selected from the early astronauts after the most rigorous and exacting training.

The Stardust had blasted off into space and Perry Rhodan, commander of the first atomic spaceship, had made a perfect lunar landing.

To be sure, mankind wouldn't have awakened from its troubled sleep except for the incident of a gigantic alien spaceship that appeared on the moon just before Rhodan's arrival.

The Arkonides - the inhabitants of the distant planet Arkon - had been forced to make an emergency landing. They had come to the Terrestrial solar system neither to benefit nor to fight humanity on Earth. It happened to be a simple coincidence which, however, enabled mankind through Perry Rhodan to obtain galactic powers.

Rhodan had found the voyagers of the crashed spaceship, whose scientific leader was suffering from a severe illness and was brought back to Earth by Rhodan.

Nobody saw clearer than Rhodan how far the Arkonide science and technology surpassed anything on Earth. Whereas mankind was on the brink of atomic war, a great empire had existed for many thousands of years in the deep reaches of the galaxy. A huge administration complex had been created for interstellar trade throughout their magnificent realm.

It was at that time that Rhodan realized with perceptive clarity that other races at incomparably higher stages of development were living - 'out there.' He reacted in his most characteristic manner: he disobeyed orders and set the returning moon rocket Stardust down in the middle of the Gobi Desert.

Arkonide weapons, which Rhodan had carried with him in the rocket, protected them from unwelcome visitors.

From then on a New Power had been established on Earth.

Rhodan remembered his battle for survival and the prevention of atomic war, thanks to the superior technology of the Arkonides. But it had taken a long time until the futile attacks against him were given up.

However the U.S. Air Force managed to destroy the Arkonide space exploration ship, which was immobilized on the moon, by using a new type of H-bomb. As a result, the last two Arkonide survivors had to remain on Earth with Perry Rhodan. They had imparted their

knowledge to Rhodan, not without ulterior motives, for they were hoping that this way he'd make it possible for them to return home someday.

The question of transport had been the big stumbling block. At the time there was only one auxiliary ship of the demolished super space vessel available in which the female commander, Thora, had escaped destruction. The auxiliary ship was, by Early standards, a giant structure, with a diameter of about two hundred feet and with a speed faster than light; but its range was, unfortunately, limited to five hundred light-years, while the distance to the Arkonide world amounted to 34,000 light-years.

Thus the Arkonide survivors were stranded on Earth. Meanwhile, Rhodan had worked hard to overcome the troublesome problems among the nations on Earth and had established his mini-state in the middle of the central Asian Gobi Desert.

Then the first reports of disturbing events in the nearby Vega system had cropped up. Rhodan had become aware that the galactic position of the Earth was in great peril of being discovered. The automatic emergency transmitter on board the destroyed super space exploration ship had emitted ultra-fast distress signals. That was the reason Rhodan expected that some strangers from outer space would make their appearance someday, if for no other purpose than 'sight-seeing.'

It had been unavoidable because in the far reaches of the galaxy a realm existed called the Great Imperium. The Arkonides had forged it and planets had been colonized. Power struggles between the Arkonides and other races were waged with awesome arms at a time when men on Earth were still living in caves.

When the probing signals came in, Rhodan decided to take immediate action. He'd flown the Arkonide auxiliary ship, the spacesphere named the Good Hope, to the Vega system. He'd been afraid that a foreign race had picked up the emergency signals of the Arkonide ship and locked onto them.

Why had the unknown spaceships appeared in the Vega constellation and not in the vicinity of the sun? Rhodan suspected that the aliens must have miscalculated the position, and he considered it a blessing to have gained time.

That was exactly what had happened. When the Good Hope approached the giant star system, they were given some reception. Spaceships of two different races appeared. One of them resided in the Vega system, and it was already known to the Arkonides through reports from expeditions ages ago.

They were the Ferrons from Ferrol, the eighth planet of the Vega system. Ferrol was not unlike the Earth. The egg-shaped spaceships of the Ferrons were quickly recognized. But there were those other long, thin spaceships with bulges around the middle...

Khrest, the scientist from Arkon, had identified them, too. They belonged to a nonhuman race which had been engaged for the last thousand years in fighting the might of the Great Imperium by rebellion and lightning attacks on outlying bastions.

These descendants of reptiles were called Topides by Khrest, and they came from the Orion-Delta constellation eight hundred and fifteen light-years away.

They had hurtled into the Vega system with their ultra light-speed spaceships because they expected to find there the Arkonide ship whose distress signals they had intercepted. This had been a miscalculation on their part.

Rhodan had become embroiled in a tough space battle which the Good Hope would have won with flying colors had it not been for the sudden encounter with a truly gigantic battle cruiser which struck the much smaller ship a disabling blow.

It was already too late when they realized this battle cruiser had been captured from the Arkonides by the nonhuman Topides. Rhodan fled immediately to the ninth planet, where he contacted the ruler of the Ferrons. Finally, with a daring coup, he succeeded in capturing the battle cruiser from the lizard race who'd landed on the eighth planet.

Thereupon he'd eliminated the Topide army from the principal occupied areas in a bloodless rout by employing the unique Mutant Corps, and the Topides had, as a consequence, retreated to the six moons of the far-out fortieth planet.

This was the situation when Terra's peacemaker attempted to come to a satisfactory trade agreement with the Ferronian Thort.

As the past history was flowing through his mind, Perry couldn't help thinking that he would still be a test pilot for the American Space Research Command if he hadn't found the superior technology of the Arkonides by accident.

The Ferrons, whom Reginald Bell now regarded as somewhat 'retarded,' were thousands of years ahead of mankind as far as their technical and scientific developments were concerned. On the other hand, they lacked the proficiency for traveling faster than light

because their brains weren't adapted to thinking in five dimensions.

Rhodan felt a little ashamed, yet the goal was to attain strength for his fellow men throughout the galaxy. The presence of the Topide invaders was proof positive how weak his people were and how little time remained to rectify their inadequacies.

Rhodan's relations with the members of a nation of another star would've been quite unthinkable in the recent past. Now he was sitting across from the Ferrons who looked almost like slightly more robust humans, and it was as if it had always been so. The discovery of aliens with real intelligence had caused a great shock at the outset but practical considerations were already winning the upper hand.

The products of the Ferronian industry were of incalculable value to Earth's economy and it was essential to open fruitful trade relations.

It would've been so simple if he didn't have to reckon with the hostile alien species on the six moons. This was like a dark threatening cloud which Rhodan couldn't afford to ignore.

Five of the eight auxiliary ships had been launched. The super battle cruiser, captured from the Topides, had carried twelve extra ships on board, each of which had a diameter of two hundred feet and was as good and powerful as the old Good Hope, the shot-up wreck lying in a hanger on the ninth planet of the Vega system.

The S-7, under the command of Major Nyssen, was posted near the outer planets. It was imperative that all tactical movements of the foreign invaders be under strict observation.

An almost inaudible whisper startled Perry and broke the chain of thoughts which were preying on his mind. Evidently the mutant Marshall had failed to make direct contact with Rhodan's mind, and so he'd begun to whisper.

Rhodan shifted his eyes without changing his position.

'They take exception to our proposed trading station in their country, sir,' breathed the mutant whose parapsychological attributes were the result of exposure to atomic radiation. There were sixteen other mutants with Marshall on board the Arkonide battle cruiser. It had been a difficult task to pick these mutants. The manifestations of their special properties had to be detected, first of all. The telepathic Marshall was one of those with positive changes who'd discovered their gifts in themselves.

Now the esper was probing in depth the private thoughts of the ruling Ferrons. So they were unwilling to concur. Rhodan had been afraid of it. Nobody wants to tolerate the agents of a foreign power on their own soil, least of all a ruler like the Thort.

'Let's wait and see,' Rhodan replied very softly. 'They'll have to admit eventually that the trading station is a necessity. Did you receive any messages from the ship?'

Marshall shook his head slightly. The telepaths remaining there hadn't yet learned anything new, other-wise they would've informed Marshall immediately.

Reginald Bell was breathing hard. Wrath was smoldering in his pale eyes. He wasn't even trying any longer to keep his composure, although he knew that it would've been much more fitting to show restraint and self control on Ferrol.

'I hope these procrastinators won't take another coffee break or something,' he muttered under his breath. 'What's there to think about?'

He looked angrily at the stooped figure of the Thort. The ruler had been in office for a long time. It hadn't yet been determined who was to succeed him. The appointment to this honor wasn't in hereditary line.

Rhodan was trying to look into the eyes of the old Ferron. He'd become accustomed to the pale blue skin of these people and the sharp contrast of plentiful copper coloured hair was no longer distracting.

Somewhat more unpleasant for human tastes were those very small, deeply recessed eyes which were overshadowed by a massive, bulging forehead.

of course these were biological prerequisites under the blinding glare of their giant sun. The eyes were well-protected from the profuse ultraviolet radiation prevalent and the thick hair prevented the burning of their heads. All these features served the purpose of adaptation to nature which allows no failures to survive.

Nevertheless, Rhodan found the barely visible eyes disturbing. It was practically impossible to catch the expression in the eyes of a Ferron and divine his feelings, except by the mutants' mind-probe.

The Thort's attention was apparently aroused. He lifted his head and the tiny mouth broke into a friendly smile. But this, too, had an unusual appearance.

'Sir, I'm expected on board my ship,' Rhodan said loudly. 'Could you come to a

decision? Do you have any questions?'

Rhodan spoke the Ferronian language very well. The Arkonide hypno-training proved invaluable, as usual, for all applications. Without it, it would've been impossible for a man like him to comprehend the exceedingly intricate Arkonide technique, let alone master it completely within three years. However, no one except Rhodan and Reginald Bell had received the all-inclusive education. The pilots, for instance, had only been instructed in their specialized field of knowledge. It was quite sufficient if they could handle their space-fighters and understand five-dimensional hyper-mathematics.

'We're asking you to be patient,' replied the Thort. 'The treaty will cause vital changes in the life of all Ferrons. The invasion has played havoc with our industry and we're only just beginning to get back on our feet. We have to make a study of whether the trade relations between us should be under control of the state or whether we can permit the free exchange of goods without government interference.'

This was clear - very dear, at last. Rhodan sympathized with the Thort and his problem. It was a strictly internal matter of the Ferrons. It made no difference to Rhodan what kind of special laws had to be decreed.

'I suggest that you take some time out for further considerations. Your sun is hot and stifling. With your permission, we'd like to spend the lunch hours in the comfort of our ship.' And he added with a smile, 'I beg your indulgence, sir. The gravity of your world is one point four G, and that is zero point four G more than we're used to.'

The Thort stood up at once. Lossoshér, one of the leading scientists and a member of the Judiciary Council, made inquiries about human endurance limits. It was a very polite gesture.

Reginald Bell and Marshall donned their radio helmets. Their salute was snappy and correct.

'You'll receive our information through our liaison officer Chaktor,' said the Thort. 'We'll reach the final agreement today.'

'Your internal arrangements are for you to decide, of course,' assured Rhodan. 'May I ask how many of the damaged units of your space fleet have already under-gone repair? The reports from my reconnaissance pilots are very alarming. Your fleet commander should take all precautionary measures to prepare for renewed trouble.'

The small face of the Thort looked worried.

'We're in the process of installing the ray cannons which were built to your specifications. All manufacturing plants on the three planets are working at full capacity. Will you let us have the plans for the fabrication of the Arkonide energy field projectors?'

Bell coughed. The quick look he gave Rhodan was superfluous.

We can talk about that after we've signed the contract,' advised Rhodan with a little smile. 'Now, may I take leave for a while?'

Saluting once again, they left while the Thort was watching them quietly and wondering where these people had come from. Rhodan had pretended to be an Arkonide.

All this had only served the purpose of keeping the galactic position of the Earth a secret. Rhodan was concerned about any accidents which might bring harm to the unstable Earthlings. In this respect he put their interest first.

They left the maze of corridors. Outside, the air which was breathable for them, seemed to boil. Vega, the gigantic sun, stood with flaming splendor in the cloudless sky. It was pouring forth enormously strong ultraviolet radiation. Rhodan pressed his eyes together.

The mean temperature had already risen to more than 115°F in the shade.

'That's enough,' Rhodan said, exhausted. 'The gravity and this heat together are hardly bearable. In another hour it'll be one hundred twenty-five degrees in the shade.'

He was walking toward the air-glider and stopped suddenly in his tracks when he heard a slight whirring noise. Simultaneously he noticed Marshall's stiffened attitude. Evidently, the mutant was receiving a telepathic message from the battleship.

Bell stared through narrowed eyes at the sky. The slight whirring noise had increased to a dull rumble which quickly swelled to an ear-splitting roar.

A seemingly white-hot glowing object came speeding rapidly from behind the peaks of the nearby mountains.

The huge sphere was pushing great masses of highly compressed air ahead of it and caused a tumultuous disturbance of the planet's atmosphere. It was as if a tremendous meteor swooped down directly on the spaceport of the capital.

Fiery pulsating bursts of energy from the reversed jets in the protection screen ripped the glowing air molecules apart. The spherical ship came to an abrupt stop. No need for Rhodan to guess at the formidable deceleration factor of the braking action.

The masses of air crashed and thundered into the vacuum behind the ship.

'If that isn't Nyssen, I'll eat my helmet!' shouted Bell, beside himself. 'If that guy would only learn to make a decent landing!'

'Now, now,' said Rhodan, teasing him. 'I can remember when you gave an even bigger show than that.'

'That was only a case of compelling necessity,' growled Bell. 'What's the matter with Nyssen? That is the S-7, isn't it?'

Bell started to run.

The mutant awoke from his trance. His slender face was serious.

'Emergency landing, sir. Nyssen is bringing Deringhouse in. Severe burns. All hell broke loose near the six moons. Nyssen chose not to return in normal flight. He leaped here directly from the orbit of the thirty-eighth planet. Taking quite some risk, I believe.'

Rhodan didn't reply. His lean body shot across the smoothly polished stone slabs of the plaza in front of the portal. Seconds later he lifted the glider up. The Ferrous used for this purpose a tiny semi-atomic ray-drive mechanism as an auxiliary lift for vertical takeoff. They even surpassed the accomplishments of the Arkonides in building miniature atomic piles. They could squeeze a miraculously controlled reaction of a nuclear fusion process into a volume no bigger than a matchbox. No wonder Rhodan insisted so much on a trade treaty to exchange merchandise. This was just what mankind urgently needed.

The Ferronian machine was racing at low level over the conglomeration of capital buildings. The pilot was bent over the peculiar double-action control stick and his feet were operating the energy pedals. This was a strange arrangement for humans, who would probably have done everything the opposite way.

As they approached the spaceport they were checked by the radio control station. Even by human standards, where all nations exercised exceedingly strict security surveillance, the Ferrons had made a fetish out of safety. One had to pass innumerable security checks.

Through the oval cabin windows the vast surface of the Ferrol Central Spaceport came into sight. Everything was built in a grandiose manner by these humanoids far out in space.

Five days ago, Rhodan had given orders to transfer the captured battleship from the carefully constructed hangar built into the mountains to the Central Spaceport. From that moment on, the skyline of the metropolis was enhanced by another 'mountain peak.'

That which arose from the ground at the northern end of the spaceport was a truly superlative structure. There was no comparison in daily life with which to describe the breathtaking and overwhelming impression.

Stardust II, as Rhodan had named the battleship in honor of the first atomic moon rocket, which he had commanded, wasn't only a symbol of scientific achievement and technical superiority: it was a symbol of power; a power which, by human concepts, had conquered, colonized and pacified an immense part of the galaxy. Only for this purpose had they built these battle-ships of the 'Imperium Class' and only with this aim in mind had they constructed these titans by untiring labor and costly expenditures. There was nothing that could withstand the concentrated might of these colossal ships. They were designed and built to destroy entire worlds.

Rhodan looked for a moment at the auxiliary ship S-7. A few minutes ago, when he observed the risky landing of the spacesphere, it had loomed very large, invincible and threatening.

Now that the Stardust II was blotting out the horizon, the auxiliary ship which had seemed so imposing before had shrunk to almost nothing. Although its diameter measured two hundred feet, and a very respectable mass was, therefore, resting on the telescoping legs of the landing gear, it looked paltry by comparison.

The battleship was a true sphere with a diameter of about twenty-five hundred feet. No known race in the galaxy had ever built bigger or more powerful spaceships.

The glider came closer. The returned auxiliary ship was steadily growing larger but the enormous mass of Stardust II could no longer be seen in one glance. One had to lean back in order to bring the upper cupola into view.

It was a veritable mountain of bluish Arkon steel which reached to the sky as it stood on the runway made of the toughest synthetics. It was a hulking monster with such

colossal machinery and output that it was capable of supplying all the electricity for all the work on the planets of an entire solar system.

Rhodan set the glider down beneath the smooth armor-plated hull. A bulging equatorial ring, running around the middle of the sphere high above him, was mounted on the hull. The engines of the battleship were installed in this ring. Although the openings of the pulse-drive jets - big as craters - were still closed, Stardust II was on alert and ready to go when alarmed.

The spaceship had been the backbone of the Topide fleet. Perry Rhodan still didn't know how it was possible for these nonhuman descendants of a reptilian race to overpower and seize this super battleship. The fact remained that they had manned it and used it for the invasion. Rhodan's mutants were able to overcome the whole Topidian crew with their supermundane powers without inflicting any damage on Stardust II.

From that time on, Rhodan was in possession of such means of destruction as could only be equaled by similar products of the Arkonides themselves. But this was highly unlikely, for the Great Imperium had never extended as far as the Vega system and now its people no longer had the desire to venture out there. There could be no doubt that the once resolute race of Arkonides had entered the final stages of decline. The mental degeneration had reached such a degree that there were wily a very few Arkonides left who still had the outstanding qualities of their glorious ancestors. Khrest and Thora were among them.

Bell and Marshall disappeared between the heavy columns of the extended support legs. The circular pad of each telescoping landing leg covered more than seven thousand square feet. There was no way of comparing the dimensions of this splendid ship with anything on Earth. Rhodan couldn't estimate its value except to say that its cost must have run into many billions of dollars. It was certainly more expensive than the navies and air forces of both World Wars combined.

Rhodan followed at a slower pace. As he walked into the long shadow of the spaceship, and Vega was concealed by the spherical hull rising above him, he noticed that an apparently heavily injured man was carried in.

The crew of the S-7, the auxiliary ship which had just landed near its mother ship, jumped out, talking excitedly. The men seemed tired and worn.

The small figure of Major Nyssen, looking parched and weather-beaten, detached itself from the crowd. He'd clamped his radio helmet under his arm and his sparse hair was soaked in sweat.

He saluted briefly.

Rhodan's lean face exuded soothing calm. He examined with blinking eyes the two hundred foot high S-7, which could easily be hidden in a small segment of the spherical super battleship. He waited until Nyssen came over.

'It was a tough flight, sir,' Nyssen began. 'Too hot to handle for the little pursuit ships. We lost Sergeant Calverman. He was one of my best men.'

He was bestowing the highest praise on the African. Rhodan remained silent. He could feel that Nyssen was in a turmoil of emotions.

'The Topidian lizards have fortified themselves on the six moons of the fortieth planet. The biggest of the moons has been turned into a cosmic fortress. They're working feverishly. The five other satellites are heavily reinforced outposts serving as warning stations with small defense crews. Topide reinforcements made a sudden hyperspace jump into the Vega system. Rous and Deringhouse were right in the middle of it and before they knew it the Topides swarmed all over them. I had dispatched them on a quick reconnaissance flight. Rous had rescued Deringhouse. It took me an hour to get to them and to take their machine on board. Then I made a short hyper-transition jump into the orbit of Ferrol. That was all. We have excellent photographic evidence.'

This was a very brief report for a very big event. Nyssen never wasted any words. He presumed that everybody understood him anyhow.

Rhodan simply nodded. Then came the question which worried him most.

'What about Deringhouse? Is he going to pull through?'

Nyssen shrugged his shoulders wearily.

'They got his fighter with a thermo-ray. We should do something about reinforcing the protective screens of our machines. He's suffered severe burns.'

'Get some rest, Nyssen. Your ship will be put into the hangar by somebody else. Thank you very much.'

Rhodan watched silently as his commander hurried away. Then he trudged slowly over to

the rolled-out conveyor to the battleship. He was still one hundred yards from the entrance at the bottom of the sphere and, while walking, kept looking at the majestic steel dome of Stardust II above him.

'I'd like to see this one get into a fight,' exclaimed Sergeant Rous. 'Have you heard anything about Major Deringhouse, sir?'

Nyssen shook his head.

The Arkonide robot specialists for evaluation of the new intelligence data were flitting back and forth. They disappeared in the brightly shimmering antigrav field, where they were gently pulled into the ship's interior.

'We'll soon see some action around here, Rous,' predicted Nyssen. 'These rascals are going to make it hot for us. I'd like to know what the old man is going to do with his mutants this time.'

Sergeant Rous fell silent. He was thinking about a quiet mountain valley in the west of the French Alps. It had been so peaceful there.

3/ RHODAN'S RUSE

He was resting still and unconscious in a special bathtub. His body was submerged up to the neck in the milky liquid of the biosynthetic cell-activating serum. Major Deringhouse was inhaling oxygen from a robot-regulated apparatus which simultaneously controlled his breathing and his blood circulation, stimulating them when needed.

Doctor Haggard and Doctor Manoli, the ship's physicians, didn't make much conversation.

'He'll pull through,' Doctor Haggard said. His eyes betrayed his indignation. Then he added:

'Sir, it's my opinion as a doctor that this whole matter is very regrettable. I'd prefer if we didn't have to treat any injured men in the hospital. Please don't wake him up. He'll remain in hypno-sleep for another twelve hours. The pain of third degree burns isn't exactly pleasant.'

Perry Rhodan was mulling over these few words. Haggard and Manoli had left. Only the medical robots were watching over the motionless patient who'd gone through hell far out there in the Vega system.

Deringhouse had gallantly dared to penetrate the closed phalanx of hostile ships in his attempt to obey his orders.

Rhodan's lips tightened. Nobody was aware of his own deliberations, not even Bell, who was standing behind his commander, observing the wounded man anxiously.

'They must've been fighting like devils,' whispered the stocky man. 'We really have to do something to avoid such things in the future.'

Rhodan looked into his friend's eyes. They'd flown to the moon together and found the shipwrecked Arkonides there. They met and became friends when they went through the rigors of basic training in the Space Force.

'We'll take care of that,' he reassured Bell emphatically. 'Let's go now. It was fortunate for me that Deringhouse was lucky.'

'What do you mean, you were fortunate?' questioned Bell.

'That's exactly what I mean. After all, some people have a conscience, and I happen to be one of them. For heaven's sake, don't think that I look on Calverman's death as an unavoidable necessity. It wasn't inevitable in principle and it was poor judgment on my part. I shouldn't have ordered these continuous reconnaissance fights. No, no arguments, please.' Rhodan cut off the discussion.

'Khrest and Thora are waiting for us in the little computer room,' Bell said, downcast. with a last look at the pilot sleeping in deep hypnosis, they left the hospital room quietly.

Outside the medical department they entered the labyrinth of corridors and numerous decks. The ship was overwhelming, like a big city. In the volume of the extensive outer hull, wide halls housed machinery which couldn't even be found in the biggest power stations on Earth.

They moved by conveyor belts to the central axis sector in which the main elevators were going up and down. The up-and-down directions were always maintained in the battleship, even in free fall, by fully automatic gravity regulators. This was only one

of the countless technical accomplishments which were unheard of on Earth.

They were gliding a thousand feet up in the smooth-walled antigrav elevator. The nerve center of the ship was a steel sphere of armor plate and was located at its hub. These big ships of the Imperium Class were constructed with such great care by the Arkonides that they lasted for thousands of years. The fleet building program on distant Arkon was a thing of the past. Unfortunately, the heyday of this galactic nation had faded away some time ago. They were definitely destined to perish.

The only question remaining was which one of many other races would fall heir to the declining Arkonides and build their realm up again. The Great Imperium was now a colossus on clay feet. Rebellions were flaring up in most sectors of the galaxy while no one on Arkon was able to make the effort to send out the still available units to make a quick end to the chaos.

This was one of the many facts of which mankind was ignorant until a few years earlier. Man had always imagined himself to be alone; had claimed to be the only intelligent creature in the wide galaxy, which now proved to be an illusion. There were numerous other intelligent races and many of them nonhuman.

The two robot guards in front of the armored door to the so-called 'little calculator room' saluted. Rhodan paid no attention. His mind was on far more important matters. The door panel in the bulkhead slid open. Before him lay an oval room with the control switches of the semi-positronic reserve calculating machine. It was designed as an emergency aggregate but it also functioned as an auxiliary segment of the main positronic brain.

Khrest, the Arkonide scientist with the strangely youthful face, stood beside the safe where the code was secured. His tall, lean figure was imposing; even more impressive were the knowing reddish eyes, which alone indicated his true age. The nearly white hair was no clue. That and the color of his eyes were a characteristic of his race. Khrest was a little taller than Rhodan. Outwardly he didn't differ from human beings. The minor differences in anatomy were only visible in X-rays.

He nodded, serious and dignified, a fact which Rhodan didn't like. It wasn't in the nature of the Arkonide to show restraint toward Perry Rhodan after their long-lasting friendship.

The young woman at Khrest's side was the embodiment of what she'd always been. Thora, the commander of the exploration vessel which had been destroyed on the moon, hadn't lost her defiance. However, Rhodan felt that her rude and haughty coolness was nothing but a mask for her imperious attitude. She'd long since given up telling Rhodan that humans were nothing but half-apes who'd become 'clever' by some accident. She'd never used the word 'intelligence' in this connection.

Rhodan had remained standing in the middle of the room. Khrest, the greatest scientist of the otherwise degenerate stellar race, tilted his high, fine-featured head. Rhodan didn't wait for the involved phrases. When Khrest talked, it was always long-winded.

Thora's lips were pressed together. She knew the cold expression in the eyes of the lean man. Rhodan had that forceful look again. He'd realized only a short while ago that he possessed the gift of compelling power under certain circumstances. This quality had become very pronounced during the hypno-training.

'Okay, let's keep it brief. I've only five minutes to spare,' he said. 'You want to point out that our people would still be flying to the moon with antiquated liquid rocket fuel if you Arkonides hadn't come. You also want to tell me how puny and ridiculous we'd be without you and that it was only a regrettable accident which caused you and your ship to land on the Terrestrial moon. You'll have to excuse me but I know this song. You've taught me your great knowledge, that's all. Now we're on the eighth planet of Vega. A very dangerous and intelligent race that's neither human nor Arkonide is lurking out there in space. I don't have time.'

'Barbarian!'

Rhodan bowed silently toward Thora. Her delicate nose was quivering. The strange love-hate relationship between her and Rhodan was overwhelming her.

'Thank you very much. It's usually been the barbarians who by virtue of common sense and physical strength have pacified and rebuilt fallen empires after temporarily conquering them. Don't you think we better skip it, Thora?' Khrest remained silent;

'We remind you of our request. You've been informed,' scowled Thora.

'You've given it to us in writing,' scoffed Rhodan. Bell grinned.

The beautiful alien closed her eyes. Her hands were shaking.

'Sorry to disappoint you,' Rhodan broke the quiet pause. 'This battleship has been recaptured by my own men. Therefore, I cannot put you in charge. Moreover, it's completely irresponsible to leave the Vega system on Stardust II to take you home.'

'But we insist on our right. You will-' Thora choked.

'I'll do nothing of the sort, if you allow me,' Rhodan countered her sharp words. 'This is a matter of life or death for mankind. The Earth is a mere twenty-seven light-years away. It can be discovered any minute by the Topide invaders. These people have apparently noticed that they've made a little miscalculation. They're checking it already. I won't take a chance. Can't you understand that?'

'Let us go to Arkon. We assure you the fleet of the Imperium will come to your aid,' interjected Khrest softly. 'I believe that I've failed in my mission. Obviously, the planet with the mysterious inhabitants who know the secret of eternal life can no longer be found. Take Thora and me home.'

'I'm sorry. I wouldn't even think of getting into the hot spot of the galaxy and risk losing the only super spaceship at my disposal. Terrible wars between rebellious races are going on there. Until mankind is strong and united, I must keep the existence of Earth the foremost secret. In contrast to your demands, my most urgent task at this time is to drive the Topides out of the Vega Constellation. The detection of Earth has to be prevented by all means.'

'You should give a little thought as to how unimportant your adored mankind is in the framework of galactic events,' declared Thora derisively.

'That's a matter of opinion,' stressed Rhodan. A sharp line stood out on his forehead.

'Khrest, you're the scientific leader of the ill-fated Arkonide expedition. Wait till we've chased the Topides out of their strongholds. Then we'll see.'

Rhodan looked at his watch. He had said it all. 'Please excuse me, the five minutes are up.'

'Then blood's going to flow again,' Khrest said bitterly. 'You know that I hold the human race in high esteem. There are no other people who are so closely related to us. If you're of the opinion that you can take over the heritage of my race in a few years, you're badly mistaken. You don't have the required qualifications.'

Rhodan paused at the sliding door. His body turned around slowly.

'You'll be amazed, Khrest. Don't mistake us for your people, who've grown so terribly tired. Someday Terra will play an important part in the galaxy. When I've insured peace I'll be glad to take you to Arkon. Please wait, and don't forget that your life would've been over without the concerted help of humans.'

'Did you have to say that?' inquired Bell as they entered the elevator outside. Rhodan didn't react. Bell continued reproachfully:

'I don't think it's wise to remind the Arkonides, or anybody else, of favors rendered. If they hadn't come we still wouldn't know what it looks like beyond our solar system.'

Rhodan's face darkened. Bell was right, but it couldn't be helped in this case.

'They'll have to get used to the fact that we're not merely "clever." I wouldn't think of letting the Stardust II leap into this galactic chaos. Arkon is doomed to failure as well as the Great Imperium ruled by it. This has been going on for centuries, although we didn't know anything about it. Now that this aggressive race with highly developed intelligence has appeared so close to our own world, we have to operate in a state of emergency. We can't let the hurt feelings of the Arkonides interfere. Any more objections?'

Rhodan pushed out of the antigrav field of the elevator. They'd arrived in the sector containing the living quarters of the officers. He stopped in front of the commander's cabin, which was guarded by two robots.

'Take over the S-7. I'll be busy. Do we have a good hair stylist on board? If possible, one who has experience with wigs.'

'I'd better call the doctor,' groaned Bell. 'Just keep quiet and rest. It's nice and cool in the cabin. I-'

Rhodan broke out in the grin for which he'd been famous among the test pilots in the Space Force. Now it was only seldom seen. Bell caught on instantly. A watchful look lurked in his pale eyes. His stocky body became tense. He dropped the bit about the doctor.

'You're planning something,' he whispered slowly. 'What's up?'

'Do we have a wigmaker on board or don't we?'

'Most certainly not. We have three hundred specialists with partial hypno-training.'

'Okay, forget it. Attend to the S-7. Nyssen is ready.'

A loud rumbling interrupted the silence. The atomic energy HHe-piles producing the electricity for the force-field projectors had started up in the F-sector. The observation screen next to the door of the commander's cabin showed that the auxiliary ship, which had been on the ground, was gone. It had been hauled in through the big airlocks of the mother ship, where it rested in the immense inside hangars.

The roar of the atomic piles eased up. A high-energy screen had been formed to enclose Stardust II. This was beyond the Ferrons' comprehension even though they were used to superior technical achievements. These energy units were of a superior order in space which insured that the structure of the defense field could never be grasped by any Ferron. Their brains didn't have the ability. They'd advanced to simple speed-of-light space travel and hadn't been able to improve further.

Rhodan listened to the low hum of the machinery. It was located about six hundred feet below him in energy hall B. By erecting the defense field, Stardust II was hermetically sealed from the outside world.

'I'll see you in the mess. Don't worry about the hair-dresser.' With that the lanky man vanished behind the sliding door.

Bell was left standing at the door. The two Arkonide robot guards remained motionless. They'd already checked Rhodan's brain waves and allowed him to pass safely.

Bell walked away, cursing under his breath. He failed to understand what a hairdresser had to do with the latest events. A cosmic fortress was being built on the six moons of the fortieth Vega planet! A member of the crew had been killed in action! And the commander was asking for a hairdresser!

That was too much for Bell. He shouted at an innocent robot repairman who'd just been told to replace a damaged picture screen.

A little farther away Major Nyssen appeared, waved silently and entered his cabin. It was time for the scheduled rest period. Everyone on board, except the guards on duty, was required to sleep. The planet Ferrol was very exhausting for body and mind.

Outside a few of the egg-shaped Ferronian spaceships were manoeuvring in the far, cloudless sky. They were of the type which had been smashed to pieces by the Topide battle units.

Bell gave up his guesswork. He was unable to fathom Rhodan's mind. Thereby he was subconsciously conforming to a principle which had been followed by millions of officers before him.

The spacious cabin with its separate compartments resembled more a miniature center of controls than a comfortable living room. At this time the various monitoring screens were dark. The interoffice communication system was shut down and the normally hectic light signals had ceased.

Perry Rhodan was alone; as alone as all commanders of great fleets had been since the beginning of the technical age.

No commander could afford to hold far-ranging discussions in the presence of his subordinates. He was obliged to keep a certain distance and to be careful at the same time that the wall of silence required by military necessity wasn't regarded as arrogance and reserved formality.

Rhodan was a natural psychological phenomenon. Even without his special training he would have known that he had to be by himself at this moment.

On a folding table at his side was a small visiphone made by the Ferrons. It was a marvel out of the micro-mechanical workshops of a people who were in this respect far superior to the almighty Arkonides.

The gadget, no bigger than a fist, was turned on. The oval mini-screen showed bright lines which formed senseless patterns under the influence of the distorting scrambler.

It took a few moments until the synchronized receiver was adjusted. Then the confusing flickering stopped. The small face of a Ferron appeared on the screen. The deeply recessed eyes under the bulging forehead could hardly be seen. However, the insignia on his gray uniform could be recognized clearly.

Chaktor, the Ferronian liaison officer between the Thort and Perry, nodded his head.

'Sir.'

'Is your scrambler working, Chaktor?'

'Perfectly, but we ought to keep our conversation short. What can I do for you?'

'I have to talk to you urgently.'

'Aboard your ship? The treaty hasn't been signed yet.'

'That doesn't matter at the moment. I have other problems. Be prepared to confer about the matter we've discussed before. Where can we meet?'

'At the old place, sir, and at the same time. Is that all right with you?'

'I'll be there. Something else. Can your secret service get me five wigs? Do you understand what I mean?'

'I beg your pardon,' said the Ferronian space officer.

'Artificial hair, a false head of hair. Listen...'

It took Rhodan a few minutes to explain his strange request. As he switched Off the visiphone and placed it in the safe of the cabin, his tanned face showed little emotion.

He'd now initiated the measures which would terminate the Vega affair sooner or later.

Slowly, he walked over to the weapons chamber. The more or less death-dealing products of Arkonide super-technology were mounted under the protection of a micro-energy field. Rhodan inserted his coded key-card to lift the block.

A moment later he felt the heavy service weapon in his hand. It was a disintegrator which was totally unknown on Ferrol. The pulse-rays of the disintegrator could cause the total dissolution of a crystalline field structure.

Prior to lying down on his pneum-couch, Rhodan switched on all control instruments. The most essential departments of the giant ship became visible on the tiny screen. The sound transmission was set for secret surveillance.

He was listening in for a few minutes on the conversations of the personnel on duty. They were talking about the six moons of the fortieth planet.

Satisfied, Rhodan shut off the equipment, which was meant exclusively for his use. He could trust his men, there was no doubt about that. What he was concerned about were the reactions and willingness of the Ferrons.

They wore dark brown cloaks, reaching to their feet, such as were favored by the allegedly wild and rebellious mountain dwellers of the planet Ferrol.

Especially Bell's short, squat figure could be mistaken for a Sicha.

It was more of a problem for Rhodan. The fact was that there was a resistance movement on Ferrol against the humans ever since the Topide invaders had retreated in headlong flight.

There was widespread dissatisfaction in the country because many didn't understand why the Thort made such concessions to the strangers. Everyone wanted to express gratitude, of course. Trade and its benefits were quite naturally also very welcome. However, some leading Ferrons opposed the establishment of a trading base for mankind which called for full sovereignty on its site.

It was argued that this would inevitably lead to a bastion of a foreign race, but Rhodan insisted on this demand. It was up to the government of Ferrol to accept or reject his request.

The contractual agreement was imminent and it had started to seethe within the opposing groups. The Ferronian television system, broadcasting from a centrally controlled transmitter in Thorta, had conducted violent debates between official agents of the government and representatives of the opposition. Eventually the decision had to be made by the ruler.

Reginald Bell was well-informed about these occurrences. He'd watched with the greatest concern and was shaking his head when Rhodan himself had addressed all Ferrons on the three inhabited planets via TV. Rhodan had reminded them in no uncertain terms of the aid his people had given them. This had been badly received by the audience.

Bell had called this speech Rhodan's greatest error since establishing the New Power. Rhodan had only smiled and dismissed the arguments of his advisers without further ado.

Now there was a new and strange event in the offing after Rhodan's public statement was also printed in the daily press and magazines.

The two moons of the major planet had disappeared behind a heavy deck of clouds. Now the last star stole away. Sudden gusts of wind heralded one of those hurricanes which weren't at all rare under the extreme climatic conditions on Ferrol.

Vega had set below the horizon a few hours ago. It had turned instantly cool. In the opinion of the Ferrons it was already ice-cold.

They were in a most disreputable quarter of the capital, next to the industrial zone in the suburbs where the spaceships were built. The last of the local population was fleeing from the upcoming storm down steep stairs to cellar taverns which were a feature of the neighborhood.

Rhodan, feeling chilly, scrutinized the narrow alley. The mutant John Marshall was tilting his head and listening into the dark night.

'Is he coming?' asked Rhodan, keeping his voice low. 'I don't feel like lingering here very long. There are some unpleasant looking characters hanging around.'

'Just now one of them thought it would be better to get out of the way of the Sichas.' Marshall laughed softly.

Bell was swearing under his breath. The outline of his weapon's spiralling barrel was clearly visible beneath his cloak.

'What a mad idea,' he complained. 'In ten minutes all hell's going to break loose around here. Couldn't Chaktor have picked a better place?'

'Not really. We can't meet in a tavern, can we? He can't let himself be seen too often on board the ship... John, watch out for Chaktor's thoughts. On my advice he officially joined the Ferronian resistance movement. Try to catch the first inkling of an eventual betrayal. In such a case the man would be useless for us.'

Bell turned around slowly. His wide face under the hood covering his forehead was alarmed.

'How was that? He belongs to the resistance group?'

'That's right. Shh! Marshall hears something.'

Out of the menacing darkness a squat form loomed into the dim light of a lantern. Rowdy, discordant singing came from a nearby tavern.

The stranger stood still. He seemed to sense that Rhodan had a telepath from the Mutant Corps with him.

'Okay, he's here,' whispered Marshall. 'Appears to be deeply worried. He feels very uncomfortable. Wishes to get out of this neighborhood as soon as possible. Nothing else.'

Rhodan flashed the light signal and the figure slipped closer. They recognized Chaktor's face in a second. Then they found a wall and hid behind it. Marshall was posted as lookout. It was well-nigh impossible for anyone to approach the highly sensitive telepath without being noticed.

'We'll have to hurry,' panted the Ferron. 'I believe I was observed leaving my glider. There are informers all over the place.'

Rhodan came directly to the point. There wasn't much left to say in a situation for which they'd prepared for weeks.

'Did you bring the wigs?'

Five of them. It was very difficult to get these wigs. What do you need them for?'

Chaktor's eyes were nothing but bottomless cavities in the dark. Bell tightened his grip on the weapon. Down the street some men in uniform appeared. They seemed to be crewmen of a Ferronian spaceship but they, too, soon ducked into the tavern.

'You'll find out,' Rhodan said evasively. 'Is your team ready?'

'Yes, sir. I have twenty men who've served under my command for years.'

'Reliable?'

'Absolutely, sir,' affirmed the Ferron. With an uneasy feeling he watched the shadowy figure of the telepath. He knew only too well what to expect from Marshall.

'Chaktor, you must trust us,' Rhodan said a little louder. You should know that I'm not interested in interfering with the fate of your country. The resistance movement is completely wrong. You'll never see any of my people except those who'll be assigned to the trading base. If your ruler hadn't requested our armed support, I would've disappeared from your solar system long ago.'

The Ferron silently stretched his open hands forward. It was a sign of agreement. Marshall nodded unobtrusively. Evidently, Chaktor hadn't forgotten that he owed his life to these men. Rhodan had rescued him when he was drifting through space in his wrecked ship after the first encounter with the alien marauders. Ever since-that time the commander of the Ferronian destroyer had proved to be a very trustworthy ally.

'You can depend on me, sir. Any instructions?'

'You'll attack according to plan. Use your regular service weapons.'

Chaktor cringed and clenched his fist involuntarily.

'Sir, they're absolutely deadly! Do you deliberately want to sacrifice your men?'

'We intend to do something about your thermo-ray guns. Don't get excited. You'll have to get into action. It's very important that you spread the news of the incident as much as possible. Don't assume that you can convince the Topide fleet commander with halfway measures. We're bound to fail unless we coordinate all details with perfect precision. Furthermore, we'll have to proceed in a strictly logical manner and remain within the limits of credibility.'

'Somebody's coming,' interjected Marshall. 'A patrol. They're going into the tavern.'

'Hurry up,' whispered Chaktor. 'Shall I report to you after the incident? I was present every day. The arguments have been heard as well as your speech.'

'Very well. That's all I wanted. It's enough for today, Chaktor. Can you go back safely?'

Seconds later, his thick-set form had disappeared. Rhodan watched him, motionless.

'Each word spoken here will save us a casualty,' he stressed. 'John, what was going on in his mind?'

'No problem there. He meant everything he said... That patrol's coming this way again!'

Rhodan didn't waste any time. The micro-atompiles of their Arkonide protective suits began to buzz and surround them with antigrav-field which lifted them off the ground. Moments later three barely visible bodies flew over the low, flat-roofed buildings.

Far back, the radiant energy dome of Stardust II filled the horizon. As the hurricane began to break out in all its fury, a small inlet in the energy structure field was opened for their admittance.

Khrest was waiting for Rhodan at the bottom hatch. The face of the Arkonide scientist was serious and he was in a taciturn mood.

As Rhodan took off his cloak he exposed the special Arkonide suit he was wearing underneath. Reginald Bell sounded off in an exceedingly sarcastic tone of voice:

'You've missed a very interesting conversation, Khrest. I'd like to know why we have a battleship of the Imperium class in fighting trim. If it were up to me...'

'It's not up to you,' countered Rhodan. 'Khrest, have you examined the documents I gave you?'

The Arkonide nodded without speaking.

'And...?'

'The calculations of the transition coordinates are correct, as well as all other additional data about the solar system in question. This star indeed has planets.'

'Please make a record of all this information on micro-tape. Use one of the regular automatic reels. It shouldn't only look genuine but it must be genuine. Thank you!'

'You're playing with fire,' cried a feminine voice. Thora had suddenly appeared. Her platinum hair became fluorescent in the dazzling light of the mighty defense screen.

Rhodan turned his head. When he saw Thora's fascinating flashing eyes, he restrained a smile.

'Mankind's played with fire since the beginning of history. Your ancestors, too, knew how to take chances. That's how they attained their power. Thora, can I count on you?'

She looked at him for a long time. Finally she nodded quietly, then added reflectively:

'It looks as if you're really interested in saving the lives of your men. You're taking a great risk.'

Rhodan didn't care to answer. The two Arkonides had made up their minds to play ball, and that was a relief to him.

'Tell the three mutants to report to me immediately,' Rhodan instructed Bell. 'I'll be in my cabin. Thereafter, we'll hold a briefing in the officers' mess.'

Bell was perplexed as he watched his chief enter the bottom hatch.

The three of them arrived together - two men and a young, slender girl with light-yellow skin.

André Noir, the plump, pleasant Frenchman, was born in Japan. Whereas Ishy Matsu was a true daughter of her country, André had only acquired a few of the customs and mores. He was a very important member of the Mutant Corps assembled by Rhodan.

André was a so-called 'hypno.' After he'd graduated from the training camp on Venus, he was capable of imposing his will on anybody.

John Marshall was the third of the trio. He was to take over the telepathic

surveillance with the assistance of the Japanese girl.

Ishy Matsu felt a chill when Captain Klein entered the room. All the other leading men of the New Power were also attending the meeting.

Klein, now in charge of fire control on board the battleship and an expert on alien weapons, had already finished his preparations. His face was blackened; the hairline on his forehead was slightly singed.

As he entered, a pungent smell of burned synthetic fibers began to pervade the room. He was carrying three badly damaged uniforms - the pastel green uniforms which Rhodan had introduced for the forces of the New Power.

Two of them had ugly holes with burned edges at chest level. The third one looked as if it had been accidentally dropped into an active atomic pile. Half of the upper part was torn away. The synthetic material was charred and blistered.

Rhodan came closer. He carefully examined the uniforms laid out on the table. On his lips was a smile but no amusement.

'Beautiful, Klein. Good work. Does this look like the real thing?'

The captain swallowed hard. He looked around with great indignation.

'Sir, if somebody had been inside these uniforms, you'd have three very dead bodies here. The little holes were made by genuine Ferronian ultra-rayguns. These weapons operate with needle-sharp thermo-pulses on the principle of ultra-high light reinforcement. We'll all familiar with these, I believe.'

'And what's that?' Bell wanted to know. Klein grinned a little.

'The big hole? This is a blast from one of the more refined products of the Arkonides. I set the focus on grade three. In spite of minimal energy release the material boiled. If this looks phony, I'll-'

'Okay, very good,' interrupted Rhodan. Then he turned to the girl whose special talents had been the result of radioactivity following atomic explosions and nuclear tests after World War II. She'd turned pale.

'Ishy, I'm sorry, but I'll have to ask you to wear this horrible uniform. Doctor Haggard will prepare your skin so that it'll resemble severe burns. He'll do the same with the manly chests of Marshall and André Noir. Don't you get pale, André!'

'Am I?' gasped the stout man, staring at the uniforms.

'Ishy, our plan is so timed that it must be followed to the second. You'll "flee" the ship in a Ferronian air-glider. John and André will "pursue" you in a similar craft. You'll all carry Arkonide micro-reactors under your clothing, which will enclose you in individual defense screens. You can be sure that not a single ray will get through to you.'

'We hope!' Marshall mumbled with a frightened look which amused Bell a great deal. Until now it was always Marshall who never lost his nerve.

'You, John, will shoot at the "escaping" spy with your Arkonide weapon. Take aim at the heart but be careful to use the lowest energy release. We want to be on the safe side. Ishy Matsu will be shot by you at the exact moment she leaves the air-glider. Thereafter, you and André will be attacked and shot down by insurgents from the Ferronian resistance movement. As you fall down, you'll have to set off the little smoke grenades so that the hit is visible and realistic. You're going to be carried off so quickly that nobody can examine you closely. That'll be all. You won't have anything else to do. Any questions? Anybody?'

Rhodan looked around slowly. He was unwilling to tolerate the most minute error.

'And what is the purpose of this exercise?' inquired Doctor Haggard.

'I'll tell you later, Doc. I need unimpeachable and fully public evidence that three members of my crew have been shot. John, you have the tallest and thinnest figure. Therefore, you'll represent an Arkonide. Manoli will stick one of these white-haired wigs on your head. I want to emphasize that it must be made clear to the Ferronian public that in this incident not only two men of the auxiliary force have been killed but also a real Arkonide. We'll see you all in two hours. The two air-gliders are already waiting outside. Doctor Haggard, please go to work on the skin burn makeup. In the mean-time, the protective screen reactors will be made ready by Khrest.'

The meeting was ended without any superfluous questions. Rhodan's daring game with a whole planetary system at stake had begun with the painstaking precision of a missile launching.

The briefing of the officers and crewmen took place a little later. The men were

given their instructions but nobody understood clearly what the military objective was. Rhodan concluded his remarks with inspiration:

... It serves to protect your lives and to prevent, if possible, any damage to our valuable spaceships. Of course, you know that the invading Topides have to be eliminated from the Vega system. I'll endeavor that this undertaking won't lead to unnecessary bloodshed. Man's intellect is his most precious possession and it should be applied with compassion. Thank you!'

That was all the assembled team had been told. No wonder the wildest rumors were flying in the numerous departments of Stardust II within minutes.

Meanwhile the medical department of the battleship was bustling with activity. Artificially grown pieces of skin were removed from biochemical cultures and seared. Then these artificial skin membranes were glued to the perfectly healthy skins of the, three mutants getting ready for action. Marshall didn't feel very well. He felt like jumping out of his skin.

4/ TIME IS RUNNING OUT

Two hours before - by Terrestrial time standards - the tremendous Vega had risen above the horizon like a ball of fire.

Because Ferronian time standards were too complicated, they'd agreed to use the wavering shadow of a towering landmark for their timing.

Chaktor, dressed in the ample, loose-flowing garments of a dock worker, was watching the narrow shadow cast by the antenna on top of the remote control tower.

The spaceport was far to the east of him. There was very little traffic where Chaktor was standing. The wide ride-walk was almost empty under the burning giant sun.

His twenty men were strategically distributed under good covers. The colossal warehouses holding supplies for spaceships offered a reasonable pretext for the presence of a few men who were standing around talking to each other. Heavy trucks were loaded automatically and were driven to the spaceport where the merchant fleet had been put back into service.

The shadow was getting close to the selected post of the fence surrounding the installations. The agreed time had been set for the exact moment when the shadow touched the post.

Chaktor kept an eye on the two air-gliders stationed nearby which were to bring him and his men to safety.

Chaktor heard a clicking signal from the micro-radio which he carried under his wide cape. He answered it softly without lowering his head. Ferronian sounds poured forth from the tiny speaker. Chaktor tasted the saline saliva collecting in his mouth. The biochemistry of the Ferrons didn't permit any perspiration through skin pores.

The voice sounded firm, but demanding and threatening.

'We're waiting. You must follow your orders. The vehicles are ready. Can you see anything yet?'

Chaktor knew that he couldn't afford to make a false move. It was the chief of the resistance movement himself. Nobody knew his name but it was no secret that he was placed highly in the Thort's entourage.

'Nothing yet,' replied the spacefleet officer. 'I'm sure that she'll get here soon. My retreat has to be secured under any circumstances.'

'We're prepared for all eventualities. Good luck!'

With that the short conversation was over. Chaktor looked at his men, who knew that he didn't really belong to the opposition group. This was also a source of potential danger. They'd have to vanish later without a trace.

He observed the wandering shadow again. Just as the line touched the post, a small flashing point came into view in the distance. Chaktor's posture stiffened. His men gripped the hidden service weapons. Pretending indifference, Chaktor walked past another group of dock workers, keeping his face turned away. They were coming! Now was the time to find out how well or how badly Rhodan had planned this action.

Chaktor was an outstanding destroyer commander. Practically nothing could upset him, provided he was out in space. Here, on the planet's firm ground, he felt insecure and restricted. His sharp eyes were tracking the rapidly growing object. Then came the shrill

howling of the engines in the form of repeated breaking of sound-waves,

Chaktor quickened his step. Farther ahead, next to the wide street, was an open, uncluttered space where the machine was supposed to touch down.

The smooth glider came in like a shot. A young woman in torn uniform and a badly burned face was at the unusual controls.

Ishy Matsu knew that it was a daring venture and that the slightest mistake would result in destruction and death.

She hastily grabbed the hand-sized nuclear reactor built by the Arkonides. It had been running for a few minutes. The energy field it had created was barely visible, but a keen observer would've noticed the faint glimmering. Thus, she was hoping that there was no such observer present.

It was a game with unknown and, therefore, unpredictable factors. Her face was bathed in sweat as she forced the Ferronian glider down in a steep curve. The towering warehouses came into view. Operating the energy controls with foot pedals and shifting the forward brake-jets to a full counter-thrust, she noticed on the rear view observation screen the approach of a screaming object. She was gripped by panic fear.

If John Marshall landed a little too fast behind her, or if he shot a bit too early, the whole plan, carefully calculated to the finest details, would fall apart.

She screamed loud and shrill as her glider touched down much too hard on the ground. Overwhelmed by her subconscious reflexes, she turned on the full power of the four bottom jets.

The machine rebounded from the ground, shot up a few yards and reeled into the air until it came to rest after another bone-shaking jolt.

Ishy Matsu's numb, limp body was hanging in the safety straps of the pilot seat. It took a few seconds until she became aware of the sudden silence. Only some slight crackling noises of the strained materials could be heard in the small cabin of the four-seater.

Still dazed, she sensed the thought impulses of the Ferrons rushing around outside. Naturally, the crash-landing had attracted people who weren't a part of the plan.

Seconds later she received Chaktor's characteristic waves. He was in utter panic.

Moaning, she scrambled out of her seat and kicked out the broken door of her cabin. Once outside, she saw Ferrons running around and also some cowering with their hands on weapons, ready to shoot.

Chaktor was shouting something she couldn't understand because of the noise made by all the onlookers. Yet she sensed that a dangerous situation had developed.

More falling than climbing down, she reached the ground. At the same instant, the engine of an identical glider roared above her. In contrast to her landing, it touched down perfectly, quick and straining the limits of the materials, but skilful and with masterful control. It wasn't the first time Marshall had flown one of these machines.

Ishy began to run. Streaks of light were flashing around her through the shimmering air in the heat of Ferro. Screaming in horror, the dock workers retreated before the rayguns of those twenty who'd jumped into action.

Chaktor had reacted with lightning-fast speed. It had to be avoided under all circumstances that innocent people with a desire to help got hurt in the process.

Thus his men fired carefully-aimed warning shots. Ishy had regained her composure. As she stumbled, according to plan, and held up the clearly visible plastic container in her hand, Marshall opened the hatch of the second glider.

He grasped the complicated situation at once. Without a sound he pulled up the heavy Arkonide weapon.

The almost inaudible hissing of the Ferronian ultra-rayguns was drowned out in the deep thunder of the pulse-energy blasters. Air molecules displaced by its force were glowing along the trajectory. Ishy saw the blue-violet, infernally hot energy beam racing toward her.

She didn't have to fake her piercing scream. As the beam struck her body like a flaming claw and whirled her around with its impact, in spite of the effective protection of the defense screen, she resembled a burning torch.

Ishy fell to the ground, where she remained still and quiet. She'd controlled herself up to the last moment but now she cracked under the tension.

Chaktor fired with cool determination. Before Marshall could aim his weapon again, he fell almost simultaneously with André Noir. The last shot from the hypno-mutant's weapon

had turned the half-destroyed glider into a melted mass of junk.

More than fifty of the onlookers, fleeing in panic, had observed the Ferron in the loose cape pick up the container which was thrown away with a last effort by the stranger.

After a few more warning shots, Chaktor's men jumped into the waiting machines. They gunned their engines and leaped into the air; and three motionless bodies were lying near a glowing mass of molten metal on the grounds of the warehouse depots.

Marshall's body was steaming. Out of the corners of his eyes he looked at the curled up body of the girl lying at a short distance. André was stretched out close to him.

'Set off your smoke grenade, man!' Marshall whispered, then, as smoke screened them: 'Okay, that's better. How's Ishy?'

'Unconscious,' replied André. 'Keep your left foot still. I hope there was nothing wrong with her energy screen.'

'Nonsense. Watch out - people are coming. Force them to stay away from us till the chief arrives. That's all we need now.'

André's uncanny hypnotic force began to take effect. The Ferrons who came running to their aid stopped in their tracks. Some of them returned while others remained undecided.

'Well done,' whispered Marshall. 'You can do it. You've learned something, fatty. How does it feel to be a corpse?'

André swore under his breath. Something exploded in the wrecked glider which was burning up and radiating a lot of heat.

'Oh Lord, I hope the chief is coming soon,' groaned André. 'I can't keep them back much longer. They insist on helping us.'

'Five more minutes. Chaktor must get away safely. Ishy is waking up. If she...'

Marshall stopped talking. Holding his breath, he watched the slender Japanese girl. She moved her hand slightly, but only once. Then she remembered that a so severely injured person would lie very quietly on the ground.

No, Ishy Matsu made no more mistakes.

The face of a native appeared on the small visiscreen of the Ferronian set. This time Chaktor was wearing the gray uniform of the fleet again.

His answers came in a low voice, concise and accurate. Rhodan was alone in his cabin with all control instruments turned off while talking to his distant collaborator.

'The Thort is deeply disturbed,' he said very softly. 'He ordered an investigation. Watch out that you don't get caught.'

'Are your people all right?' inquired Chaktor nervously.

'Of course, everything's just fine. They've done a very good job. Nobody got hurt. Do you have the reel with the information?'

'Yes, it's already been evaluated but I kept it in my possession. Now I'm one of the leaders of the resistance group.'

'Excellent. That's just what I wanted. Plan C goes into effect today. I'll give orders to start right away. Will you please go to the camp now? What's the name of the fellow there?'

'Chren-Tork. He was appointed for some time as a replacement for the commander of the Topidian spacefleet. Obviously a very important man. Our soldiers captured him as he attempted to escape.'

'That's the man we need. Is he smart? Can he think logically?'

'Certainly. These people are practically made of pure logic. They don't know the meaning of the word "emotion."'

'So much the better. Please see to it that he'll find out about the ambush against my people. Slip him some photographs of the alleged corpses. He has to form his own opinion. Don't talk too much. This always makes it obvious. Be sure to make him subtly believe that you belong to the resistance movement. After you've done that, please bring this Topide in for my interrogation.'

'I'll have to overcome great difficulties. The prisoners are subject to a scientific investigation commission.'

Rhodan's impatient wave of the hand became discernible on the screen of the other set.

'I'll take care of that with the Thort. I'll arrange with him that you'll be assigned to take the prisoner to me. I'll demand to see him on board my ship. Any other questions?'

Chaktor gave a negative answer and Rhodan added some final comments:

'We're getting down to business now. Don't lose your nerve at the last moment, and trust me. You have to keep in mind that my trading base is preferable to a Topide invasion from space. You know that your own spacefleet is inadequate. You're simply not up to the technology and power available to these monsters.'

Chaktor had experienced the truth of these remarks with his own body.

'I'll switch off now. Wait for the orders which the Thort will give you today. All security precautions for you will be provided by me according to plan C. Thank you.'

Rhodan cut off the connection. The Ferronian micro-set was again hidden in the safe. Seconds later he received the report from the officer on duty. Then Bell's face appeared on a picture screen.

'S-7 ready for takeoff.'

Rhodan arrived by way of the elevator in the central axis at the hangars for the auxiliary ships. The S-7 stood ready to start in front of the big airlocks.

Fifteen men - standing at attention - had lined up before the bottom hatch of the auxiliary ship. Major Nyssen looked fit and well-rested; so did his men.

Nyssen saluted sharply and made a clipped report. Rhodan held a short review.

'Nyssen, I depend on you. Your ship has a range limit of about five hundred light-years. Make your transition leap into interstellar space exactly according to the computed coordinates. Use the full power of your radio transmitter. The key to the code is known. Don't let anything induce you to send an uncoded message. That would be too obvious. You'll return immediately after you've sent the message via hyperwave.'

Nyssen saluted. There was a trace of a smile around his thin lips.

'Let's hope for the best. When my message is monitored and the point of origin fixed, our chances for success will be excellent.'

'You'll be heard, you can bet on that. That's just what the other side is waiting for. We'll do them a favor and let them detect the "galactic position" by carelessly broadcasting directional transmission waves. Now get going!'

Rhodan watched the ejection maneuver through the airlock, which wasn't difficult at all because the pressure in the battleship was the same as on the outside in the Ferrol atmosphere.

The huge S-7 was pushed out by a magnetic forcefield along energy tracks and, once outside, fully automatic antigrav generators placed the ship immediately in a weightless state.

Seconds later, the pulse-drive engines of the auxiliary ship began to roar. It shot up into the morning sky with breathtaking speed. When the last rumbling noise had died down, the S-7 was far out of sight.

The Ferronian radio control stations verified the launching of an Arkonide spaceship of which they'd been previously advised. That was all there was to it. These flights were daily occurrences and this special mission didn't draw any attention.

Captain Klein was waiting in the control center.

'A conference has been called in an hour at the Red Palace,' he reported. 'The request came through this minute.'

'Okay. Please confirm. Any news from the Ferrol Security Force?'

'They're feverishly trying to apprehend the "assassins." The government is assailing the ruthless opposition. The trade treaty is in the bag.'

'Two birds with one stone.' Rhodan laughed happily. 'Thora, please set up the simultaneous translator. I expect visitors.'

She raised her eyebrows as she questioned: 'Visitors? Ferrons?'

'No, other people. Are you sure that high-ranking Topidian spacefleet officers are fluent in Interkosmo?'

'Definitely. The Topides are governing the Orion-Delta system, which is part of the Great Imperium.'

'Was part,' corrected Rhodan dryly. 'These fellows gained the upper hand long ago, and you let them get away with it. Don't you realize where this must lead? The Topides will gobble up the outlying planet sectors and will strengthen their economic and political power structure, so they'll rank among the first-class powers. What measures is your wonderful Arkon taking to counteract this menace?'

Thora remained silent. Khrest, the scientist, lowered his head before he replied softly:

'We've lost the initiative of the human race. You know that.'

'I had to remind you of it again. But you must realize you can have confidence in me, Khrest. Time is running out. You must have strong and dependable friends. We're in the same boat. You're not interested in having a reptilian race nibble away your disintegrating empire. This nibbling will soon become a voracious appetite. May I ask you to follow my instructions in the future?'

5/ TRICKING A TOPIDE

The Arkonide combat robots weren't endowed with ambition. Feelings and inhibitions were as foreign to them as they were inherent in thinking, organic beings. By contrast the robots functioned by means of a carefully programmed positronic 'brain' where everything had been unalterably predetermined, which was of importance for the four-armed robot specialists.

Thus, it happened that the multi-jointed arm mechanisms instantly assumed their firing position as the individual sector of the positronic brain registered the first nonhuman impulses.

Bell frowned. A quick glance from Marshall informed him that the individual he sought was getting closer.

A Ferronian guard saluted. They walked past him, crossed the next corridor and stepped down to the round hall with the 'cages.'

Bell stood still. A pungent odor offended his nostrils. If nothing else had proved the difference, this almost painful smell sufficed.

'Nobody should use invectives for truly intelligent beings. It's not their fault if they have different bodies. But this stench...!'

Bell swallowed hard and said no more. Cautiously he stepped to the railing of the circular walkway.

The sprawling prison was located on the smaller of the two Ferrol moons. It was a dead, completely sterile world from which an escape was impossible without elaborate technical equipment. The Ferrons had refused to house these prisoners, captured in the countless battles and skirmishes of the last war, on their own world.

However, the real reason for stationing these prisoners was noted with mixed feelings. by Perry Rhodan Evidently, bio-medical experts were conducted on the premises. There wasn't much information leaking out and the Thort permitted no discussion of this topic.

Bell looked around the circular hall. These intelligent descendants of reptiles were crowded into cells resembling cages, which were secured by heavy locks and an electrically charged grid.

Deafening mewling and whistling erupted from the cages. Strong, dark brown bodies jumped against the high fences.

'Feeding time,' called out the camp commandant in a stentorian voice.

Marshall cleared his throat. His tanned face looked very impressive under the white wig. His forehead, having been changed by application of plastic and cosmetics, looked much higher, so that the telepath took on the appearance of a genuine Arkonide. Bell resented Marshall's stiff and dignified attitude.

Bell remembered Rhodan's ribbing, that he could never personify an Arkonide. So he pretended to be a commander of one of the countries in the Arkon colonies.

'Do you think it's right to treat prisoners in this manner?' demanded Marshall harshly.

The prison commandant looked at him without understanding. The idea was beyond the comprehension of a Ferron.

Chaktor gave out a warning sound and made an imploring gesture so that the mutant dropped the matter. The feeding in the cages below continued. It was an ugly and depressing sight for humans.

The combat robot kept its weapon arms in a lowered position. Close by, at an even level with the round walkway, was a row of single cells which were better furnished and even had sanitary facilities.

Signs written in the Ferronian language indicated who was locked up behind the cage doors.

High-ranking Topidian officers who'd been captured one way or another were

incarcerated in these single cells.

Bell prudently went closer. A dark-brown figure leaped up from a rough bench. The individual who was wearing strange insignia attached to a dark uniform stood without moving but poised to strike at the first sign of danger. The big glittering round eyes in his fiat-squashed and hairless skull were watching intensely. The small body of about average human height had two arms and two legs. The uncovered parts of his body revealed the scaly nature of his skin. His hands were divided into six digits. The apparently very long and narrow feet were encased in footwear resembling boots.

This creature affected Bell and Marshall like an oppressive nightmare, however he was endowed with superior intelligence. There couldn't be the slightest doubt about it, that mankind, at its present stage of development, would've been hopelessly lost in an unexpected assault by this weird offspring of nature.

Bell turned pale. Wordlessly, the representatives of two utterly divergent developments of life regarded each other with curiosity.

John Marshall, too, was greatly disturbed. Clearly, almost too clearly, did he receive the thoughts from the alien's mind. It was filled with fear and panic. Marshall divined that the Ferrons had indeed conducted atrocious experiments with the Topides. This dangerous looking descendant of reptiles from a solar system eight hundred and fifteen light-years away was overwhelmed by fearful emotions.

'The name is Chren-Tork. High-ranking staff officer. A so-called "Tubtor," which is the equivalent of a battle cruiser commander,' explained the Ferronian camp commandant.

Bell stopped in front of the bars. The slender torso of the prisoner flexed for a jump. Only Marshall recognized that this was merely an instinctive gesture of defense.

Bell looked different from the blue-skinned Ferrons and the Topide felt a vague danger.

Chren-Tork was alarmed. His big eyes took everything in. As officer of the Topide navy staff he was fully aware who was responsible for the terrible defeat. At least he realized that the sturdy, squat man wasn't one of the Arkonides. They had hair and more elongated torsos. Just the same, Bell appeared to be a threat.

John Marshall suddenly stepped into view, which caused Chren-Tork to retreat in frightful haste and with scared whistling to the farthest corner of his cell. Marshall advanced a few more steps.

Now Chren-Tork knew whom he was dealing with. This was a member of the Great Imperium against which the Topides had rebelled in bloody wars. There was no sense in pretending anymore. The envoy of the planet Arkon wasn't impressed by his, Chren-Tork's, menacing appearance. The two races had known each other for thousands of years.

With his thoroughly pragmatic logic Chren-Tork knew that he was inferior to the Arkonides in every respect and not solely as far as their gigantic spaceships were concerned.

'Chren-Tork, Tubtor of the Three Sun Realm,' Marshall began coldly in fluent Interkosmo. He'd learned this interstellar Esperanto, common throughout the galaxy, through the hypno-training method of the Arkonides.

'Is that who you are? Answer me. I know perfectly well that you understand and speak Interkosmo.'

The answer sounded shall and high. Even though the tone of his voice was like whistling, his reply was clear and well-reasoned. He was an intelligent being.

'Why do you ask this? It's quite obvious.'

'You're coming with me. My commander wishes to interrogate you on board his ship.'

Chren-Tork was afraid that his last hour had come. His muscular body sagged again.

'I'm a prisoner of these primitives here. You have no right...!'

'Of course I do,' interrupted Marshall stiffly. 'You're under the jurisdiction of the Great Imperium. Open up!'

This order was addressed to the prison commandant. Chren-Tork suddenly looked down the barrel of a deadly weapon. He recognized the Arkonide disintegrator.

'This weapon works quietly and very unobtrusively,' remarked Bell with a smirk on his lips. He, too, had learned Interkosmo in a language training course.

'Come on out,' motioned Bell. 'By the way, I come from that world which you got mixed up with the main planet of this space sector.'

Bell laughed derisively. The game was on. Marshall registered the instantaneous attention shown by the Topide. He left little doubt that the Topide staff already had misgivings and had begun to suspect that a small error in their calculations of the

target area had occurred. They had, therefore, attacked the wrong people.

Chren-Tork came out to the walkway. He was not actually walking, it was more like a supple movement of his body as he advanced. Bell moistened his dry lips. He caught Marshall's wink and knew that the Topide had fallen for the ruse.

At the landing field Chaktor certified the transfer of the important prisoner. The bureaucracy on Ferrol even surpassed the red tape on Earth and made it look trivial by comparison. It took ages before the prisoner was allowed to cross the transparent passage into the hatch of the little spaceship.

Minutes later they took off. The alien prisoner cowered on a folded-down seat in front. The robot guard was watching him with pointed weapon.

The small moon was quickly left behind by the Ferronian commuter ship. Bell observed for a few minutes the display of light emitted by the first-rate quantum engine. Then he turned apprehensively to Marshall.

'Did he really bite? The guy gives me the creeps.'

'That's over for me. He's afraid and that does it. Watch out, Chaktor's making his play.'

When the Topide heard the whispered words of the Ferron who was casually passing by, he regained his calm. If he could have smiled, he would have done it now.

Of course, Chren-Tork was informed about the Ferronian resistance movement. The people of the opposition group had seen to that in the prison camp on the satellite.

He followed the Ferronian officer with glistening eyes. However, he couldn't hear the low voice of the vigilant telepath: 'Okay, they made the first contact. He believes that Chaktor is hostile to the Arkonides.'

Bell flopped down on his seat.

A little later the air of the planet Ferrol was noisily rushing by the hull.

The sensor antenna on the upper dome of the battle-ship became activated. Rhodan was already given a report before the commuter ship had begun to make its landing.

'They'll soon be here.' Khrest was worried. 'I hope you don't think that you can fool an intelligent and shrewd Topide with mere assertions and faked documents. I know these people. They have no feelings. Any actions based on emotions mustn't be expected. If I, for instance, would feel that it's better to leave the Vega system and to go where there's more of a chance, I'd do so, but the Topides, never. You'll have to come up with a smarter trick, Perry.'

'Wait and see,' said Rhodan soothingly. 'So far, our operation's running smoothly.'

'You're a barbarian after all,' Thora shot back, looking very angry. 'You're working with very unconventional methods; primitive methods, I should say.'

Rhodan's face showed his famed bland yet meaningful smile.

'Very primitive,' he confirmed cryptically. 'Nobody'd expect this from an Arkonide. Didn't you just claim that these fellows can only think logically? By virtue of this ability they must recognize that my little game is on the level.'

Thora's jaw fell open.

Khrest expressed his surprise. 'A bold theory,' he interjected hastily. 'Are you sure? You're no Arkonide!'

'Why do you think I got these wigs? A Topide won't know the difference. For them an Arkonide is very tall and very slim. He has smooth skin, white hair on his head and small, reddish eyes. I'm going to look exactly like that. Any more objections?'

Khrest was confused and didn't answer. Rhodan's reasoning had begun to weaken his mental resistance.

Minutes later the ship touched down and Bell announced himself over the radio.

'Okay. All clear over here. Don't be too polite. Chaktor's coming with us. He communicated several times with Chren-Tork. Officially we haven't noticed anything. Chren-Tork thinks by now that he's fairly safe.'

'He should. Hurry up!'

The interrogation had taken place in the control center of Stardust II. Rhodan and a few parapsychological members of the Mutant Corps had sprung some well-planned surprises which in all probability would never be known to the Topide prisoner.

As Chren-Tork, mentally and physically fatigued, slipped out of the ship under the robot's watchful eye, he hadn't the slightest idea that he'd been under the influence of an Arkonide psycho-ray emitter for more than an hour.

Next, it had been the turn of Kitai Ishibashi, the Japanese mesmeric mutant. He had a

talent for forceful suggestion. It was out of the question that the Topide staff officer could ever detect that he didn't act of his own free will.

Nevertheless, certain ideas had been firmly planted in his brain which compelled him to do exactly as Rhodan wished.

When the nonhuman figure appeared on the picture screen of the outboard monitoring system, Rhodan took off his exquisitely fitted wig with a leisurely movement. A human observer would probably have recognized the white crown of hair as false but it would be impossible for a Topide to make this differentiation. Rhodan was sure to have made a big impression on the lizard.

Outside, Chren-Tork was loaded into a ground vehicle by a Ferronian guard-commando under Chaktor's orders. He was supposed to be taken back to the prison camp on the little moon the following day; but this had to be prevented according to Rhodan's scheme.

'That was my last contribution to this action,' mumbled the chief, staring at the television screens. 'Now it's all up to Chaktor. All will be in vain if they get wise to him or decide to reject him.'

'It'll be inevitable that we put the battleship into action,' Khrest added quietly. 'Incidentally, you gave an excellent performance as an Arkonide commander.'

'I've always told you that humanity is an admirable creation; but man has to be guided and led a little,' Rhodan said with a tired smile. 'We have a tremendous potential, many gifts and talents; all we need is a little time to develop our capabilities. That's why the Topides can't be permitted to discover the Earth, at least not until mankind is mature and unified. Consequently, these beings have to be driven out of the Vega system. We're now observing frequent structure shifts in the normal state of four-dimensional space. That means these reptiloids are busily flying around. In a few hours we'll find out if our efforts have been successful.'

'And if not...!'

'Then we have no other choice. We'd have to launch a most vigorous attack.' Rhodan spoke somberly. 'Of course, we'll have to put in an appearance anyhow. It's essential that we back up the activities of our agents. In any case, it won't be such a serious matter as it would've been without our preparations. Don't you agree?'

Khrest said nothing. He was unable to keep up with Rhodan's schemes. He decided that only people from Earth were cunning enough to play such complicated games.

Outside, the Topide staff officer was driven away in a Ferronian military vehicle. He was now utterly convinced that Rhodan's native world was located in the solar system of Capella, forty-five light-years away. Supposedly, Rhodan came from the fifth planet. Astronautical charts and documents referring to these details had been carefully prepared and smuggled into the hands of the opposition group by the mutants Marshall, Noir and Ishy Matsu.

Now Rhodan relied on Chaktor's skill to convince the Topides on the six moons of the fortieth planet that it would be advisable to invade the world of the humans in a surprise attack in order to eliminate this source of danger once and for all. After that it would be easy for them to take care of the relatively helpless Ferrons.

Were those Topides really such cold, logical thinkers as Khrest claimed? If it was true, Rhodan's plan was bound to succeed - he'd considered any and all conceivable circumstances and nothing was left to chance.

It would have been much simpler to deploy the Arkonide battleship in an onslaught. However, any number of unpredictable accidents could have happened and if he'd thus risked Stardust II it might have suffered such disabling damage that, as a consequence, the very existence of mankind on Earth would have been imperiled.

The time hadn't come yet when Rhodan could take such chances; mankind's capability and technical resources to build spaceships of the Stardust type hadn't evolved yet, Rhodan kept telling himself with painful clarity. He had to bide his time meanwhile.

Absentmindedly his fingernails were crumbling away the artful buildup on his forehead. Doctor Haggard had done a masterful job.

'We'll have to establish a department for makeup artists in the Mutant Corps,' he mused aloud. 'Bell, make a note of that. We have great experts on Earth like Piercemore, Reerdon, Smithdik.'

Then he walked with drooping shoulders across the wide control center, his men watching him. He stopped in front of the armored panel of the personnel exit and looked at his watch.

'Clear the ship for takeoff. We're going to push into the system shortly before

sundown. We'll use everything we've got, Captain Klein!'

The trim officer stood at attention, his face showing profound respect.

'Sir?'

'Report to the Thort of Ferrol. Advise him that I consider it absolutely essential to undertake a reconnaissance flight with our mighty battleship. Our survey of the structure-field measurements indicates the 'strongest probability that the Topides are about to launch a surprise attack on the ninth world of the system. Have him inform the Ferronian defence posts. We'll start exactly two hours before sundown. '

Klein saluted without a word.

'One more thing!' Rhodan displayed his determined smile. Bell knew that hard expression in his light eyes.

'Chaktor's going to flee in a Ferronian destroyer after nightfall. He'll take the Topide with him. Naturally, it would be completely logical to try to explain his successful escape.'

'What do you mean by that, please?' gasped Thora, failing to comprehend Rhodan's plotting.

'Illogical if we and our swift battleships were present on Ferrol,' Rhodan enlightened her gently. 'Chaktor wouldn't get very far in that case. Our acceleration rate is a thousand times faster and our punch a million times stronger. You can't be serious if you think that the Topide fleet commander would believe for one minute that Chaktor could escape against our will with his puny ship. He couldn't do that if he had a ten hour headstart. Consequently, we need an alibi to justify the success of his getaway. If we're not here, we can't pursue him; it's as simple as that. Bell, we'll push off with so much power and noise that everybody, including Chren-Tork, can hear us, if we have to turn this spaceport into rubble. We want to make sure that we'll win this game.'

Rhodan nodded to the silent men and left.

'Damn it!' Klein swore lustily. 'I wouldn't have thought of that!'

Bell squinted at the light panels above. Then his nostrils flared. 'His brain is slowly turning into a calculating machine,' he remarked in resignation. 'Soon I'll believe myself that Rhodan will make suckers out of these reptiles... Now, if Nyssen is broadcasting, as planned, that an armada of spaceships is on the way to the Vega system, the Topide fleet commander ought to get pretty sick. If I were in his shoes, I'd clear out of these six unimportant moons and try to beat us to the punch by jumping on our alleged home world in an unexpected offensive. Moreover, every strategist on my staff would advise me to take advantage of the temporary weakened defense of the planet because of the absence of its strongest battleships. A devilish plan; and risky, too.'

'To begin with, Nyssen's message transmission has to be picked up,' explained Thora somewhat ironically. You seem to be of the opinion that all human scheming will succeed without fail.'

Bell treated her to one of his soulful looks.

'You'll never learn,' he sighed. 'If Rhodan had anything to say in your almighty Imperium your sleepy-headed compatriots would be astonished. Believe me, they'd wake up in a hurry from their artistic daydreams.'

Thora left the room, leaving Bell grinning from ear to ear.

6/ BEYOND IMAGINATION

Tako Kakuta, the man with the astounding mastery of personal teleportation, had leaped into the prison about one hour after sundown.

At the same moment, the Japanese mesmeric mutant gasped in horror. Chaktor's men had acted exactly according to plan except that they neglected to follow the strict orders to spare the life of the innocent guards.

Tako's Arkonide combat suit made him invisible to normal eyes, due to the built-in light-refraction field. He was standing in a hidden corner of the small guard station which served as a transitory prison.

There were only a few cells and the Topide was kept in one of them. Tako Kakuta saw the guards slump down. The pulse-energy shots of the Ferronian ultrarayguns were blinding but almost noiseless.

Tako wanted to shout to express his horror but before he could do so Chaktor came

rushing along the narrow passage. The cell door was forced open. Chren-Tork, in a state of extreme agitation, appeared in the doorway, and Tako was able to listen to bits and pieces of the hasty conversation between the Ferronian space officer and the Topide who spoke Ferronian well. The Topides also used special teaching methods for the study of alien languages.

Tako moved closer. Nobody saw nor heard him. Chaktor didn't know either that Rhodan had assigned one of his mutants to this secret surveillance.

'You have a choice,' Tako overheard the strained voice. 'You know through the media of television that we're opposed to the stationing of Arkonides on our planets. I'm acting on behalf of the resistance movement. If I help you to escape, I'm risking my neck.'

'Has the Thort been informed?' asked Chren-Tork, weighing the situation carefully.

'No, we're going to overthrow him as soon as we've come to an understanding with your fleet command. We don't want you nor the Arkonides here. If you sign an agreement to leave our solar system, we'll help you to defeat your enemies decisively.'

'I have no authority to commit our fleet.'

'I'm aware of that. I'm offering you galactonautic documents with the exact astronomical position of the planet from which the Arkonides have arrived here. The fact is that they don't come from Arkon but from one of its colonies which has won its independence through Rhodan.'

'That explains this extraordinary zeal,' whistled the Topide excitedly. 'We've been wondering about it. On Arkon, they've been asleep for a long time. If you help me to gain my freedom, I'll guarantee you a hearing and negotiations. Do you have a fast spaceship available.'

'I have a new destroyer at my disposal. Rhodan took off before sundown for the ninth planet. Do you know that we've obtained those galactonautic documents from a female Arkonide traitor? I'm being frank with you.'

'I've heard about it. The news was all over the prison. Let's not talk any longer.'

'I insist on a guarantee that you'll withdraw from our system,' repeated Chaktor stubbornly. 'Without it, it would be senseless to set you free.'

'I give you my assurance,' acknowledged the Topide officer.

Tako Kakuta laughed grimly. The situation was too transparent to be taken seriously. The Topide was mortally afraid and would have agreed to anything under the circumstances.

'Don't try to deceive us. You must deal with us, not with the Thort. He's too weak and yielding. We prefer to come to terms with you rather than tolerate that Rhodan takes over our world completely. I've learned from reliable sources that Rhodan has mobilized his space-fleet. It's now proceeding toward our stellar constellation. You'll be doomed if you don't leave immediately.'

Chren-Tork was swept away in a wave of panic by this unforeseen disclosure.

'Proof!' he cried.

'You'll get it. Well, is everything settled between us?' Tako saw that Chaktor was still keeping his weapon trained on the Topide. The hurried conversation stopped as suddenly as it had begun, with the Topide's nod of agreement.

Chaktor didn't even glance at the dead bodies of the guards. Rhodan had provided him with an Arkonide psycho-beam emitter with which he could have incapacitated the men without harm. However, he'd apparently run into unexpected complications.

The Ferrons disappeared with the Topide staff officer whose rank was known as Tubtor.

Tako waited a few more minutes. Then he concentrated his thoughts on a point on the periphery of the spaceport and dematerialized by means of his unprecedented mental powers. It was a 'transition' of his body to another place. The Arkonides had long known that energy units of the fifth dimension could be manipulated by parapsychological forces, but it was extraordinary that an Earthman should possess this ability.

A faint glimmer appeared in the spaceport. Tako Kakuta materialized again near the launching pad where Chaktor's brand-new destroyer was waiting.

Here, too, everything seemed in good order. The guards had been informed that Chaktor was to start for a short reconnaissance flight.

Tako felt chilly in spite of the light-refraction field around him. Heavy clouds were beginning to form again over the nearby mountains. The time for the usual daily storm had almost come.

As the first gusts of wind howled across the landing field, Chaktor arrived in a glide-car. Seconds later three Ferrons had faded into the egg-shaped hull of the little

spaceship. One of them was conspicuously taller than his companions.

Before the ship with thundering aft engines streaked into the dark sky, the mutant had pulled back. He felt the short heat wave and was blinded by the dazzling light effects. Finally, he heard the rumbling dying away in the distance.

Tako had seen enough. The escape had been nicely carried out. He returned with a short transition-jump to the low building which Rhodan had erected at the edge of the defense screen. At this time the energy dome was non-functioning. Tako could enter the oblong room unmolested.

Ishy Matsu, the expert telepath of the Mutant Corps, looked up. She'd already perceived Tako's brain waves some time ago.

'That was quite some noise out there. Did it come off all right?'

Tako nodded silently. Then he sat down before the visiphone set which worked faster than light. The Arkonide hypercom could contact the battleship far out in space.

As the storm turned into a hurricane and heavy rain poured down, Tako Kakuta began to talk into the mike:

'Calling Stardust II, Kakuta speaking. Calling...'

The fighter robots standing in front of the door made sure that no one disturbed the two lonely people. Everything was quiet outside except for the storm. The flight of the Topide hadn't yet been detected.

Kakuta's message had been received on board the Stardust three hours ago. The enormously efficient instruments of the battleship had even pinpointed the fleeing destroyer, though it was more than thirty million miles away in the interplanetary space of Vega.

The ninth planet was tracing its predetermined orbit far from the flaming giant sun. The battleship was almost at a standstill in the deep black void between the planets.

Rhodan knew that the novel destroyer of the Ferrons would require approximately twenty-two hours of ship time to reach the simple velocity of light. Other Ferronian ships took one hundred hours to get there. Consequently, it was well-nigh impossible for the Ferrons to catch up with Chaktor. There was no danger whatsoever in that respect.

However, Rhodan couldn't return to the main planet yet. By now the prison break had been discovered. Takuta reported via hypercom that the Thort was in a desperate mood and trying frantically to teach Rhodan by radio. Since the Ferrons didn't possess the superfast telecoms, Rhodan was in a position to elude them. He neither heard nor saw anything.

The monitoring screens of the gigantic battleship were in full operation. The three hundred men of the crew were on restricted alert for possible battle action.

However, full alarm had been evoked for the personnel in the communication center. Here, each station was manned double.

Rhodan was standing in inexplicable and nerve-wracking calm in front of the diagram screens of the Arkonide structure sensors. They were highly efficient implements for measuring and locating the structural disturbance of the normal four-dimensional space induced by any force.

So far the sensors had reacted repeatedly. They all came from the direction of the fortieth planet of the system. Judging by these observations, the Topides were continually fortifying their position. The incoming ships undoubtedly brought reinforcements from the eight hundred and fifteen light-years distant Topide system.

Rhodan was waiting with steadily growing impatience. Eight hours after Chaktor's escape, the powerful hypercom receivers finally began to operate. Instantaneous positronic calculations confirmed that the hyperwave transmission originated precisely in the space sector where the home world of the Arkonides was presumed to be located. The beam came from the Capella system.

At least this had to be assumed if one followed the extension of the fictitious line between the suns Vega and Capella. The signal strength of the transmitter on the auxiliary ship - utilizing its full energy - had the right intensity to infer that a station on a Capella planet could have sent the message.

Rhodan went stiffly to the automatic coding machine. His face was devoid of any expression.

Unperturbed, he remained in front of the decoder. The positronic was working to decipher the intercepted sequences of symbols. They'd selected a very intricate and devious code. On the other hand, Rhodan knew full well that the complicated code was known to the enemy ever since the time it had been used by the fleet of the Great

Imperium.

Attention! Deciphered message as follows ... came the text from the mechano-printer.

Admiral of the Fleet Nyssen to the Exalted Chief Administrator Rhodan. Received Courier Order No. 3/ 1219. S-7 under command of Captain Tsen returned safely. State of alarm decreed on Capella 5. Fleet in readiness, target area noted. Transition coordinates computed and programmed. Available battle forces: 22 battleships, Imperium class; 31 battle cruisers, Arkon class; 77 light cruisers, 105 smaller units. Starting in 7 tantas Galacto-time Standard. Request further orders and confirmation of my message. End message.

The same text was transmitted simultaneously through the loudspeaker in the large room.

Rhodan looked around as if uninterested. It took a few moments until the speechless listeners detected his grin.

'What do you know! Nyssen has promoted himself to Admiral and me to Exalted Chief Administrator.'

'I've never seen such impudence!' screamed Thora, completely beside herself and trembling all over. 'How do you dare use the venerable titles of my country for your purposes? You barbarian! You underdeveloped thing! will...!'

She fell silent when she saw Khrest shrugging his shoulders. The great scientist was sitting on a swivel chair beside the red-haired member of the human race, hiding his face in his hands. Bell bellowed in a manner that would have earned little respect and honor for the Security Minister of the New Power.

Thora recoiled in disgust. Her beautiful eyes sparkled. This was too much for her. And worst of all, even Khrest was forgetting his dignified attitude.

'I hate you!' she cried, her face flushed with anger.

Captain Klein escorted the Arkonide woman, who'd gone completely to pieces, Out of the communication center.

'Thank God,' sighed Rhodan. 'Isn't she wonderful? At least she's honest, and I always appreciate that. She could be a woman from our planet.'

Khrest looked up suddenly. A faint smile adorned the lips of the old man.

Perry, that was the finest compliment you could've paid to a woman of my race. Really.'

Never before had the men seen their commander so embarrassed.

'Forget it, please,' said Rhodan, choking slightly. There was a gleam in his eyes. Then he abruptly turned around to the radio technicians of the hypercom-transmitter, to whom he indicated the answering message be sent via beam transssion:

Rhodan to Admiral of the Fleet Nyssen. Rush all preparations and take off immediately. Order Stage One alarm. Be ready for massed attack on Topide units. Rendezvous in vicinity of 38th planet of Vega system. Courier ship to return at once. End message from Rhodan, Chief Administrator on Capella 5.

Minutes later the coded message was racing from the powerful beam-transmitters of the battleship. Everything possible had been done.

'I'm going mad,' mumbled Bell. With how many battleships is Nyssen dropping in? Twenty-two of them? listen, chief, I must say...'

'Cut it out,' interrupted Rhodan quickly. 'We've come to the crucial point. Has Nyssen's message been picked up on the six moons? From a technical standpoint it's safe to assume that it can be done. Nyssen has moved five hundred light-years out into space. The scattering effect of the beam over this distance was sufficient. Since the Topides are familiar with the code, Chaktor will find the ground well prepared on his arrival. If he hands over, on top of that, the documents purporting to show the position of our home world, I'd have to see the fleet commander who doesn't take immediate action. We're going to beat them precisely because they're always such logical thinkers. That'll be the end of it. We can't afford to exchange any more than these two messages. That would only serve to create suspicion.'

'What if the Topides failed to receive the message or were unable to decode it?' inquired Khrest, who was still worried.

'But they did get it! They've cracked the code, although we don't have to know it. There's no reason why it should make them suspicious. Furthermore, they must realise that we can't originate from tired Arkon, where nobody is left with enough ambition to undertake such a venture. If the Topide admiral is smart, he'll leave in a great hurry. He's well aware that he has nothing to match our Stardust. What a calamity he'd be in if

he were to wait for a whole fleet of these colossal ships!'

7/ AS IF THE UNIVERSE HAD COME TO AN END

Ferrol, the eighth planet of the Vega system and the main world of an intelligent race, required barely twenty-four hours of Terrestrial time to put all available elements of its fleet into space.

It was a vast quantity of those egg-shaped spaceships which had performed so poorly under the first onslaught of the Topides. They weren't equipped with the energized defense screens. The armament was unsatisfactory since they had none of the beam cannons which functioned with lightning-fast pulse-energy effects. Only a very few units had been fitted out with Arkonide thermo-weapons.

Besides, the Ferronian ships were too slow and much too cumbersome for the indispensable maneuvers. Almost ninety-nine percent of the ships on hand needed one hundred hours of Terrestrial time to attain the simple velocity of light. This was because of the low density application of quanta impulses. The incomparable dependability of the proven engines represented little advantage.

The Thort had looked upon Chaktor's desertion as a great historical catastrophe. While Rhodan was out in space on Stardust II, the Thort called for a merciless investigation by the police and Secret Service on Ferrol and the neighboring colony Rofus.

The existing opposition group had committed criminal acts to overthrow the lawful government of the Thort.

However, Rhodan wasn't present during these searches. Moreover, he didn't consider it advisable to inform the Thort at this time that Chaktor was acting as 'double agent.' This matter had really nothing to do with the resistance movement.

Thus the fleet of Ferrol had formed its echelons deeply staggered in space. They amounted to nothing more than a pitiful, technically inadequate reserve for a single Arkonide battleship which, at full thrust, reached the speed of light within ten minutes.

In the tremendous expanse of the Vega constellation the fortieth planet was situated at a mean distance of twenty-eight billion miles from its sun. In free fall and at 99.5 percent of the simple velocity of light, it would take the Stardust - including the acceleration and braking operation - about 48.8 standard hours time to travel to the fortieth satellite.

A transition in the region of the hypercontinuum in the fifth dimension would have taken only a moment but Rhodan had to give up the idea in the scope of the overall planning. It would have been extremely foolhardy to leap to the six moons with just one spaceship. There was no way of knowing how many of the Topide units had been assembled there.

Naturally, the fleet of the aliens didn't stand a chance against the Arkonide supergiant. Unless they accidentally scored a hit. Only a stupid accident or malicious fate could make the Topides victorious.

But Rhodan had to take all possibilities into account. He couldn't exclude the possibility that the Topides might have captured a few other Arkonide spaceships. After all, they'd seized the Stardust II and had held it temporarily.

This reflection had been the principal reason for the very involved, deceptive ruse he'd devised. Although the super-battleship was adequately manned, there was on the other hand, not sufficient manpower to spare for the concurrent deployment of the eight available auxiliary ships.

His crew of three hundred trained men was just enough to handle the battleship properly. The big auxiliary ships had to remain in their hangars. At best, he could have managed a lightning-fast sortie of a space fighter group but these pilots would have been missed in the full performance of the ship's operation.

These were truly problems which couldn't be solved in an off hand manner.

The spherical giant had advanced beyond the orbit of the thirty-ninth planet in slightly over forty-eight hours. The bright point of Number Forty already glittered on the contour screen of the location sensors.

The mathematical evaluation of Chaktor's flight had been determined. The positronic

computer on board had accurately calculated the data. There was no margin for error in this respect.

Consequently, Chaktor's destroyer had been passed, notwithstanding the fact that he had twenty-four hours headstart. Whereas the Stardust II was still proceeding close to the speed of light, Chaktor had already been decelerating for the last twenty hours.

This meant - according to the evaluation - that the radio message he'd sent to the Topide fleet commander had been received forty-four hours prior to his own arrival.

These forty-four hours were the time-differential between the acceleration and deceleration rates and the radio transmission at the speed of light, a factor which hadn't been overlooked on the Stardust.

The auxiliary ship S-7 under the command of Major Nyssen had returned to Ferrol shortly before Rhodan's start. Nyssen had strained the engines of his little ship to the limit. However, both of the high-grade transitions had been performed perfectly. Rhodan's answer through the hypercom had been heard - loud and clear - on board the S-7. So the order for the immediate start of the alleged Capella fleet should have been picked up on the fortieth planet.

It was a desperate situation with many unknown factors. The pressure was mounting steadily for the urgent solution of the precarious equation. The Topides had to be compelled to evacuate the Vega system now, or they would find the Earth sooner or later.

Perry Rhodan had taken up his position at his battle station an hour before. The optical monitoring screens of the scanning system were glowing before him. The total surveillance also included the contour screen panels of the variable energy locators and the ultra-light-speed sensors.

They already delineated the fast-nearing planet sharply and accurately. Far behind the ship - shrunk to a harmless looking ball of light - the superstar Vega appeared suspended in the deep black void of the universe.

Only the highly sensitive instruments were able to differentiate the fortieth planet from the countless other points of lights. There were billions of suns in the galaxy. The profusion of stars was filling the field of vision. Among the multitudes was also a world which had no light of its own. This was Planet Forty, the huge icy sphere which received but little warmth from the distant Vega.

'Brake retardation in eight seconds,' rang out the metallic sound of the automatic navigation control loudspeaker.

Rhodan looked upward. The array and complexity of instruments and control mechanisms was bewildering. Nonetheless, it was in Rhodan's power to control from his high-backed pilot seat the most important operations. Next to him, in the copilot's seat, sat Reginald Bell.

Captain Klein had assumed command of the firing control center. Khrest and Thora were assigned to a positronic computer for specific applications such as instantaneous evaluation of sudden occurrences fraught with danger. The mutants were waiting, ready for action, at their reserve posts in the control center.

All essential departments were hooked up to the small control screen panels in front of Rhodan's seat. The engine control room had already given the all clear signal some time ago. The energy center was set for manual operation and the weapon turrets had been slid out.

Thus, the smooth unbroken line of the hull's curvature had been studded with numerous bulges and protrusions. There were no personnel whatsoever in the turrets, since all firing was directed automatically by Captain Klein. He was aware that he was holding in his hands the greatest power of all times. His control panel was of such limited size that it made an almost ludicrous impression but, belying its appearance, every button could bring death to millions. The Arkonides had created veritable monsters when they built these vessels of the Imperium class. They were capable of destroying entire worlds and indeed had been used to establish the interstellar empire of the Arkonides.

At the end of exactly eight seconds the mighty body of Stardust II began to reverbrate. Power Stations I and II had all reactors running at maximum output. Moments later, flashing light signals indicated the generation of the required pressure absorption field.

Rhodan handled the controls with steady movements of his hands. He could have done it in his sleep. On the largest of the observation screens before him he could see the space sector directly ahead of the ship.

'Orientation Section to Commander,' the call came over the loudspeaker. 'Enemy ships in red zone thirty-two degrees, vertical green eighteen point five degrees; sixty-two units identified, close formation. Positronically computed speed twelve hundred seventy miles per second. Stop.'

Rhodan was unperturbed. He didn't seem to notice the sweat on Bell's forehead.

The Arkonide pulse-drive engines in the bulging equatorial rim of the battleship began to roar. Complicated nuclear reactions were automatically regulated in each engine with such precision that full synchronization was maintained at all times. There wasn't the smallest deviation nor the slightest vibration as a result.

Nobody felt the inertia forces which were brought into play by decelerating the thrust at three hundred miles per square-second. The field absorbers held the effective rate of gravity to one G, the normal value on Earth.

Glittering floods of light beams were shooting into space. The expelled particles were as fast as light but the ship's velocity was decreasing by the second.

A strange phenomenon could be observed. As the Stardust II was travelling close to the speed of light, it looked as if the pulse-energy beams were glued to the aperture of the energy-field jets. The more the ship slowed down, the farther the streams of light streaked forward, until they finally faded into space.

After a long quiet flight, Stardust's machines had suddenly turned the ship into a frenzied giant.

Rhodan switched his controls with a flick of the finger, causing intricate chain reactions. One push of the button activated the interconnected automatic switchbox which was carefully programmed to convert one electric impulse into a myriad detailed separate functions.

More and more power generators came alive. Never before had the crew experienced the battleship in action. This was the first time!

And so they watched the raging spectacle in great awe. Once more new reports came from the orientation Section.

'We're plunging straight into them,' said Bell over the radio. This was the only means of communication possible in the pervading din. All men were wearing the studded combat radio helmets with micro-receivers and transmitters. The officers had, in addition, visiscreens for interpersonal communication.

'They know that, too,' replied Rhodan curtly. 'I'd like to see how much respect they have for us. Captain Klein wait for permission to fire. orientation Section, did you identify Chaktor's destroyer?'

'Far behind us is a single ship trailing in space. Evaluation of energy output indicates quanta-drive engines.'

'That's him. We're going to push through their line. When Chaktor arrives, we'll be very busy. The Topides will want to give him a safe escort.'

Over the speakers of the radio helmets came a sigh, followed by Khrest's voice:

'Don't risk everything, Perry! How do you know that Chaktor's radio message about his escape has been properly appreciated by the Topides?'

'Intuition, premonition, sixth sense, call it what you like. Human beings have something of the sort. I'm sure they know on the six moons that a fleet from Capella is approaching. If I'm not badly mistaken the only reason for holding their lost position is their desire to wait for Chaktor and the escaped Topide officer, and it's for this purpose alone that the fleet commander called out the greater part of his available forces... Klein, permission to fire in three minutes. By that time we'll be within ten light-seconds distance. Khrest, will the density range of our beam weapons be effective over this distance?'

'You'll be surprised,' Thora's voice came through. 'You're playing with powerful instruments about which you know next to nothing.'

'We'll see about that,' promised Rhodan. His face was an expressionless mask and his eyes were glued to the frontal screen. The brief radioed instructions ceased; only the titanic machines kept on droning.

The body of Stardust II had been surrounded for some time with the five-dimensional defense screen which was invulnerable to energy units of the normal universe. It was inherent in the structure of the defensive weapon to absorb or reflect the more limited forces, regardless of whether they were materially stable bodies or nuclear reactions, hot as the sun.

And there were a few additional surprises the ship could dish out.

The protective screen extended almost sixty miles out into space.

In the meantime, the Topidian ships had become visually discernible on the front screen. They were traveling far below the speed of light and thus the flames of their engines could be seen easily and quickly.

The battleship was racing at half-speed of light toward the wedge-shaped formation of the enemy. Now was the time for the showdown and everybody was conscious of it.

They were rapidly approaching, so rapidly that a quick evasion had become impossible. There was only one way to go - straight through.

'The tactics of these lizards are all wrong,' said somebody. 'I'd have halted, turned around and moved in the opposite direction. All they'll get to see of us is our lightning-fast shadow.'

'Who was that?' roared Rhodan's voice from the radio helmet.

'Major Deringhouse, sir.'

'Keep your mouth shut, even if you're right. Is that clear?'

'Ready for the airlocks, sir. This time, I already know the ball game. This is the area where they jumped me with Rous and Calverman. It's the defense perimeter of the Topides.'

It took only a few more seconds. Everything went so fast and with such uncompromising determination that the outcome was inevitable. All they could do was hope and-if they had to-scream.

The speed of the Stardust II had been reduced by now to 48,000 miles per second. With blazing engines the battleship was racing toward the Topidian fleet; reached it and broke through.

It was only a matter of one second. Klein's computerized firing control gave the signal two seconds before reaching the line. He pressed the dimly glowing buttons with all ten fingers.

Rhodan heard Bell shout. Amidst the terrible roar of the firing weapon turrets, a shrill screaming and howling resounded as if the universe had come to an end.

It was almost too much for human senses to recognize the instantaneous emergence of the object coming at them with tremendous speed. They perceived only that a Topidian cruiser had smashed head-on into the defense screen of Stardust II.

With the howling came a blinding violet energy cloud which formed far ahead of the Stardust. This cloud couldn't destroy the screen either. The cloud veered from its flight direction, deflected by the terrible force of the collision, and became partially neutralized.

There was nothing left to be seen of the Topidian cruiser. The armour-plated outer hull of Stardust II reverberated like a bell.

Behind the Stardust II were two glowing clouds in space and far behind those was the evidence of Klein's handiwork with his ten weak fingers.

There he'd created seventeen miniature suns. These expanding gas clouds were all that was left of the demolished ships. If it hadn't been for these, no evidence would have remained of the destroyed enemy.

Stardust II had pushed through the tightly formed line.

'No...!' groaned Captain Klein with an incredulous look in his eyes, unable to utter any other word. 'No...'

'What did you think?' Thora shouted into the mike. Her face was distorted 'Did you believe that engineers of my race would build squirt-guns? Do you have any idea what you're handling there?'

'Get ready to attack,' Rhodan interrupted slowly. 'Klein, switch over to G-bombs. Aim at the third moon. It's uninhabited; there's no life on it, only a Topian direction-finder space station. Fire when I've taken up position. I'll approach to three light-seconds.'

Ahead of the still fast-moving battleship glowed the fortieth planet, now swollen to the size of a football. Rhodan held off braking till the last moment in order to keep his velocity as high as possible for the first attack. The Topidian ships were nowhere to be seen.

Soon the fortieth satellite of Vega filled the front visiscreen completely. Four of the six moons were in sight. Number Three - the smallest - was just emerging from the shadow of the planet.

Klein's sensors were tracing the target. A blinking lamp signaled that the firing control was set, eliminating the possibility of a malfunction.

Klein waited a few more seconds till the little moon hung dead center on the circular screen of the automatic target tracker. Once again he pressed the button, but using only one finger this time. One finger on one button!

The armament turrets in the upper pole region of Stardust II released two faintly glowing spirals which had nothing in common with the concept of a bomb.

They were fast as light but had no material substance. They weren't even part of the ordinary universe, since they existed on a different and higher energy level.

Even before the braking battleship had passed the moon, the latter had vanished in a blindingly brilliant display of light.

It didn't burn and it didn't fall apart; it simply vanished from its orbit as though it had never existed.

The two gravity bombs had dissolved the stable matter and transmitted it into hyperspace in conformance with the irrefutable laws of five-dimensional hypermathematics. It was Stardust's most powerful weapon and the latest accomplishment of Arkonide science.

Approximately three million miles beyond the planet's orbit, the spaceship finally came to a stop.

The braking maneuver had taken ten minutes during this brief span something happened which made even Khrest hold his breath.

'We'll wait here,' panted Rhodan as though he'd undergone a hard physical strain. 'The Topides may be nonhuman, vicious and all that, but I won't go through all this again! We're going to wait here, regardless of what they think. Chaktor has to land first. Klein, shoot only when attacked. Is that dear?'

'Sir, that'll be all right with me,' came the reply from the shaken captain. 'My God, if I didn't realize that we'd been attacked by an entire fleet, I don't think I could remain in this seat one more second.'

'Report from the Logics Evaluation Computer,' Thora announced. 'Logical motivation for waiting is sound. Presuming that the Topide commander is informed of the impending approach of the purported auxiliary fleet, he'll consider our present inactivity justified. The destruction of the uninhabited moon will be regarded as a demonstration. Final explanation: we're awaiting reinforcements and won't take any unnecessary risks prior to their arrival.'

Rhodan was smiling silently, barely twisting his mouth, an expression of his deep amusement.

Not even Perry Rhodan himself had expected such a super impact of the Arkonide weapons. Although he'd already been thinking in supelatives, now they'd been surpassed by reality.

A few moments later Stardust II began moving again, prepared to accelerate at top speed in case of danger. There was no Topidian ship in the vicinity. Only above the distant planet did the energy orientation instruments detect massed forces.

'It must've been hell on the other five moons,' said Bell gruffly. 'Gravitational forces have been greatly disturbed. Even though Number Three was fairly small, it will cause violent quakes on the rest of the satellites till everything has settled down again.'

'That's just what I'm hoping,' whispered Rhodan. 'My God' why don't they quit? Are they going to force me to put this battleship into action again? They ought to have learned by now that they have no defense against sudden spaceships as ours, and leave while the going is good.'

'Your'e forgetting the mentality of the Topides,' retorted Khrest quietly. 'They won't understand why you don't keep pounding them without letup, since you know very well that nothing can happen to you. Believe me. I know how they figure!'

'That may be so but I'll refrain from any more attacks,' insisted Rhodan. 'Deringhouse and Nyssen, are you ready to take off with your fighter planes? Are the mutants on board?'

'All clear,' came Nyssen's answer over the intercom.

'Thank you... Tako and Ras Tschubai, you must get Chaktor out of that mousetrap. I'll cover you with my guns till you make your leap. Is your automatic beeper in good working order? Otherwise we'll never find you again.'

That, too, had been checked. Four men alone in the cockpits of two tiny space-fighters were waiting to finish the mission. This time, the more-than-human mutants were to have the last word.

8/ TARGET OF DOOM

He'd seen the flaming, fire spitting monster with his own eyes. Now Chaktor knew for certain which side to choose.

As his destroyer passed the site of the debacle, he had to apply all his skill as a pilot to elude the glowing clouds of gas. Then he witnessed the destruction of the uninhabited satellite.

The Topides had awaited him with the remnant of their fleet and escorted him cautiously in a tightly closed phalanx to the sixth moon of the planet. Number Six was the biggest of the orbs around the icy giant sphere.

They proceeded in haste. The radio communication between the rescued Topide officer Chren-Tork and the first commander had taken on hectic proportions even before the landing.

The Topides were busy making a fortress of the moon. So far, everything was still primitive and in the first stages. It was obvious to Chaktor that this bastion was still very vulnerable. The necessary power plants weren't set up yet. Meanwhile the power generators of the spaceship had to be utilized as substitutes.

Cargo ships were no longer anywhere in sight. Apparently they'd been dispatched back home some time ago.

Chaktor and the second Ferronian resistance fighter had been practically dragged out of their little ship. They were barely given time to put on their spacesuits.

As Chaktor was unexpectedly and brutally separated from his friend, he knew that his life was hanging by a thread. Just before he disappeared in a tunnel and the airlock was closed behind him, he could hear the screaming of the other man.

Then he stood in a big hexagonal room which was equipped with all the paraphernalia of a command center. A pungent odor that took away his breath pervaded the air that didn't contain enough oxygen for Chaktor's lungs. He felt panicky as he watched many figures flitting around.

Of course he was unable to tell one alien from another. Only the uniforms distinguished the individual personalities. Shrill whistling in the ultrasonic range pained his ears. At the far end of the room he could see Chren-Tork reporting to another Topide whom Chaktor recognized as Chrekt-Orn, Admiral and chief of the invasion fleet.

By the extremely strict rules of discipline for the Topides, Chrekt-Orn had life and death authority. There was no recourse from his orders. No one but the far off despotic ruler was above him.

'Halt!' shrilled a heavily armed guard.

Chaktor stopped in front of the strange control consoles of the command center. He carried the little cartridge with the magnetic tape in his pocket. All pertinent data about the Capella system had been recorded on this tape.

Thin, steely fingers grabbed his forearm. He was barely able to move in the unrelenting grip. These creatures lacked everything which distinguished human or humanoid beings. Their thinking was exclusively determined by practical purposes. It was devoid of any emotions. To Chaktor's way of thinking they were cruel, but they thought of themselves only as clever. This was the difference!

As the deep rumbling began and the ground began to shake, they all jumped up from their flat chairs. The admiral was shouting orders. The tremors faded out until the next shock arrived. Chaktor suspected that this was caused by the destruction of the third moon.

He kept waiting. Finally he heard the sound of piercing warning signals. Outside, spaceships were racing into the vacuum which surrounded the airless surface of the globe. Chaktor smiled secretly. He was beginning to relax when he saw the Topide officer approach him. He was sure that the mighty Stardust II was near.

'The documents - where do you have the evidence?' cried Chren-Tork excitedly.

'I demand a contractual agreement. I cannot reveal the data until...'

They threw him to the floor. Tough, flexible fingers tore his uniform apart. Seconds later the admiral held the reel in his hands. One of the officers rushed outside with the tape. Chaktor wanted to smile again. Unquestionably, they were examining the data electronically, too.

Then he was dragged to the commanding officer. Chaktor found himself looking into the

glistening, cold eyes of a reptile. Trker-Tork acted as interpreter.

'What do you know about the arrival of an Arkonide fleet from a system which you call Capella?'

'Rhodan has sent a courier,' groaned Chaktor under the grip of the guard, a grip that was becoming more painful all the time.

'Tell the truth! We're questioning your subordinate right now. His brain will die but he'll tell everything. I'm warning you!'

Chaktor's face became distorted. This was it. 'I'm speaking the truth. The courier took off in the smaller spacesphere. I found that out from the woman who obtained the data from the memory bank in the big spaceship for me. She was shot. Rhodan is waiting for the fleet and has notified the Thort.'

Excited discussions were going on between the staff officers. Chrekt-Orn, who was responsible for the fleet, made a sudden decision.

'This confirms the decoded message,' admitted the freed prisoner respectfully. 'It means that Rhodan's home world has been stripped of its strongest ships. May I be permitted to submit for your consideration...'

Chrekt-Orn waved him away. He'd made his decision - based on his knowledge of infallible logic - that the six moons couldn't be held any longer.

More reports were coming in. Stardust II was racing with fantastic speed across the orbit of the fortieth planet, but abstained from any attack.

'They're biding their time. Their fleet must be coming soon.'

'What information did you get out of the other aborigine?'

The commander glanced at Chaktor. Minutes later he received the report. An officer entered and stated tersely:

'The brain of the second Ferron contained the already known data. Rhodan is awaiting heavy reinforcements, battleships of the Imperium class and cruisers of the Arkon class.'

Only later did Chaktor learn that his companion was no longer alive. His violent objections were disregarded.

He was pulled out of the room and taken through a hatch in the hold into a spaceship. He never saw those in authority again.

As it wasn't feasible to utilize the absorption field inside the launching tube, the two tiny pursuit ships were catapulted into space at several G's with a high-pitched screeching on the launching tracks. Only in space did the engines spring into action.

Ahead of them and slightly to the side, the massive Stardust II was gliding through the darkness. Only the engines illuminated the spherical body. It was a haunting specter, a symbol of power.

Major Deringhouse was in a familiar situation. There was the big planet 'below' him. Straight ahead, before the long tapered snouts of their fighter ships, lay the sixth moon.

Deringhouse and Nyssen released the safety devices of their pulse-energy cannons. They were flying a mission which had only some chance of success because of the battleship which would cover them.

Behind Deringhouse was Tako Kakuta, crouched in an emergency seat.

To the left, Nyssen's machine was racing through the space between the moons. He could be recognized only by the bright light-beams leaving his engines. Otherwise the little fighters were nothing but fleeting shadows, phantoms streaking by with furious speed.

The big battleship was outlined on Nyssen's observation screens. Rhodan's ship moved slowly enough to allow him to make a quick turn toward the sixth moon. By doing so, he covered the fighter ships and drew the attention of the radar stations to himself.

'Get ready,' ordered Deringhouse over the intercom. 'Kakuta and Tschubai: jump in exactly sixty-two seconds. You have to cross a distance of about nineteen thousand miles. We can't get any closer. Do you think you can make it?'

It was a reasonable question since it hadn't been possible to determine in advance the distance to be covered.

'Good grief!' sighed the African. 'That takes a lot of strength, with all the equipment I have to carry. But I'll make it somehow.'

'Okay,' said the Japanese simply. 'I'm grateful for the tough training I had on Venus. My limit is thirty thousand miles and I have to operate with two additional suits. You'll get as close as you can, I hope!'

Deringhouse nodded silently.

They accelerated to the peak of three hundred miles per square-second. Once the sixth moon became visible on the front screen, it grew larger very quickly.

'Attention!' crackled Rhodan's voice from the speakers in the radio helmets. 'Watch out! They're hurling their ships into space. Don't get into their line of fire. I'll push off. Good luck!'

The Stardust II veered from its course in a curve of a few million miles and the giant spaceship sored over the sixth moon. Two tiny forms descended toward the desolate heavenly body, which was about the size of Mercury.

Deringhouse knew that a single hit could knock him out completely. His forehead broke out in sweat. The thermostatically controlled air-conditioning turned on the cool air fan in his sealed helmet.

'Hold it!' shouted Deringhouse into his mike.

"They're going after the Stardust. Nyssen, keep going.. Attention: Ras and Tako - jump together when I give the word.'

Ras Tschubai had already switched on the miniature nuclear reactor in his Arkonide combat suit.

He could see Kakuta's face on his pilot's visiscreen. The Japanese was ready, too. The two men began to concentrate.

'Next to that big reddish dome,' suggested Tako. 'Have you located the target?'

Now it was only a matter of seconds. Deringhouse forced the pointed nose of his fighter down. Through the flames of the upper nose-jets he saw the forts coming rapidly closer. Next to him - too close for comfort - Nyssen's machine was bearing down toward the surface of the moon.

They'd come much closer than they first intended. About three thousand miles above the surface, Nyssen's thumb pressed the button. The wild roar of the rigidly mounted pulse-energy cannons drowned out the howling of the engines. Deringhouse was firing his guns too.

Down below on the bleak surface appeared two white-hot beams of fire which sped with terrific velocity at the forts and spread disaster. Ships were exploding and molten masses of metal shot up into the vacuum. They'd done a good job.

'Jump!' bellowed Deringhouse, pulling up the nose of his fighter at the same time. The moon fell away below him. When he looked back, Tako Kakuta had vanished as if he'd never been sitting on the emergency seat.

'My man's gone,' called Nyssen excitedly. 'Is every-thing okay?'

'Fine, they made it all right. I'm getting out of here. They're becoming lively down there.'

It was too late for the Topide defense. By the time one of the forts opened fire, the two machines had become little points of light in the distance. They were scurrying to reach the Stardust, which was already on the other side of the planet.

Ras Tschubai's micro-reactor was running noiselessly and so did the micro-transformer that was coupled with it. The light-refraction field they produced made him invisible to Topidian eyes. It was just one of those little tricks. Ever since he'd boarded the Topidian flagship, he'd switched off the protective pressurizing shield. Besides, the air was quite breathable.

This was where the staff of the Topidian admiral had been assembled for the last five hours. It was obvious that the last preparations for their departure were made. Orders were going out with increasing frequency.

The consoles were strange and had confusing switches. Ras Tschubai had to change his plans to set the automatic control of the flagship to bring about a random hypertransition jump. Unfortunately, he couldn't get close to the huge central computer. Instead he did something which was still within the realm of his possibilities.

Chrekt-Orn, the commander of the Topides, had for several hours been under the paralyzing influence of an Arkonide psychoray projector which had given him the urge to fly immediately - regardless of any and all circumstances - to the Capella system and to attack Rhodan's alleged home world with all his forces.

Furthermore, Ras had impressed on the chief of the invasion fleet to proceed exactly in accordance with the documents handed over by Chaktor. This way he'd devised an alternative for the future of his plan to interfere with the main computer control.

Ras had to be careful all along that he wasn't accidentally detected. His task was

complicated but his life was never endangered. It was in his power to leave the place at any time. Walls couldn't hold him.

The mutant knew for about one hour that the fleet commander had ordered the programming of the transition coordinates. At the present time the computer-controlled ships of the Topidian fleet were ready to start. They were fed all values from the main computer-brain in the flagship. Ras Tschubai didn't know why Khrest had attached such importance to the observation of this procedure. Rhodan, too, had been a little puzzled by the request of the Arkonide scientist, but had raised no objections. Therefore, the teleporter kept watching. The hours passed by. Slowly the project became a torture.

The moment they neatly materialized at the preselected point, Tako Kakuta disappeared again. Underneath his combat suit he wore a second one just like it. It was his assignment to find the Ferron Chaktor and to rescue him.

So far, Ras had heard nothing from his companion. The flagship was about thirteen hundred feet long: where should he start looking for Chaktor? There was still a question whether the Ferron was on board or not. It was just as likely that they'd locked him up some place else, or perhaps killed him. Tako Kakuta was searching desperately. For hours he'd been running up and down the corridors, listening to the small receiver which had previously been tuned in to Chaktor's brain waves.

If it had been feasible for a telepath to enter the Topidian ship, it would have taken no more than ten minutes to find Chaktor. However, the only ones who had been in a position to reach the six moons were teleporters who had no telepathic powers. Tako was wishing fervently that John Marshall were around.

In his right ear, Tako carried a marvel of Ferronian micro-electronics: transmitter and receiver fitted comfortably. This was his only way of communicating with Ras Tschubai.

Tako had again to retreat hastily from an aisle he'd just entered, because of the sudden appearance of some briskly walking Topides. The danger of an accidental collision grew steadily.

Tako was panting. He stopped as he heard something from the little set on his left wrist. Then he lost contact again.

'Do you hear me, Tako?' came a whispering voice from the micro-set. 'Ras speaking. It's getting near the time. They're going to take off in ten minutes. Did you find him?'

'I had to get out of their way,' murmured Tako. 'How-are you doing?'

'Fine. I'm still keeping him on the psychobeam. I'm now suggesting to him that the Capella fleet will be here any minute, and he thinks that it's his own idea. He's raving and demanding instant action. He won't let himself get clobbered helplessly on the moon. I'll wait. You keep looking!'

Tako rushed once more into the now vacant aisle. After a few steps the set reacted again, indicating that Chaktor was in the immediate neighbourhood. The microsensor picked up signals only within a radius of thirty feet.

He continued to advance, but more carefully. He didn't notice any guards. The corridor was getting narrower and there were numerous small doors on both sides.

He stopped in front of one of the doors where he received the strongest signal. Since the faint whistling might cause trouble, he switched off the little wave-locating device. He knocked cautiously at the cold metal, three short, two long and three short.

Chaktor jumped up in breathless excitement. It was the secret signal he'd been waiting for. He answered in the prescribed sequence and he knew that one of Rhodan's mutants had come.

Tako acted quickly and thoughtfully. It would have been foolish to waste any time finding out how to unlock the door. Instead, he took his disintegrator and shot out the lock. The door sprang open.

They spoke little. As Chaktor stood guard with the weapon, Tako peeled off his combat suit. He wore its duplicate underneath.

'Put it on; you know how. Quick, we don't have much time. Where are the guards?'

'They didn't pay any attention to me anymore.'

'Faster, people are coming,' Tako said nervously.

Chaktor was working desperately by the light of a small lamp. If they discovered him now, he'd be lost. Outside, limber bodies were slipping past the door. Before Chaktor had finished and Tako could adjust the fittings and controls, the wild roaring noise began.

They're starting, damn it! It sounded loud and reckless in the receiver in Tako's ear. 'How far did you get?' Ras asked.

'We're approaching the command center. Please, wait a moment. I have to catch my breath first. Do they have any pressure absorbers here?'

'Of course they do. They don't want to get torn apart either. I'm waiting,' Ras said.

In less than a minute Chaktor and Tako were on their way.

The Topide fleet was already deep in space when they finally had an opportunity to slip through an open hatch into the center. Ras Tschubai met them at the specified place.

They were unable to see each other but they found each other by touch. Moving closely together, they could talk to each other softly.

'Let's cut it short,' murmured Ras, whose psychobeam was no longer directed at the admiral. 'Chaktor, do you really know how to operate this suit? If you make a mistake, that'll be the end of you.'

'I can do it,' replied the Ferron, with a shaky voice. 'What are you planning to do? I'm not in possession of your powers.'

'There's an emergency hatch directly behind us. I've already investigated it. The hallway leads to a hangar for lifeboats. We'll cut through the outer wall with our disintegrators and let the air carry us out into space.'

They managed to get to the hangar unmolested. When the inside hatch closed behind them, they felt fairly safe. In the meantime the Topidian ships had gained speed with every passing second. It would take them almost three hours to reach the velocity of light. Then they'd be ready for the transition.

They were facing the outer wall of the ship's hull where three Topides were sitting at a console listening to instructions over a loudspeaker and operating the controls.

'I can't help them,' said Ras Tschubai with regret. 'Okay, are you ready?'

His disintegrator, operating on the principle of structural destruction, was working at full strength. The wall began to glow, became transparent and all of a sudden there was nothing in its place.

Chaktor heard the shrill cries of the Topidian guards, then he was sucked out with explosive force by the rush of air. He was so forcibly expelled through the opening that he gave vent to his terror by shouting uncontrollably.

Seconds later everything was over. The flagship was a mere flickering point behind which many other small points shot through the interstellar void. They'd left the planet system of Vega.

Three men were drifting helplessly in space. Only their powerful transmitters were working.

Naturally they didn't experience their drift through space at high speed. They maintained the momentum which they'd acquired through the enormous acceleration of the flagship. It was a mathematical problem for a big ship to exactly match their movement but Ras Tschubai was very confident that Rhodan could do it.

'Attention: transition to be performed in ten point two seconds,' announced the computer controlling the automatic sequences.

Perry Rhodan crouched in front of the observation screen of the optical monitors. They'd reached simple velocity of light, the same as the fleeing Topidian fleet.

'If they make their transition leap now, they'll have programmed the operation exactly in conformance with my calculations,' said Khrest. There was an unusually hard look flickering in his eyes, which drew Rhodan's attention. He scrutinized the scientist.

'I'd only requested you to check the data I'd worked out and to put it on tape. I...'

Rhodan was unable to finish his sentence. The Topides jumped exactly within a fraction of a second. The horrendous fluctuations of their energy-shield imperiled even Stardust II.

When the situation returned to normal, the more than three hundred Topidian units had vanished without a trace.

Rhodan looked at the clock.

'They'll arrive in the Capella system in a few moments. You've done an excellent job of programming. Now we're rid of them. The only question that remains is what they'll do in that deserted system, devoid of any life. Of course, they'll find out right away that they've fallen into a trap and that they've become the victims of a deceptive maneuver.'

As Khrest walked away slowly, he said: 'They'll never come back! And they won't find out how we lured them away. They've followed my data precisely, hence they'll jump from hyperspace directly into the very core of the sun Capella. I'm sorry, Perry, but I'm an Arkonide and a representative of the Great Imperium and as such it was my duty! You can't

be held responsible at all.'

He was gone, leaving Rhodan stunned. Thora, following her fellow Arkonide, waxed bitterly philosophical as she left.

'You see, Perry, my ancestors have always reacted that way. Don't delude yourself that you can build an empire in the stars with well-meaning words alone. Nobody could in the past, nobody can now. And you, Perry, will never achieve it in the future... I'll go and take care of Chaktor. He's exhausted.'

Rhodan regarded Bell in silence.

'I guess we have a thing or two to learn,' Doctor Haggard said at last. 'Basically she's right.'

Rhodan replied flatly: 'I'm human and I'll always be human. We'll have to wait and see. The retreat of the Topides proves that it can be done without needless bloodshed, if we apply our minds. And we can do that in the future too... Reg, let's return to Thorta.'

The interstellar peacemaker left with bowed head. His thoughts were far distant and philosophical; they revolved around the star Capella, the flaming giant that had consumed the monstrous alien fleet of Topides, those reptilian war makers who'd found their target with fiery fatality.