



83

**PLANET TOPIDE,
PLEASE REPLY!**

Kurt Brand

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PLEASE REPLY!**

CALLING ALL SPACEMEN... AND ALIENS—

PERRY RHODAN—Administrator of the Solar Empire. Places all chips on one number in order to eradicate an “old sin of omission”

ATLAN—it’s no chore for the ancient Admiral to play the role of a typical arrogant Arkonide

PUCKY—When they call him “Puck”, he’s in for a tight squeak

Reginald Bell—Perry Rhodan’s best friend... but this time there’s a sore thumb between them

Tgex-go—Reptilian President of the Topides. For him, paranormal phenomena really tip the scales

Gallus—Expert in generating ionization fields. When you have to jam a whole planet’s hypercom radio traffic, you have to be an expert!

Joe Pasgin—His *Burma* spearheads a little mission known as Operation Kamikaze

Allan D. Mercant—Chief of Solar Security

Col. Michael Freyt—Second in Command after Rhodan

Khrest—the Sage of Arkon

Lt. Thomas Cardif—Son of Rhodan... but not proud of it

Ernst Ellert—A Terran torn out of time & space

Harno—A unique being

O’Keefe—A matter transmitter station operator on the Moon

Cullins—A space probe production foreman

Gibbons—Chief administrator of depot H-89

Fellmer Lloyd, Kitai Ishibashi, Ras Tschubai—Members of the Mutant Corps

Ulbers—A telecom specialist

Huang-Lu—A propulsion engineer

Ylers—The *Burma*’s computer officer

Maj. Crafford—Fire Control officer of the *Burma*

Lt. Elp—Duty officer in Communication Central

Lt. von Gilberg—In charge of the *Burma*’s sensor-tracking section

Dr. Benthuys—Knowledgeable in Arkonide hyper-mathematics

Dr. Bansfield—Research lab director

Attor—Special minister to the pseudo-Regent of Arkon

Xxal-Ri—Head sheik of Kern-Onf, greatest city in the Topide system

Lt. Jouffre—The *Kublai Khans* radio operator

Ho Kwanto & F.C. Curtiss—Terran agents on Topid

... and the spaceships *Kublai Khan, On-Tharu, Burma & Sherbourne*.

BEWARE THE IDES OF THE TOPIDES!

PERRY RHODAN: Peacelord of the Universe

Series and characters created by Karl-Herbert Scheer and
Walter Ernsting.

ACE BOOKS EDITION

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Perry Rhodan

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by Kurt Brand



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“Hallo Topsid, bitte melden!”

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Prolog

The New Year has come. Everywhere that men are found—whether in the lonely outposts of the Solar System, on colonial worlds or on the good old Earth itself—the arrival of the New Year is celebrated according to traditional customs, with merriment and a commensurate amount of noise & fanfare.

Only a few men suspect that the year 2044, so joyfully greeted by all, will be a fateful year for Mankind—a year that will be more or less decisive.

Power politics in the galaxy are in a state of confusion & uproar. The Solar Empire, tiny by comparison to the Arkonide Imperium or the vast power block of the Druufs, stands between two fires in the truest sense of the word.

One spark would be sufficient to kindle the flame of war even in the Sol System. And this very tinder spark has been smouldering for 73 years—in the home system of the Topides . . .!

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1/ BELL PUTS HIS THUMB IN IT

Evil! The shadow of misfortune... a foreboding of ill-fated destiny. Was 2044 to be the year of disaster?

The omens began on New Years Eve...

In the personal, inner circle of those few men who held the fate of the Solar Empire in their hands, the death of Thora still gloomily pervaded their thoughts, yet they celebrated the passage of the year 2043 according to custom—though not in the usual frame of festivity.

It all began on that particular occasion.

Inadvertently Reginald Bell knocked a cognac glass from the table. Its contents splashed all over; the glass shattered against the floor. When he stooped down to pick up the pieces, he cut the tip of his left thumb.

In a few minutes the New Year would begin. After straightening up swiftly and regaining his seat, Bell sat there motionlessly with his thumb in his mouth, peculiarly pale and staring at the large clock. “Hope that isn’t bad luck...” he mumbled somewhat indistinctly around his injured thumb.

Perry Rhodan, Khrest, Freyt and Mercant observed him with a mixture of derision and amusement. Yet the incident had jolted them strangely. They were unprepared for this kind of a Reginald Bell who would give credence to crystal gazing or evil omens and other such hocus-pocus. The congenial atmosphere of the small group had been interrupted.

Perry Rhodan also looked at the clock. In 3 minutes the year 2044 would begin. It was time to pour the champagne.

Bell finally took his thumb out of his mouth. He extracted a neatly folded handkerchief from his coat pocket and wrapped it around the small but bloodied wound. He was about to comment again about the evil aspects of the incident but was suddenly drowned out by a burst of riotous sound that came into the room from outside.

The New Year had arrived!

Terrania, capital city of the Solar Empire, greeted it with every noisemaking device appropriate to the occasion. Sirens howled, alert horns blasted, fireworks screamed with an infernal racket into the clear night sky and at the spaceport the mighty pulse jets of the spherical spaceships suddenly contributed their thundering to the New Year’s reception while synchronized traction fields held

the vessels of the Solar Fleet firmly to their launching pads.

In the pleasant comfort of Perry Rhodan's home, which was so seldom used by this most powerful man in the Solar Empire, the five friends clinked glasses together. They had no reason to expand upon past triumphs and successes or to revel in such memories because the general situation didn't justify it. Nevertheless they possessed a proper amount of healthy optimism.

Bell alone was the single exception—the one man who would have been least expected to dampen a celebration.

“What's the matter, Chubby?” Rhodan asked his heavysset friend whose red stubble of hair stood up like the bristles of a brush. “Are you superstitious or something?”

“No,” Bell replied, setting his glass down. “But just look at that mess!” He indicated the fragments on the floor. “That goblet was made of unbreakable glass! But there lie the shards of its invulnerability. I'm not superstitious exactly but when I even cut my thumb on the splinters of something that's supposed to be safe and unbreakable, then let's face it—it's got to be some kind of omen of impending disaster!”

“But you're still not superstitious, Bell, is that right?” smirked Rhodan, and he glanced at his colleagues and friends, who were gently derisive of Bell's dire remark.

“That I am not and never have been!” protested Bell vehemently and he was about to start in all over again when he was interrupted by Allan D. Mercant, Chief of Solar Intelligence.

“Where is the logic of it, Mr. Bell?”

Bell answered without deliberation: “Bad omens are never logical.”

Perry Rhodan laughed. “I give up! OK, Chubby, here's to you and the year 2044!” He lifted his champagne glass and drank to his friend's health.

The latter emptied his own glass in one long swallow. When he set it down he grumbled aloud to himself. “I just have one wish... that the year 2044 gets over with as fast as possible and that we'll still be able to celebrate next New Year's Eve!”

“All that over a sore thumb?” chided Rhodan with a slight edge to his tone because Bell was close to dispelling the congeniality of the moment. In these few hours while those responsible for the Solar Empire sat privately together there wasn't supposed to be any ‘shop’ talk of any kind. And Perry had now made it clear that the subject was closed.

But Bell seemed to have corks in his ears since he started in again: “Well, not only for that but also because that glass was supposed to be unbreakable...”

Rhodan cut in swiftly. “Pig apple it, (21st century slang for “Knock it Off”—Derived from Image of Roast Pig with Apple Stuffing Mouth Shut?) Chubby!” He placed the cognac bottle in front of the other and furnished him with a replacement for the broken goblet. Almost in a tone of command, he added. “Help yourself, Old Boy—have a couple. You can use them!”

Thus the congenial mood of the small party was restored during the first few hours of the New Year. But when they prepared to leave at about 3 a.m., Bell had to get in a final comment: "If somebody 'out there' doesn't egg our noggins (lower the boom on us) this year, then I didn't get cut by an unbreakable glass that's not supposed to slice thumbs. In that case I'm spaced out... hallucinating!"

No one contradicted him. They were all ready for their beds by now yet none of them could forget Bell's suddenly pessimistic mood. His gloomy foreboding cost them all at least an extra hour of sleep.

* * * *

"Take it easy!" O'Keefe yelled into the microphone. Warily he was complaining to his counterpart on Earth, speaking from Matter Transmitter Station D-18, Lunar Sector HAN/456. "Do you have to try for a record on the first work day of the New Year? Take at least a minute, anyway, before sending me up & next chunk of that assembly line—that's right, section 762. My robots are slowly heating up and the antigrav derricks are starting to sweat around here!"

There were neither overheated robots nor sweating gravlifters on the Moon but O'Keefe had celebrated New Year a bit too heavily and the work-pace of his counter-station on Earth was getting a little sharp for him. In spite of his fatigue, however, he had just confirmed that a breakdown had occurred over half a mile away on assembly line 66. A cavity close beneath the lunar surface had silently caved in and a part of the line plus a number of work robots had gone with it into the depths where they were probably buried under the rocks and rubble by now.

Then his warning board flashed a red signal at him. And automatically the Earth transmitter-station was shut down.

At the same moment the Moon's positronic Control Central went into action. The robotic surveillance centre monitored the complicated assembly processes and was capable of handling up to 250,000 event transactions per second in various locations and comparing them with the programmed master assembly schedules. Additionally, this centre was programmed to take over in cases of a breakdown. If required, it could fall back on reserve task forces to work robots and transmit orders to them so that any schedule delay due to a breakdown would be made up on the master timetable within the next two hours.

The good old Moon, Earth's ancient companion, had become one massive construction yard. The Man in the Moon was fading away!

Perry Rhodan was replacing him.

The galactic situation had forced him to do this. On Earth there simply wasn't any more room for setting up the gigantic assembly lines and launching the spherical spaceships in a continuous production flow, in addition to maintaining adjacent support industries with their constant output of parts and supplies for the ships, such as major assemblies, peripheral equipment and small replacement parts.

Only on the Moon was there still building room to be found. Most important, great transmitter stations had been set up everywhere on the Moon, backed by their equivalent matter transceivers on Earth. Once this had been established, a virtual *stream* of materials began to flow to the Moon—to the point where it might have been suspected that Earth was being stripped of its industries.

The satellite of Terra had become the armoury of the Solar Empire! Up to now Rhodan had invested more than 100 billion Solars in this new armament centre.

So an interruption had occurred in the construction of assembly line 66. Events of this nature occurred sometimes hundreds of times per hour but they could not affect the overall construction schedule. More than 50 major assembly lines had already been completely installed. Several hundred thousand special robots carried out their programmed assignments on these lines in order to build spaceships for the Solar Empire.

But this advanced idea of turning a world into one big armoury had not originated with Perry Rhodan. Arkon had put it into practice more than 15,000 years ago but not with a mere satellite: it had converted an entire planet to such purposes after having previously removed it from its orbit and established it in a new one.

18 minutes after the red light had flashed on matter transmitter D-18 as well as on its sending station on Earth 18 minutes after the cave-in of a lunar cavern under the advanced staging position of assembly-line 66, everything was running as before, even at that construction point, and an hour and a half later the delay in the master assembly program was made up in spite of O'Keefe's morning-after fatigue.

"These Druufs and Arkonides can go to the devil!" groaned Cullins in despair.

At the moment he was responsible for the production of automatic space probes. No sooner had he expressed himself than he promptly forgot the Druufs as well as the Arkonides. He was much more concerned with the curt request he had received from Terrania for an immediate shipment of 4,500 rocket spy probes via a designated matter transmitter station, to be received by the Terranian spaceport.

Cullins didn't have this quantity but the observation probes were urgently needed in that far region between Einsteinian space and the Druuf continuum which was known as the 'discharge zone'. The robot warships of the positronic Regent of Arkon, otherwise known as the Great Cöordinator, were engaged in a continuous battle with the Druufs, and they gave chase to the spy probes as energetically as the Druufs themselves.

One after the other Perry Rhodan's spying rocket-eyes were shot down in the Area of the overlap zone but some of the probes managed to return with valuable observation results to the Terranian reconnaissance cruisers stationed at forward deep space positions, which served to inform Terra of the enemy combatants' fleet movements as well as even the composition of their crews. These special observation ships were exclusively light cruisers of the City Class, measuring 300 feet in diameter, using a 150-man crew. Though carrying light armament, their

ultra-powerful pulse space-drives made them capable of accelerating to lightspeed in just 5 minutes!

Cullins drummed his fingers nervously on his desk top. He surmised what would happen when he advised Earth that he only had about 3,000 space probes available. The positronic answer to his data request was already staring at him from the screen of his video terminal, the missing 1,500 probes would be ready for shipment in 27 hours, 42 minutes and 7 seconds.

Worriedly, he activated his radio-TV communication channel with the Earth. The chief administrator of depot H-89, a Mr. Gibbons, appeared on the viewscreen. He was the one who had put in the high-quantity requisition for the probes.

When he heard the report his impenetrable face hardened. "Then I'm sorry for you, Cullins. All I can do now is advise the Chief..."

"Advise *who*?" Cullins interrupted. "You mean—Perry Rhodan...?"

"Who else? He issued the order to ship 4500 remote-controlled surveillance probes to the discharge zone and it looks like this isn't any Sunday picnic. Since when has Rhodan concerned himself directly with such routine internal matters? There's trouble brewing somewhere and we figure that these probes are needed to find out just who the trouble is aimed at. So brace yourself, Cullins—anything can happen!"

It was poor consolation and Cullins was soon startled by the appearance on his screen of the Solar Empire's administrative insignia, which signified that he was about to be confronted by a cabinet level State authority—or higher!

However, he gave a secret sigh of relief when he saw the broad face of Reginald Bell. This one did not stand so much on ceremony and everybody *referred* to him by the simple nickname of 'Bell' or 'Reggie'. It did not detract from his personality or prestige because he was somewhat of a protocol renegade in the upper ranks and wasn't past using some rather colourful Anglo-Saxon language here and there when the occasion called for it.

Bell's red stubble of hair fairly seemed to bristle as he shook his head and bellowed: "Cullins, I'm going to personally keel-haul you if our two transport ships don't take off in just 2 hours with those 4,500 snoopers! By our records you should have more than 8,000 of them in your inventory there. Don't hand me any excuses—I can't accept any. So I want those things down here in an hour, Cullins!"

Cullins called out with the blind desperation of a drowning man. "But they're not going to be there, Bell...!"

That did it, he thought ruefully. People referred to Perry Rhodan's Second-in-Command as "Bell" but with this second most powerful man in the Solar Empire you didn't just come right out and use his nickname to his face. Mr. Reginald Bell would never let him get away with it!

Nevertheless he heard Bell actually laugh. "Alright, so what the devil's the matter with you boys up there? How come our data sheets down here are

haywire?”

Up *there* was always the Moon. It was part of human instinct to ever think of it as above, so by a logical inference Earth was forever ‘down here’. Cullins felt half Of the Moon fall off his shoulders when he heard Bell laugh but he was even more relieved at the other’s calmer tone of voice when he asked about the discrepancy in the records.

“But we sent in the new adjustment, Mr. Bell. Our entire supply of reconnaissance probes has gone into the grinder out there because the old models were so easy to detect. But the inventory revision was sent through official channels three days—no, four days ago!”

Bell groaned. “Official channels...! Cullins, I can’t climb onto your back for that. You went by the Book but whenever somebody says ‘official channels’ to me I am reminded of one of the worst lickings my old man ever gave me when I was a boy. He had learned through official channels that his honourable offspring was the culprit behind two months of certain ghostly appearances in the neighbourhood, night after night. So just for that, Papa arranged to have a special officer from Criminal Investigation trace down the character who had caused more than 20 families to move out of their houses. Don’t talk to me about ‘official channels’! Anyway, Cullins, when will the snoopers be available?”

“In 28 hours, sir.”

In the viewscreen Bell was seen to give what he had once himself dubbed the Academy freshman’s salute—a helpless wave of the hands. “OK. Now give me a rundown on the latest models—just the most important items.”

“I think you want the attrition factors, sir. Out of every 100 of the old design, only 7.38 returned from their missions, on a statistical basis. With the new models this ratio has been improved to 21.83 per 100...”

“Your engineers up there are really way out!” remarked Bell, shaking his head slightly in wonderment. “So the new super snoopers return 22 out of 100 instead of only 7—and of those you have 3000 in stock?”

“Yes sir. Exactly 3,000.”

Bell’s well-known thunderous laugh of triumph rang out. Finally he shook his head at Cullins through the screen. “You’re heroes!” he exclaimed suddenly with a hint of irony, yet there was a note of extreme satisfaction in his voice. “Then why do we need over 4,000 of the damned things when the new ones are 3 times better than the old ones? Cullins, you send down 2,000 of them. They’re as good as 6,000 of the previous contraptions. Of course now you know *who* will be on your neck if your figures fall down, Cullins!”

“Sir,” announced the ‘Man in the Moon’, “those figures are based on positronic calculations and they’re as foolproof as...”

“Oh sure—just like unbreakable glass! End of message, Cullins!”

Cullins nervously wiped his brow as he stared at the darkened screen. He whispered to himself. “What in the curdled Milky Way do positronic readouts have to do with unbreakable glass?!”

He didn't get an answer.

However, within 90 minutes of this conversation between Perry Rhodan's chief deputy and Cullins, a latest model commercial space freighter took off from Terrania's spaceport with 2000 of the newly designed spy probes on board, bound for the far depths of the Milky Way where the superfast light cruisers were waiting.

* * * *

Actually, trouble really was brewing in a certain region of the galaxy. Among the many incoming dispatches and reports of the previous day, two had arrived which Rhodan handed to Bell and Atlan without a word after he had read them.

"But that's probably only one isolated case," was Atlan's comment.

"It's the beginning!" contradicted Bell with sudden conviction and the looks he got from Rhodan and Atlan failed to budge him from his opinion. "I always have to remember my thumb..."

Perry Rhodan lost some of his famous self-control. "Will you get off of that childish notion, once and for all?! You couldn't even sell Pucky such nonsense! Now how do you make a case out of just these two reports?"

Even Rhodan's outburst could not deter this boisterous, red-cropped bulldog from his course. "It's the beginning of trouble because it has to do with the so-called Great Cöordinator of Arkon. In other words, he's a robot brain, and so far I've never discovered in him any of our many human shortcomings. Here in this report it says that an Empire ship has just taken on 3 Galactic Traders for its top command, when up to now it's been flown by robots. In the other report it's asserted that a robot commander has been exchanged for an Ara! What that means to me is this: His Majesty the Great Cöordinator of Arkon has decided to put an end to the crazy material expenditure of his robots. This transistorized monster is looking at the element of human caution as a greater advantage to him than the kind of robot programming that fights until a ship is destroyed!

"Deducing further deliberations of the Brain: when Druuf ships show up, my robots either fight to win or go down in flames—but if humans run my ships and they meet with a hopeless situation they'll try to save their skins, which also has the effect of preserving some of my ships and weapons.

"So the gist of these two reports concerning a command regrouping in the Arkonide fleet squadrons is that a situation's looming up that isn't rosy at all for our side. Because that overgrown automat is getting fed up with the clanky daring-do of his robots who only grind up all his equipment—and if he's going to stick his snoot any farther..."

Rhodan interrupted sharply again and his face reddened slightly. "Reg, when will you quit mangling the language!"

"You're absolutely right, Perry," admitted Bell with amazing alacrity, "because that mammoth bucket of bolts on Arkon doesn't have a snoot!"

Atlan, who had thus far not expressed himself, was an attentive observer. At this moment he envied Perry Rhodan his friend Reginald Bell.

Rhodan, disciplined to his fingertips, stern with himself, filled with the mission of bringing Earthly humanity to the rulership of the universe, had a man at his side who was his best friend and who also never flinched from duty—one who often recovered from the rough spots without embarrassment because he only represented himself for what he actually was, big-hearted, expansive, easygoing, boisterous and with an impulsive temperament that was not averse to using strong language. He not only relieved himself this way—he even gave Rhodan a relief valve for blowing off the tension, even when such heavy altercations were involved as the present one.

Now Atlan joined the fray: “Barbarian, your uncouth friend here seems to grasp the situation better than the two of us...”

Bell appeared to mutter something to himself but it was deliberately audible enough for Atlan to catch. “OK, Little Admiral, I’ll get you for that one! But just keep talking!”

Atlan didn’t allow this to interrupt his remarks although he made a mental note of the warning. If anybody ever followed up on such promises, it was Reginald Bell. “...and we always have to keep in mind that there are going to be accidental leaks and unexpected circumstances which will have increasingly grave consequences for us, because by such means the Robot Regent either has learned already or is bound to discover that the Solar Empire is behind the incessant attacks of the Druufs, tricking them into repeated military action.”

Rhodan shook his head. “I can’t go along with you there, Admiral, because...”

Atlan interjected ominously: “In the Grautier situation you also failed to heed my warnings. If we don’t stumble upon some last opportunity to trick or bluff Arkon into its own demise, then I’ll give you 6 months at the latest—after the last battle along the overlap front—before you’ll see Arkon’s ships sitting on your spaceports and the sun of your world obscured by a massive spherical shell surrounding Terra, which will be composed of tens of thousands of warships.

“He talks like he was the one who cut his thumb New Years on a piece of unbreakable...”

The crude interjection seemed to act as a splinter in Atlan’s normally shatterproof patience as he turned and shouted: “*Mister* Bell, once and for all will you keep that snoot of yours...” He stopped abruptly, aware of verbal contamination.

Bell got up slowly with an impertinent grin on his broad face but nodded good-naturedly at Atlan, who was still in the throes of reproaching himself gravely for his momentary slip in diction. He also nodded to Perry and prepared to leave. “Friends,” he said, with the double entendre of a virtual Pharisee, “I’ll give you an ‘A’ for elocution but if report cards were to be handed out in regard to our concern for the Solar Empire, we’d come up with a goose egg!”

He was already at the door. When he spoke now, the innuendoes were suddenly

gone. Nor did he laugh or joke or speak any more of his thumb. “Thanks to the Druuf attacks, today the Robot Regent of Arkon is stronger than any other time in history or the first time the thousands of races and peoples composing the Greater Imperium are rendering unto ‘Caesar’ an unrestricted obedience and allegiance. How many battleships does he have at the front? 80,000... 100,000...? If Arkon comes out of this with only half its forces, it won’t make any difference where we are concerned, because we couldn’t be ready for 50,000 or even 10,000 ships!

“But that still isn’t the thing that keeps making me lose my sleep. The two of us, Perry—you and I—somewhere or somehow, we’ve missed something, a missing ingredient that’s vital. Since New Year I haven’t been able to shake it off. Since then I’ve been beating my brains out trying to figure what it is we’ve overlooked but I can’t put my finger on it. I only know that it’s got something to do with Arkon... and once they are here... Well then, sweet dreams to the Solar Empire!

“It’s no use to keep hoping for a stay of execution until the end of the fighting along the discharge zone. Sure I’ve often referred to the robot Regent as a bucket of bolts—I got it from Pucky in the first place. But now I know why. It’s because I’ve always feared that super genius and his machine logic. I only sent up a flak of trick names for him in order to deceive *myself*. But since New Year’s Eve, that’s over with.

“That positronic brain only needs one little microcircuit or relay register to start snapping in the right direction—among all the millions of circuits he’s composed of—and the doomsday calculations will begin. Just how calculating he can be we’ve learned only too well! We also know that he never forgets. And when somebody comes up with a bid to buy a hundred spaceships, the Brain is bound to mark him down on a special list. In about one second the big monster can extrapolate a fairly sharp estimate of the strength of our spacefleet, so from that point on, who gets the last laugh—not us! It makes no difference whether a galactic war is blazing along the overlap zone or not.

“Then, my friends, the Arkonide spacers will suddenly be here and the two of us, Perry—we’ll be clicking our heels to attention in front of the Arkonide robots. As for you, Admiral, to them you’re a traitor and it’ll only take one fighter robot to convert you into a puff of smoke. That is, if we don’t come up real quick with that missing ingredient that we’ve overlooked. Good luck!”

Perry Rhodan stared for some time at the door after Bell had closed it and departed. Atlan did not say a word. Bell’s warnings and gloomy foreboding had gripped Rhodan more powerfully than he cared to admit.

“That’s Bell!” he said finally. “Ever since New Year’s Eve he’s been waving that crystal ball of his...”

“The question is, is he *seeing* anything in it?”

Rhodan looked at Atlan in astonishment. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What I mean is, Perry, without Reginald Bell you would never have built a Solar Empire. Always at the right time he has the unfailing instinct to put his

finger on the trouble spot, and what's more, he has the frankness and courage to admit it when he's afraid of something. Perry, you know it's an advanced concept for administrators to use all the esper talent they can muster, so if somebody foresees the hand of fate in the near future is he to be called a crystal-gazer or a realist?"

Rhodan leaned far back in his seat, his gaze fixed on Atlan. He took a long, deep breath. Every feature of his striking countenance became deeply etched, while his hands rested calmly on the armrests of his chair.

"Crystal-gazer or realist... At the moment I don't think I can give you an answer, Arkonide. I'll have to sleep on it."

It seemed to satisfy Atlan as he nodded reflectively but then he asked: "Perry, of course you don't think you can tell me what the two of you may have forgotten or overlooked?"

There was a trace of surprise on Rhodan's face. "Don't tell me you're being taken in by that dumb thumb of his!" he said brusquely.

The Arkonide replied calmly: "Barbarian, that may be an unanswerable question. Nevertheless, I don't take Bell's vague premonition lightly. We ought to make every possible preparation against unpleasant surprises, in the interests of the future security of the Solar Empire."

"Hm-m-m," muttered Rhodan, grudgingly. "I know what you're getting at—Grautier. Before that world went under, I should have given more weight to your warnings. And of course now it's a weak excuse to complain about a faulty frequency damper that happened to lead Arkonide ships onto the right trail... OK, this time we understand each other, and from where I sit—Bell isn't a crystal gazer. He's a realist with ESP!"

"To put it in the Bell vernacular," replied Atlan, "is that sour grapes or are you eating crow?"

2/ THE TOPIDES TIP THE SCALES

Earth's strategic situation deteriorated from day to day. Rhodan and his staff were powerless to prevent it.

Owing to the collision of two universes separated by two planes of time, the mighty Arkon Imperium was stronger than ever before in spite of past decadence and all the strivings of its many hundreds of races and peoples for independence. The unceasing attacks of the Druuf space squadrons and the implementation of all their alien resources to force an invasion into the Einstein universe had had a reverse impact. After 5,000 years of continuing signs of dissolution and decay, the Greater Imperium had for the first time united itself under the rulership of the colossal positronic Brain.

Arkon's war fleet, heretofore splintered and scattered all over the Milky Way in separately operating squadrons and task units, had now gathered itself into one massive blockading conglomeration of power before the discharge zone where the two universes touched and slightly overlapped.

As long as this gigantic, material-consuming battle continued between the Arkonides and the Druufs, the comparatively small Solar Empire was not in any acute danger. However, Rhodan's space-time astrophysical experts had determined that in about 12 months the discharge zone between the two universes would become unstable again and therewith an easy access from one continuum to the other would come to an end. On the one hand this would throw Terra into a stage of red alert, whereas that Great Cöordinator, the Robot Brain of Arkon, would have his hands completely free to throw some 80,000 warships into a galaxy-wide search for the Solar Empire. For the giant positronicon had already concluded that the latter was a greater threat to Arkon than this still raging battle with the alien Druufs from another plane of time.

Rhodan had counted on emerging from this clash of great powers as a third-party observer who would have the last laugh, more or less like one who holds the coats while two other contenders fight. However, after the destruction of his advanced fleet base on Grautier he had come to realize that the proverbial did not always hold true.

All possible security measures had long since been taken which were designed to conceal the galactic position of the Earth. Commercial traffic to other worlds, which had been increasing heavily during the past few years, had now been reduced to a minimum after the failure of a residual frequency damper had led to

the loss of Grautier, yet Rhodan, Bell and Atlan were in complete agreement that all of these measures meant nothing more than a temporary reprieve. By one means or another, Arkon was bound to find the Earth one day.

Marshal Allan D. Mercant, Chief of Solar Security, sat facing Perry Rhodan and Atlan together with John Marshall, leader of the secret Mutant Corps. Like the two other Earthmen present, he had retained his youth by means of a biological cell shower on the synthetic planet Wanderer. He had come to the meeting without portfolio or documents, thus imitating Perry Rhodan who more often preferred to 'play it by ear' rather than fall back on a mass of fixed figures and data.

He had never tended to blow his own horn over the fact that he had built up within the galaxy an intelligence network that was without parallel. He had infiltrated his men onto all important planets of the Greater Imperium, and their coded hypercom dispatches accurately reflected the prevailing situation within the vast realm of the Arkonides.

Rhodan and Atlan listened to his report in silence.

On the other hand, John Marshall did not appear to be with them. Still they knew him too well to be deceived by the absent expression on his face. At the moment he was receiving Reginald Bell's thoughts, which informed him of the latter's thumb-cutting incident on New Year's Eve.

However, Marshall was not in the least amused. He recalled another time when Bell's premonitions had gone unheeded. With his usual grumbling and blustering he had expressed his foreboding in no uncertain terms concerning the planet Honor, long quarantined and declared off limits by Arkon. At that time no one, including Rhodan, had taken him seriously, and then when catastrophe struck the crew of the Titan and 800 crewmen including Thora, Khrest and Bell were gripped by a mortally dangerous euphoria, it was too late to react to his warnings.

While Mercant continued with his report, Marshall 'listened' further: *We're roaring at light-speed into a situation where the roof is going to come down on our heads. All the mutants had better get back to Earth on the double so they can take a hand in this!*

Bell, who was busy somewhere several floors below the conference room, suddenly turned his thoughts to other problems. Now the Chief of the Mutant Corps gave his full attention to the status briefing at hand.

The discussions so far had made it graphically clear that the Solar Empire had been backed into a defensive position.

Rhodan was speaking. "If we just try to wait it out we'll be putting our heads in the sand. Somehow we have to checkmate the robot Brain before the last of the space battles between the Arkon ships and the Druufs have faded out..."

"But my barbarian friend—!" interrupted Atlan sympathetically. "That's precisely what you cannot do—it's impossible! Without the robot Regent in charge, do you know what that would make of the Greater Imperium? Star cluster M-13 is one galactic fusion bomb and taking out the Regent would bring it to

critical mass—an explosion capable of enveloping us all. No, Rhodan, that’s not the answer, and yet any further discussions on the subject seem to be a waste of time because so far we haven’t yet found a way that leads us to Arkon III. We... uh—your intercom is buzzing, Perry.”

The grey raster of the viewscreen flickered bright, suddenly revealing the face of a man who was recognized as the chief of Terrania’s great hyper-communication centre.

“Sir, I can’t reach Mr. Bell but I have some latest dispatches that I think should be evaluated immediately...”

“Put them on the screen—we’ll read them here!” ordered Rhodan swiftly. He moved to one side to make room for Atlan.

The man’s face disappeared, to be replaced by a sheet of printed text. They recognized the decoded dispatch of an observation cruiser:

0005-1 to Chief.

Summary of findings from returned rocket probes 45618, -19, -34, and -65.

82nd light fighter squadron, Arkonide fleet task force 312, relieved and withdrawn at 5:54:34 Earth time.

All robot officers including commanders trans-shipped
Arkon freighter H-56874.

At 11:03:21 Earth time, top command of 82nd light fighter squadron taken over by Topides.

At 14.33:06 ET, this unit was returned to the battlefield.

0005-1 to Chief...

In that moment Perry Rhodan had a vision of the Solar Empire being shattered to pieces under the bombardment of giant Arkon ships. “Thank you!” he called into the microphone before Atlan could utter a word.

“What about the rest of the messages?” asked the Arkonide with a touch of annoyance.

Allan D. Mercant and John Marshall hadn’t been able to read the hypercom text on the viewscreen, so at least Mercant was at a loss.

Rhodan was oblivious to Atlan’s question. His face was noticeably pale when he turned to Mercant and Marshall. “Light fighter squadron 82 of the 312th Arkonide Task Unit has had its robot command replaced by Topides...”

Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant, normally a model of self-control, suddenly sprang to his feet. Although John Marshall did not react as conspicuously, he pressed hands to his temples and repeated: “Topides... Topides...” Then, with startled emphasis: “*Topides!*”

Atlan’s powerful voice interrupted. “May I be informed as to what is going on? How is it that these reptiles can send you scurrying for cover like so many mice?”

Within seconds Rhodan had regained his legendary calm. He turned to Atlan,

who was still glaring at him demandingly. “Those lizards from the planet Topid aren’t driving us *into* any holes but with Arkon’s gladly-furnished support they’ll be able to drive us *out* of our hiding place. My friend, within a slight coordinate error of just 27 light-years, the Topides have known the position of Earth for more than 70 years!”

Atlan looked at him sharply. “Barbarian, I’m aware that you Terranians are afflicted with a ludicrous brand of humour but this exceeds my Arkonide understanding. This joke that you...”

“A cosmic joke of world history, Atlan,” Rhodan interrupted bitterly.

“To borrow a phrase from Bell again,” fumed the Arkonide gruffly, “how long do I have to wait for the punch line?” His yellowish gleaming eyes flashed ominously. “How does it happen that the reptile people know your position within an error of 27-light-years? Why does each of you sit here like the personification of guilt? Are you saying that actually this is not a joke and that perhaps it slipped your mind that the Topides had an approximate fix on the Earth’s location?”

“Yes,” admitted Rhodan. “For more than 70 years nobody’s thought of it! And now the robot Brain is setting up Topides as officers and commanders of full-fledged Arkonide battleships! All that’s necessary is for my name to be mentioned—just a certain memory to be awakened—and about 3 hours later you’ll see thousands of Arkon spaceships swarming out from that one tracking focal point, 27 light-years away, heading right down into our section of the Milky Way. It won’t take them long after that to find us...”

Perry went on to give Atlan a summarization of preceding events.

The whole thing had started when Thora’s exploration ship was forced to make a crash-landing on Earth’s moon. The degenerated crew had forgotten to provide themselves with vital repair parts for the vessel. In order to advise Arkon of their situation, a hypercom message had been beamed to star cluster M-13, where at that time the robot Brain was not yet in charge. Either Arkon had ignored the distress call or due to some rare disturbance the information had not gotten through. But in the Orion sector on the planet Topid, the reptilian intelligences there had traced the hypercom’s point of origin—without noticing, however, that the particular tracking equipment involved was defective at the moment. An error of 27 light-years had crept into their Chi-coordinate alignment.

Thus misguided, the Topides had searched for the crashed Arkonide cruiser in the Vega sector, where they encountered an Arkonide, humanoid race known as the Ferrous. The Ferrous were a harmless, amiable people who were unable to defend themselves against this invasion which had come upon them from a distance of some 800 light-years. So Rhodan had managed with very meagre forces to strike a destructive blow at the Topides in the Vega sector. This was his first actual triumph in interstellar spheres, which appeared to open the way toward one day becoming the ruler of the universe.

“The planet Topid is 815 light-years distant from Earth, Atlan. The lizards’ Chi-coordinate tracking error was only 3.4% off. Yes, and then later we ran across

the scaly-skinned devil's again in the Betelgeuse system..."

"I know," Atlan interrupted. "That was the time that Arkon along with the Springers and the galactic Medical Masters thought they saw the Earth become an inferno of atomic destruction... but it was an Earth which your clever tactics had relocated in that area. But Perry, that second episode was all the more reason for you to remember that small margin of error the Topides had made in their original tracking attempt! I just can't understand it! How can anybody overlook something, like that!"

"Humans are not Arkonides, Admiral," Rhodan replied calmly. Then he turned to the chief of the Mutant Corps. "John, I want you to call your people back to base."

"What are you planning to do?" asked Atlan curiously.

"I hope to make use of our last chance for cleansing a sin of omission from the world—that is, if we've got enough time left to do it."

"You're going to Topid, to the reptiles?" asked Atlan in mild amazement. Once more he was nonplussed by these tough, adaptable Terranians who could often cold-bloodedly face up to problems that his Arkonide intellect simply couldn't grasp.

"I don't *want* to go to the Topides, Atlan—I *have* to go!"

The Arkonide thought it necessary to remind him that Topid was a part of the Greater Imperium.

"Just as *you* are—right?" Rhodan's face was unmoved as he countered with the laconic question. But again he did not wait for an answer, turning instead to Allan D. Mercant. "How many agents do we have on Topid?"

"Two, sir," replied Mercant without having to cogitate on it. "Ho Kwanto and F. C. Curtiss. The Admiral's reference to Topid being part of the Arkon Empire is of secondary importance. Those reptiles' mood is anything but cheerful, or even safe, when anybody mentions Arkon among them. They'd like to shake loose from the Greater Empire and the sooner the better..."

"...which is of course the precise reason why they are furnishing operations officers and top command staffs for a fighter squadron, I suppose!" interjected Atlan derisively.

"I won't dispute you," said Mercant with a slight bow to Atlan. "However, my exposition of the general situation did not contradict the fact—for you see, if the Topides had dared not to comply with the robot Regent's order to man his ships, then today the planet called Topid would no longer exist!"

Rhodan took no part in this particular debate. "Mercant, have your men find out if there are any Arkonides on Topid as yet. I'll need that intelligence in 5 hours. Anything else to discuss, gentlemen?"

It was a signal that closed the meeting.

Perry Rhodan found himself alone with Atlan in his combination office and conference room.

“Well,” sighed Atlan, “you and I seem to have been gradually deflated. But I repeat my question once more: how could all of you have forgotten that the reptiles knew the galactic position of the Earth, except for that one small deviation of a Chi-coordinate?”

Rhodan remained silent.

Atlan never did receive an answer on the subject.

What the Topides knew had simply been forgotten, that was all—but now every human being in the Solar Empire was going to have to pick up the tab for it!

3/ PUCKY & THE “MAGIC FLUTE”

24 hours had passed since that memorable discussion and during that time an increasing number of mutants returned to Terrania.

John Marshall called all of his people back and as they perceived that they were not the only ones being ordered into home base they knew that somewhere a major threat must be looming.

Bell didn't venture to mention his thumb anymore. In fact he didn't have time for such matters. He had not seen his bed during the night because he'd been busy laying out a detailed plan of action. When Atlan saw it finally, it caused him to cry out half in dismay and half in uncomprehending perplexity.

“What—?! You're going to fly to Topid as Arkonides...?”

“So what's so hard about sticking your nose in the air like an Arkonide and walking around like you're half asleep?” asked Bell with a malicious attempt at innocence.

Atlan did not deign to answer him but instead immersed himself in a study of the plans.

In the adjacent room, Rhodan and John Marshall also had their heads together. The Mutant Corps chief was able to report to the Solar Empire's Administrator that all mutants were present in Terrania, with the exception of a few who could not be spared from their strategic Posts.

“Does that include Harno?”

“Yes sir.”

“I haven't seen Pucky around here. Is he off the base, John?”

“No. For the past few hours he's been wandering around on board the *Kublai Khan*. It seems that our mousebeaver friend has been mentally spying on somebody again.”

“How do you figure that, Marshall?” asked Rhodan, suddenly concerned. He was a stickler for enforcing his special rule affecting the mutants. With the exception of John Marshall, no telepath was permitted to invade the thoughts of any responsible person in Terrania. And Pucky was no exception to this strict order.

“About an hour ago I found him in the Command Central of the *Kublai Khan*, where he was just sitting and staring at his special boots. When he saw me he gave me some of his innocent-sounding double-talk: ‘John, I wonder if I should

exchange these plod-hoppers for some heated boots—or do you think that on our new assignment we’ll all be having cold feet?’ Of course when I heard him, sir, I knew that Pucky had come across some kind of information.”

“And it also reveals he’s found out about our plans to use the *Kublai Khan*,” said Rhodan pensively. “Marshall were you and Pucky alone in the Command Central, or...?”

“Alone, sir.”

“So what did you give him as an answer, John?”

“I was impatient with him, sir. The pessimism around here has been pretty heavy and the mousebeaver’s wisecrack was like the straw that broke down the camel, you might say. I remember I practically growled at him, ‘As far as I’m concerned you can order yourself a tailor-made straitjacket!’ But that was an indirect way of admitting to him that we’re planning some pretty rough action. Pucky’s incisor tooth popped out, of course, and he grinned, ‘It’s a sick wind that blows no good, alright—and this one’s going to be a real stink bum! When I think of Fatso’s bunged-up thumb, it gives me cold feet already!’ Right after that I asked Mr. Bell if he had discussed the alleged allegory of his injured thumb with Pucky. Well, I...”

At this moment Pucky contacted them over telecom from the *Kublai Khan* and with his usual disarming impudence admitted having ‘listened’ in on their conversation.

For the sake of security he telepathed his message into their minds: “*So I found out a thing or two—is that so bad? Don’t knock it, Perry... you should see the mess that’s been piling up around here. If the Kublai Khan is going to be remodelled into an Arkonide super-giant, then the least you should expect is that these Nucks learn something about Arkonide spelling and put a ‘TH’ in On-Tharu. Naturally I had to straighten the Nuckheads out...*”

The mousebeaver was always stealing Reginald Bell’s verbal expressions, which he employed with the gleeful banditry of a magpie.

However, when he got to the word ‘knuckleheads’, it appeared to be the last straw for Perry. “*Lt. Puck, this is much too serious a situation—!*”

“*Right you are!*” Pucky interrupted him. “*Whenever you pin that Second Looey handle on me I know there’s trouble brewing—but I still don’t think it was neighbourly of Marshall to snitch on me. Can I come over to see you, Perry?*”

“*At once! That’s an order!*”

Rhodan and Marshall both sensed that Pucky was no longer there. Either he had shut off his thoughts or he was already teleporting himself to their location. But nothing happened. There was no shimmering in the air—no Pucky. Rhodan asked Marshall to search for him or his thought impulses but after a few minutes the chief of the Mutant Corps had to confess that he could not locate him.

“I’m going to take that scamp Pucky to task and this time he’ll get no mercy from me!” Rhodan promised. His face reflected deep annoyance over the mousebeaver’s arbitrary and wholly unauthorized action.

He swept a hand across his brow as though to eradicate thoughts of Pucky for the moment, then launched into a discussion of Bell's plan with Marshall. Which seemed necessary because it contained a problem with regard to the mutants.

Marshall had grave reservations about it. "Sir, isn't this concentration of mutants in one place an extremely risky procedure? If anything happens—and we can't discount such a possibility—then you're in danger of losing the entire Corps at one blow."

Perry Rhodan shook his head slightly. "John, you're still missing the point that our sins of omission in the past have forced this upon us. It was just 70 years ago that the reptile invasion of the Vega sector took place. Does that fact give you any idea of how dangerous it would be for either the Topides or the robot Brain to find our trail? The ruling Topide dictator at that time is probably dead now, along with his particular military junta, but there may well be several thousand of those lizard intellects who still have a vivid recollection of the events of 70 years ago... and don't forget such things as records, files and archives that can always come to light. If the recall capability of those reptiles isn't dangerous to us, then their records can still break our necks. In order to eliminate this sharpest threat to our existence we have to put all our eggs in one basket—we have to use every means at our disposal on the planet Topid and make sure that not one document or computer register will ever endanger us again."

"I know the gamble I'm taking in this, Marshall. I also know the magnitude of the task that's being assigned to you and your mutants. But if just one man fails us, John, the Solar Empire could be lost overnight! The Arkonides would be here even faster than we've feared they would up till now."

But John Marshall still had objections to this joint mission of his irreplaceable mutants. He stubbornly pursued the matter out of his sense of responsibility and Rhodan had to privately congratulate himself that he had this hardheaded but honestly frank John Marshall as his chief of the Mutant Corps.

"Sir, you just explained to me that this time the entire ship's crew was being selected on the basis of physical appearance. So this limits the men you can choose if their physiology is supposed to be as close as possible to that of the Arkonides and most of my men are exceptionally small. I beg you to consider that!"

"Well, Marshall, do you have any other plan that's easier to carry out and yet be able to support our action with a reasonable probability of success?"

"It shouldn't be difficult to set up a secret network of hypno-transmitters on Topid and then keep the reptiles under our influence until the robot Brain ceases to be a source of danger to us."

Rhodan was mildly startled by this. He looked at Marshall reproachfully. "Come on now, John... you know my opinion of any device capable of mass influence! I'd only sanction such a thing as a last resort and even then with the greatest reluctance. Besides, in these areas we don't have much information about the lizard men. So we don't know if weeks or months of constant hypnosis would

cause them brain damage. Am I supposed to assume the burden of conscience or be responsible for driving 100,000 reptilian intelligences insane? I just don't happen to be a soulless robot brain!"

At this moment it did not occur to Perry Rhodan that he had just passed a test which justified his claim to leadership of the Solar Empire, whereas by contrast a super-intelligent but soulless synthetic creature on Arkon 3 could never be more than a short-lived passing phenomenon.

Before Marshall could make a reply to this, the door opened and the mousebeaver stepped in, accompanied by Allan D. Mercant.

Although Pucky knew that by rights he could expect a sharp scolding, he managed a friendly grin with his incisor. With his small feet encased in the special boots and slightly supported by his wide tail, he pattered across the room and sat down in a chair in a quite grandiose manner.

Rhodan attempted to probe the mousebeaver's thoughts by means of his almost negligible telepathy but he came up against a powerful mental screen. Pucky permitted no eavesdroppers to steal up on his thoughts.

"I have to disturb you, sir..." This was Mercant's opening statement as he came in the door.

Regardless of pressures, it was Rhodan's habit to have everyone comfortably seated before discussing anything with them. He maintained that few crises justified omitting such a small amenity. So Mercant seated himself before he began.

"Sir, after Pucky alerted Security he contacted me. The action I then initiated is still in process but in a short time I expect the matter to be taken care of.

"Pucky apprehended two people in an act of treason. Telecom specialist Ulbers and propulsion engineer Huang-Lu were about to give a prearranged signal to a clique of workers on the Moon, which would have resulted in the launch of a space probe. My Security people have already confiscated this missile. It contained a hypercom transmitter which was programmed to begin operating 5 minutes after takeoff—and it would have broadcast a repeated sequence of information containing the galactic position of the Earth!"

Although normally the personification of self-control, Allan Mercant had delivered this announcement with a trembling voice. For a second or two, Perry Rhodan's face turned pale and John Marshall's start of dismay did not go unnoticed.

The mousebeaver continued to lounge in his chair, slightly rolling his intelligent eyes about the room while his bright incisor produced an even friendlier grin. Supporting his mouse head in his left paw with an elbow on the armrest, his roving gaze always returned to Rhodan.

But the Administrator ignored him. Very quickly he recovered from the shocking news. "Mercant, why do you presume that this matter will be taken care of shortly?" he asked without preamble.

"Pucky has given Solar Intelligence the names of all persons who were

connected with this incredible conspiracy. Ulbers and Huang-Lu had already been detailed to the *Kublai Khan* and were on board in the Com Central when Pucky suddenly accosted them and held them in the grip of his telekinesis. He then alerted Security and made sure that the crewmen had Ulbers and Huang-Lu under arrest. After that he teleported to me.”

“When the report came in from the Moon that the space probe had been confiscated and I...”

The intercom sounded. The screen brightened and a man wearing the insignia of Solar Intelligence announced in clipped military tones: “Sir, Operation *Magic Flute* is completed. All 18 conspirators have been apprehended. That is all. Any questions, sir?”

Since the chief of Solar Intelligence had no further questions, Rhodan inquired in some puzzlement: “What’s this *Magic Flute* business, Allan?”

Then the mousebeaver squeaked from his chair: “What’s wrong with *Magic Flute*? Don’t those super snoopers look Eke flutes? Naturally you have to use your imagination a little but weren’t those nuck-heads going to use the probe to lure the Arkonides with their little song? That’s how I got such a rise out of your trench-coat laddies, Allan. I simply yelled into the intercom mike: ‘Start Operation *Magic Flute*!’ well, the poor guys jumped in the air like they’d forgotten to turn off the stove or something! Nobody asked me a thing. Like a bunch of octopuses they grabbed every detail and siphoned up the names and billet numbers as though their lives depended on it. And then everything hit the van. So that’s why there was nothing so special about it. But John, when you snitched on me to Perry I got mad at you. Sure, I broke the rules and opened up with my telepathy, which led me to the Com Room where I caught Ulbers and Huang-Lu at their mischief.

“That about winds it up, I’d say, except when the crew from the *Kublai Khan* got hold of those two yeckheads...”

“Pucky!” interjected Rhodan reprovingly. He was about to say more but the mousebeaver hurried to correct himself.

“...by the time they took these two ‘gentlemen’ off my hands, I had gotten them into a very willing state of confession. I scrabbled through their brain convolutions and picked out the names of their co-conspirators.”

“What did you do to them to make them confess?” asked Rhodan sharply.

Still not disturbing his luxurious repose in the chair, Pucky replied with a sublime expression on his impish face: “Now Perry, you’re the Administrator of the Solar Empire. You should leave such trifling matters to us. No sweat. But when is Operation *Tweezers* going to get under way?”

“What the devil is that supposed to mean?!” Rhodan flared up, obviously irritated this time.

“Don’t you get it, Perry?” asked the mousebeaver in wide-eyed innocence. “You know the heavy-calibre tweezers the dentist uses? I thought we were going to go and *de-fang* all those Topide lizards so they can never nip us again—huh, Perry?”

“Out! Get out of here, you double-talking—little—!”

The air surrounding the mousebeaver’s chair shimmered lightly. In the same instant, Pucky disappeared. The little scamp had perceived that weather conditions in Rhodan’s office had suddenly deteriorated for him and so he had elected to depart without undue ceremony.

* * * *

Allan D. Mercant’s Solar Intelligence organization operated with the precision of a positronicon. Pucky had not been gone 5 minutes before a more extensive report came in over the intercom, a report which also revealed the motivation behind the conspiracy.

During the past 3 years, all 18 of these men had been guilty of some infraction of discipline. They had all been given warnings and in some cases had even been punished. However, not one of the cases had involved any complaint against their work performance. In fact, Ulbers had the reputation of being one of the best hypercom specialists, as shown by his 3 promotions in Hyper Communications’ top ranks.

This group’s opposition to Rhodan’s policies and politics had in the course of time built up in them a hate complex, which had resulted in their attempt to betray to Arkon the galactic position of the Earth. This they had sought to accomplish by means of a continuous hypercom transmitter device, which was to have been sent out on board the confiscated space probe.

“Bad luck usually comes in pairs,” observed Rhodan darkly, after reading the report. “But what am I going to do with Pucky? I can’t lower the boom on the little devil when he’s just saved us from the ultimate catastrophe but I have to figure some way to box those floppy ears of his. Otherwise he’ll get out of hand even more frequently than he always has in the past.”

“Sir,” suggested Marshall, resignedly, “he’ll probably get the better of us, no matter what we do. Would he be Pucky otherwise?”

4/ THE HUMAN FACTOR

Perry Rhodan had assigned 3,000 Swoons and as many humans to a single task. As soon as possible he wanted them to develop equipment which would enable his technicians to generate giant ionization fields in hyperspace and keep them stable there.

Bell had also developed this part of the plan and now once more he proved that he could get along very well with men as well as even the little Swoons—also known as the ‘cucumber’ people.

At first they had only stared at him in startled amazement. Wherever he went with his plans concerning the giant ionization fields, he was only met with uncomprehending expressions. He let them have their fun and he refrained from making any scornful insinuations but 2 or 3 hours later he returned to the scientific experts again and once more discussed the problem with them.

“I need hyper-interference fields of astronomical proportions. And I mean super ECM-ionization clouds that won’t break down after one hour, 100 hours or even 1,000 hours. What I’m talking about is colossal jamming fields in hyperspace that’ll knock out the entire hypercom traffic of a whole planet. Now if I don’t get this equipment within a reasonable time, it’s just possible that you’ll be looking for another boss. Theoretically I don’t see anything that stands in the way of building such generators, so in about 3 days I’d like to have an operating model to try out.”

Even the Swoons, top micro-mechanics of the galaxy and practically geniuses in their technical specialization, were apparently stumped. They rejected Bell’s demand as unfeasible. But then he demonstrated his reputation for stubbornness.

“Friends,” he said in softly congenial tones, “you know I don’t happen to be a lousy amateur at this stuff and so I realize that what I’m asking is almost impossible. *Almost...* and that is a little word, gentlemen, that should spur you on to making the almost impossible possible.

“Now if we consider that the constant *hy* usually throws an asymptotic curve on a hyperscope graph...”

And Bell proceeded to force the experts to simply start talking shop. Of course he didn’t have their technical knowledge in depth but he was able to find his way around in the conversation. But he did not spend more than half an hour on the subject because he knew only too well the precious value of time at the moment.

At any hour, doom could strike in the form of countless Arkonide fighter squadrons.

To the casual observer, Terrania might have seemed to be no more than a very busy metropolis but it had actually become a veritable witch's cauldron, bubbling and bursting with feverish preparations. There were unforeseeable breakdowns and interruptions everywhere, planning details had to be revised and orders were cancelled by counter-orders. What had been top priority items in one moment were removed from production lines in the next.

A small army of robots was made to look like Arkonides. Their total programming had to be revised so that their logic gating could reflect two Arkonide characteristics: arrogance and pride.

Without exception, the 2,000-man crew of the *Kublai Khan* was subjected to intensive hypno-training. Once on the planet Topid they not only had to give the outward appearance of Arkonides, in their walk and mannerisms and very nature they had to be recognized as such.

The *Kublai Khan* had been camouflaged to represent an Arkonide super battleship, bearing the name of *On-Tharu*—after the spelling error had been corrected. But this was not the only ship assigned to the mission: 8 spherical spaceships of the State class were to accompany the larger ship. These vessels were 300 feet in diameter and carried 150-man crews. In addition, there were also two heavy cruisers in the formation. All ship hulls carried lettered and numerical insignia of Arkonide derivation, even though it was not expected that the escort fleet would itself land on Topid. However, should they encounter a spaceship of the Greater Imperium, Perry Rhodan did not wish to risk extermination because of some ridiculously small oversight.

Bell had allowed 4 days for preparation and Rhodan was in agreement with the basic stipulations of the plan. However, by the end of the second day it was starting to look as though a takeoff for Topid in Orion would not be taking place even in a week. One delay after another was encountered. And meanwhile the battle reports from the discharge zone were becoming more alarming.

By this time the robot Brain on Arkon had mobilized all allied and subordinate races of the Greater Imperium, forcing them to consign their best space captains and officers to the fighting front. And now fully 19 squadrons had been manned by Topides!

Bell had just gotten a breather, having unravelled a Gordian knot of schedule slippages after a 3-hour struggle—but his relief was short-lived when Rhodan advised him of the latest news.

“You don't say! 19 fighter squadrons, all manned by Topide officers! Are you alone, Perry?”

“Yes,” came the reply over video intercom.

“Then do me a favour and don't tell me any more! This thing is getting to me, I don't mind telling you. There's a steamroller building up here, something that's going to get out of hand. Good Lord, Perry, do you think maybe there's still a wild

card we've overlooked or forgotten somewhere?"

Rhodan was reminded of Atlan's question as to whether he thought Bell was a crystal gazer or a realist with all his dark premonitions. But to see Bell in this frame of mind was a strange experience. It was hard for Rhodan to recognize his old friend when he was in such a state. True, Perry didn't deny the incident on Honor where Bell had also played the role of an unheeded doomsayer but the intensity of his premonitions then had not been of this magnitude.

"We have neither overlooked nor forgotten anything in regard to the Topide special task force," he finally answered, firmness in his voice. "And it might interest you to know that the positronic brain on Venus has completed an evaluation of all important items of the mission. Its readouts show a success probability curve ranging from 85 to 97.5 % and..."

"There we go again—always a mechanical brain!" interrupted Bell hotly. "My view of those Frankenstein monsters is growing dimmer by the hour. They may be a big fat crutch when it comes to fast figures but they sure weren't designed for fortune cookies! Perry, you can take those brains and—well, they can go to the devil, that's all! On this mission I've promised myself I'm going to follow my instincts and not get all polluted with empty statistics from an adding machine...!"

Rhodan shot back at him over the video connection: "You won't be in a position to put your crystal ball into action, Bell. One detail in your plan has been changed—to the effect that neither you, Atlan or I are going to officially lead the Topide expedition. The mutants will run the show, backed up by the technical specialists."

Bell let out a low whistle. His deeply pensive scowl disappeared, to be replaced by a barely perceptible nod of agreement. "So what will be left for us to do, Perry?"

"The fine polish, Chubby—all the little arabesques and filigree. We'll have the almost impossible task of covering every loophole necessary for out-foxing the robot Regent of Arkon. Have you ever thought what it means to get camouflaged data past that giant positronicon? Now, just to get your self-confidence up off the ground again, I'm going to read you what the Venus brain has to say about our intentions. Atlan came back to Earth pretty dejected about this statement, and I quote:

"It is impossible to counterfeit or imitate a traditional pattern which has been the total experience of a race. The pertinent probability equations project a series of variables ranging between 78 and 98.47%, thereby negating a positive guarantee of success."

"So the tightrope we're using in our Topide action has a few weak spots here and there—thin enough, in fact, to represent only 1.53% of its average tensile strength. Compared with the 98.47 high figure..."

"Perry!" Bell broke in impatiently. "What is all this? Overall probability curve, 85 to 97.5—specific projection 78 to 98.47. Gwash! (Hogwash.) Have you ever wondered why in all these years the Solar Empire hasn't once taken a real

nosedive? Oh, we've earned ourselves a good pratfall more than once. Don't give me the eyebrow, Perry, you know it as well as I do! But in spite of it, what do we do before every mission? We go to our great tin goddess, the modern Pythia, and let her spill out her oracles in dead numbers and decimal fractions! Before you know it we'll be half Arkonide! We just stand there in front of a robot brain designed along Arkonide mental patterns and we swallow it all without contradiction—forgetting in the meanwhile that we are human beings!

“Don't hand me that gwash about the possible dire consequences of this Topide move—I mean, as a reason for having to go to the Brain on Venus. Everything we do has consequences. If we can ever quit branding ourselves as slaves to positronic logic, if we ever once put our own free wills into action, we'll out-figure those math monsters any time. And even on Topid we're going to have a chancel

“Thanks to their automated think-tanks, the Arkonides became mentally lazy and half-degenerated. Do you want our grandchildren and great-grandchildren to become such molasses heads? That's why I couldn't care less what that overgrown Venus trap has to say about what we're going to do or not going to do! Dammit, Perry... if we're not going to turn into a bunch of Arkonides then we'd better start acting like men!”

Without saying a word, Perry picked up the, computer report and held it in view of the intercom camera. On Bell's viewscreen he saw Rhodan's handwriting, with an arrow pointing to the figure of 98.47%. His note said: *False! Human factor not considered. Rh.*

Bell's broad face slowly brightened. “If that's what you think,” he grumbled even as he chuckled, “why did you let me keep running the tape? You could have—”

“Because it was a shot in the arm to hear you talk, buddy. Good for morale after all that crepe-hanging you did. My friend, I think we should mutually remind ourselves of such truths now and then. But incidentally, what's the latest on the development of the ion-field generators?”

“I can't count on having the first results before tomorrow night. The trouble is in holding the reflection layers stable in hyperspace. It works off and on. All of us know too little about hyperspace. And we've just uncovered another headache, too, the hyper-interference fields act like fugitives that you can't pin down, once they're generated in hyperspace. They're disc-shaped and start spinning, then suddenly for no reason they fall off our directional beams and disappear without a trace. Perry, am I really the only one who came up with this idea for hyperspace ionization fields?”

“Of course—it's your show, Chubby, and that's why I'm only indirectly concerned with the internal problems. When does the production of the interference assemblies start running, tomorrow night?”

“Yes, if we pick up a couple of miracles by then. Otherwise...”

Perry Rhodan demonstrated that in spite of his closeness to his heavysset friend

Reginald Bell, he was cut out of another timber. With ice-cold relentlessness he demanded: "By tomorrow night I want to see that production line going, Bell. I'm depending entirely on you. That is all!"

* * * *

Khrest, the old Arkonide master scientist, had come into Rhodan's office. Like Thora he had been denied the life-preserving biological cell shower on the artificial planet Wanderer. The time had come for Khrest in which the inroads of senility were visibly heralding the end of his days. Nevertheless, today his mental acumen seemed to be as sharp and agile as: in his prime.

He sat down near Perry in the same calm and collected manner that Rhodan and Bell had come to know since they had first met this Arkonide on the Moon decades ago.

"Rhodan," he began, "I've rechecked the list of mutants who are to go on this mission. Wouldn't it be wise to only commit half of these irreplaceable men to the Topide action? Atlan doesn't see it that way—I've just come from him—but John Marshall and I seem to be in agreement. We see too great a risk in this mass assignment of his total corps."

Rhodan took a deep breath. "Khrest, we've got to play it that way. We've got to get in and get out on Topid as fast as possible. Don't forget that we haven't any choice—this move is forced upon us. We're making a defensive thrust, which is always the most unfavourable point of departure. Just a minute—something is coming in over hypercom."

Again, reports were coming in from the war front, where Arkonide space armadas were blockading the overlap zone and were constantly engaged in battle with the Druufs, who were still emerging from their alien universe.

More than 3 dozen dispatches were on hand. This deluge of reports was due to the new spy probes which had by now demonstrated a much higher longevity rate than the previous models because they could not be tracked and shot down so easily. Credit was given to the improved magnetic optics, whose operation was strikingly similar to the long since outmoded flexible plastic lenses. Their observational performance had improved 1,000%.

The commanding officer in charge of Terrania's hypercom station spoke to Rhodan with a touch of pride in his voice. "Sir, we now have in our hands a complete summary of the Arkonide fleet disposition at the front. Including all auxiliary and reserve replacement units, Arkon has 83,000 fighting ships in action. More than 50,000 of them are under humanoid direction. Every hour, thousands of robot commanders are being exchanged for humanoid intelligences. By the end of today the change of command will have been completed for all classes of Arkonide battleships.

"Two hours ago, a contingent of 6,000 reptile people from the Topide system arrived. That was the third transport reported in a period of 10 hours. Sir, we

haven't made a complete evaluation yet but I can already be certain of this statement: everywhere on the front where the reptiles are commanding the warships, Arkon has suffered the least losses in material and equipment. On the other hand, in these areas the Druufs are being pushed back with unprecedented vigour."

"If you please, sir, here are the detailed reports as backup..."

"Thank you," Rhodan interrupted. He had heard enough. The summary alone was sufficient to guide him now. He cut the connection, aware that Khrest had heard it all.

"Well," he said to the elderly Arkonide, "that doesn't look very encouraging, does it? Now the base on Hades as well as Ellert will have to get into it. We can't let the robot Brain have a moment's respite or tomorrow or day after tomorrow there'll be Arkonide spacers descending on the Earth..."

"So what do you intend to do, Rhodan?" asked Khrest. He had always silently admired this Terranian from the first hour of his acquaintance with him.

"Our base inside the Druuf universe will receive an order through one of our space probes to use everything they've got, and especially Ellert's influence with the Druufs, so that they will mount stiffer attacks against the blockade front. Don't you think we should throw the Druufs some bait and tell them that in the next few days the enemy is bringing fleet units to the front with super powerful defence screens that are practically indestructible? That ought to flush out their maximum reserves! Khrest, how long will it take to create the numerical data for such a decoy?"

"Three, maybe 5 hours at the most, Rhodan, but..."

"Forgive me, Khrest—there can be no 'buts' about it. So I'll expect the data in 5 hours. Anything else?"

Khrest departed.

Rhodan startled Bell with a call. The latter was again struggling to overcome his delays without a schedule slippage.

"Chubby, by tonight the Brain on Arkon will have placed most of his fighting ships under command of living intelligences. You have to see to it that your hyperspace interference fields will be available by tomorrow night so that the first ships can make a night flight out to Topid. I can't give you any more time. That is all!"

Rhodan then established contact with Allan D. Mercant. "Anything new on Topid?"

"No sir. With the exception of a few robot spacers, no Arkon ship has appeared in the Orion sector nor have any been announced by the Brain but my two agents were able to detect three different hypercom contacts in the past 24 hours involving messages between the positronicon of Arkon and the Topides. They were unable to decode the conversations."

"And what's the general situation, Mercant?"

The Marshal's face was grim. "Bad, sir! From hour to hour the giant positronicon is becoming stronger. Even at the height of the Empire's former power the people were never governed with such a tight rein on all their actions... and not even the Aras dare to rebel, much less the Springers and the Mounders. These Druufs and their continuous mass attacks... they've practically welded the crumbled pieces of the Greater Empire back together again. My agents don't have our general perspective of the situation but everywhere they run into the same mystery. Independent or subversive action, revolts and secession movements—all of that has disappeared from star cluster M-13."

"Thank you, Mercant."

He prepared the text of the orders which had to reach Hades, a planet in the Druuf universe, within the next two hours. Since the loss of Grautier, direct support and physical contact with Hades had been cut off and now there was only radio contact. Rhodan used that sparingly because he was well aware of the danger of being traced. So in order to deliver his latest orders he was resorting to use of a remote-controlled spy probe. The worst that could happen was that it could either be shot down or in case of seizure it would self-destruct, leaving no clue as to the message it carried.

He was reading the orders directly to the hypercom central when his other screen started flashing a call from Pluto. "Hold on!" he called to one side, and he finished reading the text, giving orders to have it transmitted to the probe-launching ship through at least 10 separate relay stations. Then he finally turned to handle the call from Pluto.

The relay stations were nothing more than State class observation cruisers which were widely deployed through the galaxy. Messages in transmission were often ping-ponged from one ship to another, in pulse-burst coded format and at varied frequencies. This zigzag pattern normally caused a 5second delay for a dispatch to reach its destination but it made it impossible for either the point of origin or reception to be traced.

"Yes?" Rhodan turned to the screen where the C.O. of the Pluto garrison had appeared.

"Sir, excuse me, please..."

"Alright, what is it?" interjected Rhodan, obviously vexed by the interruption.

The garrison chief's face became colder than was normal even for the chilly climate of Pluto. He cleared his throat and finally rasped out his message in a tone that Rhodan didn't like at all. "Sir, for several days a certain Lt. Thomas Cardif has been attempting to..."

A tiny shock ran through Rhodan as he heard his son's name—Thomas Cardif—but he betrayed nothing of the sudden storm of emotions within him as he interrupted the officer on Pluto: "Am I his immediate superior or you, Major? Handle Lt. Cardif as you would any other officer in your command!"

"Sir..." Rhodan could not fail to notice the major was marshalling all of his courage in order to present his case. "The lieutenant's psychiatric examination

indicates a hate complex he has built up against you. Since he is not entirely responsible for his behaviour at the moment, I'd like to take the liberty..."

Perry Rhodan leaned forward, his grey eyes suddenly glaring. His lips tightened. The deepened cleft between his brows now revealed his agitation. Only his voice remained calm, though the tone was cold. "If your Lt. Thomas Cardif belongs in a sanitarium he cannot remain an officer of the Solar Spacefleet. But if he's not sick and is only suffering from a self-induced hate complex, then put the youngster to work, Major! Don't you have any children of your own?"

"Yes, two boys and a girl, sir..."

"OK! So what are you going to do with him now, Major?"

"He is making subversive and rebellious speeches against you, sir..." The Major had finally managed to reveal Thomas Cardif's indiscretion to his father.

"Unfortunately, Major, that's nothing new. But it rubs me the wrong way that you're looking at him as my son and that you don't feel free to act as you see fit. Well, I want you to handle him exactly on that basis. Put him in front of a court martial where he belongs and after he's served some time just keep him so busy that he won't have any time or appetite for rabble rousing!"

"Sir, might I add a further observation?" asked the major.

"Please do!"

"Sir, as you may know, Lt. Cardif has your own brand of energy..."

Rhodan broke in again: "A plus-factor I'm glad to hear about. Just guide that energy of his into constructive channels. For Thomas Cardif's sake, I hope you succeed... Yes, I know, Major, you can't have children without expecting headaches... Thank you. That is all!"

The connection between frozen Pluto and the Earth had been cut off but in Terrania Rhodan's thoughts whirled for some minutes around the subject of his son. It was during a mission to Siliko 5, a planet fortress of the Arkonides, that Thomas had first learned that Thora and Perry Rhodan were his parents. In a bitterness of reproach over the fact that his origin had necessarily been kept secret, he had refused to discard the alias of Cardif, the name he had grown up with.

Supporting his head in his hands, Rhodan sat there and stared into space. Again and again his thoughts cried "Thomas!"—yet he knew that cry could never penetrate to Thomas Cardif through the Arkonide wall that was his mother's legacy.

Thomas Cardif, Perry Rhodan's only son, hated his father!

It was with a sense of relief that Rhodan noticed Bell's arrival. The stocky fellow was startled at the sight of his friend sitting there in a mood that was rarely ever revealed to anyone.

It made him more cautious than usual. "Something happen?" he asked.

"Reg—Thomas is going to be courtmartialled

"What?!" The exclamation sounded like a trumpet blast for a battle charge. "And you...? Naturally, I suppose you agreed to it, is that what you're telling

me?”

“What else would you expect, as Administrator of the Solar...”

Bell interrupted. “Perry, you’re one of the best—a magnificent guy—but as a father you’re not worth the powder to—Look! My old man used to tan my hide any time I got into mischief but he would have gone to the President of the United States to fight for me if it had ever been necessary. So what do you do, instead? Let me have that space phone!”

He pushed Perry to one side. The call key snapped audibly as it was pressed home. The interplanetary exchange answered. Bell asked for an immediate connection with the major at the Pluto garrison.

Shortly thereafter, the viewscreen brightened.

Bell wasted no time. “Major, I’m calling about Thomas Cardif. I do not agree that the youngster should be courtmartialled... That’s right, I’m talking to you from the same spot where the Administrator spoke to you a few minutes ago. He’s sitting here next to me. So we understand each other, right? And whether you decide to nurse him or whatever, you can figure it out from there better than I can. But one thing is clear, OK?”

“Very clear, Mr. Bell.” And a sigh of relief came from Pluto.

“Alright, that is all, Major!” Bell finished and pressed the disconnect.

He had the sensitivity to drop the subject of Thomas Cardif, then and there. In fact, this wasn’t what he had come to see Perry about. “By noon tomorrow the new equipment will be in production, Perry. The specialists have gotten over the hump. In a few hours the tech experts will be putting their know-how to the test. I think this is one night we’ll be able to see what a bed looks like.”

While he talked he had been looking at his thumb. It had healed long since but he seemed to be troubled by it because he shook his head with grave dissatisfaction.

Perry Rhodan refrained from asking him what he was shaking his head about. He was in no mood to listen again to his friend’s gloomy premonitions. “That’s right,” he answered, attempting to get Bell off the subject. “Tonight maybe both of us can get some sleep.”

5/ OPERATION KAMIKAZE

Eight light cruisers of the State class, each of them a fast spacesphere 300 feet in diameter, had taken off in the direction of Orion. Simultaneously two heavy cruisers of the Terra class also departed on the same mission. The only vessel still waiting to go was the superbattleship *Kublai Khan*, now disguised as an Arkonide ship bearing the name of *On-Tharu*. It would not be able to move into action until the complicated preparations for its visit to Topid had been completed.

On board the *Burma*, one of the light cruisers, a tiny lab had been set up for Gallus, the chief expert for hyperspace ionization fields. He did not emerge from his workroom until he received an intercom call from the ship's commander, Joe Pasgin, and was ordered to come to the Command Central.

A small, slender-framed man, Gallus was a sensitive bundle of nerves but he was without peer in his specialized field. Realizing that this was the expert's first trip into outer space, Joe Pasgin was there to greet him in front of the great gallery of panob screens as Gallus stepped into the Central and was confronted with the spectacle of thousands of unblinking suns, staring at him from the darkness of the void. But the ion-field specialist seemed to ignore the reproduction of the universe hanging before him. He was only interested in reports concerning his synthetically generated interference fields, which were now to undergo a practical testing.

Pasgin had to inform him: "We have to wait until we're in the Orion sector before performing the tests. That's a strict order from the Chief, Mr. Gallus. After all, we don't want to put up a neon sign for the Arkonides just yet. Do you hear that countdown? In 20 seconds we'll be making a transition jump to the Orion area. So if you can just be patient with us for a minute or two..."

Under protective concealment of the residual shockwave absorbers, the 8 light cruisers and their 2 Terra-class escorts made a formation hyperjump and emerged into normal space at a distance of slightly over 800 light-years from their starting point. After the shock of rematerialising had been dissipated along with the pulling sensation of pain at the nape of the neck, a signal was received from the Sherbourne to start the first test with the newfangled equipment, which was supposed to generate ionization fields of astronomical proportions and keep them stabilized.

The distance between the *Burma* and the *Sherbourne* was slightly more than 600,000 miles. They could not directly observe each other without electronic assistance. But in the Communications Central of the *Burma*, the presence of the

distant Sherbourne was demonstrated as Gallus and Pasgin watched 3 new instruments that were connected to the hypercom receiver. On the screen of something that looked like an oscillograph, a weirdly formed and constantly changing double curve caused Gallus to cry out: "There! That's the *Sherbourne*!"

Knowing nothing of these communications techniques, Joe Pasgin could only give a polite nod of confirmation. The curves told him absolutely nothing and their strange configuration was somehow alien to him. But the frail small man beside him appeared to have fallen in love with them. He gazed at them in fixed fascination and then suddenly uttered an ecstatic cry when an adjacent black oval screen flashed to life with an extremely bright greenish glow. Its intensity wavered momentarily and then it held steady.

The *Burma's* Chief Com Officer seemed to have been briefed from the start on the operation of the oval-shaped screen, for now he exclaimed: "It's for real! The hypercom stuff isn't getting through at all. I wouldn't have believed it!"

Now Gallus was the pure researcher. "Hold the directional beam where it is," he said to the communications man. "I want some readings on the field reflections."

Almost in spite of himself, Joe Pasgin began to be interested in Gallus' testing because in the final analysis their results would determine if it would be possible to cut off Topid's total radio traffic and only let controlled messages come through. The latter would be cross-relayed by Terra ships through the screening zone, and once inside they would be rebroadcast to the lizard people.

While the small composite squadron of the Solar fleet approached the planetary system of the reptile intelligences at half speed, the last practical experiments were being completed on board the *Burma* and the *Sherbourne*. Gallus had changed from a quiet, frail little man to a dominant focal point of wizardly energy. In a seeming rage of zeal, he extended the range of his experiments and made test after test comply with more and more rigid parameters. And whatever he did to try to break through his ionization fields in hyperspace was blocked. What he was most enthused about was the fact that the interference fields held stable and that they could be moved in all directions and to any desired distance with a minimum of energy output."

"We'll achieve maximum efficiency," he explained to an attentive Joe Pasgin, "by placing the field at a distance of from 24 to 34.5 light-minutes. Three cruisers on one side of the screen will be enough of a field generation base to suppress all hypercom messages to cluster M-13 or the blockade front. Two other ships will be needed on stand by in case of emergency." Almost rapturously, Gallus concluded: "Mr. Pasgin, the Chief will be pleased with what we've accomplished!"

Pasgin discounted the other's enthusiasm for the moment. "And how are we supposed to intercept all the messages through the interference fields—the ones intended for the lizards?" he wanted to know.

"You don't intercept them *through* the fields. No hypercom dispatch can penetrate these unique screens, no matter how powerful. But it's a characteristic

of the ionization layers to reflect transmissions at 100% efficiency. Of course, there's one danger in that..."

"What danger—where?" asked Pasgin.

"There is a danger of placing the reflection field at just the wrong angle to the directional beam's angle of incidence, in which case it wouldn't be difficult to send the beam directly back to its point of origin at its full original strength..."

"Glord!" Pasgin stared at him in sudden alarm. "You mean to tell me then that the robot Brain could receive back his own hypercom messages?"

"Naturally!" replied Gallus in some surprise, unable to understand the other's flare of excitement.

"Does the Chief know of this possibility, Gallus?"

"Of course not. How could he?"

"Shoosh! Only a nuck on cloud 99 would ask a question like that!" Pasgin blurted out. "What do you think the robot Brain would do if instead of getting an answer to his inquiries he had his own message bounce back into his receiver? He'd send out a fleet force to the place where his hyper-beams were being reflected..."

"Where? In hyperspace?" asked Gallus innocently. He was merely the dedicated scientist, devoid of cunning or guile.

Joe Pasgin got control of himself. It galled him that this expert was so blind to the cold facts of reality but he answered: "No. The Arkonide ships will show up at the *source* of the hypercom interference and they'll start blasting without mercy. That's why the Chief had better know about this as soon as possible!"

The ship's P.A. system announced from the Control Central that the Terranian squadron had arrived at the ordered position within 5 minutes. Pasgin hurriedly excused himself from Gallus.

When he entered the Control Central he was aware of a high pitch of activity. Messages and reports were coming in from all parts of the spherical spacer in an uninterrupted stream. They were a prelude to one of the most daring manoeuvres that Perry Rhodan had ever attempted.

Many of the men in the Command Central of the *Burma* had flown missions in other ships and in the course of time they had developed an almost infallible instinct for the kind of assignment they were on, whether harmless or dangerous. They knew that this run was not only one of the riskiest, it was the ultimate of impudence. Not one man among them was especially anxious to get into a shooting match with the enemy but they were all keen on getting the better of the robot Brain of Arkon, and the sheer cheekiness of the plan intrigued them to the point where they were willing to accept any risks that might be involved in the project.

There was a name for their mission which had been adopted by everybody: *Operation Kamikaze!* Its meaning was ominous but it made little difference to Perry Rhodan's men. They were accustomed to hitting rough weather once in awhile. Although they knew it would be no picnic, however, they didn't quite

recognize it for what it really was, Rhodan's desperate attempt to rescue what could still be salvaged!

Joe Pasgin received the reports of the other spaceships. He checked their position figures and then nodded a confirmation to the positronic section. For the officer in charge of the computer computations, this meant that the other ships had taken up their planned positions and that his work could now begin.

The *Burma* was unique among all other State class ships in that it was equipped with a special positronic computer brain. The feature of this machine was that it handled the higher math of Arkonide meta-mechanics which even made it possible to make calculations concerning hyperspace functions.

At the moment it was occupied with the incredibly complex problem of calculating the angle of incidence of the directional beam from Arkon 3's hypercom transmitter, which was regularly used by the Regent. For every second of time, hundreds of vector radiants had to be considered including contra-rotational motions. The fact that the Topide system was more than 33000 light-years from the central world of Arkon was not the main difficulty but the fact that the incidence angle against the interference screens had to be determined *within* hyperspace. For according to the theoretical postulates of Arkonide meta-mechanics, in hyperspace there were neither any normal space-time characteristics nor any concepts at all that were related to our own universe.

Without the help of this machine the humans of the Solar System could never have even approached their present task. However, here on board the *Burma* the problem was being attacked without furore or fanfare.

Now when the readout strip chucked out into the receiver tray, Pasgin inquired: "Ylers, don't you think we'd better consult our expert on this? When I was in the Com Room, Gallus was telling me something about a 100% reflection factor..."

"Get him in here!" the computer officer gasped, shaking his head incredulously. "At least that way I'm not going in solo on this thing!"

Pasgin gave an order for someone to get Gallus. He was interested in Ylers' reaction. "You don't believe in that 100% possibility?" he asked.

Ylers answered without much hesitation. "No such thing as 100% reflection! Even the reflective process itself consumes energy!"

"Even in hyperspace?" asked Pasgin.

"Ouch!" groaned Ylers at his console. "You've got me cornered on that one because no man alive can say yes or no..."

"Hold it, Ylers. Our expert on the subject says yes. He told me that the very *lack* of energy loss is a characteristic of hyperspace."

"He ought to know," conceded Ylers grudgingly but he still continued to shake his head.

Gallus entered.

"Oh, Mr. Gallus, would you please check over the results from the positronic..."

“One moment, Mr. Pasgin,” interrupted Gallus. “There must be some misunderstanding here. I’m not at all in a position to verify the computations of the meta-positronicon. Nor is any Arkonide in a position to do so. Everything pertaining to such hyperspace mechanics is an exercise in multiple unknowns. Just why or how even a practical interface with these phenomena is obtained through a mathematical approach in the first place is a riddle, especially one that results in answers that prove out by actual application—such as physical tests and of course your regular hypertransitions. Not even an Arkonide can explain it—but he uses it.”

“Then am I clear to beam our agreed signal to Earth, telling them that our preparations have been completed?”

“Yes,” replied the ionization expert. “Nothing stands in the way of it now.”

“OK then, fine!” muttered Pasgin to himself. “Here goes *Operation Kamikaze!*” He switched the intercom to the Communications Section. “You may send our pre-arranged signal to the Chief. Multiple relay, pulse-burst coding and scrambled. You know the special code. Confirm please!”

The confirmation returned immediately from the Com Room. At the same time the prepared signal was beamed out. The operation countdown began...

* * * *

At 20:31:09 Earth time, 6 January, 2044, the main hyper-communication station in Terrania received the *Burma’s* hypercom signal and immediately relayed it to the *Kublai Khan*, which was standing by ready for takeoff.

At 23:35:14, the superbattleship rose into space and was on its way. Other than the flagship *Drusus*, the *Kublai Khan* was the only ship that carried a tele-transmitter on board.

Its great spherical hull, made of the best Arkonide steel and measuring a mile in diameter, held within it a 2,000-man crew. But for this particular mission they had been very specially selected. Their uniforms alone were a telltale departure from normal procedure. To those Terranians who had never been off the Earth before, the uniforms were nothing more than disguises, only Atlan saw something in them that was intimately familiar and he started to be afflicted by a slight touch of homesickness. Wherever one looked on board the *Kublai Khan*, one encountered Arkonide uniforms, and everywhere the men either spoke in the Arkonide language or in the broader-sounding Intercosmo, the commercial language of interstellar space. In fact the entire crew did not seem to know English!

At 02:01:34 Earth time on January 7, 2044, the massive space battleship dropped under the protection of its powerful residual shock-wave dampers and entered into hypertransition. It emerged into the normal continuum again, somewhere in the Orion sector. Specifically it was just one light-minute away from the advance Terranian squadron that was waiting for it.

While its 2,000-man ‘Arkonide’ crew was recovering from the ‘jump shock’ of

transition, the vast ship's automatic transceiver sent out its recognition code-signal to the other fleet units nearby.

The most important leaders of this daring enterprise were gathered together with Perry Rhodan in the Command Central of the *Kublai Khan* at this time in order to hear Joe Pasgin's report on the hyper-interference tests.

Reginald Bell was too short and stocky to look much like an Arkonide but he wore the uniform of an Arkonide staff officer. At this moment he seemed to be talking aloud to himself. "If these ionization fields don't break down on us, I'll be amazed. But great galloping galaxies—what am I saying?!"

No one contradicted him, not even Pucky the mousebeaver. Wearing a special Arkonide inspector's uniform, the latter was lolling as usual on his small couch, where he had placed a ball-shaped object named Harno—his new little friend.

It appeared that Perry Rhodan and Atlan were the only ones who were presently occupied. Although Bell himself had developed this plan against the Topides, just now he was merely a listener like the others. The mousebeaver yawned somewhat conspicuously and made matters worse by neglecting to place a paw in front of his mouth.

On the other hand, the Com Central had its hands full. One order rapidly followed another. Rhodan's ships were beginning to erect an electronic blockade around the reptile-inhabited world of Topide in Orion, in order to seal it off entirely from all external radio traffic. One after another, the great ionization fields were set up. At an average distance of 30 light-minutes from the Topide system, a vast spherical structure slowly took form—something that had no existence in normal space but which was nevertheless locking together in the incomprehensible dimension of hyperspace. This had the double effect of cutting off the lizard men from any communications which might be sent to them from other worlds and keeping them from being able to beam out any messages farther than 30 lems from their planet. Such directional beams were met by the unyielding spherical interference field structure, and in accordance with laws peculiar to hyperspace itself they were then deflected by a 100 % reflective process.

In the Com Central of the *Kublai Khan*, alias *On-Tharu*, complicated apparatuses with still more complicated adjustments and controls were busy converting a series of incoming peeps and chirping into messages which were of a quite respectable length and vital importance. The ship's intercom system transferred them immediately to the team that was working with Perry Rhodan.

By 03:42:04 ET, on January 7, 2044, the reptile world of Topid had been completely isolated from all other systems in the galaxy. Only now could Perry Rhodan turn to the task of eradicating an old sin of omission.

While the *On-Tharu* made a gradual thrust at half lightspeed toward the binary system of Topid, the mixed Solar Fleet squadron remained behind, each vessel at its assigned picket point either before or behind the interference zone. Meanwhile on the superbattleship the last preparations were being made for a landing on the

reptile planet, in order to insure that they would not be met with a powerful barrage of energy-beam fire.

Rhodan leaned toward the grid mike and called to the Com. Room: "Turn on the robot Brain's frequency channel and beam out his private recognition pattern. 30 seconds should do it. He never holds his call-flash longer than that with us!"

At the same time the heavy footsteps of a robot rumbled up behind him. Atlan forced a smile. Bell grinned his satisfaction. He appeared to have forgotten the New Year omen connected with his injured thumb.

The mousebeaver did not seem to share the nervous high tension of the moment. His paw rested on the smooth round surface of Harno, whom he had rolled up close beside him. Pucky's eyes were closed and only his incisor tooth was in evidence. This was a sign that he was in his element.

A confirmation came over the loudspeaker: "The call signal is on the air!"

Rhodan nodded almost imperceptibly. The tall robot remained standing beside him, apparently specially programmed for just this event. On the hyper-screen was the widely famed recognition wave-pattern of the robot Brain of Arkon 3. This signal must have been visible also for the past 20 seconds on a number of special view screens operated by the reptilian intelligences below.

Then came the first radio response from the Topides, confirming their reception of the 'command call from the robot Regent of Arkon'! It lasted half a minute.

Precisely at the end of the 30th second, the robot next to Rhodan began to speak with a metallic-sounding voice. It bore an astounding resemblance to that of the Robot Brain itself: "This is the Great Cöordinator speaking. Today the *On-Tharu* will land on Topid under direction of my special minister Attor, who is to carry out an immediate inspection survey. You are to give every assistance, fulfil every request and obey every order. Any resistance or failure to comply will result in the destruction of the planet. That is all!"

This was the abrupt end of a message which had every appearance of coming from the Great Cöordinator on Arkon 3 and which every Topide had no recourse but to accept as such.

The robot who had been prepared for this deception promptly withdrew. The *On-Tharu* continued hurtling at unabated velocity toward the double-sun system, which by virtue of its 27 planets was by no means small. 15 of these 27 worlds belonged to the great brilliant white star which had 6 times the mass of its violet companion. 6 other planets orbited around the violet glowing sun, which at first glance might have seemed to be a 'dwarf'. But closer inspection proved it to be a very hot small star with a relatively meagre mass, a fairly insignificant gravitational field and a small diameter.

However, the remaining 6 planets revolved around both stars and one of these was the principal world of the lizard people, while the other 5 planets of this complicated system were in every respect a secondary importance.

The giant main computer brain of the *On-Tharu* had absorbed its Arkonide knowledge from the data banks of the older *Titan*. Just now it was feeding the last

coördinates of Topid into the massive automatic pilot system of the spherical battleship and at the same moment the operators became aware of being tracked by the reptiles and their space surveillance patrol ships.

“Bogies on the screens!”

“Space-warp trace!”

“Six ships in yellow zone... two in the green!”

The three men responsible for the success or failure of *Operation Kamikaze* quickly exchanged glances.

“Fire Control?” Atlan hailed the giant ship’s Weapons Central over the intercom.

“Yes sir?” responded an officer, who then corrected himself: “Yes, Admiral?”

“If those lizards seem to be getting too close, give them a full warning salvo across their bows. We will not give them any radio warning nor will we respond to their own signals. If we’re going to represent ourselves as Arkonides, then we have to act like them. So fire without warning but don’t hit any of the Topides. Understood?”

“Yes, Admiral... once an Arkonide always an Arkonide!”

This unexpected reply from the Weapons Central caused Atlan to react with a slight start of surprise. He did not have to look to his right or left to catch the reactions of Rhodan and Bell. They tried to suppress their smirks of amusement but did not succeed.

Atlan snorted angrily. “That one’s got his nerve!”

Bell, of course, had a comment. “I didn’t know that our weapons chief was also a poet. You know only a poet could sum up the total character of a race in just 6 words—nothing left to be said. Atlan, wouldn’t you say that the whole Balawax is in those 6 words: ‘*Once an Arkonide always an...*’” He got no further.

From the main gun turrets at both poles of the *Kublai Khan*, all weapons opened up on the approaching Topide ships, blasting a titanic warning salvo across their bows. Even though a mile separated the two firing positions on the ship, the thundering shots were heavily felt in the Command Central.

The heaviest sound-waves had barely subsided when Atlan leaned toward Bell and muttered: “My fat friend, I’m going to take that poet of yours in hand personally and...”

Reginald Bell placed a hand on Atlan’s arm. Although he always preferred the pleasanter aspects of life, he was never one to sidestep the rough spots. “You’re not going to handle our fire control officer like an Arkonide! Listen, friend—you know, with all your understanding of our mentality, sometimes it’s frightening what you miss in us humans! Major Crafford—I think that’s his name—wasn’t aiming at you with that crack. He was only expressing a judgment of your own people’s impossible stupidity and arrogance. Admiral Atlan, the whole universe would be yours today—if you had developed friendships instead of...”

The sound shock of a second salvo ran through the mighty vessel. Major

Crafford had fired his next warning in the deadlier form of combined beam concentrations.

The loudspeaker crackled with an announcement from the Com Room: “The lizards are asking for the vessel’s name, sir.”

Khrest emerged from the background, about to speak to Rhodan, when he was interrupted by a ringing additional announcement:

“We have an energy trace, sir! They’re making trouble for us, directly from the planet itself!”

The statement was very ambiguous.

“What do you mean—trouble?” Rhodan shot back sharply. “What kind of trouble?”

In the same moment the overload alarm for the defence screens set up a howl of sirens. Within the ship, transformers roared suddenly to peak capacity while the energy absorption system threw in one reserve bank after another. A deluge of unknown forces engulfing the super powerful outer protection screens of the *Kublai Khan* had to be absorbed and converted by the mighty transformers so that the titanic energies could be conducted into the buffer storage banks which had purposely been held empty for just such a case as this.

The surprise attack lasted only two seconds, then the deadly phenomenon creased like a passing flash of lightning.

The Com Central blatted more news out of the loudspeaker. “Topide wishes to be excused for having recognized the *On-Tharu* too late—all approach ships ordered to turn back!”

Bell was promptly heard to say: “That’s a double donk brazen lie! We ought to...”

But the speaker continued: “The hypercom station on Topid requests direct contact with the Brain of Arkon!”

“No dice!” countermanded Rhodan curtly. He recalled having also called the Arkon robot monster repeatedly in vain. “Just don’t answer them! That is all!” But Perry turned back with emphasis to the nature of this ‘trouble’ the Topides had served them with. “Now, gentlemen, may I please have a fast explanation of what almost broke through the maximum capacity on our screens?” The tone of his voice advertised that he would tolerate no more excuses. His grey eyes flashed with an inner fire, not of uncontrolled emotions but of anger at having to ask for the information.

The very busy research lab was heard from, under the direction of Dr. Bansfield. “Sir, this is Tech Department 184.” On the intercom screen the young scientist’s face reflected an obvious excitement. He was in his early 30s. “Sir, the Topides must have developed a new kind of defence weapon. Pending a recheck of our findings, they were firing a 3-phase beam...”

“What the devil is that?” interrupted Rhodan irritably.

“Sir, I beg pardon, but...”

“No buts—just say it!” insisted Rhodan.

“3-phase beam is just a working term, sir, because we don’t yet know how the reptiles have solved such a complex problem. They seem to use a probing beam to measure our defence screen capacity. As far as we can determine, the test beam seems to regulate its own high tension to match the tension levels of our absorption fields...”

“Which are never constant,” interjected Bell. “That’s gwash (baloney)!”

But the young scientist appeared to be very confident of what he was talking about. “Sir, that’s what we thought at first but we had to remember that our reserve absorption banks were purposely kept empty for just such a case of overload. But when we found that even some of the master accumulators had suddenly lost 20% charge—in less than 2 seconds—we could only conclude that the lizard people have hit on a new deadly weapon. They can cause any spaceship, after even a light attack, to destroy itself *from within*. Because—contrary to all previous experience—our absorbers didn’t extract any excess of alien energy fed into our screens *from outside*. Instead, the paradoxical reaction occurred whereby monstrous amounts of our own energy were transferred in just 2 seconds from our main reserves into the banks, not only overloading them but threatening us with an overall collapse.”

Atlan had straightened up with a jolt of alarm while Bell moved close to the viewscreen.

Rhodan remained unmoved in his chair but when he spoke now that same peculiar note of calmness crept into his voice which he had so often been noted for during other precarious situations. “Doctor,” he said, “briefly, do I understand the following? A probing test beam contacted our screen field and measured its strength. At the moment, the transmitted energy adjusted itself to the tension level of our defence screen. Please interrupt me if I go off the track here. So by all outward appearances that would strengthen our screen. What I don’t get is the fact that our absorption banks acted exactly opposite to their designed function. Instead of drawing in and storing the excess energy, they switched additional energy into the screen fields!”

“Sir...” Dr. Bansfield sighed deeply. “Since the probe beam became identical in strength to our screen, it was able to come through but as our present flow charts show very clearly, all absorbers including the transformers were *changed in polarity!* This process may perhaps be explained by considering the hypothetical and speculative border science that was once propounded by an ancient Arkonide mathematician...”

Perry Rhodan, who together with Bell had undergone the most advanced phases of Arkonide hypno-schooling, was familiar with the work of the scientist mentioned, and he was taken by surprise that Dr. Bansfield should also be informed about it. But he did not express himself on the matter. He thanked Bansfield and urged him to pursue his further investigations on a top priority basis.

“I haven’t any time just now to get into this thing personally but we’ve all just experienced how vitally important it is to get to the bottom of it. When you can, please keep giving me any further reports on developments... and you can depend on one thing, Doctor, on Topid we’re going to keep a sharp lookout for any clues to this uncanny defence weapon. Thank you. That is all.”

6/ KERH-ONF SPELLS POWDER KEG!

The towering telescopic struts of the *On-Tharu* slowly extended. The raging thunder of the mighty pulse engines in the skirt-ring of the gigantic spacesphere had subsided to a low rumble. The antigrav projectors were rendering the mile-high ship almost weightless.

According to Arkonide star catalogues, the Topide spaceport of Kerh-Onf belonged to the most important city in the entire binary sun system. It was the only sort that could receive a super-class ship without the pavement breaking through. A thousand feet over Kerh-Onf the *On-Tharu* lowered with an exasperating but majestic slowness toward the landing apron.

Perry Rhodan had summoned John Marshall and Pucky to him, along with Harno, the little ball-shaped creature. By means of their telepathic faculties the first two were to check over the psycho-mental disposition of the reptile people who were waiting at the edge of the spaceport. With his natural long-distance vision, Harno was to search for the battle position which had projected the energy sensor beam.

Atlan and Bell landed the massive spaceship, whose monumental size was a fitting representation of the Greater Imperium. All battle positions were manned and even the tele-transmitter stood ready for action.

Suddenly the mousebeaver blurted out: "Perry, those lizards are mad enough to pop their scales! What they'd like best is to shoot every last Arkonide off in a mail rocket with no forwarding address. And if you think that's something, when it comes to the Great Cöordinator..."

"That's right," agreed Marshall, the Mutant Corps chief. "Arkon has forfeited the last trace of sympathy in the Topide System by its forced recruitment here."

Khrest was listening and now added his comment: "Throughout history the reptiles have broken every treaty they ever made with Arkon."

Pucky leaned against Rhodan. He was the only one who could allow himself such a liberty. After all he wasn't a human being and he didn't care to be one. Often he seemed to take more pride in his animal shape than in his phenomenal faculties and above-average intelligence. Whoever came in contact with Pucky had to divest himself of the conviction that intelligence was only related to the humanoid form. The mousebeaver was proof of the fact that humanoids did not necessarily play the superior role in the workings of destiny.

“Boss,” he said, “the official delegation from the Government is forming. The head sheik around here seem to be somebody named Xxal-Ri. But don’t hold me to the spelling. Man, how he loves the Arkonides! And his conscience must be unkosh because all he can think of is the deceptions and dirty tricks that this system has pulled on Arkon. He also thinks the slowness of our landing is suspicious...”

At this moment the *On-Tharu* touched down as lightly as a feather. With a last sputtering murmur the pulse engines died out and the antigrav projectors slowly folded under.

Harno made telepathic contact with Rhodan. The globular creature floated chest-high before him and projected a vision of a strange-looking piece of space artillery. The thing had no resemblance to a disintegrator assembly or a thermo-beam pointer and it certainly was no impulse cannon.

“This is the place, Perry Rhodan, from which the sensor probe beam was shot upward at the Kublai Khan. A few minutes ago the reptiles learned from their follow-up computations that with their new beam they are able to break down the defence screen of our ship. They are just now in the process of reporting the results to higher authorities...”

“If these overgrown Gila monsters can do as they please, Perry... they’ll make spinnets (spinach?) out of us chirped Pucky excitedly. “Now they’re discussing years gone by and are talking about the beating they took in the Betelgeuse System... But what’s making them tear their hair now is that not a single airlock has opened on our ship...”

He was interrupted by Bell. “Topides don’t have hair, Pucky, so they couldn’t be tearing it. Once and for all, you’re going to have to express yourself more precisely. A little while ago you referred to the head of their delegation as a sheik. Such expressions are unbecoming a lieutenant in the Mutant Corps!”

“Forgive me, Sir Deputy Administrator!” chirped Pucky. His manner was so grave that even Perry Rhodan was taken in by it and stared at the mousebeaver in amazement. No one was accustomed to see in him such discretion and reserve. Normally he would have put up a fight. “Sir, I shall henceforth guide myself by your example!”

Incipient laughter was cut off by a call from the Com Room. “Sir, a dispatch from the *Sherbourne*!” The *Sherbourne* was located in *front* of the interference zone. “A fleet of Topide merchant ships is trying to make hypercom contact with their home port...”

Rhodan spoke angrily into the microphone. “Let’s not have the *Sherbourne* make things any more complicated than they are already! Use the handover procedure at once!”

The handover procedure meant that an, Earth spaceship would pick up the message of an alien ship and fly through the electronic screen with it. Once on the inside, it would then relay the message onward to its destination. It was actually a very cumbersome method but the best brains of Terrania hadn’t been able to make

a better suggestion. Although not happy with Bell's idea, they had been forced to accept it.

In the meantime all preparations for disembarking from the *On-Tharu* had been made. One report after another streamed into the Control Central. The plan went along like clockwork.

When Allan and Rhodan prepared to leave the Control Central, Pucky piped up rather emphatically: "I think I should play the number one role with the lizards—have you forgotten? After all, my uniform—"

"Priority message to the Chief!" The repeated announcement over the speakers drowned out every conversation on board. Lt. Elp, the officer on duty in the Com Central, turned the volume down to a rattle after this alarming beginning: "We have a warning from F.C. Curtis, Solar Intelligence agent on Topid. He has just learned that two Arkonide robotships have been here for three days, preparing to take on a troop consignment of 6,000 Topides with spaceflight experience. Location of Arkon ships unknown! End of message from F.C. Curtis."

Atlan and Rhodan quickly exchanged glances. Bell sat bolt upright in his chair, suddenly tense. For some seconds, silence reigned in the great Control Central on the *On-Tharu*.

Perry Rhodan drew in one long, deep breath, then turned to look at John Marshall. His order was brief: "Your mutants can go to work now."

Bell looked at the tip of his right thumb. Suddenly that same weird premonition came upon him which had come within a hair of completely ruining his last New Year celebration.

While Atlan and Rhodan left the Control Central, Pucky moved over to Bell and chirped in his car: "Fatso, I should have gotten me some heated plod-hoppers after all, because we're all going to have the worst case of cold feet you ever saw... everybody! Now don't grumble about my choice of words because I have to politely remind you that up till now you were always referring to boots as plod-hoppers..."

"I'll plod-hopper you—!"

The mousebeaver eluded Bell's grasping hand by making a lightning jump to one side. Ploud-hopper!

Marshall called to Pucky: "Keep in contact with the Chief until I get back!"

Then he too left the Control Central in order to get several mutants started on a search for the two Arkonide robotships. It was a matter of prime urgency to find out up to what age the robot Brain was conscripting space-experienced reptiles for action at the front. John Marshall had not forgotten the reasons behind Rhodan's last-second decision to take this desperate action.

By means of the central antigrav shaft, Atlan and Rhodan reached the main airlock exit, which directly faced the waiting Topide delegation. As the two of them marched down the broad ramp to the plastic pavement, 150 robots began to move in two contingents, one on either side of Atlan and Rhodan, all of them having the unmistakable appearance of Arkonide fighting machines.

Before them the bizarre buildings of the reptile city of Kerh-Onf rose against a backdrop of shimmering, white-grey mountains that spanned half the horizon. Approximately 2,000 yards ahead of them a group of more than 200 of the lizard men were standing at the edge of the spaceport.

Rhodan and Atlan marched toward this group, looking as proud and arrogant as possible in their magnificent and colourful Arkonide uniforms. To the right and left of them thundered the metallic cadence of the 150 combat robots against the hard plastic surface of the field. Behind them followed a retinue of 9 men but only 3 of them could have been taken for Arkonides by their appearance. However, the remaining 6 could be regarded as members of some Arkonide subordinate race of people.

These 9 men actually belonged to the most unique organization in the galaxy—the secret ‘Mutant Corps’ of the Solar Empire. They had not come along for the purpose of protecting Rhodan and Atlan but rather were assigned the difficult task of determining, on their first contact with the reptiles, what was still known or remembered on this planet concerning events that occurred 70 years ago in the Vega sector.

The reception committee now began to move forward from the edge of the spaceport. The Topides walked like humans, more or less. They possessed hands and feet and held themselves upright. They also breathed the same kind of atmosphere as humans but beyond that all points of similarity vanished.

Their low, broad and hairless reptilian skulls with their almost razor-sharp lips and protruding chameleon eyes gave them a predatory appearance. It was difficult to imagine that these reptilian creatures could be intelligent, and it required a still greater effort to keep in mind that their level and quality of intelligence was largely comparable to that of the average human. But as understood by humans the standards of ethics and morality had no validity in their world. In their language there was not even a word for pity or mercy. However, in certain areas, alien to both Arkonide and human perspectives, they nevertheless made their advancements along intellectual and technological lines.

In addition, the brownish-black covering of scales over their serpent thinness of form served to emphasize their alienness, and of course their chief non-humanoid characteristic was the unmistakable reptilian shape of their heads.

However, no problems in regard to communication were anticipated. Every Topide attached to the government service in any way had to be completely conversant with the commercial language of Intercosmo. For this reason Rhodan and Atlan had dropped the idea of bringing along a positronic translator. Prior to making a new approach to this alien binary system, they had even gone into hypno-training in order to learn the reptiles’ own language. However, in this latter regard they did not intend to let the Topides know that they could understand them in their own tongue.

The two groups met each other at the halfway point. Eleven humanoids and 150 robots stood opposite almost 200 lizard men, with a 30-foot separation zone

between them.

Atlan took a half step forward, the very epitome of an Arkonide—arrogant, proud and even brazen. “Who is Xxal-Ri?” he said in such a caustic manner that it even made Rhodan uncomfortable. “Let him step forward at once!”

The several hundred lean and motionless reptiles betrayed their inner agitation by the cold gleam in their great, protruding eyes, which could turn independently in all directions. One of them stepped forward, dressed in an olive green uniform without insignia.

“You are Xxal-Ri? By order of the Great Cöordinator I demand an immediate investigation concerning which Topide official gave the order to send a sensor probe to the *On-Tharu*! Xxal-Ri, do you know what I refer to?”

“Yesss,” hissed Xxal-Ri.

Atlan corrected him sharply in the same second. “You will always address me as *Your Lordship*, and here”—he indicated Perry Rhodan—“you will address the representative of the Great Cöordinator as *Great Arkonide Attor*. When will you produce the Topides who dared to sensor probe a ship of the Great Cöordinator? I shall wait no longer than two hours. And now I wish to go into the city. Out of the way, lizards!”

Only an Arkonide like Atlan could have played the role as convincingly as this. Behind him, Rhodan could hear several of the mutants draw in their breaths sharply. Although every detail of the present action had been carefully discussed beforehand, and in spite of their familiarity with Arkonide arrogance and conceit, nevertheless Atlan’s portrayal was so realistic that it went against their instincts. It was not compatible with their human mentalities. And what Atlan had just topped it all off with by directly referred to the Topides as *lizards* was the greatest insult anyone could possibly inflict upon this non-human race.

But the reptilian creatures kept their raging thoughts to themselves without any open display of resentment. It was too soon to make an open move against Arkon. Their minds were aflame with the memory of the deadly blow their spacefleet had suffered in the system of Betelgeuse but they were too intelligent to consider a senseless resistance that would only invoke the danger of being destroyed by the Great Cöordinator.

“Sir, no moves toward active resistance can be detected but this Xxal-Ri person has no intention of initiating the investigation that Atlan has demanded. Instead he will hand over three Topides who have already been condemned to die.”

It was a powerful telepathic message which Atlan was able to sense. Instantly he thundered at Xfflal-Ri, “Lizard, if you dare to substitute three death-sentenced Topides for those who are guilty of the ship-sensoring, the Great Arkonide Attor will request the Great Cöordinator to send three squadrons of superbattleships and sweep your entire planetary system out of the galaxy!”

Atlan’s swaggering boastfulness was preposterous but because of the marvellous way he played his role of the arrogant Arkonide all the reptiles took him at his word and for the first time Xxal-Ri revealed that he could stiffen in

sudden fear like any humanoid. His great eyes ceased to wander but instead stared fixedly at Atlan, horrified. Perry Rhodan had never seen naked fear expressed as plainly as it was in the bulging eyes of Xxal-Ri at this moment.

The reptiles were heard to mutter in their own language. “The robot Brain has sent a demon here who can read our thoughts...!”

A state of growing unrest began to be evident among the closest followers of Xxal-Ri. But Atlan and Rhodan left no opportunity for this to get out of hand. The marching advance of the 150 combat robots separated the Topides and soon the 11 men arrived at the edge of the spaceport together with their escort.

Suddenly Rhodan lightly nudged the Arkonide’s hand. Atlan nodded inconspicuously. He had also received Harno’s telepathic message, as relayed through Pucky: “*Boss, this F. C. Curtis agent has just flashed us a report. The two Arkonide robotships are about to fly to Kerh-Onf. There are supposed to be about 1500 lizards on board.*”

By way of reply, Rhodan made use of his wrist microcom. He called Bell directly. “As long as possible, take no notice of the two robot-controlled spaceships. But advise the interference zone immediately. That is all!”

Having overheard this order, Atlan observed Rhodan’ apprehensively. “Barbarian, I’m afraid a storm is brewing. We should keep the *Kublai Khan* ready for takeoff against any eventuality. Knowing we have that as a backup is reassuring, to say the least... but I’m going to teach these Topides how to properly receive Arkonides who have come here as representatives of the Great Cöordinator.

Rhodan and Atlan were the first to be transported by air toward the city, along with four fighter machines and two mutants. Atlan spoke so softly to Rhodan that no one else could hear him.

“Back there I was even disgusted with myself when I tore into those creatures and flaunted my uppity Arkonide arrogance. But at the same time what I discovered, old savage friend... was that it wasn’t too terribly difficult to play the role...”

He was interrupted by a sudden thundering that emerged from the violet-hued Topide sky. Two Arkonide battleships dropped toward the spaceport of Kerh-Onf. These were the two robotships that had come here on orders from the Arkon Brain to make a forced recruitment of another 6,000 reptiles experienced in space flight. By the fastest means, they were to transport them to the overlap front where such a horrendous loss of personnel and equipment was being encountered.

Rhodan calmly watched as the two ships landed at the other end of the spaceport. Contrary to Atlan, he considered their appearance on the scene as posing no particular threat to their daring operation. A glance behind him revealed five other hover-gliders of Topide construction, which were bringing the rest of the mutants and the combat robots to the city.

The bizarre buildings of the heavily populated city of Kerh-Onf towered above the haze that was present every where on the planet. During three circlings of

Topid the precision instruments of the *Kublai Khan* had also detected this haze on the night side and had identified it as a form of vapour.

Measuring 8,825 miles from pole to pole, Topid's axis was over 1,100 miles longer than that of Earth, yet the surface gravity was only 1.3 g. Ice masses at the poles had not been detected. Although there were no oceans here of Earthly dimensions there were a number of large lakes and inland seas, connected with each other for the most part by communication canals. Four tremendous mountain chains might have given a passing observer the impression that Topid was geologically very rugged yet vast plains stretched out between many of the individual mountains.

Three moons circled Topid—tiny satellites measuring only 360, 480 and 540 miles in diameter.

“Admiral,” asked Rhodan, “were the Topides known to the Greater Imperium in your own time?”

“No... at least I've never heard that they were. But what's that coming from the spaceport...?” He pointed in some concern to his left. Five small spherical ships of Arkonide design appeared to be moving to block the flight of the hovergliders.

In the same moment, the air in front of Atlan and Rhodan shimmered briefly. Then Pucky the mousebeaver stood before them with Harno tucked under his left arm.

“Perry,” he chirped before Rhodan could ask him why he had come here, “the Topides are dismantling the sensor beam installation. I'd love to give those lizards a hand with it. May I...?”

“The Topides are more underhanded than the Brain!” exclaimed Atlan.

“That's why I thought it might be cute if all the disassembled parts were placed safely on board the *Kublai Khan*,” Pucky grinned, showing his single incisor tooth. “It'll save us a lot of trouble later...”

“But you will leave Harno here, Pucky!” Rhodan ordered. “And don't stick out that fuzzy neck of yours too far, do you understand?”

“OK!” enthused the mousebeaver. “But take good care of Harno for me, Boss...” The air shimmered once more around Pucky and he vanished in a teleport jump which took him to the Topides' secret installation.

The mousebeaver's unexpected appearance had caused them to momentarily forget about the five Arkonide auxiliary craft. Just as Rhodan was turning his attention to them again, Bell contacted him on the telecom.

“Three of those Arkonide space balls have come overhead. They're scout snoopers. No answer to our radio calls. *On-Tharu's* in fire readiness. If they drop down any closer or land in front of our ship, we'll give them a welcome with our heaviest tractor beams. OK?”

“Right—but tractor beams first, before you.

“Oops!” interjected Bell. “May be a false alarm. They're turning away again. But how come the other two are hanging on your heels? The sneaky things are

half a mile above you. Don't you see them?"

On board the *Kublai Khan*, Bell was presently making full use of all available observational equipment on the superbattleship. At maximum magnification of the positronic optical system he had such a close view of the small spheres that they seemed to be only 10 feet away.

"Don't attack them!" Atlan called into the microcom instead of Rhodan. "I have a hunch these five scoutships are on the lookout for Topides who are suitable for recruiting..."

"Well spoken, Admiral," Bell answered with a tinge of mockery. "You probably haven't forgot your Arkonide soldiering days! OK! Over & out!"

At an altitude of 2,500 feet, the Topide hovercraft moved with astonishing speed toward the metropolis.

Atlan shook his head as he stared at the slender but exceptionally high structures ahead. "What kind of crazy architecture is that?" he muttered, half to himself.

Rhodan had already asked himself this question minutes before. And along with Rhodan and Atlan their companions were expecting at any moment that the buildings would collapse because they seemed to violate all normal structural principles.

Then Rhodan suddenly exclaimed: "Stalactites... stalagmites! Do you think that's a clue as to where these reptiles originally came from?"

Atlan stared at his Terranian friend, nonplussed for the moment. To him the words stalactite and stalagmite were rare but he finally recalled that stalactites were formations caused by the dripping of water in limestone caverns and that they suspended from the ceilings, whereas stalagmites were their counterparts which built up toward them from the floors of the caves. This is what all the buildings of Kerh-Onf looked like—pillars of limestone as in a titanic cavern—but it still didn't explain why they all didn't come tumbling down, before the first blast of wind.

"They must be held up by antigravity," asserted Atlan. He continued to shake his head perplexedly over this city and its structures. "I could say there's no other explanation but it's still a form of madness to build a city..."

"It may be a primitive instinct, Atlan... an unconscious memory of some primordial age when the Topides were still cavern reptiles."

"Too bad they're not still down there," said Atlan, while looking straight down through the observation port. The glider and the other craft following it were preparing to land in front of the largest building in Kerh-Onf.

At an elevation of 100 feet was a landing platform that surrounded the weird skyscraper structure Eke a platter. But the group of reptiles moving raybeam projectors into position on either side of the great entrance portal did not go unnoticed.

Having been guided in by a precision automatic landing device, the gliders were now lined up in a straight line next to each other.

The arrival of the Great Arkonide Attor on Topid was dramatized by the marching and platoon-forming robots, which had every appearance of Arkonide fighting machines. But an even greater impression than Rhodan in his resplendent uniform was made by the Admiral, Atlan. A typical Arkonide arrogance was expressed by his every step and mannerism. Whereas Rhodan was forced to enact his false role, Atlan gave full rein to his natural habits of old.

The 40 or so reptiles present only bowed in principle before the power and might that was embodied in the representative of the Great Cöordinator, for they were again shrewd enough to perceive that any resistance against the Empire would only result in the annihilation of their binary solar system.

The standard phrases of greeting were exchanged in Intercosmo, Rhodan disposed of the amenities in two curt sentences. With the third sentence he was already telling them why he had come to Topid.

“...And I not only demand that all Topides be brought before me here in Kerh-Onf who were engaged in the space battle in the Vega sector but also that an examination be made of all particulars connected with that engagement. Now I require that my delegation and I be accommodated in some chamber that is befitting to my commission. Or isn't it understood on Topid how a direct emissary of the Great Cöordinator is to be received?”

The expressionless reptilian faces did not betray what kind of impression the words of the Arkonide Attor had made. The Topide named Tgex-go stepped forward. His close-fitting olive green uniform was distinguished from the others only by three white stripes. “Please follow us!” he replied curtly.

As Perry Rhodan, Atlan and his mutants took their first steps forward, the robots closed in on both sides of them, shielding them in all directions. Ten minutes later, after coming out of the central elevator shaft, they entered a vast assembly hall. Tgex-go continued on ahead with his companions to the right and finally stopped at a group of seats which were especially designed to accommodate humanoids.

After Rhodan and Atlan alone had sat down, Rhodan asked, “Tgex-go, are you the President or the Dictator?”

“Your Lordships,” replied the reptile, “the double-sun system of Topid is no longer ruled by a dictator but by the people...”

“I didn't ask for an education, Tgex-go,” retorted Rhodan in an irritable tone. “So you must be the President, if you are not the Dictator?”

The eyes of the reptile began to glitter coldly. The tone Rhodan had used was simply impossible—but among Arkonides it was nevertheless their practiced manner of speaking to subjugated and colonial people. Whoever didn't like it would always feel the might of the Greater Imperium.

“Distinguished sirs...” Tgex-go once again violated Arkon protocol.

Atlan snapped at him: “At the spaceport I already made it clear to your deputy, Xxal-Ri, that I shall be addressed as *Your Lordship*, and you shall address Attor; the representative of the Great Cöordinator, as the *Great Arkonide*. Now may I

expect that you reptiles finally get that through your skulls?”

Once more there was a slight evidence of unrest among the Topides but a signal from Tgex-go silenced the rising murmur. Without commenting on Atlan’s admonishment, he began, “Great Arkonide, we have nothing to hide from the Greater Imperium...”

Now fully playing the part of Attor the Arkonide, Rhodan interrupted: “Spare us your lies, Tgex-go! How is it then that you are at this moment scurrying as fast as you can to remove all evidence of the new sensor device, which is designed to destroy the defence screens of spaceships? Are you not attempting to conceal this apparatus from our eyes?”

“OK, Barbarian—let them have it!” Atlan whispered to him in English.

Tgex-go seemed to start in a very human fashion at this, as did his companions. “Great Arkonide...”

Once more he was not permitted to finish his sentence. His thin lips closed in a reaction of horror as a member of the Arkonide commission suddenly proclaimed in haughty tones: “And you were also in command of a battleship at the time your invasion of the world of the Ferrons began! Come along, Topide!”

Two robots stamped forward simultaneously. The sinister-looking fighter machines stretched out their metallic arms and grasped the reptile. Although he had briefly considered flight, now he didn’t dare to move. Nor did the others of his kind.

“*Sir...*” Rhodan was receiving an amplified telepathic message from Harno. “*Tgex-go is thinking of a room that is about 300 feet beneath us. That’s where most of the records are concerning the battle in the Vega sector. The Topide is also trying to figure out why Arkon is interested in digging up this ancient history. Besides that, he’s still terrified that we are informed about the secret sensor device. Tgex-go is not at all fond of parapsychical phenomena...*”

This was interrupted by a call over Rhodan’s wrist-microcom. Also a call came in for Atlan. Both clicked on their small receivers. It was Reginald Bell on the other end.

“For five minutes John Marshall hasn’t been able to make contact with Pucky. But something also happened five minutes ago in front of the two robot spaceships that we haven’t been able to explain so far. So I’m calling you because...”

“Hold it!” called Atlan into his micro-mike. The air between him and the Topides had begun to shimmer and now the mousebeaver Bell was searching for made his appearance.

“Have you taken leave of your senses?!” snapped Rhodan imperiously, only to forget his indignation immediately as he added: “You look a mess—what happened?”

The mousebeaver straightened up, trying to add to his 3-foot stature, but was not successful. “Mission completed, Chief, but I had a run-in with the robots, shall we say, of the ‘other’ Establishment! They were quicker to know about that

prober-beam thing than we were. They even must have known that I snatched away all the pieces, and suddenly they were after my hide, because I guess I'm a suspicious-looking character. Every bone in my body aches, Perry. I came within a hair of getting the worst beating of my life! But Atlan, you can give my fond greetings to your robot Brain and ask him when he's ever going to make those robots so they're able to stand a half-mile drop! I tossed up 14 out of 16 of them and then let them crash. When they came down they splattered like ripe tomatoes. But I couldn't catch the last two and that's why I took the *direct* route to get here. Perry, those things are new models. These robots have real brains in their heads! They..."

Bell cut in again on the microcoms. "Our Mickey Mouse friend hasn't been telling a fairy tale. We have 8 robots standing outside and they're demanding entrance into the ship. Their request is coming in here like a broken record over and over... And here comes the next swarm of them, flying this way. I make out maybe 30 or 40 units..."

"That's my cup of tea!" chirped the mousebeaver next to Rhodan. And before the latter could say anything to prevent it, Pucky was already gone.

This unexplainable disappearance of a creature into thin air filled the reptiles in the room with horror, and Tgex-go, their President, was shaken the most.

Rhodan noted this and saw his chance to confuse Tgex-go even further. "President, you'll find out soon enough why the Great Cöordinator of Arkon is interested in those incidents of the past. I shall personally put my staff to work in the archives, which are located 300 feet below us here. Meanwhile, you and your Government, for the moment, have nothing to do other than to bring all Topides who were active at that time to Kerh-Onf and place them at our disposal.

"In the name of the Great Cöordinator, I demand that within one hour a government announcement be in effect which will require all Topides to exert every possible effort to assist us in the search for old pertinent records and eyewitnesses.

"Tgex-go, I will tell you that I have to wind up this mission within two days. Every hour I have to remain here longer than that period will cost you reptiles 3,000 space pilots, who will be consigned to the front immediately!"

It was a very severe threat. It wasn't easy for Rhodan to express it but if he wished to, maintain his front as an Arkonide he had to talk like one. Arkonides never asked for something—they demanded it.

"Great Arkonide," replied Tgex-go, who had been badly shaken by these mysterious proceedings, "the Topide people and their government, will do everything possible to fulfil the assignment which the Great Cöordinator has imposed upon us. Am I permitted to retire with the People's Council and begin initiating what has to be done?"

Perry Rhodan's nod was hardly perceptible yet not a reptile missed it. When he and Atlan and the mutants were left to themselves for a short time, Rhodan said: "I feel as though I were sitting on the proverbial powder keg!"

7/ AN ILL WIND BLOWS

For a period of 24 hours it appeared that Perry Rhodan with his desperate all-out mission on Topid was going to be able to stop the universal wheels of history so that an overlooked and forgotten event of 70 years ago could be falsified just the way he desired.

For 24 hours, everything went along like clockwork.

Even the robots from the two recruiting ships had lost all curiosity concerning the *On-Tharu* after losing an additional 33 fighting machines.

Also for the past 24 hours mousebeaver Pucky had wallowed in the indescribable ecstasy of having been more formidable than Arkon's newest fighting machines. In his lively fantasy he kept reliving the scene in which he had incapacitated the robots by means of his telekinetic powers.

During this same period of time the group of specialists who were unconditionally assigned to duty on board the *Kublai Khan* had been working with the mutants and coming up with one triumph after another. It was determined that 8 Topides were still alive who had taken an active and responsible part in the Vega sector affair. Two of these reptiles had been attached to the radio tracking station which at that time had received and traced the emergency call sent out by the Arkon research ship on the Moon.

These two Topides had hardly been brought before an examining team of mutants before a Gazelle took off for the southern pole of the planet. The tracking station was surprised and occupied, whereupon 8 Terranians in the guise of Arkonides proceeded to turn the place upside down, raking through every available dispatch file and positronic data bank.

John Marshall personally led the expedition. Finally, at a certain point of playing the old tapes, his hair almost stood on end. "Play that back again!" he ordered in a husky tone, although he was sure he had heard it correctly.

Again came the playback—a mere 3-millimetre section of the strip. The automatic translator connected to the output reproduced the message in precise English. And there was the spot again:

"Phi 43: 72.6458... Chi 09: 79.3852... Psi 18: 00.9851. Hypercom frequency: 4763 0086... frequency 0999, galactic exploration ship. Time: 456:735:886 Arkonide standard time, astronomical error adjustment +/-0.031. Input field

strength 3rd +/- 2. Topide station at 456.735. 886. Phi..."

"Thank you!" Marshal said and Dr. Benthuy's quickly shut off the replay.

Benthuy's not only held a captain's commission for light cruisers and was a specialist in interval-positronics, he was also a Class 1 astro-navigator, and his hobby was the meta-mechanics of Arkonide hyper-math. Although his reddish complexion and perpetually rough-shaven face gave him the appearance of a backwoods farmer with a preference for hog grits and gravy, nevertheless he was always first to respond to any challenge that called for his penetrating intelligence.

And this was one of those challenges. He hunched over his work next to John Marshall, scribbling numbers and formulas on an old-fashioned scratch pad that he held on his knee, and employed a still more old-fashioned lead pencil to do it with.

"Marshall," he said in the midst of his calculations, "I need a fast readout on Earth's position for..."

Marshall simply switched on the coded Com-Link channel of their radio so that Benthuy's was speaking directly to the Control Central of the *Kublai Khan*.

Five minutes later he had the data he needed. "Hm-m..." he kept mumbling but did not mark down a single number. Just when Marshall was thinking the operation would probably take another half hour, Benthuy's got up suddenly, drew him over to a large star chart and pointed with his pencil to a small dot that represented the planet Topid. "This is where we are now... You heard the coordinate data, Marshall. A hypercom transmission hardly every contains information about its point of origin but this message of 70 years ago does give it! That is, it's because the Topides were even able to determine the field strength at the input side, which is not possible normally... Ah! But you see if you take about a half a thousand variables into consideration and by a sort of vector summarization draw a hypothetical line on any decent star chart, going outward from Topid, its direction should give you a result of... something like... Ha! And thus we would be back to your Vega sector again, which is fairly close to the Earth..."

Which marked the end of the 24-hour period of grace in which Rhodan's desperate undertaking appeared to be working favourably. Their radio receiver gave an alarm signal. Dr. Benthuy's suddenly paused in mid-sentence. Marshall turned to the receiver and heard the Chief on the other end.

"How much longer will it take you there, Marshall?" he asked, without preamble.

"Anywhere from four to six..." The Chief of the mutants did not get any further.

"Two hours, Marshall! We don't have any more time than that. Is the Gazelle concealed or camouflaged? Do your men have their space suits on?" This sounded ominously like a top alert. When Perry Rhodan spoke in this manner, usually there was a cloud of trouble brewing that was thick enough to cut with a knife. What

could have happened?

But John Marshall did not venture to ask. If the Chief did not offer an explanation it meant that he didn't have time for it. Marshall looked questioningly at Benthuids, who would be the one to decide whether the assigned task could be accomplished in two hours.

Benthuids nodded.

"OK, Chief, in two hours we'll have the record alterations finished here. Dr. Benthuids feels it can be done and..."

Rhodan interrupted again. "During those two hours you will keep the Gazelle on standby for emergency takeoff. I repeat: put on your suits! We are anticipating attacks from outer space. That is all!"

"Attacks from outer space...?" echoed Benthuids. But he only shrugged a moment later. "However, that's not my concern. Just now I have to counterfeit some register data. Will you advise me if this imminent difficulty involves our own location, Marshall? Until then, I don't want to be disturbed—and if I'm going to keep all my peanuts salted (keep all my marbles together), get out of here with that portable panic box!"

* * * *

Once again the Arkonide admiral, Atlan, was forced to marvel at this Terranian, Perry Rhodan. But Bell didn't find anything unusual about Perry's present manner of handling the situation. In his place he would have done the same.

"Sweat it out!" Rhodan had just decided. "We'll wait and we'll be prepared. There's nothing more we can do at the moment. In two hours Marshall's team will wrap up their work at the polar tracking station. Fellmer Lloyd is cracking the whip on a similar effort in Kerh-Onf and he also hopes to be done in two hours. Either he'll destroy the whole batch of records there or re-edit what he has to. Admiral, that laugh of yours means you don't approve of something?"

Atlan was not aware of having laughed. "Who, me? If I laughed, it may have been at your childish simplicity. Do you really think you can fool Arkon with clumsy falsifications? Has it ever occurred to you at all what means the Greater Empire has at its disposal for testing the authenticity of documents or electronically registered data? You are and will ever remain a..."

The red-haired Deputy Administrator, Bell, stopped the Arkonide with a broad grin that contained a hint of malice. Atlan did not make the mistake of underestimating this Terranian. These humans often came up with flashes of wit or insight which were quite miraculous.

"My fat friend," Atlan retorted grumpily, "that malicious grin of yours is soon going to disappear." When Bell made no move to comment, he added: "Have you forgotten your thumb?"

Normally impulsive, this time Bell refused to be lured from his self-imposed

reserve. He continued to grin but maintained his silence.

When Atlan saw that even Rhodan wasn't going to say anything, he asked in some wonderment. "What's the matter with you two, anyway?"

"I'm sorry for you, Admiral," Bell finally responded. "Even, though you're supposed to have spent the last 10,000 years among us humans, you're still living in a bat belfry. Arkonide, your so-called Greater Imperium is a festering witch's brew of mixed races and interests which are only being homogenized at present by the Druuf danger..."

"Any skonhead could come up with that kind of reasoning!" Atlan broke in roughly. "So what connection does that have with your not very intelligent grin?"

"You're right," replied Bell, parrying deftly now. "It's hard to leer intelligently. Your trouble is that you think Arkon is and always will be the bellybutton of the Cosmos. According to your own ingrained convictions, we Terranians haven't got a chance of throwing a red herring at the robot Brain. I don't care if I cut my thumb again for the next ten New Years—do you want to lay a bet, Atlan, that we don't do in that overgrown laundromat like he's never been done in before? To lie or deceive is easy—anybody can do that. But it's stupid to lie, just as to cheat or defraud. Technically speaking, my dear Admiral, we don't intend to do either the one or the other, this is a slightly different piece of music we're playing. All we're trying to do is keep Arkonide spaceships from using good old Earth for target practice. So everything on this lizard planet here is going to be left just as it was—with the teensy difference, however, that their records, in whatever form, are finally going to definitely advertise what Arkon has been panting so long to discover—the actual location of the Earth: to wit, at the other end of the galaxy, 2,000 light-years inside one of the spiral arms. That's where we're tucking away the Earth, and your super-colossal Clatter Brain can look for it there until he blows his diodes..."

The Com. Room interrupted Bell's monologue. From the inner side of the interference zone, Joe Pasgin was speaking from the Burma. "Sir, I've received a message from a courier ship that three large fleet units of the Galactic Traders have been trying for hours to make radio contact with Topid. One of their cylindrical ships has hailed the Arkonide station G-98765-0 in the meantime and hounded them to do something, once and for all, about the strange interference they're running into. Station G-98765-0 is 38 light-years away from this system in the direction of Bellatrix.

"For over 20 minutes that station swamped our entire receiving setup outside the zone on more than 100 hyper-frequencies. So far there have been no breakthroughs but since the Arkonide station has told the Galactic Traders they don't find the slightest interference, two of the clan Beets have decided to fly to Topid. They are approaching at 0.8 light-speed and will reach the interference zone within 40 minutes. Sir, are there any instructions?"

"Let them fly through Pasgin. Just make sure none of our ships are discovered. Anything else?"

The conversation with the *Burma* was at an end. Somebody else was waiting on the telecom for Rhodan to be free.

Kitai Ishibashi, the hypno-telepath, was reporting from Din-Kop, the 2nd largest city on Topid. It lay on the Sea of Gun-Ki, the largest land-locked ocean on the planet, and was also the industrial centre of the whole binary system.

The voice of the Japanese mutant rang from the speaker. "Sir, we have just picked up a local radio dispatch—that is, from within the system. Three communications techniques are not only alert to the interference phenomena but are also getting some hunches that are close to the truth. They keep talking about their communications being 'isolated'..."

"Is that all, Ishibashi?" Rhodan broke in.

"No sir..." This was accompanied by a deep sigh. "We won't be ready in an hour. Tama Yokida and his companions have been at the spaceport here and have found more than 30 fighter ships that were used during the war in the Vega sector. None of them are flight worthy now but they haven't been salvaged either! More precisely, there are 32 ships with 32..."

"But Ras Tschubai is with you, isn't he, Ishibashi?" asked Rhodan briskly. He had instantly perceived the danger that this news presented. With such a small team at Din-Kop the Japanese hypno-telepath couldn't possibly 'work' all the positronic data banks on board the derelict fighters and falsify the Vega System astro-coördinates.

"Yes sir—Tschubai is here..."

"I'm also going to send Pucky to you. He'll be there in 5 minutes. I want Tschubai and Pucky to destroy all the shipboard positronics in that old ghost fleet. And you, Ishibashi, must make sure that your team doesn't overlook one ship that was active in that period of time. You know the threat they represent for us..."

"You can depend on us."

"Hold your receiver open. I'm just now calling the mousebeaver."

The latter was the only member of John Marshall's Mutant Corps who could take the liberty of teleporting directly into Rhodan's cabin.

When he materialized, ready for action, he stood as tall and straight as he could in his magnificent little uniform, which had been elegantly tailor-made for him. "Boss," he chirped, "I've got it all. Will you give me a free hand?"

Pucky liked nothing better than to *play!* Some men had referred to his playfulness as a sheer rage to destroy but there were many more men who in a time of distress had prayed for Pucky to show up. As a telepath, a teleporter and an expert in telekinesis, he was the mutant with the greatest repertoire of psi faculties. Moreover, it kept him stouthearted to know that nobody could possibly wish for a better partner than the mousebeaver.

"What do you mean?" asked Rhodan. "You want me to give you a free hand, Lt. Puck, even though you again disobeyed my explicit orders against reading my mind?"

When the 'y' was dropped from his name, it always meant trouble. But today Lt. Pucky seemed to take the threat lightly. He continued to grin with his single incisor. "Chief, we're all, on pins and noodles for time around here and I have to get going! Do you like my new boots? You, too, Fatso. Electrically heated. So here's *one* that's not going to have cold feet! OK—then free hand it is—so long!"

Once more the air shimmered and as mousebeaver Pucky vanished from Rhodan's cabin he was teleported more than 7,000 miles, appearing suddenly beside Kitai Ishibashi. Whereupon he chirped to the tall, lean mutant, "Hey, Kitai, you can turn off that receiver now. Where am I? Shucks—what am I saying? I'll just tune in on your thoughts."

* * * *

The last evidence of Pucky's presence was the shimmering of the air where he had been but even that seemed to attenuate like thinning smoke that softly dissipated in all directions, finally to vanish entirely.

Reginald Bell got up, an action which served to emphasize his stocky figure. "So what do we make of the red alert signal from outer space, about Arkon battleships on approach flight to the Topid system 2 Our boys aren't just seeing things, I hope..."

Over an hour before a message had also come in with high alarm coding, to the effect that three enemy spaceships were sighted, only to be down-coded 30 minutes later with the explanation that the reported objects were probably asteroids containing a high percentage of iron. Yet no one yet had become completely certain of what had been picked up by the tracking instruments.

"Our men out there are overloaded," Rhodan answered, protectively. "Their nerves are at very high tension." On his finely chiselled features was the shadow of another concern as he turned to Atlan. "Arkonide, do you still have fears that the Brain could see through our manipulation of the Vega records?"

"Yes. Hasn't the bad news from Kitai Ishibashi proved to you how easy it is to overlook extremely important items, using these brute force tactics of yours? The present action had already attracted attention. So one more oversight like that and one of these days you'll see Earth surrounded by the space fleets of Arkon."

"Admiral, no one has ever won without a gamble. Of *course* the Brain will find out we've attempted to wriggle the records but he may well take our falsifications for the items we've overlooked. If that works, then this desperate mission to Topid will have succeeded. The only thing that will be left for the robot Regent is to search for the Earth on the opposite rim of the galaxy. As for those Topides who held responsible positions during the Vega War, that's been taken care of because these sections of memory have been erased from their minds. That is, although they may recall a certain battle with somebody named Rhodan, back 70 years ago, the scene of their recollection will be shifted to the rim of the galaxy."

The intercom speaker blared forth in Rhodan's cabin: "Sir, our fleet reports

space-warp disturbances! An Arkon fleet is on its way to the Topide System. Projected arrival in 35 to 40 minutes! Estimated strength of fleet formation, 1000 to 1500 fighting ships of all classes!”

Bell stared at the loudspeaker as though at the enemy itself. “My aching thumb...!” he murmured.

Atlan was about to say something but didn’t get the chance as Rhodan switched contacts and calmly spoke into the microphone: “Alert to all units! Alert to all units! Pull back our ships. Avoid hostile action or contact...” On another channel he said quickly: “Call Pasgin and request more precise details!”

Due to the fever of emergency, the Com Central of the *Kublai Khan* failed to cut the connection for a few seconds. The three men in the cabin caught a portion of the furore going on there. “Yea gods! Half the galaxy is in an uproar! Hello *Burma*, hello *Burma*, come in, please—on the double! Get back on the air, will you?!... Must be half a thousand hypercom dispatches jamming the bands!... And the Topides are onto something!... No, that’s *more* than just 1,000 Arkon battle spacers! Never heard such a mess of radio traffic in my life...

It was only then that the connection to the Com Central cut off. What the three men had heard filled them with grave foreboding but none of them said anything. They left the cabin in silence.

When they entered the huge Control Central of the *Kublai Khan*, the final preparations for takeoff had already been taken care of. In every situation Perry Rhodan could rely on the men of his Solar Fleet. The mile-high spherical shell of the ship was filled with the rumble and roar of activity and the raging thunder of vast machinery.

A concise message came in from John Marshall, who was still with his team at the polar tracking station. “Chief, we still need another 10 minutes. Your OK, please!”

“Agreed, Marshall, if you’re here 5 minutes after that!”

Atlan was about to rear up and protest against this decision but then he felt Bell’s hand on his arm. The redheaded Earthman looked at him so forcefully that he desisted. However, he could not suppress an exclamation: “These crazy Terranian savages!”

Joe Pasgin’s awaited report came in from the *Burma*. “Sir, we’re the last ship holding our position here, under strongest possible tracking shield. Approaching Arkon fleet at least 2,000 ships strong. Will attempt blockade of entire Topide System. So far, 130 superbattleships identified. Number of heavy cruisers, between 500 and 600! We still have an open flight channel in green sector, degrees 67 to 85. However, even there... Sir, we have to make a transition jump—there’s a mass attack on our...”

With one last crackle over the telecom the hyper-frequency connection between the *Burma* and the *Kublai Khan* was broken.

In its place came an emergency call from Kerh-Onf. In an attempt to leave the building, the 20-man team from the archives was being blocked by Topides.

From Din-Kop over 7000 miles away, Kitai Ishibashi reported: “Starting return flight. Only ones missing are the two teleporters, Ras Tschubai and Pucky. They will follow!”

A swift announcement came from Lt. von Gilberg, in charge of the ship’s sensor-tracking section: “Topide fighter formation approaching at yellow 43, 18 ships...”

Rhodan was already on another internal channel. “Central Fire Control Warning shots—force the Topides to veer off! Warning only—no direct hits!”

From his co-pilot seat Bell made contact with the tele-transmitter station. “Is the FTM ready on standby?”

“Yes sir!”

“OK, then keep your ears open because you’re soon going to have more to do than you can handle!”

Atlan practically had to regard himself as a mere onlooker. “These savages!” he repeated several more times half aloud to himself. “These crazy Terranians...” He could only watch in amazement. Here they had an Arkon fleet of 2,000 ships thundering down out of space at them and these men who but a few moments of Eternity before had been in the Stone Age acted as if they could wipe out a 2,000-to-1 superiority or even be tricky enough to escape at all!

He couldn’t help asking Bell, “Chubby, don’t you feel any more pain in that thumb?”

A salvo from the thermal gun-turrets of the *Kublai Khan* blasted toward the approaching Topide fleet in a thundering concentration of warning shots that vaporized the planet’s atmosphere in their wake. The superbattleship hardly trembled from the recoil and after a short pause it fired two more salvos.

On the great panob gallery screens of the *Kublai Khan* they could already make out the Topide spaceships as glittering points of light. During the Vega War these types of ships had demonstrated their lack of speed and manoeuvrability, which was also evident now.

“Sir, all Topide defence positions are ready for battle!” announced the operator in the power-sensor section. “Advised approaching Gazelles to keep under 1,000 feet,”

Between Atlan and Bell the air shimmered. Two teleporters appeared, Pucky and Ras Tschubai.

“Perry,” said the mousebeaver, “the positronics in those old space cows can only be used for scrap now. Got anything more for us to do?”

Bell reached for the mousebeaver. “Mission to Kerh-Onf, historical archives—give our men support. The lizards are advancing on them with thermos and pulse-beamers. You have to have them all here in 10 minutes at the latest. Then we’ll be gone...”

“You’re on, Fatso...!” Pucky took hold of the African’s hand and the two of them made their jump.

One message after another came in from the hangars of the *Kublai Khan*. The individual teams had returned in—their Gazelles. There were still only 3 groups missing: John Marshall's, Kitai Ishibashi's and the Kerh-Onf group from the archives.

“In 15 minutes the Arkon fleet will be over Topid!” warned Atlan.

“We won't be here by then Bell's voice did not sound quite as self-confident and certain as usual, however.

Again there was news from the Com Room. “Sir, this approaching fleet has been summoned here through Arkon station G-98765-0. The Robot Regent has just spoken from Arkon to Topide's President Tgex-go. Unfortunately the conversation could not be deciphered...”

Crafford the Fire Control Officer broke in on an emergency channel: “Chief, I need permission to fire! Ishibashi's Gazelle is close to being shot down. He won't be able to...”

“...but no major hits!” decided Rhodan, swiftly checking his watch.

Time was rushing by. Every second brought the giant Arkon fleet threateningly closer. Where was John Marshall and his Gazelle? Why didn't he signal his takeoff from the polar station?

Just then the permanent defence installations of the Topides began firing from locations all around the spaceport, all of them apparently aiming at a single target which the panob gallery screens of the *Kublai Khan* couldn't yet pick up.

There was another shout on the emergency channel from Fire Control. “Chief, we're opening fire!”

Almost simultaneously the mighty impulse cannons thundered. Their target was the Topide defence positions. Then a gleaming streak moved across the viewscreens, coming from the sky. Was it a spaceship that had been shot down?

From the Com Central: “Marshall signalling for immediate landing in the hangar, sir!”

So it was Marshall who raced on that mad course with the Gazelle, hurtling out of the thinner air strata at top speed toward the protective screen of the *Kublai Khan*!

“Topide fleet turning away, sir...”

A glance at the master chronometer. No later than 11 minutes from then the first of the Arkon ships would be over Topid.

A saucer-shaped body raced toward the *Kublai Khan*. An announcement came from hangar 18. “John Marshall returned with team from polar station.” And 3 seconds later, “Kitai Ishibashi landed with his group from Din-Kop!”

Rhodan only looked at Bell, who got the message. The latter could only shrug. He didn't know either why Pucky and Ras Tschubai were not back yet.

“Com. Central...” Now Rhodan's voice sounded somewhat hoarse. “Try to pick up a contact with the historical archives at Kerh-Onf. Urgent!”

Then the mousebeaver chirped up from behind Rhodan's back. “Perry, it's not

urgent now. We can merk (scram) out of here in 30 seconds!”

Rhodan whirled about in his chair. “Lt. Puck! May I ask for a more rational report, please?!” His grey eyes glared sharply at the mousebeaver.

Pucky’s incisor tooth disappeared instantly. The mousebeaver tried to assume a military bearing. His right paw flew up to the peak of his Arkonide headgear. “Lt. Puck, member of secret Mutant Corps, returned from mission. Rapped some Topide knuckles and slapped their wrists. Together with Ras, yanked commando group out of the mess they were in clear up to their necks. Real nice fun and games...”

Perry Rhodan had enough. Especially the last expression soured on him. He dismissed the whole subject with an irritable wave of the hand.

Atlan had been an Arkonide admiral 10,000 years ago and had flown one mission after another but he could not tolerate this display of Terranian negligence any longer. Sarcastically he cut in. “May I draw your attention to the fact that in 10 minutes there are going to be 2,000 fighter ships over our heads and...”

Rhodan calmly retorted: “But we will only take off when the last man is on board, Admiral. Wasn’t that standard procedure for you and your Arkonide Fleet 10,000 years ago?”

“And if the Topides again use their latest sensor-beam device just after our takeoff and succeed in destroying our defence screens...?” countered Atlan.

“They can’t do it,” chirped Pucky. “The lizards only had this one piece of equipment ready. When they tried to cart away the disassembled pieces, I swiped them from them. I’ll bet you the Topides will look everywhere except in the storage hole on the *On-Tharu*. After all, you know, I’m a pretty fair lad with the telekinesis, and...”

Hangar 18 reported again: “The group from the archives has just landed. Airlock doors have closed!”

It was a signal for takeoff!

8/ THE THUMB OF DOOM

In the great equatorial skirt-ring of the *Kublai Khan*, the impulse engines opened up at full power. Following in close sequence came the activation of the antigravs, the inertial absorbers and a few million relays and positronic functions.

From one second to the other, the antigravs rendered the *Kublai Khan* weightless. At first almost imperceptibly the colossal battleship rose upward from the Kerh-Onf spaceport but as the thrust power continued to build, the ship's acceleration indicators took an exponential jump. Beneath the great spacesphere the planet of the Topides appeared to drop away into the depths.

All of which invited the first attacks from the planetary defence positions of the reptiles.

Titanic bolts of energy discharged against the defence screens of the Terranian ship. A flaming cascade of lightning exploded in all directions, generating a loud thundering within the ship itself and causing the various compartments to vibrate slightly. But the automatically unleashed forces on board were even more powerful, louder than the crashing Inferno outside.

“Topide pursuit ships are following us!”

It was the beginning of an endless series of red alerts.

Rhodan called to the one station on board that differentiated the *Kublai Khan* from all Arkonide ships of the same size and class. “In case of an attack against us, you have permission to fire with the tele-transmitter!”

While in the same second the mousebeaver was squeaking to Bell. “I'm turning on the heat in my boots now—can't stand cold feet...!”

Had Rhodan heard this completely superfluous remark or had he preferred to ignore it? His tone was sharp but controlled when he announced: “All hands into spacesuits!” This applied to himself, Bell, Atlan and Pucky—all except Harno, who was placed in Rhodan's pocket.

The *Kublai Khan* shot through the last of the upper atmospheric strata and the nerve-shattering scream of superheated air masses faded away. But from the power and machine rooms came the ever-increasing thunder of transformers, converters and engines running at their maximum capacity.

The scenes on the great panoramic gallery screens changed with a seeming abruptness, to be replaced by the velvet blackness of outer space. The two suns of the binary system looked like glowing eyes staring at them with painful sharpness.

Topid, principal world of the reptile people, had disappeared into the endless night of the universe.

“We have a tracking fix!”

In 8 minutes the Arkon spaceships would be upon them! The sensing equipment of the *Kublai Khan* had detected the approaching fleet.

“Spacewarp sensor trace!”

This meant that an increasing number of ships continued to emerge from hyperspace, intent upon blocking the mysterious ship whose command had presented themselves to the Topides as emissaries of the Robot Regent.

“Radio surveillance...?” Rhodan wanted a follow-up analysis of all radio traffic to see if either the approaching Arkonide forces or the Topides had any idea of who had tricked them.

The operators in the *Kublai Khan's* Communications Central were veritable wizards. In practically five sentences Lt. Jouffre delivered to the Administrator a complete report on the subject. In all the intercepted and deciphered dispatches thus far, there had not been one mention of the name Perry Rhodan or Terra. On the contrary, the Arkon Regent believed that some rebellious colonial race of the Imperium had attempted to exploit a neglected or forgotten bit of Topide knowledge. But this had not been the main reason why the Great Cöordinator had sent out a giant fleet formation. It was, rather, the fact that somebody had misused his own hyper-frequency channel.

For that reason alone, Arkon had to make its actions serve as a warning example to all miscreants. And just how thoroughly the soulless machine Gargantuan on Arkon 3 could strike had been demonstrated more than once.

“Chief...” This way of addressing Perry Rhodan had nothing to do with any regulation designation of rank but now it seemed to be the prelude to every announcement of disaster. “More than 20 super-class battleships approaching in Green, 156 degrees!”

The polar gun-turrets of the *Kublai Khan* opened fire. On the panoramic gallery screens the blackness of the void was rent asunder by needle-sharp beams in mixed colours of green, pale red and bright crimson. The Terranian battleship was firing with all classes of energy weapons.

A star was suddenly born in the night. One of the Arkon super ships had been struck by the concentrated volley of raybeams and had blazed into a glory of atomic chain-reaction.

But now a storm of counter-fire enveloped the *Kublai Khan*. In the Control Central the sirens began to howl. In relation to the size of the superbattleship, the capacity of the protective field screens was astronomical in its magnitude—yet also limited. Struck just now by more than 10 raybeams, the defensive shielding threatened to collapse.

“What happened to the TTM?!” Bell called over the mike to the tele-transmitter station.

He did not receive a verbal reply but the abrupt cessation of the infernal sirens

was answer enough. The defence screens became stable again. The attack of the superbattleship flotilla had suddenly ceased.

“Half of them are gone!” cried out an officer from the sensor-tracking section.

Rhodan and Bell nodded curtly. Only the tele-transmitter could give them the chance to break through this powerful front of Arkon ships.

“But if those spacers are manned by robots,” Bell whispered to Rhodan, “we can still say ‘sayonara’ to *Operation Kamikaze!*”

The velocity indicators of the *Kublai Khan* were approaching ½ speol. It would not take much longer before they would be able to go into transition.

Suddenly, gun positions 35 to 62 opened heavy fire. Transformers howled, power stations thundered. Under a new attack, the defence screens were bathed in a sea of flames and this time the *Kublai Khan* appeared to actually stagger under the direct hits. Of course this was incredible but even Atlan looked up and stared at the field screen capacity meter.

97%!

Then, just as suddenly, “Glord!” Another cry of uncontrolled astonishment from the sensor tracking station. Once more the detectors had shown that a portion of the approaching space flotilla had literally dissolved into nothingness.

The tele-transmitter, the most frightful weapon ever to come into human hands, had struck again. But human hands had not produced it. The TTM came from the artificial planet Wanderer, where the entity lived who was known as *It*, and the only tele-transmitter outside the one on the *Kublai Khan* was on Perry Rhodan’s flagship *Drusus*.

“Starting transition countdown!”

“We’re going to make it!” exclaimed Bell, half aloud.

Beside him was Pucky, who only looked at him questioningly with his great mousebeaver eyes. He had long since ceased to grin with his incisor tooth but he did not appear to have ‘cold feet’.

However, by now the main Arkon fleet had grouped itself for a concentrated attack. The sensor-trackers could not keep up with the count, there were so many oncoming squadrons.

It not only looked like doom—it was!

More than 2,000 ships shot from all directions into the flight path of the *Kublai Khan*. In the Control Central of the Terranian superbattleship a few brief outcries were heard. 300 beams... 400... 500 beams... all around and making destructive impact on the screen of the *Kublai Khan*—yet Perry Rhodan’s ship still endured.

However, it was spinning around its own axis! It had taken more than 2 dozen direct hits. The TTM station had fallen silent. The upper polar gun-turrets were no more. In Green sector 0 impulse cannon batters must have gone out. The disintegrator positions reported a 20% loss of firepower. Inside the ship, both sirens and klaxons plus signal lights combined into what was known as the “Disaster Alarm”. Robots were running everywhere to close up giant holes caused

by raybeams.

“G-shock inertials are dropping...”

This was only one of hundreds of disaster signals running through the ship.

Velocity... Now even Perry Rhodan paled... Speed was still only 0.48!

“Losses, Chief... Dead and wounded count, Chief...”

Another speaker rattling: “Chief, one-third of the ring-skirt has been destroyed...”

Then the *Kublai Khan* received more direct hits. The machinery sections were 80% destroyed by an impulse beam that measured almost 100 feet in diameter. The *Kublai Khan* was a reeling shell!

“Abandon ship!”

Perry Rhodan kept on repeating this order. But would any man escape at all from the doomed ship? Would the *Kublai Khan* blast into a cloud of vapour under the next direct hit?

“Abandon ship! Man the guppies!... Abandon ship! Man the guppies!” Rhodan sat like a machine in the pilot’s seat, like a robot that was only programmed to say: ‘Abandon ship Man the guppies!’

Now even the great panob gallery of viewscreens failed, just when 8 titanically powerful beams vaporized the lower fifth of the *Kublai Khan* in the fraction of a second. The superbattleship was wobbling like a dying top around its central axis yet the effects of centrifugal force were becoming stronger by the second. This meant that the g-shock inertial absorbers were just about out of commission.

Bell was still sitting beside Rhodan. Next to Bell stood Pucky and in the last chair sat Atlan. They were the last ones remaining in the Control Central.

By now they were only, able to communicate by means of their helmet radios. It was in their headphones that they heard the final disaster report. “Sir, there’s only one single guppy left that can be used! We can’t get the others out of the hangars because the airlocks are jammed and can’t be opened!”

Bell groaned inside his helmet. The guppies were slightly less than 200 feet in diameter and the *Kublai Khan* carried a 2,000-man crew. Not even half of the survivors could crowd into the available space of a single guppy!

But Bell, Atlan and Pucky were startled when Rhodan shouted louder than before into his helmet mike. “We will all find room in the guppy!”

This was drowned out by sudden piercing outcries. They emerged from somewhere inside the half-destroyed superbattleship, which the Earth had required 16 years to construct. Finally the shouts became understandable.

The *Kublai Khan* was on fire! But this was no normal conflagration that had broken out through a combination of misfortunes, an atomic reaction was in progress down in the energy banks.

“Out of here!” Rhodan ordered his two friends and Pucky. “Don’t talk now! Let me have the radio channels free...!”

None of the antigrav lifts worked. They struggled from deck to deck through

emergency ramps while Rhodan kept repeating instructions over the helmet com system.

“Let the ship burn! That’s our last cover, actually, because otherwise by this time we’d be a gas cloud! In the guppy you’re going to pack in like sardines, layer by layer. How? By use of the antigrav fields, so that the lower man-stacks won’t be crushed! But give the wounded more room...!”

Pucky could have teleported ahead. Although he took a very dim view of normal means of locomotion, just now he stayed with his friends. It hadn’t even occurred to him to do otherwise, and Rhodan, Bell and even Atlan considered it a matter of course for Pucky to be with them.

The lights went next, leaving them in an ominous darkness. They were still over 800 yards away from the hangar where almost 2,000 men were trying to stuff themselves into a 200-foot guppy.

The loss of lights made them realize that the ship was still under enemy fire. The *Kublai Khan* was struck again and again. It rocked back and forth like a derelict in a heavy storm swell, all the while whirling around its axis and losing portions of its massive hull in almost every location.

“No go—not going to make it any farther!” Bell gasped suddenly as he pressed to Perry’s side and held his arm. He pointed downward to their left.

They stood before a lift shaft. Three men and a mousebeaver stared into the fiery depths where a blazing atomic inferno expanded inexorably, intent upon converting the blasted remains of the *Kublai Khan* into a miniature sun.

“Keep going! If the Arkonides think we’re an ocean of flames we might live through it yet...!”

Atlan growled his derision: “Barbarian, once you are dead, someone is going to have to deliver an extra blow to that optimism of yours so that it will not wander off by itself!”

Pucky was suddenly animated. “The last men are climbing on board the guppy, Perry. I’ll teleport with Atlan and come back for you and Reg. OK, boss?” He explained that he’d been in touch with one of the telepaths on the guppy this whole time. Before Atlan could protest, the mousebeaver gave him a tight hug and caused the two of them to disappear.

Three minutes later, Perry Rhodan was in the flight seat of the guppy, staring at the viewscreen and the wide-open airlock door of the hangar. The interstellar darkness beyond that portal was like a surrealistic cutout from some alien dimension, illumined by brilliant points of light which seemed to him for the first time to stare back with a menacing hatred.

The battle-torn hulk of the *Kublai Khan* had just been shredded further by another hit as the guppy thundered out of the hangar at top acceleration. Rhodan had one burning wish at the moment, that the Arkonide ships’ tracking instruments would mistake the small space vehicle for a flying piece of debris from the main body of the once great battleship.

The propulsion engines in the small skirt-ring of the auxiliary craft thrust away

at full power, yet it seemed to him that it was crawling sluggishly across the emptiness. Four energy beams split the darkness like lightning, sizzling past the lifeboat a thousand or so miles away and striking the shattered remains of the *Kublai Khan*, which now began to blossom into a swiftly brightening ball of orange fire.

“You were right, Barbarian!” declared the Arkonide, shaking his head inside his helmet. “My countrymen seem to have spared us the coup de grace, since the *Kublai Khan* appears to them as the virtual fires of hell. But dammit, Perry, at the very crack of doom, how can you come up with such intuition and optimism?”

Rhodan found time to cast him a quick glance. He answered with careful deliberation. “The only time a human really gives up—is when he is dead.

But in that moment, Death appeared!

An Arkon spaceship had detected the guppy and fired a broadside. Rhodan cursed, which was rare. It made no difference where he flew—the enemy lay in wait in every direction.

“Chief!” John Marshall called to him from the communications console. “An interesting message just came through. The robot Brain has ordered his fleet to capture the unknown superbattleship and bring it to Arkon. He wants to find out who’s behind the action!”

Bell laughed bitterly. “One to nothing for our side, Regent! Look there...! You put in your order a mite too late...!”

Behind them the labours of 16 years dissolved in a torrent of flames, the last evidence that could have told the robot Regent who it was that had dared to use his hyper-frequency channel and play dark games with his borrowed power.

Pucky had never taken his eyes off the velocity meter and now he chirped. “We’re at 0.9! We can still...”

A viciously wide disintegrator beam swept harmlessly past them into the depths of space.

“Chief, 2 light-cruisers appear to have us pinpointed now and they...”

Marshall’s suspicions became reality. The lifeboat was suddenly gripped from both sides by tractor beams.

Rhodan flipped up the switch of the auto-positronics. “Out you go!” He had the guppy on manual override. As had been the case from the first minute of their mission, he played everything on one card. If they didn’t succeed now, it would all be over with... The small ship’s inertial absorbers groaned under the strain as he tore it from its course, turning sharply to Green 45. Then he slammed in the positronics again and started a transition countdown.

The fingers of Death still reached for them in the form of traction beams. Their power tore at the lifeboat’s defence screen, bringing it momentarily to the point of collapse. But then the transition came, and with activated residual energy damper the guppy and some 1,700 survivors vanished into the safety of hyperspace.

* * * *

Operation Kamikaze had cost the lives of 243 men of the Solar Fleet. By comparison, the loss of the *Kublai Khan* along with the priceless tele-transmitter was as nothing. Material and equipment could be replaced. The men—never!

Atlan admitted this fact with a heavy sigh. “Arkon would be ruling the universe today if we had not forgotten too quickly that men are more important than machines. But we made our own bed, as you might say. We didn’t deserve anything better than to be dominated by a soulless machine... Perry, are you quite convinced that your men have not overlooked anything on Topid...?” He looked at him expectantly and Rhodan returned the look with equal gravity.

“Yes, Admiral, I’m convinced that there’s not a single clue left on Topid that could show the Brain the path to the Earth. We’ll talk about it more later. Here’s the final transition—the one that brings us home. Ready, Bell?”

The latter stood by the small nav positronicon, into which he had just fed the necessary data. “Ready, Perry... already getting the green light!”

And once more the automatic timer began the countdown toward zero.

Transition... rematerialisation... After the shock of slowly awakening from An indescribable state, everyone heard a curse that was something new for even the most hardened space veteran.

Reginald Bell had uttered the curse.

Pucky looked up in semi-confusion. Atlan looked at the stocky, red-haired man in some astonishment. Rhodan surveyed his friend slowly from head to foot. An uneasy feeling came over each of them, even though the guppy’s viewscreens now revealed the familiar sun of the Sol System.

They all had reason to breathe a sigh of relief for their deliverance but nobody did so.

Atlan even started to say, “It certainly will be wonderful to...” But he found he was the only one talking.

As for the others, they could only stare silently at the tip of Bell’s right thumb. He had cut it again and blood was oozing out. In view of the events following the first injury to his thumb, even the least superstitious felt uneasy.

Red omen?

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

TROY LIVES AGAIN.

The famous Trojan Horse ploy is revived in the 21st Century. This time, though the “horse” is blueprinted on Terra and built on Zalit, its destination is:

Arkon.

For Khrest reveals that his ancient ancestors provided the Robot Regent with, one might say, an Achilles heel.

Meanwhile, unknowing of the plot strands being drawn against it, the Giant Brain, the positronic robot of Arkon, analysing the war against the inhabitants of Druufon, reaches the conclusion that robots are not enough and what is needed are living human beings as—

RECRUITS FOR ARKON

By

Clark Darlton