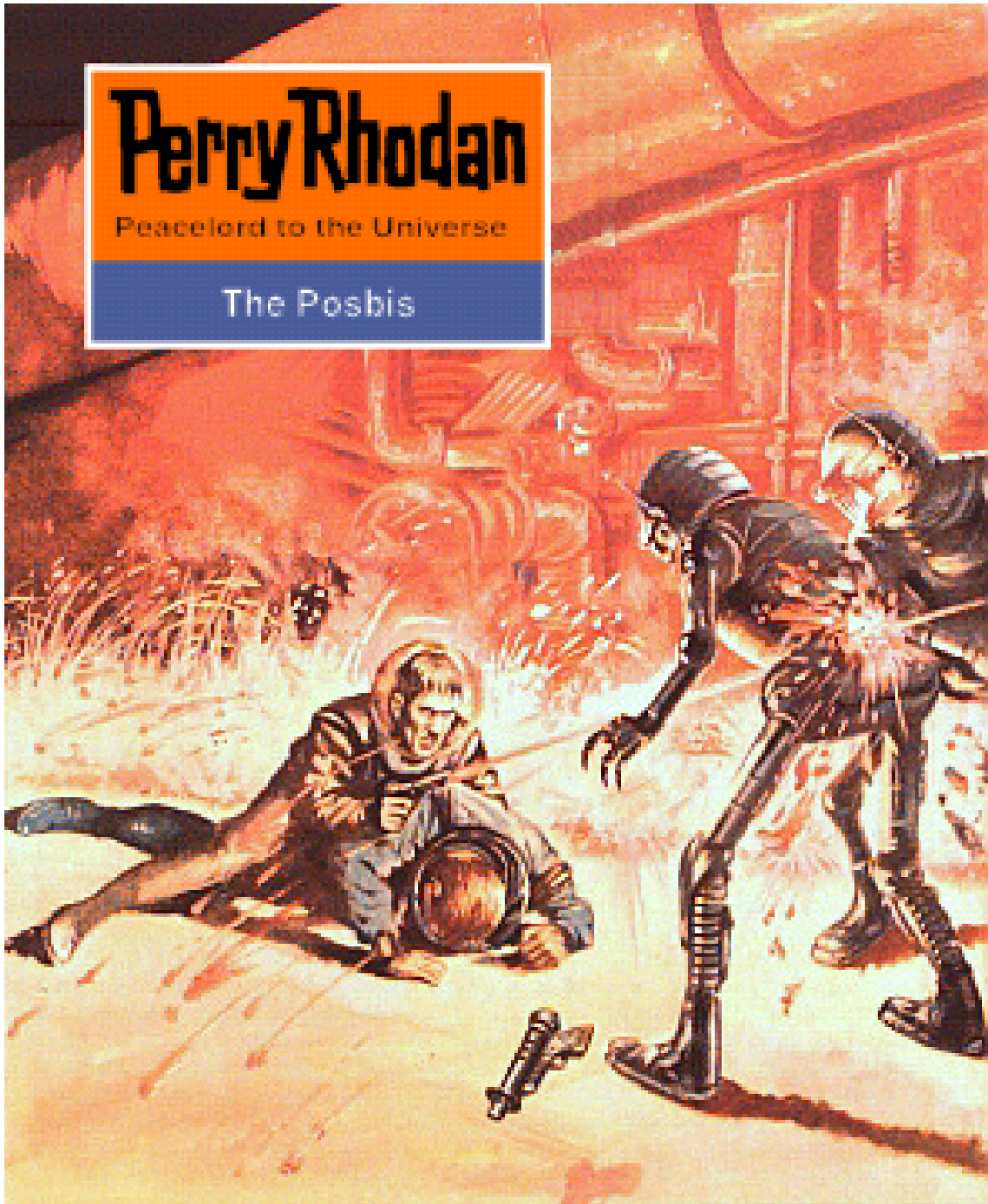


Perry Rhodan

Peacelord to the Universe

The Posbis



103

THE PLASMA MONSTER

Kurt Mahr

HAVOC ON HUMANITY!

ROSY the situation is not.

More aptly, thorny

For out of bitter experience Terra and Arkon know that there is a Power out there in the Milky Way that has no sympathy for either Terrans or Arkonides.

The Blue System harbours the enemy of both cultures.

The ancient Akons.

The Energy Commando is employed and a new menace is created.

The menace of—

THE PLASMA MONSTER

A MONSTER CAST FOR A TREMONSTROUS HAPPENING

PERRY RHODAN—The First Administrator learns that 2 + 2 is a town in France!
ATLAN—The Arkon Imperator has to use his Brain
Walt Ballin—The newsman who becomes a citizen of the universe
Allan D. Mercant—The Solar Intelligence Chief has a clue he's not aware of
Reginald Bell—Perry's friend and First Deputy gets very attached to the problem
John Marshall—The Mutant Chief gets a mindful
PUCKY and Ras Tschubai—The mutants are kept on the 'jump'
Gen. Deringhouse—The home front fight is the deadliest of all
Prof. Degen—The medico between two plagues
Dr. Koatu—Someone has to meet the monster first!
Gentkirk—Colleague of Dr. Koatu
Dr. Haenning—The Solar Health Inspector quarantines a planet or two
Dr. Boyd—Specialist on Mercant's staff
Yvonne Berclais—Reporter Ballin would like to 'make her an item' as Walter Winchell was once wont to report in the 1930s and 40s
Mr. Jacquuse—Owner of the *Europa News*
Maj. Dugan—Duty Officer at Command Centre, Terrania
Lt. Harold Fitzgerald—Runs a 4-way relay at doomsday
Lt. Brisby—Commander of the *Condor*
Sgt. Hopkins—Nile leader of boarding crew
Sgt. Stainless—On duty at Relay Station ORI-12-1818 (Orion)
Cpl. Penter—On duty at tracking console
Ortlow—Robot Depot Chief
Pagdor—An Ara
Ulland, Kokstroem and Church—Rhodan's specialists are hoping for interference
Lt. Pout Naya, Alain Berliez and Roger Dempsey—Gentlemen briefly on the scene
MAL-SE—An endospermic monster, an amorphous gelatinous thing

THE AKONS

Vu Pooh (Commander of the *Retse-U*... Mna E-Ig... Gim Sarem... Gut-Ko (Chief Engineer)... Hut-Up... Ol Pan-Thel... Untk (Akon's Greatest Philosopher)

...and the spaceships *Nile, Fantasy, Drusus, Retse-U, Burma* and *Condor*

THE PROBLEMATICAL BECOMES PLASMATICAL!

PERRY RHODAN: Peacelord of the Universe

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

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PERRY RHODAN

THE PLASMA MONSTER

by Kurt Mahr



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PROLOG

HUMANITY stands on the threshold of a New Era!

Since the death of Khrest, 57 years have passed—it is now 2102 A.D. and much has happened in the meantime.

With the support of Earthmen, Atlan has succeeded in consolidating his position as Emperor. The treaty between Arkon and the Solar Empire has borne fruit—especially for the Terrans, many of whom have already taken over important positions on Arkon itself. Atlan has to tolerate this because he cannot depend on most of the members of his own race.

The Solar Empire has become a major commercial power along the rim of the Milky Way. For the past 22 years a virtual stream of emigrants has been flowing out to suitable colonial worlds. Also on many of the planets inhabited by other intelligences, Terran embassies have been established as well as far-flung trading settlements.

In spite of all this, however, the situation is tense. An ominous discovery has been made: there is a super power in the galaxy which is friendly neither to Arkonides nor to Terrans! These are the Akons of the so-called Blue System. This terrible race will unleash the most incredible and frightening creation humanity has ever seen... the horrible PLASMA MONSTER!

1/ INTERSTELLAR ALERT

“THIS MAN I would like to meet,” said Perry Rhodan.

He folded his copy of *Europa News*, then pointed out the byline of the leading article. “Walt Ballin...” He muttered the name half aloud to himself while sitting at his desk and gazing out through the windows at his view of Terrania.

Today a rare note had been struck by the daily information that his Press advisers had selected from the virtual ocean of news sources within the Imperium. Although he was neither friend nor foe of the Press, he had just expressed the wish to actually meet a journalist.

Rhodan appeared to ignore the questioning stare of Allan D. Mercant, Chief of Solar Intelligence. Instead, the First Administrator of the Solar Imperium continued to look out the window across the expanse of rooftops comprising Terrania, even beyond the great city to the park-like countryside that had once been the Gobi Desert.

“You know, it’s a matter of both duty and courage, I’d say, to address ourselves to this question of whether or not our overall policy is basically a destructive one, Mercant. Usually it’s not very practical to even bother to read the kind of aggressive outpourings that Walt Ballin is capable of, but in this case he’s brought up some considerations that we should also be concerned with. I’m especially interested in his assertion that we may have neglected to prepare the man in the street for thinking in terms of a galactic perspective. Mercant, don’t you think this Walt Ballin has a point?”

The Intelligence Chief’s lean face had not moved a muscle as he continued to fix his gaze on Rhodan. “It’s quite easy to be a critic, sir,” he contradicted calmly. “We can’t accelerate man’s development any more than we have already. Our duty is to direct ourselves to the average level of intelligence. If we were to attempt a thorough explanation in detail of what’s cooking out there in the galaxy, if we tried to point out the dangers that are the most acute for the Solar Imperium—or if we told them that we’ve just discovered a race at the core of the galaxy which is far superior to the Arkonides in every sense of the word—it would not only serve to throw the majority of the population into confusion but might also start a wave of panic uprisings.”

“But I think, my friend, that it would be better to face such potential upheavals now rather than to have them shoved upon us at precisely the wrong time. However much I’d like to follow your advice, Mercant, at present I think it’s best

to give Walt Ballin the benefit of a doubt. In fact I'm ready to join him in saying that we are indeed on a course of self-destruction if we don't go to every Terran—and I mean the man in the street and make every one of them a true citizen of the universe!”

“Every last individual has to feel that he is united with us. But how can he feel that way unless he is able to share our apprehensions and the responsibility for our needs? That is exactly what we're not doing, my dear Mercant, and it's what Walt Ballin is holding up to our faces. We shouldn't forget the panic that swept over the Earth when the Druufs made a sudden appearance in our system, followed by Arkon's robot fleet, with the ships of the Galactic Traders joining the fray.”

“No, I think we should prepare mankind, step by step, for the reality that a far superior race of people is living in the centre of the galaxy and we should be counting on their paying us a perhaps unpleasant visit. And if Walt Ballin is all that his article seems to promise, then he's the man for the job. That's why I'd like to meet him as soon as possible. When can he be here, Mercant?”

Allan D. Mercant smiled ironically. “Sir, Walt Ballin is a journalist and journalists are a very unusual lot. Hopefully he can find his way to Terrania if Intelligence asks him to come here, in your name. I hope I can have him here by tomorrow.”

* * * *

While Walt Ballin was talking on the *Europa News* seefone to Yvonne Berclais, he was no longer thinking about the lead article he had written for the first June issue of his paper. The visitor out in the reception room could just cool his heels, the stranger didn't seem to be very important. Walt Ballin didn't know anybody named Garibaldi. Besides, the main thing on his mind was to date Yvonne for this evening so that he could finally come to an understanding with her.

“OK, Chérie, then it's all set for tonight at eight at *Trois Poulardes*? If it's OK with you I'll reserve our front table on the left side.”

Yvonne Berclais was an enchanting young woman, an elegant brunet who was world famous in spite of her 22 years. Whenever ‘La Berclais’ opened up with her brilliant soprano on the networks, her goddess-like voice was listened to by 100 million viewers. But just now Yvonne Berclais was not the singer, she was a happy young girl who was in love with Walt Ballin.

“I'm happy about tonight, Walt, and this time I'll be on time. You won't have to wait for me. So until then...!”

She had cut off the connection with Walt who in spite of his 27 years was the lead writer for *Europa News*, yet he continued to stare at the screen. However, the muted sound of his buzzer reminded him of the visitor waiting in the anteroom.

So let him come in!

Ballin found himself in a euphoric mood. He was still thinking of Yvonne as he

absentmindedly greeted his guest. Even as he made a gesture inviting the man to sit down, he could only see Yvonne before him. Tonight she wouldn't keep him waiting at *Trois Poulardes* and if he didn't want to miss having a table he'd have to reserve it within the hour.

But now who was this visitor, anyway?

"What... I mean, would you repeat that, please?" He stared in sudden bewilderment at the bald-pated man with the tremendous belly, who, in sitting, was so short in stature that he hardly came up over the arm rests of the chair.

The little fat man repeated his message and Walt Ballin suddenly sharpened his ears in astonishment. What was this? Day before yesterday his lead article had been brought to the attention of the First Administrator? "Yes, and so?" Ballin was alarmed. As his mind raced ahead he had a presentiment of very big trouble and a headache for the Editor-in-Chief! The Head Office had already expressed its reservations about the article even while he had been insisting on an editorial release so as to meet the issue deadline.

"On the basis of your article I have been commissioned by my superior, the Chief of Solar Intelligence..."

All Ballin heard was *Solar Intelligence* and he could already see himself walking the streets as an unemployed journalist. He might just as well cross off tonight's date with Yvonne from his appointment calendar. But why was Solar Intelligence concerned with his article in the first place? Since when had Press censorship reared its ugly head again on Earth?

"Where am I supposed to go? To Terrania?" he asked sarcastically. Again he had missed half the context of the invitation to visit Terrania. He still tied the whole thing to Solar Intelligence.

"That's right, Mr. Ballin, because after all you can't expect the First Administrator to come here to Paris to talk with you."

Talk? That's what the bald-headed little fatso had said. A conversation with Perry Rhodan!

Walt Ballin got to his feet. "April Fool's Day has passed, mister," he said rather sharply, "and I'm sure the First Administrator hasn't got time to spend every day reading lead articles in the world Press..."

The little man had opened his briefcase and now he handed over a small plastic foil about the size of a postcard. "Mr. Ballin, your ticket. But this isn't for any scheduled airline. At 13:40 a space jet will arrive at the spaceport at berth 68-B, where it will be waiting for you. Would you be kind enough to connect me with your editor so that I can arrange for your leave of absence, Mr. Ballin?"

Ballin finally gasped. "Hold it! Hold it!" he protested, suddenly on the defensive. "I'm not on my way to Terrania yet! What did you say your name was?"

"Jeff Garibaldi, Mr. Ballin, but in my case the name has no significance. Of course my parents did come from Italy..."

"And your grandfather was the notorious...?"

“My great-great grandfather, sir—but I’d rather say he was less notorious than he was well-known among his contemporaries.”

Allan D. Mercant had known very well the kind of man to select from the ranks of Intelligence to send against a journalist like Ballin. What only appeared to be a superficial conversation was actually a psychological manoeuvre that served to water down Walt Ballin’s initial excitement.

In spite of himself, Ballin was forced to smirk slightly when he compared the small fat bald-headed figure of Jeff Garibaldi with the fiery Italian freedom fighter of old. On his part, Jeff Garibaldi knew what was behind the smirk but said nothing. He was satisfied with the present development of the situation.

“And what am I supposed to do with this ticket, Mr. Garibaldi? What business do I have in Terrania? That the First Administrator of all people should want to parlay with me about my article is pretty absurd! There must be something else behind it...”

“Mr. Ballin, Solar Intelligence has merely been commissioned to carry through with this invitation. My directives do not go farther than that.”

“But this is ridiculous!” exclaimed Ballin. He suddenly grasped the portly visitor by the coat collar. “You have other plans for me? Your reason for my accepting Rhodan’s invitation is very sleazy, little man! You know that our first issue this month carried my lead article in which I attacked the government of the Solar Imperium and that’s why you want to shut me up. If that fails, then you’ll make trouble with my Head Office and see to it that I’m fired! So now tell me, Mr. Garibaldi, once and for all—why have you come here? It seems that your name is significant, after all. It *still* means trouble!”

But the little fat man only laughed at him pleasantly. “Mr. Ballin, my ancestor was not la bandit and Solar Intelligence is not in the gangster or kidnapping business. Now, please—are you familiar with the seal of Solar Intelligence? Then read my orders. It’s against regulations to show them to you but I’ll take that risk if it will convince you. Perry Rhodan wants to talk with you—not Intelligence. And that, Mr. Ballin, is an unusual opportunity. What journalist can say’s he’s interviewed the Administrator alone?”

Walt Ballin was still suspicious. The thought of Rhodan’s having been influenced enough by his lead article to take interest in a mere newspaper hack like himself was such a shock that he simply couldn’t believe the invitation. “Mr. Garibaldi,” he finally inquired, “would Solar Intelligence cover the bill if I were to put in a call to Terrania?”

“With whom do you wish to speak there?” asked the little fat man maintaining an outward indifference. “You mean Rhodan?”

“Who else? If as you say he wants me to come to Terrania, then he probably won’t have any objection if I speak to him briefly—or would he...?”

Jeff Garibaldi could not answer the question but he explained that the Paris headquarters of Solar Intelligence would assume the cost of a call to Terrania.

“Good! I can hardly wait!” was all Ballin could manage to reply. He got up

from sitting on the edge of his desk and made a connection with the main switchboard of the *Europa News*. Although it did not have a French name, in terms of circulation it was the largest of the French language newspapers. “This is a call to Terrania,” he said into the seefone. “Put me through to the First Administrator.”

“With whom, please?” The voice that rang in the speaker was that of a robot operator.

“Perry Rhodan,” Ballin confirmed positively while glancing across at Garibaldi.

The Terrania connection came through only a barely perceptible flicker of the viewscreen betrayed the action of a positronic relay as it opened a security circuit to Rhodan’s line.

“Yes?”

Walt Ballin swallowed involuntarily. He was looking into a pair of calm grey eyes as the mightiest man in the Solar Imperium faced him on the viewscreen. It was the latter who was first to speak.

“If I have my signals straight, you must be Walt Ballin. May I expect you today in Terrania, Mr. Ballin? Just let me know when you arrive. Will you do that?”

The Parisian journalist was plainly flabbergasted. “Yessir... uh, sure thing!” he managed to stutter in reply.

A fleeting smile touched Rhodan’s lips. “I’m looking forward to chatting with you, Mr. Ballin. Was there anything else?”

“No, sir... thank you, sir... there’s nothing else, sir!”

Ballin was already bathed in sweat as the viewscreen started to darken but then flickered to life again. At the other end of the line was Mr. Jacquuse, the owner of the *Europa News*.

“Mr. Ballin!” he snapped sharply. “You have just made a global call without permission!”

By this time, however, Walt Ballin was no longer in doubt of where he stood. “Of course!” he answered confidently. “I was just thanking the First Administrator for his special invitation, Mr. Jacquuse.”

“You, Mr. Ballin?—with Perry Rhodan...?”

Ballin ignored the other’s amazement and took advantage of the situation. “Sir, at 13:40 a space jet will be waiting for me at the spaceport. I’d like to request unlimited leave for my visit to Terrania. My phone call will be...”

Mr. Jacquuse interrupted magnanimously. “But my dear Ballin!” he exclaimed. “Of course you may have the leave—that goes without saying! And naturally we’ll bear the cost of that call. But before you go to the spaceport you’ll still hand in your article for the evening edition, won’t you?”

Walt Ballin wasn’t aware of any article he was due to turn in that day.

“But my dear Ballin...” And Ballin could not recall when the arrogant Jacquuse had ever addressed him as “my dear”. The Frenchman continued hastily. “I’ll hold

the presses for you! We'll run a headline on the front page that our chief writer, Walt Ballin, has been called to Terrania as an adviser to Perry Rhodan..."

In that moment, Walt Ballin turned in his notice without saying it in so many words. He abruptly interrupted the proprietor of the great *Europa News*. "Mr. Jacquese, I am not Perry Rhodan's adviser or anything of the kind! And I will not allow you to bring out any such announcement. Since it is now 12:58 I'll be leaving the building in the next few minutes. Good day, Mr. Jacquese!"

The little fat man stirred and got up from his chair. "You might as well have said farewell, Mr. Ballin. After your interview with Rhodan is over, you won't find a chair you can call your own in this newspaper building. But don't forget your ticket. Without that pass you won't get by the robot. Shall we go?"

* * * *

At 12:00 Standard Time, Lt. Harold Fitzgerald again took command of Relay Station Ori-12-1818. Since Sgt. Stainless did not have any unusual events to report, the latter retired to his cabin as he did every day at 12:00 to get some well-deserved rest.

Ori-12-1818 was stationed in an orbit around the largest system in Orion, that of the giant red sun Betelgeuse. The super sun had a diameter 500 times as large as that of Sol and had once possessed 14 planets but in recent times, only 118 years ago, the 3rd planet had been lost in an atomic explosion. That was when the great fleets of the Springers and the Topides had clashed in this section of the galaxy. The Galactic Traders had mistaken the Topides for allies of the hated Terrans and the Topides had believed Conrad Deringhouse's warning that the Springers had come here to destroy Topide power in the region. The laughing 3rd party in the background had been Perry Rhodan who at the time was fully occupied with the task of concealing Earth's position when Terra which was still comparatively weak. By a ruse he had contrived to falsify the vital data stored in the positronicon of a Trader ship, leading them to believe that Earth was the 3rd planet of Betelgeuse. The horrendous power of a single Arkon bomb had annihilated the uninhabited world.

Planet 4 was the world of Akvo, Earth-sized but with 95% of its surface covered by water. It was a life-supporting world containing a single continent that was about as large as Europe and here Terra had long since established a trading settlement and built up a military Fleet base. In the course of many decades the name Akvo had fallen into disuse. Now like all the rest of the satellites of Betelgeuse, it was designated by a number. Number 4 had thus become #3 and the methane-gas giant in the farthest orbit was now #13.

Every 3 months the crew of the relay station was relieved by replacements from the 3rd planet. Lt. Fitzgerald had just completed his check of all the controls and now that he had time for musings he began to think about his forthcoming relief.

At a distance of 172 million km beyond the 13th planetary orbit, Ori-12-1818

circled the Betelgeuse System, using its sensitive instruments to register every disturbance of the space-time continuum. Although the spherical station was not equipped with high-powered propulsion units it was an advanced bastion of the Solar Imperium on the outer fringes of the Terran sphere of interest.

Fitzgerald was tall and strikingly lean in figure and was endowed with a crop of straw-blond hair. He was startled out of his reverie by a drum-like rattling sound. The hypersensor equipment had set off an alarm as it detected the transition of an unannounced spaceship.

The Solar Fleet maintained a continuous surveillance of all areas of space which had been declared commercial territory for Terra. Any approach flight by alien ships had to be announced beforehand. The relay stations formed an overlapping, interlocked ring of surveillance posts which were designed for policing Rhodan's policies and making sure that all Galactic Trader elements observed it. If there were any violations, Rhodan's space squadrons would make a lightning-swift appearance and demand that the unannounced ship identify itself in a hurry.

Lt. Fitzgerald quickly glanced at his oscillographs and saw that the spacewarp had been generated by a normal hypertransition. "That's another Springer, for sure!" he said.

All he had to do was press a button. Instantly a datalink signal was transmitted to the two Solar ships that were cruising at picket stations in his sector. The automatic data hookup provided the patrol ships with all information necessary for them to reach the point of emergence of the unknown spacer—that is, if in the next moment the stranger did not disappear in a new transition jump.

The *Nile* was a ship of the Terra class, measuring 200 meters in diameter and carrying a 400-man crew. It had been alerted by Fitzgerald's data-link signal. The *Nile's* big positronic computer processed the coördinates and started programming the transition manoeuvre. The powerful impulse engines opened up with a full-power propulsion blast. The power stations and inertial generators started to howl and the converters built up swiftly to maximum output. 400 crewmen quickly donned their spacesuits and scrambled to their stations. The ship's weapons control central announced its battle readiness. The loudspeakers began to make the transition countdown.

In the ship's Control Central the operation was routine. The alert had been no cause for undue excitement. These men were veterans of far more serious missions than merely flagging a ship that had failed to announce its approach.

"Normal hyperjump?" asked the commander. Communications had just completed evaluating the pulse-coded input from Ori-12-1818, so he was double-checking to make sure.

"Sir, it's a normal jump.

3 minutes later the *Nile* made a hypertransition and emerged back into the normal void some 28 light-years away, travelling at a velocity of 0.4 light-speed. Even in the moment of rematerialisation its tracking instruments spotted the alien vessel and fed the data into the positronic. While the crew was still recovering from the transition shock the *Nile* was already on an automatic course toward the

unidentified spaceship. The instruments indicated that the stranger's speed was 0.1% greater than that of the *Nile*.

"Sir," remarked Corp. Penter without looking up from his tracking console, "we should have been equipped by now with the new 3-D sensors like the relay station."

"Are you thinking of Rhodan's latest alert orders, Penter?" returned the *Nile's* commander.

"Yessir. Because we might be facing one of those Akon ships. What's to prevent those pre-Arkonides from still being able to use 'Stone-Age' equipment like ours and bumble through hyperspace like we do?"

In the course of test-flying the research ship *Fantasy*, Rhodan and his companions had penetrated the centre of the galaxy and there had discovered the Blue System which was the home of the Akons, an incredibly advanced race that was evidently the true ancestors of the Arkonides. Since that time, Rhodan and the Solar Fleet had been expecting a visit from the Akons. But no one was certain as to *how* they would come—whether in a spaceship or by means of a technology which was so advanced that most men hadn't dreamed of it as yet.

Rhodan's alert order to the Fleet and to all relay stations read as follows: *In the case of unannounced penetrations of our zone of interest, should any alien ship give any indication of an unusual form of propulsion, Terrania Headquarters shall be alerted immediately.*

The commander of the patrol cruiser did not answer Penter's question. He merely sat before his flight console and accelerated the spherical spacer slightly beyond its safety limits. "Alright," he said, speaking through the intercom to Communications, "you can hail the alien ship!"

The antenna beamed the standard identification challenge to the stranger. Communications had automatically connected Control Central with the ship's receiving channel and now the crewmen began to experience a certain amount of tension. In a surprising burst of acceleration the intruder attempted to get away.

"Fire Control: 3 warning shots!"

From the *Nile's* polar gun turret a heavy impulse cannon fired a barrel-sized beam in the direction of the fleeing ship. The deadly ray of energy intercepted the stranger's course within 100 kms. Speed and acceleration had been accounted for and although the 'bow shot' held its intensity for 3 seconds the starship did not make contact with it.

"Hold fire!"

The commander called the order into his mike just as the bogey ship's reply was heard on the speakers.

It was a Springer!

5 minutes later the *Nile* braked its velocity to match that of its quarry and drifted in close alongside the cylindrically shaped vessel. A prize crew was sent over while the cruiser's guns held steadily on the 200-meter hull of the alien craft.

"We have intercepted a Springer ship from the Gelsla System," began the *Nile's* report to Relay Station Ori-12-1818 and to the Fleet base on Betelgeuse 3. "A

prize crew has been sent across. Stand by—we have a message from the boarding detail... Glord! Hello, Ori-12-1818—send us a medi-cruiser at once! Springer ship *UG DVI* has been hit by an epidemic or plague of some kind. More than half the crew is dead. There are only 8 Traders who can still be considered intact. We are informed by Sgt. Hopkins that this Trader clan may be afflicted with what spacemen refer to as the ‘stone-belly’ sickness. This estimate, however, is provisional. OK, Fitzgerald, so when do we get the hospital ship?”

Lt. Fitzgerald called back from Ori-12-1818 with a counter-question: “Have you quarantined the boarding crew and ordered them to stay with the *UG DVI*?”

“No, but I’ll take care of that. Have you alerted the medi-ship? What sector is it in now?”

The Solar System maintained 3 ships of this class. In spite of their relatively small 100-meter hulls they were effective flying clinics equipped with the most modern facilities that Earthly medical science and Ara skills had so far developed. The first ship of this class had just been commissioned only 2 years before but within its first 4 months of service it had been able to chalk up its first major success. After a 10-day marathon of Herculean efforts on the planet Sulf the medicos had managed to isolate an unknown bacterial agent. It had caused the Terran settlers there to break out into a continuous state of perspiration so that they were dying due to dehydration. 5 days later a serum was produced in sufficient quantity to inoculate 120,000 otherwise helpless settlers, thereby saving their lives.

Now the lives of the 12-man boarding crew were at stake, as well as the lives of the remaining Springer survivors.

One medi-cruiser lay in a docking berth in Terrania, ship 2 was on a mercy mission in the Vega Sector. Flying clinic #3 was on picket post at a distance of some 8,590 light-years. This latter vessel was contacted by Fitzgerald and it announced its ETA within 6 hours.

While the medi-ship left its station and struck a course toward its first transition, the chief medical officer got into communication with the patrol cruiser’s commander. Also, through relay hookup he was in contact with Sgt. Hopkins, leader of the boarding crew on board the plague-ridden *UG DVI*.

“Describe the symptoms, Sergeant,” the chief medico requested.

Hopkins had no doubt taken various medical-service type courses at the Space Academy but he was no physician. He hesitated to describe the nature of the malady.

But the chief medico appeared to be in a hurry. “Come off it, Sergeant! Get hold of one of those Springers and start feeling his abdominal area. It doesn’t matter any more if you’re handling the sick ones—you’re all infected by now. Alright now, do you feel a stony hardness in the abdominal area clear up to the rib cage or are there still some pliable spots and if so, where?”

Sgt. Hopkins’ groan of protest was heard 8500 light-years over the hypercom channel. He felt that he was over his head and being asked for more than he could deliver. But he hesitantly reported what he could. The chief medico only broke in here and there with a yes or no but listened patiently to all of it.

“I’m at the rib area now, doctor,” said Hopkins, still unsure of himself. “Are you able to make anything out of all this?”

“Thank you, Sergeant. You’ve done very well and I’m sorry to say that your original suspicions concerning enteric occlusion may be valid. You’d better prepare your men to expect their first intestinal cramps within 2 or 3 hours. I’ll get everything started here that is necessary. That is all!”

“Hello? Hey, Doc...!” yelled Hopkins into his microphone but then he clamped his jaws together in discouragement. The hypercom operator on the medi-ship had already cut off. All he knew was that this type of intestinal plague had the highest rate of mortality.

While monitoring this conversation, Lt. Harold Fitzgerald had shaken his head once or twice. He had heard a technical name for the malady before. Enteric infarction had the reverse effect of cholera. Instead of dysentery the result was a total dysfunction of the abdominal-intestinal tract and a general hardening of the whole area, followed by a rapid rise in blood poisoning. In recent years the occurrence of this affliction had been so frequent in this section of the galaxy that it had taken a frightening toll of lives. Even the Galactic Medical Masters, the Aras, had declared themselves willing to work with Earthmen in order to combat this sinister epidemic. Meanwhile their joint efforts in this direction had probably developed a good prophylaxis for the ailment but as yet their search for the specific cause of the ‘stone-belly’ plague had been without success.

Fitzgerald called into his Com Station. “Give me Headquarters in Terrania,” he ordered.

The hypercom connection was quickly established. The lieutenant started to report the situation but was interrupted before he had spoken a dozen words. Medi-ship 3 had already advised them of the plague condition.

“Anything else, Lieutenant?” asked Maj. Dugan from Terrania.

“Nothing else, Major.”

“I’d like to have soft job like yours for about 4 weeks,” commented the major enviously as he cut off the communication with Relay Station Ori-12-1818.

“Soft job...!” grumbled Lt. Fitzgerald. “It’s the boredom that drives you up the bulkheads. But if I had a nice desk in Terrania...”

* * * *

His car was stopped and the impersonal metallic voice of a steel monster demanded his I.D. papers.

Walt Ballin was familiar with robots but he had never had any direct dealings with them before. But now this towering mechanical creature led the way for him to Perry Rhodan, whom he only knew from all his appearances on television. He was not aware that he had passed through 4 half-dozen invisible control points on the way but at a time like this he wouldn’t have noticed them even if they had been plainly conspicuous.

Ballin was in a cold sweat of tension. When he thought of his blatant nerve in

calling Rhodan from Paris he almost felt sick to his stomach.

The robot went ahead of him and opened one more door. He quickly announced: “Sir, Mr. Walt Ballin!”

The newsman came within an inch of having a stroke. He stood rooted to the spot while he stared into the large, brilliantly lighted room and at the desk, behind which was sitting the man who had built up the Solar Imperium from a world torn by internal politics.

“Please come in, Mr. Ballin!”

He heard Rhodan’s friendly voice and saw the First Administrator of the Solar Imperium stand up behind his desk.

Ballin pulled himself together. But all the formal words of greeting he had rehearsed during his flight to Terrania were forgotten in his excitement. He hesitantly entered the room and sat down. He was now in the presence of the man whose face one could never forget, once he had looked into his cool grey eyes.

Rhodan came to the point at once. “Mr. Ballin, I have read your feature article in the *Europa News*. It made such an impression on me that I’d like very much to hear more about it. You have accused the Administration of not keeping Terrans sufficiently informed concerning galactic developments. We have been reproached for this a number of times before. In fact it became a serious issue before the Parliament. Now it seems that the World Press has brought it to their attention again through your article.

“Now tell me, Mr. Ballin, what was really on your mind when you wrote that June I feature for your paper?”

Rhodan had scheduled a half-hour interview with Walt Ballin because his appointment calendar was very crowded. However, an hour and a half went by and the journalist was still talking to him while Rhodan continued to listen with increasing interest. His original judgment of the man had not changed. Ballin belonged in Terrania, not among the tens of thousands of backup assistants who took care of the routine operations but among his closest collaborators.

He was about to make this suggestion to Ballin when the phone came on simultaneously with the red alert signal. Rhodan jumped up and went to his desk. On the viewscreen was the obviously agitated face of the chief of operations for Terrania’s main hypercom station.

“Sir...” The man’s voice was so husky that he had to swallow before he could go on.

But Perry Rhodan could guess what was about to be reported to him. Intuitively he thought: the *Blue System*.

By interstellar standard time for the Sol System, the hour was 18:59.

10 ADVENTURES FROM NOW
you’ll be amazed by the
Wonder Flower of Utik

2/ THE OMINOUS VISITOR

On board Relay Station Ori-12-1818 the standard time chronometer registered 18:50. Lt. Harold Fitzgerald was in the midst of a luxurious yawn.

For an hour now, medi-cruiser 3 had been moored alongside Springer ship UG DVI. A staff of medicos had transferred on board the stricken vessel in order to take up their fight against the insidious pestilence.

For a long time Fitzgerald had been in the Com Room listening to all the interconnected voice traffic that was going on. Help had been too late for the majority of the crewmembers on the cylindrical Trader ship. According to the medicos it was questionable whether or not some 20 remaining Springers would be able to recover. It was a characteristic of this type of enteric petrification to not only cause death rapidly but also to paralyse and harden the intestines even in the early stages of the illness. This hardening process could be arrested by a medication that also served to reverse the process but where the final stages of the disease had been reached there was nothing more that medical skills could do.

During this hour Fitzgerald had learned so much about the malicious malady that it had caused him to feel of his own abdominal section a number of times in order to make sure it was still pliable and normal. He figured it was a foolish thing to do and several times had an inclination to disconnect from the voice-com channels but he did so finally only because the doctors all began to speak in highly technical terms.

And now he was at loose ends and bored.

The chronometer clicked to 18:51.

The lean, straw-blond Scotsman rose to his feet, thinking that he might as well go have a chat with the Com Room operators but just then he happened to glance at the hypersensor's tracking oscillograph. And instantly he was in no mood for idle conversation. He took one jump and was standing before the instrument, staring at it intently.

On the green-glowing oscilloscope screen he saw an unusual series of low, flat curves. They indicated a transition, all right, but no Terran or Arkonide spaceship was able to show movement through hyperspace with this kind of waveform and amplitude. The very distortion of these curves from the norm gave emphasis to the fact that the unknown vessel's emergence into the normal continuum had been unusually gentle.

The alarms rang out. The ship's positronicon had once more detected an unannounced ship. It was not necessary for Fitzgerald to shake the Control Central's 5-man crew out of their lethargy from hours of boring duty. The alarm had done it for him.

Since the discovery of linear space-drive the special 3-D hypersensor indicator had been developed. This versatile instrument had already connected itself to the computer in response to the alarm. It was inputting all of the coordinate data. The positronicon only required a few seconds to determine the galactic position of the alien ship.

Alain Berliez and Roger Dempsey had been assigned to Ori-12-1818 as shavetail lieutenants only 6 months before but they were especially trained in regard to the new 3-D sensor. Now the main burden of responsibility was on their shoulders.

This was a case that applied to Perry Rhodan's alert bulletin. However, before the alarm signal could be beamed to Headquarters, certain details had to be determined. In a few moments they had the contour echoes of the target object showing in relief on the sensor screen.

"It's a spherical spacer!" Berliez; suddenly blurted out in surprise. "We came within an ace of disgracing ourselves for all time!"

"Are you sure—a ball-shaped hull?" Fitzgerald was perplexed by the flat configuration of the oscillograph curves. He could not believe that this abnormal type of spacewarp had been generated by an Arkonide class of ship.

"No doubt about it!" Berliez confirmed in a steady tone of conviction.

"Something's haywire!" Dempsey interjected. "Don't you see it, Berliez? That spacer's got definite flat spots at the poles. Blast! Are we getting a distortion or something?"

Lt. Fitzgerald hurried over to the sensor console and his two under-officers made room for him. He examined the 3D picture on the screen instantly. There was some distortion going on but not enough to hide the obvious flattening of the spherical object at its poles.

"Alien ship velocity: 0.8 LV. Distance: 4.1 LH."

"Direction of course!" insisted Fitzgerald.

"Orion System," came the answer.

The chronometer registered 18:56 standard time.

"Berliez, can't you sharpen that picture any more?" Fitzgerald didn't realize that beads of perspiration were standing out on his forehead as he let Berliez get back to the keyboard.

With practiced hands, the latter manipulated several vernier adjustments. The picture blurred out and then came again as sharp as a pin, only to disappear a moment later.

"Come on! Come on!" yelled Fitzgerald impatiently.

But the 21-year-old 2nd lieutenant did not allow himself to become rattled.

Now the picture was there again, clear and sharp. With unmistakable clarity it revealed a definite flattening of both poles of the alien vessel.

It was 18:57.

When Fitzgerald gave his instructions to the Com Room he only spoke 6 words: “Order 486. Red alert to Headquarters!”

Order 486 referred to Rhodan’s warning bulletin. Two short pulse bursts had been coded and prepared by the positronicon. They were beamed forth from the station’s hypercom antenna. The Solar Fleet Headquarters in Terrania was advised by the interstellar operator in 3 short sentences concerning the observation of station Ori-12-1818

Terrania did not return any questions. The contents of the dispatch were all they required.

Alarm sirens howled on board the superbattleship *Drusus*. To the 3 duty officers in the giant Control Central there could be no mistake about their signals. The Chief had given the alarm himself and that meant a crash takeoff.

* * * *

Newsman Walt Ballin was fascinated by Perry Rhodan’s lightning-swift but carefully considered actions. He finally began to realize that he was witnessing a key moment in which new developments were taking place.

“Bell, are you there?... Marshall! All available mutants to the *Drusus*—red alert!... Freyt, you take over—I have to go!... *Drusus*...!”

Now for the first time the loudspeaker came to life.

“Yessir, this is Control Central of the...”

“Emergency takeoff in 15 minutes. I want a 3-way hypercom channel hookup between the *Drusus*, Command Headquarters and Ori-12-1818!”

“Understood, sir. Emergency takeoff in...”

But Rhodan had already changed his connection to Fleet Headquarters. “Instructions to Orion Fleet Task Force. Do not intercept alien spaceship in Orion Sector. The *Drusus* is joining you. But in case additional alien ships appear you are to attack per Order 486-A. This is a red alert for all Orion Fleet units. That is all!”

When Rhodan glanced sharply at him, Ballin was startled. “Care to come along?”

The newsman felt a second shock run through him. “You mean me?”

“Yes, I mean you, sir. Come along. We’re taking off in 13 minutes!” Rhodan was already passing him on his way to the door, so all Ballin could do was follow him.

The antigravitor carried them to the roof of the skyscraper. While they were floating up the shaft, Rhodan spoke to the journalist. “If you’d prefer not to, Ballin, you don’t have to make the flight. It’s my guess that some very heavy risks

will be involved.”

“Are you kidding, sir? I’m grabbing the chancel. What profession doesn’t involve a risk?”

His words brought a smile to Rhodan’s face but Ballin couldn’t tell whether it was an expression of sympathy or mockery.

“It’s true what you say about risks in general, Mr. Ballin, but I doubt if you understand the difference between professional risks and those that are involved in flights such as this.”

They reached the roof just as Reginald Bell’s aircar rose up and shot away in the direction of the spaceport. A few moments later, Ballin was sitting next to Rhodan in a second aircar. Under forced acceleration the vehicle hurtled toward that section of the spaceport where the giant spherical hull of the *Drusus* loomed into the sky.

The bewildered journalist heard Rhodan saying: “I’m surprised you aren’t asking any questions, Ballin. Naturally you should know where this flight is heading, and why I issued the red alert.”

He ignored Ballin’s astonishment and once more scanned his thoughts. He could see that the reporter was aware of a big newsbreak of some kind but that he had no suspicion of the fact he was sitting next to someone who was equipped with special faculties.

“Sir, this whole change of situation has happened so unexpectedly... I...” Ballin broke off in confusion when he heard Rhodan laugh.

“For *you*, Ballin—but not for my closest aides and companions. We’ve become accustomed to these things and maybe it’s a habit that’s to blame for not keeping Terrans up-to-date on what’s going on. But that’s a task I’m handing over to you, Ballin. It’s the reason why I had you come to Terrania. OK, so here we are!”

Rhodan landed the aircar in front of the first of many towering telescope struts supporting the *Drusus*. He jumped out with a lithe, limber movement and was 10 steps away before Ballin could get into gear enough to follow him. Walt Ballin was completely disoriented and felt like a gawking tourist here. He had never stood directly under a superbattleship of the Solar Fleet before and now he couldn’t quite get it into his head that this colossus could actually move one centimetre off the ground.

The huge ramp of the ground lock might as well have been another city street. The hatch door itself loomed like some mighty gate to Eternity. Then came this vast tube—the antigravitor, which carried them aloft with startling swiftness.

“Better check your watch, Ballin.” Rhodan’s voice broke the bubble of his fixation.

“19:12 standard, sir,” replied Ballin, still mentally at sea.

“Correct. In 2 minutes we take off. You’ll have to excuse me just now because I won’t be able to watch after you for awhile, Ballin. Just keep your eyes and ears open. Your job will begin when this operation is over with. Here now—don’t let it get to you so soon, Ballin!”

But at that moment Ballin had suddenly thought of a young woman named Yvonne Berclais, whom he had dated for tonight at 20:00 o'clock at the *Trois Poulardes* in Paris. Ballin had completely forgotten about the rendezvous!

The antigravitor itself was a scene of hurried emergency traffic in personnel. Several hundred men were drifting upwards and downwards in transverse fields, each of them en route to an assigned station. Ballin had noted the fact even as they entered the *Drusus* that no one had even taken notice of the First Administrator's arrival or even saluted him. All this plus the overwhelming impression the titanic ship had made on him was momentarily forgotten as he remembered his date with Yvonne.

For the first time he could appreciate the meaning of the old saying: to take one's heart in both hands. This he did now as he explained to Rhodan what had skipped his mind during the turbulence of the day's events.

Rhodan grasped his arm firmly. "We get out here!" he said. Then they were suddenly on the main level that led to the Control Central. "Are you saying you want to go back, Ballin?"

"No, but... but it isn't right, sir!" the newsman answered, still in confusion.

"Come along, Ballin. Naturally there's a way of handling this. We have to go past the Communications Central, so you go in there and ask for a connection to Paris. Here—this is the place. OK? Good luck, Ballin!"

Could Rhodan suspect that in this moment he had won anew friend?

"What a man!" Ballin." whispered. He watched Rhodan's departing figure until it disappeared beyond the hatchway of the Control Central.

He was about to enter the Com Central when he suddenly froze. The *Drusus* was thundering and bellowing. The great spacesphere, measuring 1500 meters in diameter, was starting to take off. The mighty impulse engines in the superbattleship's equatorial ring had been opened to full power and the hull had begun to rumble in the grip of their unleashed forces.

"Hello here, now who are *you*?"

Ballin heard a powerful masculine voice behind him, in fact almost in his ear. Simultaneously he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to stare into the freckled face of a man whom he had seen before.

"Mr. Bell, I'm Walt Ballin from the *Europa News*. The First Administrator has invited me to come along on this flight of the *Drusus*."

A pair of suspicious eyes flashed at him. "It's easy to see you're a stranger to this type of operation. I'll soon find out if your information is true. No way for you to get away now other than run around inside the ship. So what's your business in the Com Room? Can't you read? Restricted area!"

"But the First Administrator..."

Bell interrupted him with a brisk wave of his hand. "Lay off that right now! You'll do Perry and the rest of us a big favour if you'll refer to him as the Chief and not the First Administrator. But what do you want with Communications?"

Ballin was well informed concerning Reginald Bell's general personality and disposition, so there was nothing left for him to do but to confess his sin of omission once more.

Bell's sudden grin widened as he listened. "Man," he said, "now I've heard everything...!"

With a startled cry, Walt Ballin drew back before a heavy blast of air as an animal 3 feet high appeared out of the shimmering whirlwind, mouse-like above and beaver-like in its lower extremities.

Simultaneously the creature squeaked out in a piercing shrill voice: "Fatso, this youngster isn't pulling your leg! He was really about to stand up his girlfriend and I suppose you've never done that before, eh? Wasn't there a certain Sheila Gibbons, a Madeleine Ykes and Rosita Menderez and..."

"Please, mister!" Bell told him anxiously and Ballin couldn't understand why Rhodan's Chief Deputy should do him the honour of holding the door open for him to the Com. Room, even gesturing to him to enter.

But Bell knew very well why he was driven to this desperate move. He had hardly closed the door again before he turned toward Pucky, only to snort out a cussword. The little devil disappeared again in the same way he had come, after accusing him of all these things in front of the young newcomer.

While Walt Ballin got his connection to Paris and waited for Yvonne Berclais' face to appear on the screen, in the Control Central Rhodan was studying the latest reports from Relay Station Ori-12-1818.

Gen. Conrad Deringhouse was standing next to him. "Nothing much new, sir," he was saying in his quiet way. "But the little we have is bad enough. I believe they have come!"

"As convinced as all that, Deringhouse?" Rhodan's question, however, carried no note of sarcasm.

Without comment the general handed him the latest photos transmitted to them by hypercom. They revealed a small spaceship with a spherical hull and flattened areas at either pole. "And here's the oscillogram, sir, with the flattened curves. They are abnormal for our own type of transitions. If this isn't an Akon ship from the Blue System, then here we go again—faced with another alien race. But there's everything to argue against the latter supposition. That ship's configuration leads to only one conclusion, flat poles or no: we're face to face with the Akons."

Meanwhile the *Drusus* had been picking up speed as it left the solar system, yet many a valuable minute was still required before the flagship of the Solar Imperium could enter into its first transition.

At this moment Ori-12-1818 sent through some additional data and 3 Central Control officers proceeded to lay out the visible course of the unknown spaceship on the stellar map board. As Rhodan and Deringhouse came over to the map section, Bell entered unobtrusively and took up a position behind the two men.

Typically, Bell expressed what he thought of the situation without being asked. "Doesn't look to me like they're headed for a landing on Betelgeuse 3," he said.

“I have the same impression, Chubby,” Rhodan replied. “But if our guests aren’t going to land on the only inhabitable planet of the system, what are they doing here?”

“Why not give them a hail and ask them? Speaking of radio calls, do you happen to know there’s a youngster on this ship...”

“I brought him along. But the young man is not the subject at the moment. Bell, you take over the hypercom yourself. I wouldn’t give them more than three repeats of the IFF interrogation signal.”

Bell was standing next to Rhodan now and looked at him querulously. “You don’t sound very optimistic,” he commented.

“I’ll show a little of that maybe, once I know who’s sitting in that alien ship and what they plan to do in the Orion Sector. Deringhouse, expand this alert to the entire Fleet and all military bases. Need I tell you that this situation is beginning to make me somewhat apprehensive?”

After a mutual exchange of glances, Bell and Deringhouse left. One went to send a hypercom interrogation challenge to the stranger, demanding his origin and destination. The other attended to sending out a general alarm to all Fleet formations as well as to the heavily armed ground bases.

5 minutes later, Ori-12-1818 transmitted further data. And another small stretch of the, alien starship’s course was laid out on the star map. It could clearly be seen that its primary goal was the giant system of Betelgeuse. The red monster star was more than 100 million km in diameter, an M-type giant.

Perry Rhodan’s thoughts were turning ever more intensively to his recollections of the technically superior Akons from the Blue System—in the heart of the galaxy. That’s where he had first discovered them while making a major test flight in the experimental *Fantasy*, Terra’s only ship equipped with the Kalup-type compensator converter. For several thousand years the Akons had dispensed with ordinary spaceflight in order to travel from star to star. Instead they made use of high-powered interstellar transmitters. But whenever they wanted to emerge from their sovereign territory they had to fall back on regular starships if they did not have a transmitter-receiver installation on the planet of their destination.

Again another piece of the alien’s course was posted on the chart, bringing it still closer to the Betelgeuse system. Unless the Terrans were being thrown off the track by this ship, it was now becoming clear that its destination had to be one of the outer planets.

Bell returned from the Communications Central. “They don’t answer. They’re maintaining a radio silence—not even any hypercom traffic of their own. At least the Orion relay station hasn’t picked up anything yet.” Bell wasn’t happy with the situation. He had a healthy respect for Akon power. “What the devil do the Akons want with us? Their appearance so close to the Solar System isn’t any coincidence—or do you believe in coincidences, Perry?”

“As long as I know the Blue System exists I can’t bet on coincidences any more. I hope I’m wrong and the Akons *don’t* know the exact position of the Earth!

That's right, Bell, you can stare at me like that all you want to but we're not going to be able to play hide and seek with the Akons as we did with the Arkonides and the Springers."

"You're sure in a real terrific mood today," grumbled Bell, brushing a hand through his red hair. "And all this just because that flat-nosed meteorite is flashing across the Betelgeuse system. I don't see where there's a call for such pessimism."

"And I don't see what the Akons are up to. Whatever it is, they're too obvious about it. They want us to see them. And whoever parades in the open like that must really have an ace up his sleeve."

A boyish grin appeared on Bell's freckled face. "At least we have the edge on them in one particular," he said. "We even have their linear space-drive, Perry. With that we penetrated their screened-off system *and* against their will we got out again!"

"You poor fellow!" replied Perry pityingly.

"Well, you ought to know the score," answered his stocky deputy. "But if you carry on like that you're going to be as contagious as that 'stone-belly' plague. Hey! Do you think there's any connection between those sick Springers and the appearance of the Akons?" A new tone of excitement had come into his voice.

"Those Springers are as fond of living as we are, Chubby. Try using your head before you make statements like that. Dying men can't very well be playing games and even, if there were any collusion between them and the Akons the doctors on medi-ship 3 would have advised us by now. Your theory is absurd, my friend!"

"OK, Perry, so what's *your* theory?"

"I don't have any. I'd just like to have an answer to one question: why are the Akons coming here?" As he spoke he glanced thoughtfully at the alien ship's course marking on the star chart.

"Then do I take it you're convinced it's an Akon ship, Perry?"

"So far, yes."

"And you plan to intercept it with the *Drusus*?"

"If it comes to that, yes. In spite of that little starship's greatly superior firepower, the *Drusus*' screens will be able to stand up under their attack."

Bell regarded his friend suspiciously. "You're not telling me what's worrying you, Perry. What is it you're really afraid of in the appearance of an Akon spaceship?"

"Everything! I haven't forgotten how they received us in the Blue System or how they treated us as though we were primitive bushmen instead of humans with a certain grade of intelligence."

"The Akons are galactic snobs!" retorted Bell. It was with such vehemence that it made Rhodan smile.

"That describes them alright," he agreed. And then he was aware of the general's arrival.

“Sir, I’ve picked up something of interest. I’ve just gotten word from Lt. Fitzgerald on our station in Orion that sensor impulses have been emanating from the unidentified ship which nobody can explain so far. At first Ori-12-1818 was impacted by mysterious high-frequency pulses of unusual field strength and then patrol cruiser *Nile* reported that they had been surrounded by some kind of force that damped down their hypercom so badly that they were practically jammed. Before the relay station or the cruiser could make an analysis, however, it was over with. The Ori station alone was able to determine the field strength. Sir, the Oersted reading was 12 times 10 to the 12th power—and at that distance!”

This area of the physical sciences was Bell’s strong point. In one sequence of mental operations he established a relationship between the distance of transmission and the impact strength of the magnetic field that had been reported. His voice carried a note of conviction when he said: “In that spaceship there can only be Akons!”

Neither Rhodan nor Deringhouse contradicted him.

“Well, by that token our logicians and the robot brain on Venus are right again,” said the general. “It looks as if we must have been generous enough to leave our calling card in the Blue System when we made our unexpected visit there.”

Rhodan had his own view of the matter. “You mean they more or less slipped it out of our pockets. Maybe we can thank that Akon woman, Auris, for the fact that they now know in the core of the galaxy where we came from, Gentlemen, it’s my guess that our traitor in the case was the computer memory on board the *Fantasy* before it was destroyed. Wouldn’t you say so?”

The other two men shook their heads and took a deep breath. They failed to understand how the Akon woman, Auris, had been able to obtain the Earth’s galactic coördinates from the positronicon of the test ship *Fantasy*. It was no use trying to figure such things because it only served to pile unanswerable questions on top of more questions. The technological superiority of the Akons was too overwhelming.

Rhodan glanced at the big positronicon of the *Drusus*. “When do we make our jump?”

“In about 8 minutes, sir. By that time we will have left the Sol System’s gravitational field.”

Rhodan thanked the operator and turned back to Bell and the general. “For the present all we can do is wait. No use going to our cabins at this stage, so let’s take our seats.”

Then the metallic voice of the computer came over the speakers as it began the countdown. The three men took seats behind the two pilot positions.

Deringhouse had looked briefly but penetratingly at his chief when they sat down. Now he leaned closer to him. “Sir, do you think this is really something sweat about?”

“Yes!” admitted Rhodan without hesitation. “This is a real bed of nails, my

friend. The Akon ship's direct approach has every earmark of some kind of definite plan. And their radio silence only strengthens that suspicion. But, playing with riddles isn't getting us anywhere. We have to intercept the little ship and force the Akons to lay their cards on the table."

Bell had overheard this conversation. "Seems a little weird to me the Akons are making this visit in just one ship—and just a 100-meter shell at that. Or do you think maybe there are more of them in our territory that we haven't spotted yet?"

"Anything is possible. I don't exclude the possibility that they can be camouflaging themselves with an anti-tracking screen that we'd be powerless to detect."

"Then we'd better get set for some surprises around here!" growled Bell.

The *Drusus* was close to making its 650 light-year transition into the Orion sector. The positronic computer counted out the last minute before the jump. Sirens were heard throughout the giant battleship, warning all crewmembers to strap themselves in.

The zero count arrived, followed by the transition. Where the vast sphere had been an instant before, the dark void was empty.

25 ADVENTURES FROM NOW
Kurt Mahr tells of the
Killers from Hyperspace

3/ VOYAGE OF THE RETSE-U

The tall men with their satin-brown complexions stood before their spaceship engaged in conversation; they laughed and joked just as though they were Earthmen and not a special task force of the Blue System that was always busy with dangerous assignments. Their deeply tanned skin colouration was a natural effect of the giant blue star above them, which was 180 times as large as Sol. Its powerful ultraviolet radiations had endowed them with this accentuated feature of appearance.

By Terran standards they were on the average a head taller than normal and they resembled the inhabitants of the Arkon worlds more than they did those of Earth. However, aside from their physical stature they also differed from the Arkonides due to their lack of reddish eyes. One would look among them in vain to find white hair, which instead was a coppery red in hue. Or at least the latter colour predominated.

A thinning cloud layer allowed the light of the blue sun of Akon to break through bringing the oppressive heat of a summer day to the planet Sphynx. But the small group of Akon commandos did not appear to notice it. These were all young men who stood there conversing easily, apparently unconcerned about the task which lay ahead of them. They were waiting for Vu Pooh, the commander of their 100-meter spherical vessel, the *Retse-U*.

The flat-poled starship was #38 in the fleet of the Energy Command, which comprised 52 ships of this class. But that was all. In the Blue System there was no ship 53.

In fact for many thousands of years now there had been nothing that humans or Arkonides would have regarded as spaceships, other than a small force of such vessels as these. The Akons had long since dispensed with this crude form of transportation. They had converted the moon of Sphynx into a tremendous transmitter station and had installed smaller transmitter-receiver stations on almost all of their colonial worlds, which served to transport all passenger and freight traffic through time and space.

A trip from one planet to another was nothing much more than a short walk. All any Akon had to do was step through the station's energy gate and with one step he would leave his own world to arrive through a receiver gate on the destination planet with the next.

The small fleet of 100-meter ships was reserved for special cases. Officially the

task force carried the name of Energy Command. However small and insignificant their outward appearance, mighty forces slumbered within these ships. In more than 8000 years of Akon reckoning, not one ship in the command had ever been lost. And this was why the crewmembers did not consider their missions to be dangerous. For them such assignments only represented a trip through the galaxy by this primitive means, perhaps accompanied by adventures which were in themselves always completely harmless.

Their flights were for the purpose of maintaining the security of the Blue System. And now a portion of the *Retse-U's* crew was waiting for their ship commander in order to sally forth once more on a mission that would serve to guarantee the security of their stellar domain.

A dark-haired Akon named Pan-Thel was the first one to see the commander, Vu Pooh, as he came across the small spaceport. He drew this to the attention of his companions and the laughter was suddenly silenced. All of them looked at Vu Pooh expectantly. The latter was bareheaded, a flame-haired giant of a man who gestured to them even from a distance.

“Here we go—nothing again!” commented a slender Akon named Mna E-Ig. He sounded disappointed. “And here I was hoping that we’d finally have an exciting assignment.”

Gim Sarem, who was second in command, looked at him questioningly. “Are you thinking, Mna, of those obnoxious little white-skinned aliens?”

“Who else?” interjected Ol Pan-Thel. “I’ve seen them and I didn’t find them so obnoxious or repulsive. A person could easily accustom himself to the sight of their pale complexions. When I recall that tall man with the grey eyes I have to admit he somehow made an impression on me. And in the end analysis, didn’t they surprise us when they were able to disappear when we thought we had them pinned down?”

Mna E-Ig seemed to chuckle soundlessly as he turned to Ol Pan-Thel. “Then perhaps our mission isn’t going to be quite so dull, after all, Ol!”

“Nonsense!” contradicted Gim Sarem. “Ol just has a weakness for anything alien. Those ugly white-skins were merely lucky, that’s all. I have it from reliable sources that we simply underestimated the quality of their propulsion system. Everything else about their ship is said to be of little value.” He happened to note Ol Pan-Thel’s derisive smile. “But of course you don’t believe that, Ol! It’s typical of you. Sometimes you can become very aggravating on this subject. So what can you object to in what I’m saying?”

“The fact you keep thinking of those aliens as being obnoxious and loathsome, Gim. Do we really know them? Are we the only ones in the galaxy?”

“So that’s it!” snapped the 2nd officer of the *Retse-U*. “It goes against your grain but perhaps you will not deny the way they behaved themselves when they came here? Did they meet us with any modicum of discretion or restraint as would be proper for strangers? We made it plain enough to them that we didn’t want to have anything to do with them but still they obtruded upon us in the most

annoying manner possible! Would you, care to contradict that point, Ol Pan-Thel?"

"I remember a saying of our greatest philosopher, Untk," replied Pan-Thel, still calm and collected although meanwhile the commander Vu Pooh had joined them and was listening to him. "Untk once said..."

"Spare us your antiquated philosophers!" Gim Sarem exclaimed, but he suddenly became silent when Vu Pooh joined the discussion.

"Ol, what saying was that?" he asked.

"It's a short axiom that Untk once stated: *Nothing happens without cause or reason.*"

A few men laughed and loudest of all was Gim Sarem. But Vu Pooh did not laugh.

"Nor will you find that our mission was ordered without cause or reason, Pan-Thel. The Ruling Council of Akon has decided that *Mal-Se* is to be employed here. Now let's get on board. That will be more practical than to stand out here philosophizing."

It was an order. The debate was not brought up again. Shortly thereafter, one additional container was loaded into the hold. Stamped on it were the Akon letters: *Mal-Se*.

Then came the order for the *Retse-U* to take off.

Like an arrow shot from a bow the flat-poled sphere hurtled upward through the opening in the clouds. It disappeared beyond the sky and entered upon its mysterious mission.

* * * *

Gently and without any shock effects the *Retse-U* emerged once more into the normal universe. The glowing red eye of Betelgeuse stared at them balefully in the empty void.

The only crewmembers present in the small control room were Vu Pooh and Gim Sarem. Unimpressed by the monster star before them, they sat idly in their flight seats and did not even cast a monitoring glance at their simplified instrument panels.

A few minutes passed in silence until Vu Poch suddenly leaned forward and examined a small sphere that seemed to float inside a metallic housing. Two clearly glowing blips of light could be seen on the surface of the ball. Vu Pooh nodded his satisfaction and leaned back again in his seat.

"They've discovered us, Sarem."

"Good!" replied the other. And with that the matter was taken care of for both of them.

The *Retse-U* appeared to race toward the planetary system of Betelgeuse without intelligent guidance. The two Akons gazed with disinterest at the scene on

their viewscreen, which would have been a strange and wonderful sight in the eyes of humans. The viewing instrument was aimed at the ship's destination. It was capable of revealing the farthestmost planets of the giant system.

Time passed. At undiminished high speed the *Retse-U* continued to race toward its goal. Suddenly Gim Sarem stirred himself. He pointed to the viewscreen where a pale disc-like object had become visible, its diameter was still very small.

Vu Pooh hardly gave it the benefit of his glance. "That must be the observation station that we're automatically tracking, Gim." The chief officer of Energy Command ship *Retse-U* did not consider it worth the effort to say any more about it. Why should he? This mission was no more or less routine than any of their other assignments.

The small ship crossed the orbit of the outermost planet, which was a frozen gas world, and proceeded onward to within 30,000 km of the next celestial sphere of the system. The fact that it traversed the outer layers of the planet's turbulent air masses was not noticeable within the ship itself. Seconds later the giant orb lay far behind them.

Suddenly an instrument rose up from the flight console's flat surface and came to a stop at eye level before the two Akons.

"Look there!" said Gim Sarem in some surprise. "Three ships of the white-skins!"

Both men stirred themselves to a state of new alertness. Their gaze held steadily on the instrument while they read the indications suspiciously.

"Strange," murmured Vu Pooh. "They're paying no attention to us. Three ships, all hanging motionlessly in one location."

Nor did the situation change.

The Akons could not guess that the patrol cruiser *Nile* had received explicit orders to disregard the unknown spaceship and to remain alongside the medi-ship and the contaminated cylindrical ship of the Springers. But the Akons' interest in the three vessels soon subsided. They were confident of the speed and combat strength of the *Retse-U*.

The flattened spacesphere raced past Betelgeuse at a vast distance and yet the monster sun hurled its protuberances at them 100 million km into space. It was a titanic molten furnace of nuclear forces undergoing a continuous conversion. But the Akons did not even favour the spectacle with a single glance.

"They're hailing us," remarked Vu Pooh succinctly.

The built-in transmitter came to life and they were aware of Reginald Bell's request for identification. The challenge came three times and three times the translator converted the repeated text of it into their own language. Vu Pooh and Gim Sarem sat there like silent gods. This insignificant aggravation on the part of the white-skins failed to move them.

"Their radio traffic has suddenly increased..."

Vu Pooh merely commented on this to relieve the monotony of their

assignment. He didn't expect Gim Sarem to answer him, nor did he. The translator remained silent. It was a clear indication that the radio messages did not concern them. They had no interest in the contents of the alien communications.

The *Retse-U* had traversed three more planetary orbits when three instruments rose up from the panel simultaneously. Also the overall picture on the viewscreen had changed abruptly. Now there was visible a spaceship of titanic proportions. Each of the eye-level instruments before the Akons reported various details concerning the mighty ship: its distance, its acceleration capability—and also the fact that it was following them.

Vu Pooh smiled. "If we don't increase our speed they'll overtake us in 9 time units," he said, while leisurely leaning forward to the console. With his left hand he touched an adjustment and shoved it forward.

Although there was no change on the viewscreen the *Retse-U's* position within the Betelgeuse system was altered abruptly. It disappeared from its location and in an infinitesimal moment reappeared over the 7th planet, which was a methane gas giant.

Now the viewscreen changed and boiling gas clouds almost seemed to penetrate the control room of the Akon ship. Still under fully automatic flight control, the flat-ended spacer headed for a landing at an incredible speed. Seconds later the air masses around the ship started to glow. Streamers of methane gas could be seen on the screen as they reddened to incandescence.

Even this spectacle did not merit a glance of interest from either Vu Pooh or Gim Sarem. But now the first order was issued from the control room since the *Retse-U* had taken off from Sphynx.

"Command detail—stand by for action!" And Vu Pooh added: "Landing in 1/10th time unit!"

After that, everything was quiet again.

Down in the ready room there was also an air of calm, Although two groups of Akon technicians had gathered there. In a quiet atmosphere of small talk they waited for the spaceship to land. Thin, close-fitting spacesuits covered their practical service clothing. Their completely transparent helmets appeared to be very fragile. On their backs were protuberances about the size of a cigar box which indicated that special life-support systems had been installed in their suits.

At the flash of a green light, their conversation stopped. Space helmets dropped into place. The young commandos took up positions in the oblong chamber where about one-third of the space was taken up by large and small pieces of machinery.

Five Akons took their positions in front of a rectangular switchboard. A second green flash followed the first. At the same time the barely discernible lock hatch opened, which served for loading and unloading the ship. The turbulent masses of methane gas swept into the room and sought to engulf everything in it.

More than 20 Akons stepped outside but they hardly glanced at their bizarre and deadly surroundings. In the course of their many missions they had encountered enough alien worlds so that this planet with its incessant hurricanes

was nothing new to their experience. In spite of the whipping force of the gas masses around them and the tremendous gravitation of this life-hostile environment, the Akons moved about with incredible self-assurance.

In uninterrupted sequence they were followed by machine components which floated on concentrated antigrav repulsion fields. The Akon team was coordinated like a troupe of professional performers. Every handhold went firmly to the right place and every step of the work was coordinated with the activity of each man in turn. The permafrosted ground was bored into with energy beams to a depth of 20 meters and metal uprights of a corresponding length were placed in the holes.

At a slight distance from the main team the control group was also busy. Each member was in radio contact with the *Retse-U*. The ecliptic of the methane planet, orbital velocity, celestial mechanics of the entire solar system with respect to their own sun back home—all these and several hundred other factors, some of them even contra-rotational, had to be taken into consideration so that the end result would agree with all natural conditions.

When the 7th time period had passed, Gut-Ko, the chief engineer of the team, connected the converter to the almost barn-sized power plant, which was a miniature replica of the giant transmitter back in the Blue System. He used a hand-sized combination test instrument and operated its sensor beams, checking out all the main phases before he felt he was ready to close the power circuits.

The main work team had already returned to the *Retse-U* but the control group remained long enough to make the final vernier adjustments. Then Gut-Ko and his men also went inside the ship. When the last of them had come on board, the airlock hatch closed silently. Instead of pumps, force fields pushed out the poisonous methane gas in one operation. It was a process that only took a fraction of a second to accomplish. Once more the green light flashed, signalling the specialist group that the *Retse-U* was taking off.

In the small Control Central, Gim Sarem asked Vu Pooh a question: “So what are we really going to do with *Mal-Se*, Vu?”

“Nothing! We’ll take him back with us because our head start over the white-skins is still more than one time period.” There was a hint of triumph on his expressive face. “These alien ships are ridiculously slow. The Ruling Council will be surprised to know how slow they really are. That’s what makes it all the more difficult to understand how they could have broken through our energy curtain.”

While the methane atmosphere roared past the *Retse-U* again and the starship withdrew from the inhospitable planet with an incredible acceleration, a brief buzzing signal was heard in the peaceful control room. The transmitter the Akons had erected on the Betelgeuse world was advising them automatically that it had made its contact with the giant transmitter station in the Blue System. Vu Pooh had expected no more and no less from his specialized commandos. It was not the first time they had accomplished such lightning-swift work.

Chief engineer Gut-Ko entered the Control Central. He had come to obtain information concerning the giant ship of the white-skins that was reported to be

flying toward them. Gim Sarem manipulated a control dial and out of nothingness appeared an unusual viewscreen which duplicated a miniature representation of the Betelgeuse system with all its planets but it also revealed the position of the white-skins' ship as well as their own.

Gim Sarem explained the situation for the engineer. "At present the sun is between us and the aliens. Only their observation station can detect us just now. The big ship is entering the system at 0.9 light-speed. But now we're going to increase our lead on them of one time period to near infinity." He raised his head to look at the engineer and he noted his grim expression. "Not quite satisfied, Gut-Ko?" he asked.

Gut-Ko shook his head. "Gim, with those entirely antiquated spaceships, how did the strangers ever manage to get into our system in the first place? It couldn't have been just a coincidence."

"It doesn't make any difference now, Gut-Ko, coincidence or otherwise. The aliens will land where we were back there on the planet and *Mal-Se* will pay them a visit. So it's superfluous to even discuss them anymore."

At that moment the *Retse-U* vanished from the void to plunge into a higher continuum.

The 3-D sensor on Ori-12-1818 lost the ship's image on its special screen and simultaneously the hypersensor's oscillograph displayed the puzzling flat waveforms once more.

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4/ GATE OF THE UNKNOWN

At a velocity of 0.9% the speed of light the *Drusus* hurtled onward into the system of the giant sun Betelgeuse. The hyperjump was behind them and the side effects of rematerialisation had subsided for everyone on board. Bell and Deringhouse were engaged in a low-voiced conversation in front of the star map which showed the course of the alien ship, Perry Rhodan still sat in his chair and silently pondered the situation.

He was not even shaken from his meditations by an announcement from the hypersensor section: "Spacewarp with abnormally flat amplitudes. Location: approximately 1 million km from planet #7!" He felt that the appearance of the Akons so close to the Sol System was no coincidence but he wasn't able to figure out what was behind this very short visit.

Ori-12-1818 came through with a brief report which was also being transmitted to Solar Fleet Headquarters. "Unknown spaceship of non-standard class has vanished from the normal continuum, presumably by means of hypertransition. This occurred 1 minute and 18 seconds ago. We have no further responses on our relief sensor screen. End of message."

But now Rhodan stirred himself. He got up and went over to the hypercom panel. "This is Rhodan speaking. Request data from Ori—how long was the alien ship on the 7th planet's surface and what's the location of their landing site? I'm standing by for the answer."

When he spoke these words, the conversation between Bell and the general was suddenly cut off. They turned around to Perry while he was still at the microphone.

Lt. Harold Fitzgerald's voice crackled from the loudspeaker: "Tracking Station Ori-12-1818 to the Chief! Duration of alien ship's ground time on 7:29 minutes and 4 seconds. Landing site location..."

The ship's computer automatically registered all the data that Fitzgerald was transmitting. When the report ended, Rhodan looked up pensively. Many crewmen in the Control Central saw him shake his head.

"How much longer?" Although his question seemed to be disconnected, the copilot understood him.

"We can reach the landing site in 20 to 25 minutes, sir, provided the tracking data are correct."

“Thank you,” Rhodan replied as he went over to Bell and Deringhouse. “Well, gentlemen, what do you say?”

Bell took refuge in silence. Gen. Deringhouse lifted his shoulders in a single shrug. “Baffling, sir—completely inexplicable! What can anybody possibly do in just a 30 minute stay on a planet?”

Bell blurted out the first thought that came to his mind. “He can lay a cuckoo’s egg!”

Deringhouse laughed briefly. “If there is such a thing as a galactic cuckoo...” But immediately he gave Bell a warning look and surreptitiously indicated Rhodan.

The latter was looking at the star chart but seemed not to see it at all.

Meanwhile the *Drusus* raced past Betelgeuse at a safe distance and then swung off to take up a course toward the large methane planet. The giant viewscreen system was filtered down to where it only admitted a 10th of the stellar monster’s yellow-red flood of light and still the illumination was much stronger than the normal lighting of the Control Central.

“A galactic cuckoo’s egg...” Rhodan repeated the words and looked at Bell finally. “My fat friend, you know you often have inspirations that are priceless.”

“Glord!” exclaimed Bell defensively. “I didn’t say anything actually!”

“But you did. You said a lot, Reg. Since hearing your remark a weight’s been taken off my mind.”

“That may be,” said Bell, who felt uncomfortable at the moment, “but what could a wisecrack like that have to do with the Akons?”

Rhodan smirked faintly and cast a quick glance at the general to see if he had perceived how much truth was contained in the casual remark. But Deringhouse had also failed to follow the trend of Rhodan’s thoughts.

“OK,” he said, “we won’t belabour the point. Perhaps when we’ve landed on #7 at the Akon site we can take a look at the cuckoo’s egg they’ve left behind.”

“Perry, you don’t seem to trust them very much.”

“Would our experience with the pre-Arkonides justify anything else? When we first met the Arkonides themselves we were heavily exposed to their high-nosed arrogance. So when we arrived in the Blue System we ran into the original root-race of the Arkonides—the Akons. They wouldn’t even take notice of our presence among them. Would you call that anything but arrogance and exaggerated pride?”

“Hm-m-m... In their technology the Akons have a 40,000-year lead on us. Considering that and your belief in a cuckoo’s egg, Perry, what are we really expecting to find on the methane world?”

“Danger! An insidious form of menace, gentlemen—probably double so inasmuch as we may not recognize it as such initially.”

A call from the energy tracking station interrupted him. “Sir,” said a lieutenant, “we’ve just picked up an energy emission—it’s weak but steady. Coming from

#7, from the location that Ori-12-1818 indicates as the landing site of the unknown spaceship.”

“Report immediately if there’s the slightest change, lieutenant,” Rhodan ordered.

The great spacesphere measuring almost 1 mile in diameter began to brake its speed. The soaring g-pressure was counteracted by the inertial absorbers and in a matter of a few minutes the *Drusus* dropped from a velocity close to speed of light down to 300 sec/km. Meanwhile a third of the converters went to full power, the inertials howled, the super-powerful impulse engines thundered in the equatorial ringbulge and transformers and power stations were rumbling and roaring at maximum. In spite of the size of the ship and the distance between the power and engine rooms from the Control Central, the avalanche of sound penetrated all acoustical barriers so that the men at the command controls had to raise their voices to be heard.

Also in the meantime the brilliance of Betelgeuse had subsided to where its light was bearable under more direct observation. Circling the stellar giant at a vast distance, planet 7 now appeared as a basketball-sized celestial orb at the upper edge of the panoramic screens. At first glance it seemed to be merely a cloud of gas but as the robot positronics cut in some adjusting circuits the nebulous atmosphere vanished to reveal the giant planet itself.

Apparently suspended in space, it was a jagged, frozen world devoid of life. Its rotational rate was 129 hours but in comparison to its great size this was extremely swift, resulting in powerful turbulence in the atmosphere.

The *Drusus*’ high-precision instruments detected hurricanes having velocities as high as 400 km/hour but at an altitude of 40,000 km the air masses raced along at 10 times this speed. Number 7 was a dead world and with a gravity pull of 5.3 Gs it definitely qualified as a heavy planet.

“It’s getting to be a bigger mystery than ever, what the Akons were up to here,” said Gen. Deringhouse.

He had just issued orders over the intercom that all crewmembers assigned to the landing detail were to put on their special spacesuits. Following the *Drusus*’ braking manoeuvre the ship was placed on battle alert. All gun turrets were manned and all firing position hatches had opened. The Fire Control Central was under high tension.

Two decks below, 180 crewmen wordlessly changed into their special protective suits. 10 minutes prior to landing the last ready signal from stations was received in the Control Central. The Solar Fleet’s super flagship appeared to be ready for anything—including even mysterious eggs that the Akons may have hidden here.

* * * *

The *Drusus* stood on the surface of the 7th planet. In spite of the roaring

hurricane it remained as motionless as though it were at its home spaceport in Terrania. But all outer hatches were still closed. Neither robot nor reconnaissance rocket had been released as yet. The order for action had been delayed.

And Perry Rhodan had no intention of issuing such an order. First he had to know the purpose of the thing out there just 4 km away. It was about the size of a house. Under maximum magnification it filled the main observation screen. It was clearly determined that the energy emissions were coming from the structure—still weak but with a steady intensity.

“Gentlemen!” Rhodan’s voice broke the silence in the Control Central. “What is that? I can’t figure it out. Can anybody tell me?”

He received no answer. He shot a question to Fire Control and confirmed that more than 50% of the *Drusus*’ guns were aimed at the unknown object.

This confirmation gave everyone a certain sense of security, inasmuch as only a third of the giant battleship’s fire power was capable of converting a small planet into a wasteland within minutes, without employing fusion bombs. But even the latter were ready for launching. Actually nothing could happen to the huge ship—and yet a feeling gradually grew that they were facing a danger against which their defences would prove inadequate.

“What is it?” asked Rhodan again. There was a grave expression in his grey eyes. “The Akons had a reason for letting us find this *thing* so soon. What in the world can it be, Reg?”

The latter replied with a despondent shrug of his shoulders.

“Sir!” The lieutenant at the energy tracker fairly shouted. “We have a new emission reading! Never seen anything like it—like a warp shock and yet—something else again. Wait...! Now it’s gone again!”

Was this the signal for Rhodan to take action? “Positronics! Analysis, please—and hurry it up!”

Bell and Deringhouse secretly exchanged glances. No one knew this tone in Rhodan’s voice better than they did.

A strip of plastic foil popped into the computer’s receiver tray. The man who picked it up took one look at it and stiffened in amazement. His voice was hoarse when he announced: “Nothing! The positronic brain is unable to analyse the input from the energy sensor!”

Rhodan’s voice was ominously calm. “I expected as much. Well, Reg, any further doubts as to whether that Akon ship was manned or not?”

“No, I’m sorry to say. But that doesn’t help us to know what that *thing* out there is supposed to be.”

Rhodan answered with sarcasm: “Well, since the Akons didn’t leave us any operating instructions for it, we’ll take a minimum risk. However, I don’t want to use the troops. Deringhouse, are the combat robots ready?”

“Four groups of 60 each, Chief!”

“And what’s the situation with the robo-technics, General?”

“I’ve given orders to have 5 of them programmed.”

“Then send them along with the others. We’ll remain here and watch the action on the screens. Reg, any other ideas?”

“How about our mutant televisor, Perry? Is Harno on board?”

“No, and I’ve already regretted his absence. He probably could have given us better information.”

At this moment they heard a loud voice behind them. “What the devil are you doing here?” someone asked roughly. “Who are you, boy?”

Perry guessed who had entered the Control Central. He turned to see that Walt Ballin had just been stopped by Poul Naya. “Naya, let the gentleman pass. By the way, he’s a journalist from the *Europa News* in Paris. In his latest feature article he claims that Solar Administration is following a destructive policy because it’s neglecting to keep Terrans sufficiently informed concerning galactic policies.”

Thus Rhodan tossed a ‘hot potato’ into the hands of the *Drusus*’ staff in Control Central. These were men who would unheedingly face fire for their Chief and they were enemies of anybody who tried to reproach him.

“Is that so!” blurted out Poul Naya with a gleam in his eye. “Sir, don’t you think this gossip writer is the perfect candidate for our action outside? Since he’s a professional snooper, why not let him take a close look at that *thing* out there? He might learn a few things in a hurry about what’s going on in the galaxy!”

In spite of the undecided situation facing the *Drusus*, Rhodan’s men took the opportunity to vent their displeasure. They had always been anything but kindly disposed to journalists. However, if they had expected to find an enemy in Walt Ballin they were deceived. He had no intention of confessing the sins of his colleagues only to become a martyr.

On an impulse he reached out his hand to Poul Naya. “That’s a deal on one condition,” he said. “I’ll let you send me into the action *after* you’ve managed to write an intelligent feature article for the *Europa News*!”

“But I’m no newspaper writer!” retorted Naya incautiously.

Ballin nodded pleasantly. “And I’m a member of the Solar Fleet, mister. I’m here on board the *Drusus* as a guest of your First Administrator.”

Rhodan smirked at the journalist’s quick repartee which had made any further aggression impossible. He called to him. “What Lt. Naya says about first-hand observation has its justifications, Mr. Ballin. Come take a seat here and join us as we watch the developments on the viewscreen. Have you been informed concerning our mission?”

“Thank you, sir, I have. Your Lt. Puck has briefed me.”

Despite himself, Bell sharpened his ears. Now he didn’t want to miss a single word because he detected the possibility of shenanigans in this so-called briefing by the mousebeaver.

There was also a twinkle in Rhodan’s grey eyes when he asked, “And what did Lt. Puck tell you, Mr. Ballin?”

“He said that this mission would involve an encounter with the Akons from the Blue System. Their technical advancement is supposed to be so superior that it would be a mere trifle for them to wipe out the Arkonide and Solar Imperiums together. Sir—the way you’re looking at me—is there something wrong about my information?”

“Quite! But my astonishment isn’t directed at you as much as at Pucky, who should know—”

Instantly the mousebeaver was between them and he squeaked at them while making a pitiable attempt to stand at attention. “I’m here, Perry! But you should know that among your officers there are no liars or tellers of fairy tales!” Whereupon Pucky disappeared.

The general burst of laughter in the Control Central was suddenly silenced when the viewscreen revealed the advance of 245 combat robots toward the *thing*, which was 4 km away. Nothing could deter the heavy march of the giant fighter machines, neither the gravity of the massive methane planet nor its hurricanes.

“How about that!” muttered Bell aloud to himself. “A major robot assault against the Trojan Horse!”

Nobody noticed Rhodan’s slight start at these words. Reginald Bell’s mixed proverb concerning a *Trojan Horse* had suddenly broken his mental impasse. He knew at last what the *thing* represented.

It was an Akon interstellar transmitter!

* * * *

But the transmitter on Betelgeuse #7 was of special construction. It was not only a means of transport from star to star but also a picture transmitter. On Sphynx at this moment, three Akons were sitting before a gently curved viewscreen where they casually observed the tremendous 1,500-meter spacesphere and the troop of marching robots. The latter had advanced to within 2 km of the transmitter station.

The youngest of the Akons laughed amusedly. “It seems that destiny is on our side. *Mal-Se* won’t even have to exert himself.”

But he was contradicted by the elder Akon to his left. “Destiny is not involved here but rather the leadership of the Energy Command and the calculations of Vu Pooh. The place was so selected that the ship of the alien white-skins would have to land where you see it now. After all, what is destiny but the vagary of chance? Numbers, however, leave no room for chance. In fact it is numbers that can even shackle chance itself and hold it prisoner. You shouldn’t ever forget that, Hut-Up!”

“I shall try to remember, O Wise One,” replied Hut-Up.

The three Akons in the Blue System were unimpressed to the point of boredom as they watched the advance of the Terranian robots toward the transmitter

Station. When the leading phalanx of fighter machines had come to within several hundred meters of their goal, the Akon whom Hut-Up had called the Wise One turned to the colleague on his right.

“*Mal-Se* may go!”

The latter relayed this instruction to someone farther on.

The answer came back: “*Mal-Se* will depart in the 25th part of a time period.”

The Wise One nodded and cut off the viewscreen. “Once more the Ruling Council will be satisfied with the services of the Energy Command. Has Vu Pooh reported yet?”

“Yes, Wise One,” Hut-Up informed him. “The *Retse-U* will arrive in the first 5th of the 4th period.”

“Very well. Vu Pooh is to report directly to me. I must speak with him, Hut-Up.”

* * * *

“You’re right!” exclaimed Bell. “It’s actually an Akon transmitter!”

There was no longer any doubt. Within seconds a 100-meter arc of energy had spread out over the thing. Impervious to the 7th planet’s natural forces it began to glow red around its inner edge. The entire formation appeared to concentrate its energies into compact lines of force as a darkly shimmering tunnel took shape.

The only one who spoke in the *Drusus*’ Control Central was Gen. Deringhouse as he ordered the robots to stop where they were and await further orders. It was not necessary for him to say more. Their programming took care of the rest. The Terranian fighter machines stopped their march within 200 meters of the Akon transmitter and its red-glowing energy field.

Now Rhodan pulled the microphone to him. “Whatever comes out of the transmitter is to be captured. Under no circumstances is there to be any destruction or killing!”

He returned the microphone to the general. And then the waiting period began.

The vast wall of the *Drusus* facing the Akon structure loomed in fire readiness. Unswervingly its heaviest thermo-disintegrators and impulse cannons held their sights fixed on the technological product of an alien race, ready to convert it into a fiery tornado of destructive forces.

Through this direct observation of the mission, Walt Ballin learned more about the capacities of the Solar Fleet than he would ever have dreamed of. He kept watching Rhodan and his admiration for this man’s cool, considered calculation grew with each passing moment. Perry Rhodan was neither a dictator nor a dogmatic martinet.

At the moment he was saying: “The Akons certainly didn’t go to this trouble just to play games with us. Perhaps we have already waited much too long.”

“But nothing’s happened yet,” Bell reminded him.

Rhodan didn't argue with him. "Deringhouse, bring the robots back into the ship—on the double. This thing is getting a bit too weird for me. Gentlemen, what are the instruments picking up?"

The question was directed to the officers in the Control Central. Deringhouse sent out his radio command to the robots, causing them to turn back. Bell did not agree with the procedures but he shrugged and let things take their course.

For the first time in his life, Walt Ballin felt what it was like to have cold feet. An uncanny fear possessed him, yet it was not a fear of the strange, red-glowing structure out there, it was a deeper fear of something indefinable.

"Pole turrets! Fire at will!" Rhodan's voice fairly rang in the room as he spoke into the intercom mike.

Almost simultaneously, yard-thick disintegrator and impulse beams shattered the Akon transmitter. Everything went up in an atomic gas cloud that was instantly shredded and dispersed by the methane hurricane. In the place where the station had stood was a glowing spot where the frozen rock surface turned to lava and vaporized.

The bombardment from the *Drusus*' upper turrets lasted 3 seconds. When the energy cannons were silenced, 4 km away was a gaping crater in which the molten rock was slowly cooling off under a forming crust of gleaming obsidian.

"I'd have waited a little longer, Perry!"

"For what, Bell?"

His stocky, freckle-faced companion did not show any reaction to his obvious excitement but he said, "Well, if that's the way you had it figured..."

Me, too, thought Walt Ballin, but he couldn't understand why he was still gripped by nameless fear.

Shortly thereafter, Deringhouse reported to Rhodan. "Sir, the robots have come back through the locks. I have instructed the robo-techs to report here to the Control Central."

"Bell, take charge of positronics. I want to get a readout as soon as possible on the robot observations, although I don't expect very much."

"OK!" Bell went to the console of the positronic brain and switched on the interrogation circuits.

It required 10 minutes for the technical robots to appear in the Control Central for their observation report, so meanwhile Rhodan utilized the time by conversing with Walt Ballin. The first thing that struck him was the journalist's almost sickly appearance. Walt Ballin was fearful of something; it was exactly the same fear that had assailed himself! But he masterfully concealed his amazement and alarm. He concentrated on Ballin's own field of endeavour and managed to involve the journalist in an interesting discussion.

"You mean I can write everything, sir? When we get back to Earth, don't I have to show my report to get a release from you or some control commission?"

Rhodan's features remained stern but there was laughter in his eyes. "Ballin, we

don't have a dictatorship and... what's more important, Mr. Journalist: the Administration has nothing to hide, other than normal security items—but those are withheld from everybody. The thing I'm anxious to see is *what* you'll make public in the newspapers and what not."

"Everything, sir! I won't strike out a line of it," asserted Ballin with conviction.

"That's the way I thought once myself, Ballin. It was a long time ago. Yes, in those days I was as young as you are now. And then came the responsibilities and the doubts. I had to ask myself what I could reveal and what I could not."

"Sir, even journalists carry their responsibilities!" Ballin felt called upon to defend his profession.

"I invited you to come to Terrania because I took you to be a person of conscience and responsibility... Ah, the robots, Ballin! We'll have to interrupt our conversation again."

5 robots stomped ponderously into the Control Central. It was always an imposing sight to see these metal Titans in motion. Walt Ballin heard them report, one after another, soon realizing that he could not follow the gist of it because he simply didn't have the technical background. But he fell to marvelling at these masterpieces and their scientific creators.

But Bell wasn't marvelling at all. He stood idly in front of the positronic board and from second to second his face took on a grimmer expression. He couldn't make anything out of the scientific robots' assertions. Their direct measurements in front of the Akon transmitter were full of contradictions and obviously false.

Deringhouse shut off their special program circuits and sent them back to the storage depot. Rhodan was just getting ready to give the order for takeoff when a call came in from robot depot 4. Ortlow, the Depot Chief, reported that all returning robots had come back covered with some kind of smudge.

"Ortlow, you know we have cleaning equipment on board for that," Rhodan answered him angrily. He was vexed at being held up by such a triviality.

"But sir, the stuff simply won't come off! It clings to the robots as though it were burned onto them."

"So what, Ortlow? You take care of it—that is all!"

He turned to Deringhouse. "General, take over the ship. You may take off..."

The speakers blared with a hypercom interruption. The Com Room announced an urgent message for Rhodan from medi-cruiser 3. The hypercom viewscreen in the Control Central stabilized its picture and the Chief Physician of #3 became visible.

"Sir," he began, "we've identified the epidemic on board Springer ship UG DVI as enteric paralysis and all of the prize crew that came over have also become infected with it. But that's not the main reason for my call. What I wanted to tell you is that this plague among the Galactic Traders on the UG DVI has been planted there by artificial means—that is, deliberately. There is every indication here that the enteric paralysis culture was produced on Earth."

Rhodan was sharply reproachful. “Prof. Degen, consider what you’re saying!”

The medico made a defensive gesture with his left arm but added: “Sir, naturally I’m no criminal police expert and I could be mistaken, but how could a broken ampoule with traces of this culture get on board a Springer ship when it could only have been in contact with Terrans during the past 4 weeks?”

“Professor, my day also has only 24 hours in it and not a minute more. Now you cut off this call and get in touch with Allan D. Mercant, the Chief of Solar Intelligence! You convey to him—”

“Sir, just a few minutes ago he directed me to you and I’m to ask you in his name to fly to our present position so that this ampoule can get to Earth by the fastest means. Of course there’ll be no danger in transporting it. The plague culture is so well isolated that nothing in our strict quarantine regulations can be violated.”

Rhodan nodded at the hypercom screen. “Very well, Professor. We’ll be alongside in about an hour.”

Shortly thereafter the *Drusus* rose up from the giant methane planet. At the time, Reginald Bell was in Rhodan’s cabin. His stocky figure moved from one chair to the other but he couldn’t feel comfortable anywhere. But Rhodan made a special effort to feign an outward self-composure.

“If Allan D. Mercant is using us as a courier, Reg, I’d say he attaches great importance to this plague situation. OK, so we’ll do him the favour. For the present we won’t be missing anything by making a slight detour. Although I may sound pretty hard it doesn’t change the fact that the ‘stone-belly’ business doesn’t interest me just now. I haven’t any time to get into the matter because this mysterious lightning visit of the Akons has got me so buffaloed that I can’t think of anything else. More and more I’m getting to feel that we’ve all overlooked an important small detail somewhere.”

“And naturally nobody’s come up with any afterthoughts on that score... What’s that now? Perry—the relay station. It’s for you!”

Lt. Harold Fitzgerald had something to report from Ori-12-1818. “Sir, we’ve run across an observation error here. The Akon’s transmitter-receiver station sent out two shockwaves instead of one. The first one must have shown up on the *Drusus* instruments as well but then—exactly 30 minutes and 8 seconds after the first spacewarp the second one happened. But it was of a strange extra-dimensional variety and so weakly heterodyned that we’ve only just now stumbled onto it by accident. Sir, we’ve replayed the whole thing over again and...”

“Alright, Lieutenant,” Rhodan interrupted gently. He could see that Fitzgerald was a bit uneasy. “I’ll channel you in to the Control Central where you can transmit us that replay. Then I’ll take a look at it, myself. Many thanks!”

A moment later, he and Bell hurried to the Control Central. The transmission from the relay station had already come through. The officers made room for them and it was not long before Rhodan made his first comment. “It’s easy to see how

they could have overlooked it.” He switched to a detailed magnification while back-reeling the tape, after which he played it forward from a specific timing marker.

Rhodan and Bell had both seen curves like this when they were in the Blue System and they assumed they had to be transmitter shockwaves but in this case there were certain modulations of the waveforms that were unfamiliar to them.

“We’re not much smarter now than we were before,” said Bell impulsively but he became silent when he felt Rhodan’s hand on his arm.

“Wrong, Reg. At least now we know that the Akons sent something back to #7 and they went out of their way to keep us from knowing it. Deringhouse, activate the Fleet units stationed on Betelgeuse 3. Planet 7 is to be watched very sharply. We can’t give the Akons any chance to set up a base there. You will advise the Fleet Commander that he is to prevent this with every means at his command. When do we go into transition?”

The hyperjump came 3minutes later.

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5/ DEATH STALKS THE WORLD

Once more the *Drusus* had taken its accustomed berth at the Terrania spaceport. Two medicos picked up the broken ampoule of plague virus that had been discovered on the UG DVI. They handled the tiny, thinly sealed package as though it was an explosive that could go off at the slightest impact.

In Rhodan's aircar were Bell, Gen. Deringhouse and the journalist Walt Ballin. As the craft raced toward the skyscraper office building and curved in for a landing, Rhodan broke the silence.

"Never until today did I ever come back from a mission with such an uneasy feeling. I don't know..."

The aircar made a gentle landing. They left it and the antigravitor carried them from the roof landing to the next lower floor where Rhodan's offices were located. When he passed through the anteroom with his entourage all key spots in Terrania were automatically advised that the Chief was back.

The intercom viewscreen was already on. The face of Allan D. Mercant was visible. While Rhodan took his seat he was already speaking into the microphone. "Mercant, you'll have to let me off the hook on this plague situation. Whatever's at the bottom of it I'm not interested in it at the moment. Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

Mercant shook his head negatively. "Sir, the *Drusus* has just alerted Solar Intelligence. There is suspicion of sabotage in the robot depots. Depot Chief Ortlow has asked for a major investigation. All robots including the regular working robots on board are showing surface damage. I had a look at a couple of them a few moments ago and I can tell you it's pretty alarming."

"Alright, Mercant. Report to me if the suspicion of sabotage is confirmed. Anything else?"

The Solar Intelligence Chief knew Rhodan too well not to see that at present he didn't want to be burdened with relatively minor matters. He hastened to say there was nothing else and he cut off his connection.

Rhodan turned to the journalist. "Well, Ballin, what will we be reading tomorrow in the *Europa News* concerning the *Drusus*' latest mission? Do you already know what you're going to write about?"

"For the present you won't be reading anything, sir," replied Ballin. "I certainly can't just build a report on guesswork!"

Bell and Deringhouse stared at him in astonishment. They had not expected such an answer.

Rhodan sought to draw him out. "But Ballin, we've just given you an exclusive about the Akons. The Administration will be glad to place any further details at your disposal."

"Sir, I'm no scandal sheet hack, you know." As he spoke he scratched the back of his hand. "You've said, yourself, that you know very little about the Akons and I think this whole matter should be resolved or clarified at least in order to be published. But why are you laughing, sir?"

Bell and Deringhouse had also broken out laughing. In fact Bell was fairly shaking in pleased amusement.

"Now you're wearing *our* shoes, Ballin. And they fit you very well! We often thought like you did and then something new would come up and something still newer, even before the first business was safe to talk about... and then the day comes... when the Parliament claims we've failed in our duty to inform them... Hey, dog gone it all, what's making my hand itch like that? What's going on?"

"Mine, too..."

"Same here." This third admission came from Rhodan.

The four men looked at the backs of their hands. Each of them had a few flat spots on their skin the size of pinpoints.

"It itches like the devil!" Bell had never been the most patient of men and he could become very annoyed by molestation of any kind. "I'll call the medico on duty and have him give me something for it. Let me use your intercom, Perry?"

"For a trifle like that, Reg? But go ahead, as far as I'm concerned."

Rhodan drew to one side and Bell called for the doctor, who happened to be on the same floor of the building.

"I'll be right in, Mr. Bell!"

Moments later the doctor stood among them, examining the backs of four pairs of hands. He shook his head perplexed, then turned to Rhodan. "I should be able to diagnose something like this on sight but I don't know what we have here. I'm afraid this is a job for the clinic's dermatology lab. Sir, you have the same pinpointy red spots on your face!"

The telecom buzzed. It was the *Drusus*. One of the staff officers was on the screen. "Sir, something very weird is happening here! All of a sudden the entire crew has picked up an awful skin itch. I've already alerted the main clinic of Terrania!"

Before Rhodan could say anything the doctor was speaking. "Hold your hand up to your view camera!" he ordered the man on the *Drusus*. The latter obeyed and the doctor confirmed their fears. "The same visible symptoms! Glord, I'm beginning to itch, myself!"

"Doctor," said Bell, "you don't think we've come down with the 'stone-belly' sickness, do you?"

Ballin and Deringhouse stiffened in new alarm.

“No, gentlemen, such a suspicion is absurd. These are not the symptoms of enteric paralysis.”

“Sir, can I cut off now?” asked the officer from the *Drusus*’ Control Central.

Rhodan nodded his permission. The picture on the screen fluttered as though to disappear and then it was replaced by another. It was a call from the main clinic in Terrania.

“You—?!” Rhodan’s question carried a new note of alarm.

“Unfortunately, sir. I have just placed the *Drusus* under quarantine and I have to request that you and everybody who’s come in contact with you since your landing not to leave their rooms.” This was stated by Dr. Haenning who was simultaneously the Quarantine Chief and Health Inspector for the Solar Imperium.

Rhodan had no intention of contradicting him but like any man who is stricken by something unknown to him, he asked for further particulars.

“Sir, I can’t tell you anything yet,” replied Dr. Haenning regretfully. “In all probability this ailment is harmless but under the quarantine regulations I am forced to...”

A top priority call came in from the hypercom station.

“One moment, please, doctor,” Rhodan interrupted. “Stay on the channel.”

As the hypercom screen stabilized its picture it revealed the worried features of the Chief Medical Officer on medi-ship 3. “Sir, I’ve just heard the news that the *Drusus* has been quarantined. Either we infected the *Drusus* when we handed over the plague virus sample or the *Drusus* has passed it on to my ship, the *Nile* and the long-ship UG-DVI. All of a sudden crews on all 3 ships are showing the same symptoms!”

“How’s that for a chain reaction?” Bell looked fretfully at Deringhouse.

“It’s impossible that we could have been the carriers of the infection!” protested Deringhouse as he looked sullenly at his hands. “Dammit!” he exclaimed, which was unusual since he seldom used harsh language. “The spots keep getting bigger! Now my left shoulder is itching already!”

“I’m itching clear to the soles of my feet,” grumbled Bell and he turned to the journalist. “So where’s it hitting you, buddy?”

“You just said it, Mr. Bell. Everywhere! I’ve never experienced anything like this before in my life.”

Meanwhile Dr. Haenning issued orders which placed medi-ship 3, the *Nile* and Springer ship UG DVI under quarantine. To this he added a proviso that startled all four men in Rhodan’s office. The Quarantine Chief restricted the three spaceships from flying to any planet.

“I think you’d better explain that order, Doctor,” said Rhodan a bit sharply. “I insist that you tell me everything, without considering my own infection.”

Dr. Haenning’s features hardened. “Sir, the present case is unprecedented in the history of the Solar Imperium. Three of my colleagues were working on this

infection while observing the most stringent safety regulations but they contracted it also. And now I, too, am beginning to itch!”

“Doctor—I suddenly have a suspicion of what this uncanny epidemic is all about,” said Rhodan. “Can you conceive of robots also becoming infected with it?”

The physician stared at the Administrator as though completely stupefied. “Robots?” he repeated. “Robots pick up an infection, when they’re made of metal? No, sir, that I can’t conceive of! There’s no such thing in medical experience. But how did you get that idea?”

“Only a suspicion, doctor. I’ll go into it later. Issue a quarantine order immediately for Terra! No ship may leave, no ship may land! Any ships that took off after the *Drusus* landed must return at once to Earth. But if any ships in that category have landed anywhere else by now, strap the whole planet down the same as Earth!”

“Sir!” exclaimed Dr. Haenning. “What in the world is it you fear?”

Perry Rhodan’s sudden calm now had an almost hypnotic effect. “I’ll tell you that when I have the first results of the investigation.”

He cut off both the hypercom and telecom connections, after which he inspected his hands with new interest. The pinpoint spots had changed to freckle-sized markings. Their swift propagation was frightening. For the moment the sharpness of the itching began to subside somewhat as the spots widened out.

“We’ve brought the death kiss of the Akons back to Earth! Yes, we, gentlemen. An insidious present—like a cobra by special delivery. They weren’t just playing around when they set up that transmitter station on #7!”

“But what did they hand us through that damned thing?” raged Bell. “We didn’t see a thing and even our robotechs didn’t detect anything!”

“Which is not any proof, however, that something didn’t come through the transmitter. Bell, don’t forget the second shockwave with those camouflaged modulations. Doesn’t it all make sense to you now? The Akons figured we could detect and analyse spacewarps of this nature—up to a point. They were also relying on us to operate in an irresponsible manner, which we did! And now...”

The telecom buzzed again. It was the Solar Health Authority asking for Rhodan. The gist of the message was that within one and a half hours after the landing of the *Drusus* five major areas of contamination by the unknown infection had been identified.

In the middle of this conversation, Rhodan suddenly tensed. “Bell, we’ve forgotten the transmitter station on the Moon! See to it at once...”

“Sir,” interrupted the Health Authority official, “that precaution is too late. We are just now receiving a report from the Moon that’s talking about a mysterious breakout of an infection which is causing violent itching of the skin.”

It was then that Deringhouse groaned aloud.

* * * *

Even the worst announcements of disaster tend to have a diminishing effect over the course of time if every message is simply more of the same. Twelve hours after the landing of the *Drusus* it became known that 21 million humans had been afflicted by the puzzling infection, on the Moon as well as on Earth. Places which were completely isolated from the environment and which evidently had no contact with any possible disease carrier had nevertheless reported breakouts of the infection.

This and many other instances made the situation all the more mysterious. Examination of the *Drusus* robots turned out to be as negative as with hundreds of other sick men. With the most modern means at its disposal, Medical Science kept running into a blank wall while the symptoms of the illness continued to change.

Why Dr. Koatu turned his hypno-gun on several songbirds he could not say and that the birds were also afflicted by the sickness was not a surprise to him. Since the city of Terrania had become completely infected by now, all restrictions on traffic and communication had been lifted so that Dr. Koatu was able to get to the *Drusus* without any difficulty. He was interested in the outer hull of the ship. His activities were reported to the Control Central, which passed the information on to the Chief.

“Connect me with Dr. Koatu!” Rhodan ordered.

But Poul Naya announced in a subdued tone: “Sir, he’s left orders not to be disturbed by anyone.”

In spite of the crisis situation, Rhodan managed to laugh. “I see. Well, my friend, it seems we’ve been given our notice. In the Solar Imperium the doctors are in charge now. Ask them to find the source of the infection soon, Naya!”

Encased in a spacesuit, Dr. Koatu moved across the hull of the *Drusus* at a height of some 300 meters. He was concentrating on the strange, smudge-like coating that had attacked the polished surface. So far he had not succeeded in even budging the smudge coating with his clinical scraper.

As he was about to float higher on his antigrav he noticed a place to his left that had a different appearance. It looked like a layer of scrambled gelatin. Having been long since infected, Koatu struggled to fight back the lethargy of his illness and finally he moved toward the strange substance with the irresistible zeal of the research scientist that he was. He immediately applied his scraper, only to draw back immediately in sudden fright.

Behind the transparency of his wideview helmet his features took on an expression of fear and horror. His eyes were unnaturally large and his lips trembled. As soon as he approached it with the scraper the mysterious layer of substance began to detach itself from the curving surface of the *Drusus* and started to alter its colloidal appearance. The material became clear as glass and seemed to be fluid, yet it was not affected by the vigorous winds at this altitude.

Koatu could not believe his eyes. This transformation of the 1-meter square

area was a weird and unnatural process. What was much worse, the fluid glassy material seemed to be trying to deposit itself on Koatu's spacesuit! The research scientist had the impression that the layer of gelatinous smudge had sensed his presence.

When he switched his gaze from his spacesuit back to the steel surface of the hull, Koatu heard himself cry out. The smudge area was gone! Instead it had transferred to the outside of his suit, then it had reverted to its former appearance of scrambled gelatin—clinging to him in an uneven layer.

"It looks like plasma!" he heard himself groan aloud. He could feel his body trembling in horror, already weakened by the progress of his illness. A terrible suspicion began to rise within him.

Plasma: naked, slimy, formless yet endlessly forming; a viscous colloidal mixture of complicated endosperms and inorganic materials. Subliminally Koatu recapitulated all the medical experience that had become a part of his nature during a good decade of practice but the plasma clinging to his suit was different from all plasmoidal substances that he had ever observed.

A voice in his earphones suddenly jolted him out of his paroxysm of fear. "Hello, Doctor! Did you find something? You're breathing strangely!" It was Gentkirk, a colleague calling him from the clinic.

"Come and get me! The *thing* is on my spacesuit! But come in a sealed spacesuit and bring a piece of bread with you!"

"Bread?" came the astonished query. "What *thing* are you talking about, Koatu? Is that sickness getting the better of you?"

"Come and get me—on the double, Gentkirk!" urged Koatu. "The monster is spread out all over the ship. But don't forget the bread!"

"He's flipped!" Koatu heard his colleague remark to someone else in the clinic as the connection cut off.

But a few minutes later the fastest aircar available raced toward the *Drusus* from the research department of the clinic. The two medicos in their spacesuits had brought along some bread. Koatu saw the grav-glider approaching as he still hovered there at 300 meters next to the curving hull of the *Drusus*. He hastily switched on his helmet transceiver.

"Don't land. Come straight to me up here and let me on board. Otherwise this monster will have us all! Too many men running around down there!"

"Sure, Koatu, we're coming!" Gentkirk assured him from the glider, while he looked significantly at his companion. Unlike the Chief Physician, they both figured that Koatu had lost his mind. Perhaps the sickness had already made greater progress with him than among the others.

Koatu came on board. "Where's the bread?" He was still speaking through the helmet radio.

Gentkirk pointed to his left where the bread was lying. "Do you see this stuff on my spacesuit? Take a good look at it! Soon the beast will... there, it's stirring already. It's sensed the presence of the bread! Look at that transparent plastic

pseudopod reaching for the bread!” Koatu’s voice cracked under the strain of excitement. He stood motionlessly on the spot and watched while the gelatinous smudge disappeared from his suit within 10 seconds.

But now Gentkirk and his colleague no longer thought that Koatu was insane. “And now?” asked Gentkirk, flabbergasted.

“So!” said Koatu as he pounced upon the bread that seemed to have absorbed the plasma. With his scalpel he shoved the bread into a special container that automatically closed and sealed itself. “Now it can’t get away anymore!”

The doctor could not know that the creature was not without a name, for in the Blue System it was called *Mal-Se*...

* * * *

Mal-Se was a protein creature or endospermic monster which was characterized by an insatiable voracity. It could actually detect and locate all protein-containing or albuminous compounds. When this occurred, an instinctive reaction in its billionfold colloidal essence caused the amorphous gelatinous thing to lift up and become transparent to the point of invisibility. Once arrived at this state it utilized its tracing sensors and moved with an uncanny swiftness to fall upon alien albuminous and other organic compounds.

“Sir,” said Dr. Koatu, reporting to Perry Rhodan, “it is insensitive to vacuum, cold, gases and acids. It also withstands tremendous temperatures and cannot be destroyed with less than 24,000° Fahrenheit. In the short time we’ve had for our research on it, sir, we haven’t been able to confirm this but it seems to be capable of travelling over its own hypothetical tracer impulses—a combination tracking and transport beam, if you will—at speeds up to 700 km per hour! Even at a distance of around 20 km this plasma can detect protein compounds.

“And, sir, it’s a clear fact that this thing is the cause of the infection that’s spreading over the Earth and the Moon. But there is not the slightest prospect of being able to contain it because the plasma increases itself at a rate of billions of times per second. We have calculated that it will take only 16 months till the Earth will be covered with a 1-meter-thick layer of plasma and no other life will exist!”

Rhodan, who had been marked by the infection like everyone else, could see by the disfiguring, clotted growths on Koatu’s face that he was no better off than himself. The insidious, fungus-like blood-marks were spread all over their hands, arms and the body in general, providing nesting places for the plasma. Every second it ate its way deeper into the epidermis, thereby multiplying itself many times. This monstrous plague had only been rampant on Earth for 24 hours and yet a 5th of the planet’s inhabitants had been stricken by the illness.

The Akons had indeed sent a deadly gift to Terra!

“They’re trying to exterminate us like so many bugs!” exclaimed Bell at the end of the doctor’s report. “Perry, they’ll get away with it, too, unless there’s a miracle!”

“The miracle can only come from Arkon, Reg. Now that we have the preliminary facts before us, I can call Atlan. He will have to question the robot Brain. But if there’s no help for our own case here, then I’d say it will all be over within 3 months because our life expectancy with this infection can’t be extended any farther than that. I’m calling Atlan now.”

Using a special frequency channel that was reserved exclusively for instant contact between Rhodan and Atlan, Terrania’s huge hypercom transmitter made contact with the Crystal Palace.

“Hello, Barbarian!” was Atlan’s initial greeting but then he saw for the first time the disfiguring effects of the puffy blood spots on his friend’s face. “Perry, what’s happened!”

“All Terrans now need your help, Arkonide,” replied Rhodan. “We have been attacked by an insatiable plasma life form. My face is an example of what the infected ones look like after 24 hours.”

“How many have been afflicted?”

“A 5th of the Earth’s population, my friend. And on the Moon it’s the same situation. The only protection against infection is for a man to be wearing a sealed spacesuit.”

On the viewscreen it was apparent that Atlan’s reddish Arkonide eyes began to flash with alarm. “What do you know of this plague? Do you know where it came from?”

“It’s a form of plasma that pounces on any kind of albumin compound or protein like a starving carnivore and it’s capable of sensing food sources and is able to move toward them at speeds up to 700 km per hour. I must have brought this horrible thing with me from the Orion Sector on board the *Drusus*. Thanks to a lucky circumstance and the knowledge of one of our doctors, we have been aware, as of an hour ago, of what we’re dealing with. But beyond that we know nothing more. Now do you understand why I’ve called you, Arkonide?”

Rhodan still refrained from telling the Arkon Emperor anything concerning the donators of this death gift or how the plasma creature had gotten from the Blue System into the *Drusus*.

“Perry, you are almost unrecognizable and you say that these symptoms develop within just 24 hours?”

“Yes. It starts with little pinpoint red markings on the skin. They itch very badly during the first few hours but then the spots begin to spread out. But instead of giving you these non-professional explanations I’d better transmit to you the results of our preliminary findings over the pulse-burst scrambler.”

“Send it directly to the positronic robot on Arkon 3, Perry. I’ll instruct it to ascertain whether or not any similar case is known to us. But what were you saying? Something about a death gift?”

Rhodan did not reveal his surprise. He knew very well that he had only thought in such terms but that he had not expressed the matter verbally. But before the question made him become suspicious he remembered his facial disfiguration.

Perhaps this was what had caused Atlan to make the remark.

“Atlan, whoever is attacked by this plasma has 3 months to live at the most.”

In the course of the past 10,000 years the Arkonide had outlived all humans during his long sojourn on Earth and so he had followed their varied destinies from their beginnings until now. In the present moment he revealed the depths of his consternation. “Three months, Perry? Friend, depend on me—whatever I can do shall be done. By the gods, where did this devilish plasma pestilence come from?”

“From the 7th planet of the Betelgeuse System, Atlan, a world of methane gas.” Rhodan spoke very carefully, seeking to avoid an actual falsehood, yet manipulating his story so that Atlan would be satisfied with the minimum of information.

“And what’s with your mutants, Perry?”

Rhodan made a helpless gesture. “They look as bad as I do, Arkonide.”

* * * *

In the meantime the Earth had suffered four waves of panic. Everybody remembered when the Black Plague had raged throughout Europe during the Dark Ages, causing fear-driven people to move begging through the land in large groups, which had only served to spread the epidemic more swiftly. All news and TV media urged Terrans to remain calm and to continue their work as far as their ailment permitted.

It was soon evident that the populace could be handled much more easily by straightforward explanations than it could by recourse to vague promises. During the first 24-hour period the southern hemisphere seemed to have been spared but then even that area began to report that the infection was making a sweeping inroad upon them.

Nor was Allan D. Mercant spared from the sickness but like Perry Rhodan, he continued to carry on with the responsibilities of his office. Before Mercant lay an astonishing report. The plasma entity had attacked the virus of the enteric paralysis sickness. Apparently absorbing the culture like a delicacy it had then proceeded to distribute its bio-genes in its place and so to multiply itself. The plasma monster’s relationship to the other plague was reminiscent of the proverb that the Devil could only be driven away with Beelzebub. In other words, the cure was worse than the ailment.

Mercant contacted the hypercom station. He spoke to the Chief Physician on medi-ship 3. The latter vessel along with the *Nile* and the long-hulled UG DVI were still located in the same position in the depths of space. The viewscreen revealed Prof. Degen, who looked no better than Mercant. His face was also disfigured by the plasma infection.

“Just one inquiry, Professor,” began Mercant. “What’s the status of the enteric paralysis on board the Springer ship?”

“Mercant, how can you ask that, of all questions?” asked Prof. Degen. On board the clinic ship he must have leaned far forward as he spoke because on Mercant’s screen his face overfilled the frame.

“I’ve had the report on the enteric paralysis presented to me from the epidemic section of Terrania, Professor. In it the disappearance of the paralysis virus has been noted with obvious irony. The plasma seems to have absorbed the poisonous stuff only to use it for self-expansion. I’m not that well-trained in medical science, so can you understand why I’m asking this question?”

“Yes.” Then came a pause after which Prof. Degen shook his head in resignation. He stared at his disfigured hands and then continued. “On board the UG DVI the enteric paralysis has subsided abruptly. It was an inexplicable mystery to me and my colleagues—until now. The plasma infection converted the paralysis virus by giving it its own colloidal structure. Mercant, it may be due to the debilitating effects of my illness but at the moment I can’t see my way clear in the present situation. By some malicious chance we finally found a cure for the enteric paralysis but the price tag is that within 3 months the infected victims will be converted into formless protein by this plasma.”

Mercant suddenly tensed and his marked face drew taut. “What did you say would become of the plasma victims, Professor? Formless protein, like so much albumin? Did I understand you correctly?”

“Not only that, Mercant—each of us in turn will become a plasma monster! All of us will become what our attacking agent already is!”

“Professor, when we’ve been transformed, are you saying that we’ll turn on healthy humans and devour them?”

“You could express it that way, yes.”

Mercant shut off the connection. By means of the biological cell-shower treatment on the planet Wanderer he had not aged in many years but now he refrained from looking at his deformed hands. He shoved aside the report that he had received from Terrania’s epidemic-control section and he yawned. The doctors had predicted this unnatural state of fatigue. Such symptoms were the warning signs of the second stage of the illness which after about 2 or 3 weeks would result in minor paralysis phenomena. Whereupon the third and final stages would begin. What the victim could expect then was still unknown.

“Yessir, the Akons really sent us a present! What an accursed race!” Mercant heard himself muttering.

But the veteran Intelligence expert still possessed sufficient reserves of energy to be able to shake off such morbid thoughts and return once more to his work.

Shortly thereafter he alerted his specialists. Only one of these 8 highly qualified doctors was not yet infected by the plasma.

“Boyd, you take this matter in hand. But gentlemen if in this case you don’t get any results then the plasma will have won the race against you. Because as I have

just been informed, the plasma monster is fond of eating up enteric paralysis cultures, which it then uses for propagating itself. However I'd much prefer that you pick up the trail of this inhuman clique who tried to use enteric paralysis virus in order to further some kind of dirty business. Here, take this data with you. They give conclusive evidence that the paralysis culture was grown here on Earth, and there's no doubt that the broken ampoule is of Earthly origin. It's an unprecedented case. Do the best you can so that we can put these Terran monsters out of business for good!"

Wherewith he dismissed them, yawning even as they left him. Finally he reported to Rhodan concerning his conversation with Prof. Degen.

* * * *

The complex pattern of lines on Rhodan's hypercom screen announced an incoming transmission from the giant Brain on Arkon 3. Before the metallic voice rang through on the speaker, Rhodan had already made a cross-connection with the Research Centre of Terrania's main clinic. Without any loss of time he wanted the medical researchers to be informed of the positronicon's findings.

"Ye gods! If that mammoth think-bucket lets us down...!" It was all Bell could say before the giant Brain's voice resounded in the speaker.

"Answer to question 973/3, His Majesty, Emperor Gonozal VIII, to the First Administrator of the Solar Imperium, Perry Rhodan. In the second year of the reign of His Highness Fufulgon IX the inhabitants of 3 Arkon colonial worlds were decimated by a plasma infection. In order to prevent the spread of the infection, the Emperor ordered the 3 plague-ridden planets to be destroyed. They exist no more. The destruction of these 3 planets clearly indicates that there was no cure to be found for the plasma infection.

"Research at that time did not succeed in making a complete analysis of the plasma. They did not determine whether the plasma infection had been deliberately distributed by someone or if it had merely occurred by chance.

"The following is an evaluation of your own analysis data, in addition to what was known at that time..."

Perry Rhodan, John Marshall and Reginald Bell listened tensely to the incoming information from the giant Brain on Arkon 3. Even though they couldn't understand a single one of the medical terms being employed, at least the volume of the data led them to hope that the scientists of Terra would be able to make good use of the information and go swiftly to work.

"It's been going on for 8 minutes already..." Rhodan whispered this to Bell, whose face had been affected worst of all by the infection.

After 8 minutes and 11 seconds the transmission of data from the robot Brain came to an end. The dizzying swirl of lines appeared as its closing signature and then the hypercom channel with Arkon 3 was disconnected.

But the channel to the Research Centre was still open.

However, no comment seemed to be forthcoming from the clinic concerning the flood of information from Arkon 3 and Rhodan asked no questions over the intercom. He who had always restricted anyone from disturbing his critical deliberations now granted the same right to the men who held the fate of Earth in their hands.

With a glance he prevented his temperamental friend Bell from making one of his typical remarks. Marshall, normally very much composed, now stared transfixed at the viewscreen which revealed a conference of doctors in the background. There was no way of comprehending the muffled confusion of voices coming over the speaker.

But now they finally saw Dr. Kontu emerge from the group and approach the intercom. He had not previously been especially distinguished from his colleagues but at present he appeared to be in his moment of destiny. "Sir," he said excitedly, "barring any unforeseen errors I believe we can tell you that the Arkon analysis has provided an excellent reference basis. According to the data received we seem to be dealing with a denatured type of protein compound—the kind that is produced out of the natural processes of heat and acidic reactions and fermentation. But the unprecedented characteristic here is that it takes on an optically neutral albumin state which is neither polarized in one direction or the other. But for the moment I can't tell you anything else, sir."

* * * *

Millions of humans on Earth were yawning, yawning and yawning.

All who had been stricken with the new sleeping sickness were also those who had become the most seriously disfigured by the plasma plague. So far there was no medication capable of removing or even reducing the spread of the spongy, fungus-like swellings on their skin. The afflicted areas of their bodies seemed to deaden the skin sensitivity but unafflicted peripheral areas became taut and painfully supersensitive.

3 days had passed since the outbreak of the epidemic. For 3 days and 3 nights the television networks had been hammering the thought home to people on the Earth and on the Moon that they must not lose their composure. No one attempted to pacify them with empty promises. They were frankly informed that Perry Rhodan and his closest staff of working associates were also afflicted just like millions of others.

While such announcements were coming over the news, journalist Walt Ballin happened to be in Rhodan's main office.

"Ballin," said Rhodan, "now's about the time for you to speak to the men of Terra and I want you to speak to them with the same note of challenge that you used in your feature article. Set up your airtime, whatever way it suits you, but make arrangements for me to have 10 minutes out of the slot you schedule. When you're through I want to talk to the world!"

When Ballin left the room, Bell expressed his apprehensions. “Why didn’t you fix it so that you spoke first? Without a word first from you he’s liable to stir up a panic again! Have you heard the latest police reports from Terrania, Perry? In our own capital the mobs are creeping up out of their holes and there’s a dangerous fermentation rising everywhere. Revolution and doomsday panic is in the air. So at a time like this you place your bets on Ballin?”

“Yes, Reg, I think...”

He got no further. The telecom flashed an alarm. The broadcast chief of the Terrania TV station was on the screen, apparently at his wit’s end. “Sir!” he exclaimed helplessly. “A Mr. Walt Ballin has just used your authority to interrupt our broadcast and he’s tied in 28 other network outlets to address the entire northern hemisphere!”

“Channel his speech in here—quickly!” Rhodan interrupted and his grey eyes were gleaming strangely.

“Good God!” groaned Bell. “Your news hack is talking off the cuff—strictly extemporaneous! This is going to be something!”

In fact, it turned out to be tremendous.

Walt Ballin’s speech to his fellow Terrans owed its outstanding impact to the fact that it was simple and based on an honest conviction. What he said simply had to be believed. And this was the way he sounded on the loudspeaker:

“I am still young... 27 years old. I still have my life before me. Yet you can see on your viewscreens the way I look today. If there’s to be no salvation then I’m supposed to have only about 3 months to live—but I am hoping to be saved somehow during that 3-month period and I don’t intend to grab a rope and hang myself.

“Anybody who lets despair get the upper hand and seeks to end it all has never had the stuff in him to be a citizen of the universe. That’s what I want to be—even now! And I believe that such a citizen I shall become. At this very moment I know now *why* I believe it.

“I believe it because I’m a Terran and for us the future stands wide open even though this plasma infection is blocking the way at present...”

While Ballin continued his address to the inhabitants of the northern hemisphere, Reginald Bell felt Rhodan’s searching gaze resting on him.

“You have my admiration, Perry! What the devil does Ballin have that he can talk so simply and yet be so convincing? He even gets to *me*! Just as if I was the only one he was talking to!”

“It’s just that he believes in what he says, Reg. But now I have to get to the broadcast studio...”

Ballin had to interrupt himself because of a yawn and he let everybody see it. In fact he made a point of it. “The plasma infection is causing fatigue in all of us but what our medical scientists can still do about it is another matter. I’m not going to stand here and make silly promises but I have every reason to believe that our doctors will conquer even this terrible affliction.”

A few minutes later, Rhodan was speaking over the networks.

The live transmission was also being received in Terrania's medical Research Centre. On 3 separate occasions the doctors interrupted their discussions to listen. Almost all of them had contracted the infection, yet they nodded in agreement with what they heard. Death faced them all and yet they wished fervently to keep on living—especially Dr. Koatu, who had just turned 33 and had been married for only a year.

200 ADVENTURES FROM NOW

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Attack on OLD MAN

6/ THE ENEMY UNMASKED

Short, fat and bald-headed, Jeff Garibaldi looked out the window toward the Parisian Arch of Triumph. Since the outbreak of the plasma plague 10 days ago, he and his staff in the French Sector had not had much to do.

Although he wasn't sick yet, he knew it didn't mean very much when one considered at any second the plasma plague might detect him; every morsel of food he ate might already be infected by the plague. The monster had become an ever-present menace. The coded message from Terrania today had been pretty discouraging. They were still groping in the dark. The plasma resisted every medication and yet day by day it was on the increase in an exponential progression. It pounced on all organic matter it could find and even turned that into its own type of voracious protein.

Refrigerated warehouses containing tons of food, vast acreage ready for harvest, giant herds of cattle—all of it had already been consumed and destroyed, or such destruction was imminent. Thus hunger, that other horseman of the Apocalypse, was charging neck and neck with the advancing plague. It was a new danger of which the general public was not yet aware but those in charge in Terrania were watching this development with ever-increasing concern.

Jeff Garibaldi was a remote grand uncle of the famous freedom fighter whose name he bore. Now he suddenly sat up rigidly in his chair as a thought struck him.

Yesterday he had been in Soisy-sur-Seine, a small town 50 km from Paris where he was to meet with a contact man who never showed up. Garibaldi had enjoyed the beautiful summer day, having waited until evening in the small cafe in the Rue de la République.

There in Soisy-sur-Seine, did I see anybody marked by the plasma sickness, or didn't I? Anybody at all? Garibaldi tried to remember but couldn't. The more he tried to think about it the more excited he became, which was something else he couldn't understand. *Is this thing starting with me, too?* he asked himself while examining his hands suspiciously. But he could find no telltale pinpoints on his skin.

What the devil! Was there something I missed in that little place? He was free to muse because he was alone in the Parisian office of Solar Intelligence, which covered all French language areas.

He knew it was against regulations to leave the office empty but outside the sun

shone in a cloudless sky. A summer day beckoned—an irresistible *Parisian* summer day.

“The last summer—for everybody,” said Garibaldi as he got into his car. “After that there’ll be nothing—only the plasma monster!”

Ordinarily he would have taken a good hour to drive out of Paris but today he only needed 12 minutes to get to its outer periphery. The highway sign said: Soisy-sur-Seine—42 km. Jeff wanted to know what he might have overlooked yesterday in the little town.

Until 10 days ago this main highway had been an unbroken chain of cars all the way but by the time Garibaldi reached Soisy-sur-Seine he had only encountered 4 vehicles and one of those had been coming from the opposite direction.

The Earth and humanity were waiting for death. Garibaldi tried—in vain—to shake off the horror that swept over him at the prospect of such a fate.

He made a right turn to pull up in front of the Cafe Nicole, where he got out. Two tables were occupied, 11 others were empty.

“Café au lait,” he ordered as a slender dark-blond girl came up to him. At first she had looked anxiously at his face but then she seemed to give a sigh of relief when she could not detect any bloodied fungus-like markings on him.

At that moment a light dawned in Garibaldi’s mind. Now he fully remembered what it was about his visit here yesterday that had made a subconscious impression on him. *He had not seen a single victim of the plasma sickness in the town! Not a one!* And yet Soisy-sur-Seine had a population of 45,000.

His coffee with milk arrived.

In some astonishment the young, dark-blond waitress watched Garibaldi as he got up to leave. He had paid but had not touched the coffee. Instead he hurried directly across the street toward the old-fashioned town hall. They were willing to give him information once he had identified himself as an employee of Solar Intelligence.

“No, Mr. Garibaldi, in Soisy-sur-Seine we haven’t yet had a single case of the plasma sickness.”

“Definitely none?” Garibaldi couldn’t believe it. In the entire northern hemisphere there wasn’t anyplace left that had been spared by the plasma monster, even if there were only two houses in a village. Yet here in a town of 45,000 inhabitants, was he supposed to believe that the plasma plague hadn’t taken hold?

“Thank you!” he said, half in a daze as he left.

The two officials who had informed him shook their heads as they watched him leave.

It was 3:20 A.m. and the greyness of dawn was beginning to appear over Terrania when Perry Rhodan was awakened by an alarm signal. Instantly he was alert.

“This is Rhodan—what is it?” he said into the telecom instrument beside his

bed. The viewscreen was still flickering when the voice of Allan D. Mercant came through

“Sir, I’ve just received a call from France, from the same man who contacted Walt Ballin for us. His name is Jeff Garibaldi. This fellow Garibaldi has confirmed something I think is incredible. In his section of...”

“Mercant, what’s the matter with you? At this end I can’t make out what you’re saying. Make it shorter, will you?” Rhodan shook his head in exasperation.

“Excuse me, sir, but this news! 50 km from Paris there’s a town called Soisy-sur-Seine. Its population is 45,000 but in the whole place there’s not one case of plasma infection!”

“None...?!”

Rhodan had not said anything more than this but Mercant also remained silent.

“Is this Garibaldi reliable, Mercant?”

“He’s reliable, sir, though he’s not one to stick close to regulations. Nevertheless, today he’s...”

“Yes, alright! 45,000 inhabitants—you told me that, Mercant—and no case of plasma sickness. Are you still in bed?”

“Yes.”

“Then get out of it! We’ll meet in half an hour at the spaceport, berth 67. The *Burma* is there. We’ll take off in that!”

“But sir, we surely can’t...”

“We surely can...”

But what they were supposed to be able to do Rhodan didn’t say. He alerted Reginald Bell, John Marshall, Pucky, Ras Tschubai and finally the journalist Walt Ballin.

“Well take off in half an hour. Meet me at the *Burma*, berth 67.”

Why and where remained unknown.

The *Burma* was a State Class spaceship. When two aircars carrying 7 plasma-afflicted passengers approached it, its impulse engines were already warming up. The groundlock showed lights inside but only the outer hatch was open. In the airlock itself were 7 spacesuits.

“Get into them!” ordered Rhodan. “Helmets sealed. And check your air supplies, gentlemen!”

While they were still getting into the heavy suits, the space door closed and half a minute later the *Burma* rose up with thundering engines. Thanks to its super powerful propulsion system it was capable of reaching the speed of light within a few minutes.

Only Rhodan knew the flight’s destination. Mercant could guess but he wasn’t too sure. Naturally the first to lose patience was Bell.

“Perry, will you let loose and give us some information?” he grumbled, punctuating his question with a yawn.

“We’re flying to the *Condor* where we’ll transfer over to it but there we’ll also

stay inside the airlock and we'll land at Soisy-sur-Seine."

"Susie who? Who's that, a female doctor?" Bell had no idea of what was going on, nor did the others except for Mercant and Walt Ballin.

At this time, however, Pucky made a probe into Mercant's mind and so found out that a town near Paris was involved. He immediately chirped over his helmet transceiver: "Fatso, you were probably pretty skimpy on your geography studies in school. Soisy-sur-Seine is a small, town near Paris, not the name of a doctor—although I'd prefer to fly to any doctor who could give me back my natural good looks! I look a mess and you're no better, Tubby!"

"So what are we supposed to do in this Swozzy sur Seine, Perry?" asked Bell, deciding to pass up any comment on Pucky's aspersions concerning his geographical ignorance. "And why not go into the ship instead of being cramped inside the airlock?"

"The answer to your last question should be obvious," replied Rhodan with a slight edge to his voice. "The plasma monster hasn't attacked any crew member of the *Burma* yet because it hasn't had a chance to get in. We certainly can't be responsible for bringing the beast on board with us. There's also no sickness on the *Condor*. We could spare ourselves a transfer to the *Condor* if the commander, Lt. Brisby, had any battle experience."

"What?!" Bell's voice rumbled inside his helmet. "What the devil's going on?"

Rhodan answered calmly. "Just a vague suspicion, Reg... as frail and opalescent as a soap bubble. This town, Soisy-sur-Seine, with 45,000 inhabitants, does not contain a single plasma victim. Can you conceive of that? I can't!"

"Alright, so?"

"To answer that question is why we're here."

"With two State Class spaceships?"

"Their fire power may not be heavy enough at all. It might have been better to come in battleships."

"Jumping galaxies!" exclaimed Pucky, equally surprised. "What *is* going on?" His probe toward Rhodan's mind had been stopped by the latter's mental screen.

"Just a wild guess—a flimsy hope. That's why we won't land in front of the town. We'll jump!"

Shortly after that they transferred over to the *Condor* which had left its orbit to rendezvous with the *Burma*. And again the 7 of them remained within the two airlock hatches and communicated over their helmet radios. Only then did Rhodan reveal the direction of his thoughts.

He finished with the remark: "Prof. Degen, the chief medico on medi-ship 3, is the one who started me to putting 2 and 2 together."

"And did he know that there were only healthy humans in this little French town, Perry?" Normally the optimist, Bell still sounded pessimistic.

"No, the 7 of us know it, as of a short time ago," answered Rhodan, yawning again. It was impossible to resist these urges to yawn and any attempt to suppress

them was a useless waste of energy.

“But how come you didn’t take the doctors into conference before the takeoff, Perry? Your whole plan is the groundless idea of a layman because you don’t know that much about medicine!”

“Which I won’t argue with, old buddy. But knowledge of that kind isn’t always the decisive factor. What’s important is to do the right thing at the right time and it’s my guess that we might be able to uncover something in Soisy-sur-Seine that’s important for all humanity. Why do you think there are no plasma victims in Soisy-sur-Seine? Why shouldn’t there be? Maybe this isn’t quite so groundless, after all!”

“So where are we supposed to look for something when we don’t even know what to look for?” Bell still wasn’t in favour of Rhodan’s present action.

“We’ll leave that to John Marshall and Pucky, my friend!” Rhodan’s reply was sharp so that even Bell realized his questions were superfluous.

When they made their jump at an altitude of 10,000 meters over Soisy-sur-Seine and fell through the darkness of the night, they formed a chain. Each one in his spacesuit was a small independent spaceship. Each suit provided a defence screen, a propulsion system and certain speed capabilities. The micro-generators threw maximum power into their collision screens while their antigravs functioned at half their intensity. But when the altimeters marked 300 meters the antigravs went on full. All 7 landed as lightly as feathers.

“Switch on your deflectors!” Rhodan ordered over his radio.

In spite of the darkness of the night they took the extra precaution to make themselves invisible by use of the deflector-field generators. They were satisfied to put up with the inconvenience of not being able to see each other when they turned on their searchlights.

They were 3 km from the outskirts of Soisy-sur-Seine. Telepath John Marshall and Pucky went to “work”. They attempted to detect any alien thought-streams that might give them a clue.

“Nothing,” said John Marshall after a good quarter of an hour.

Pucky was silent though normally he was the most talkative.

A vehicle with bright headlights was coming along the express highway. Its lights beamed far ahead into the night. The car was racing at high speed. The driver must have been very familiar with the road. At a distance of 1 km it swept past the men who stood in the open countryside and waited to see if Pucky could discover anything.

“Chief! There’s an *Ara* in that hotrod!” Pucky’s chirping voice trembled with excitement. “I’m making a jump! Marshall, keep in contact with me!” With his last word he teleported.

In a few moments Marshall spoke up. “Pucky’s crazy. He’s sitting on top of the car, heading for town... Now it’s passing the main square... making a turn... third street to the right. Pucky thinks it’s an arterial road. The car is accelerating... wow, how that little devil can cuss! He can hardly hang on... maybe going to

teleport. No, he's staying. The car's slowing down, turning into a private driveway. Robot security here. Wait—now I can't understand him. What kind of nonsense is that? What's he thinking of gingerbread for at a time like this? A small gingerbread castle... Four Aras! Three of them waiting for the car... another coming out of the house. All of them disguised as Terrans..."

Marshall had reported all this bit by bit, with various pauses in between.

"Ras Tschubai." Rhodan spoke to the African teleporter. "Go and cover Pucky and watch out that the little rascal doesn't take too many chances. Under no circumstances are the Aras to know how close we are on their trail."

"OK, sir!"

Then Ras Tschubai also disappeared. Marshall was also in contact with him but he was not able to communicate with him telepathically as he could with Pucky.

"Let's take off, gentlemen. Marshall, you lead the way!" was Rhodan's next order.

Forming a chain again, they rose from the ground and flew toward the small community at an altitude of 100 meters. The street lamps were working and the main square was easily located. There were only a few lights burning in the houses. Soisy-sur-Seine was still asleep.

Without any detours Marshall led them directly to the objective where the two teleporters and the Aras were located. The small castle was surrounded by a park where they landed in a garden among flowering bushes. The men were still enveloped in their deflector fields.

"Marshall, what are the other two doing now?" asked Rhodan. But before the telepath could answer, he added: "Let's open our helmets and cut off the radio and the deflectors."

They opened their helmets to the cool but humid night air. About 200 meters away a light was burning in the portal of the castle. A car was standing in front of it, which was doubtlessly the one they had seen racing down the highway.

"Sir, our two teleporters are inside the place—and it's swarming with the galactic medicos! According to Pucky they're talking about the plasma plague... Sir, they're *laughing* about it!"

"But not for long!" growled Bell menacingly.

"Just for once keep your mouth shut!" Rhodan snapped at his companion. "Marshall, call Pucky and Tschubai back here!"

In the next second the two teleporters were beside them.

"Helmets open. Deflectors and radios off. We don't want them to trace..."

But the Aras had already tracked them. Marshall interrupted his chief. "Sir, the Aras are launching a robot attack! We have to get out of here! They have us right in their tracking beam!"

At the first warning Rhodan had switched on his high-powered minicom and now he called into it: "Pigeons sighted! Hawks come in!"

It was a coded signal that caused the Aras some frustration. By the time they

comprehended the double meaning of the words, the *Burma* and the *Condor* were over the castle.

In the next moment the Ara attack was opened. Arkonide fighter robots shot at them with every weapon available to them but the only thing they hit with their long-range energy beams was a small part of the garden area. Before the first shot the six Terrans and Pucky hurtled up vertically into the dark night sky.

But then Pucky disappeared again. Allan D. Mercant was next to last in the flying chain and he noticed his sudden absence as the final link in their line. However, the mousebeaver's objective soon became apparent.

Five Arkonide combat robots, each weighing a ton or more, shot heavenward as though jet-propelled. The positronic monsters could not grasp what was happening to them and so they fired aimlessly in their desperation, shooting in all directions. At first the weapon rays were seen sweeping about in brilliant colours but then they thinned and grew pale.

When the raybeams became barely perceptible lines of light, Pucky released them from his telekinetic forces. Accompanied by a shrieking of wind around them they fell from a height of several 100 meters and crashed to the ground. They bored holes in the park-like garden like unignited aerial bombs.

"Sir, the Aras are blowing up the castle!"

John Marshall's warning came a few seconds too late. The earth seemed to rise upward. The small castle that had, stood on the outskirts of Soisy-sur-Seine for 400 years was suddenly shattered by a blast of fire, followed by a nuclear thunderbolt that shot a ragged jet of flame up into the night.

The six Terrans could thank the automatic function of their protective screening for the fact that, they were not killed immediately by the blast of radioactivity but the relatively weak antigrav systems could do little against these unleashed atomic forces. When the first shockwave hit them they were swept away over the town like withered leaves and the chain they had formed with their hands was ripped apart.

Walt Ballin, who had only seen such things as this on television, believed that his last hour had come. Since he had not been trained in the Solar Space Academy, in his confusion he forgot which control buttons on his suit were for what. Erroneously he turned up his crash screen generator to maximum and cut off his antigrav. He only realized at the last moment that he was no longer flying along with the raging blast of the winds and that instead he was dropping downward like a stone. A new shockwave was all that saved him from being shattered against the ground. The crash screen let him just slip over the ridge of a roof; a chimney also failed to present a deadly obstacle as he glanced against it but it served to divert his course and thus to reduce his velocity to some degree. Then when he plunged from the roof gable into the top of a fruit tree, his crash screen was strong enough to protect him from the branches. Yet within the screen itself he was jolted too severely to one side, which caused him to lose consciousness.

Pucky had only heard the rumbling of the atomic blast but hadn't seen it. A

second prior to the catastrophe he had teleported, attracted by certain mental impulses that were emanating from under the ground.

Now he was blinking out of his cunning mouse eyes while holding a disintegrator gun in his right hand and an impulse blaster in the other. Both weapons were aimed at three Aras. These galactic medics were not wearing plastic disguises to make them look like Terrans.

“That’s the Pucky creature!” cried one of the Aras and he tried to reach the weapon at his belt.

But in vain. He lost his footing and flew like a ball to the ceiling. Pucky unleashed his telekinetic powers as he brought the Ara crashing to the floor again, where he lay half-unconscious, unable to move. The other two were pressed into a corner, also lying on the floor under such telekinetic pressure that they couldn’t move a limb.

Then Pucky sensed danger. He detected an emanation of incomprehensible thoughts. However, since his first experience with robots this kind of impulses was nothing new to him anymore. And if there was one intelligent being in the Solar Imperium that robots couldn’t face up to it was Pucky the mousebeaver!

Swiftly he took out his hypno-gun and played a full beam on the overpowered galactic medics and a second later he vanished in thin air. The next thing he knew, he was in some sort of subterranean installation of the Aras. By some means as yet unknown these aliens had managed to come to Earth undetected. They had disguised themselves as Terrans and settled on the outskirts of Soisy-sur-Seine.

In the moment of his rematerialisation, however, he let slip a startled exclamation which came within a hair of costing him his life. He had landed in a vast laboratory which was swarming with robots. Not all of them were robo-medics programmed to supervise the processes of manufacture here. Two combat robots were only 4 steps away from Pucky but fortunately they were programmed for reaction in the presence of Arkonides, Springers and Terrans, not to a creature who was 3 feet tall and looked like an overgrown mouse.

“Phew!” squeaked Pucky in alarm as he realized the kind of metallic monsters he was facing and he jumped again.

The raybeam of the first alerted robot only melted the plastic flooring where Pucky had just been standing. The fighter machine didn’t have a chance to fire a second shot because it was melted down with its companion under Pucky’s disintegrator fire. He had landed only a meter or so behind them.

“Pagdor, what’s going on back there?” He heard a voice call out in Arkonide. It came from the other end of the gigantic laboratory and processing room. Pucky was just beginning to concentrate on his next jump, which was to bring him close to the excited Ara who had called out, when all of a sudden Ras Tschubai appeared before him.

Tschubai spoke before the mousebeaver could say a word. “Help me to find the Chief and the others, Pucky!” he exclaimed urgently.

The little one did not stop to ask how the African had located him. “Let’s

scram!” was all he said and he disappeared with his companion in a jump to the surface.

Their automatic spacesuits responded instantly to the high radiation in the atmosphere and closed their helmets. Where the small castle had stood for the past 400 years was a vast yawning crater. The park had also disappeared and the outskirts of Soisy-sur-Seine were ablaze. The heatwave from the nuclear blast had set the houses on fire. Although spared by the plasma monster the little town was now in danger of being gutted by flames.

“Ras, I have contact with the Boss, Fatso and Mercant but I can’t find John or the newsman. Here, take my hand and off we go!”

They jumped. They found Rhodan, Bell and Mercant standing by the wall of a machine works of some kind. Pucky heard Bell’s voice in his helmet phones.

“Ras and I are here!” the mousebeaver announced.

“Pucky, we’re missing Marshall and Ballin!”

“Later, Perry!” Pucky interrupted him. “Guess what? The Aras have set up a giant medical production plant, 500 meters underground. Everything’s going full blast down there! We’d better get busy before these Super Sawbones blow up the whole thing! Then this town will switch from no plasma to no people!”

“Well, there you have it, gentlemen!” was all that Rhodan said.

Instead it was the usually taciturn Mercant who commented, “Sir, I’m beginning to see how all this fits together and I can also see how Prof. Degen’s remarks brought you to suspect this.”

Rhodan and Bell both got a grip on Pucky’s spacesuit. Allan D. Mercant put his arms over Ras Tschubai’s shoulders.

“Jump!” signalled the mousebeaver, whereupon the two teleporters brought their three companions into the subterranean fabrication plant of the Galactic Medical Masters.

But they landed in a hornets’ nest!

Eight Arkon robo-fighters literally charged toward them, followed by eleven Aras who were smart enough to take cover behind the powerful machines.

“You bunch of bolts!” chirped Pucky and his mouse eyes flashed a menacing challenge at the robots. He didn’t wait for an order from Rhodan. “Ras, let’s get the robots from overhead—come on!”

They disappeared from behind the big cooler housing where Rhodan and his companions had taken cover and they landed just under the ceiling in a maze of tubular conduits of various sizes. The mousebeaver was faster than the African since here his smallness was an advantage. The eleven Aras were unaware of his presence above them until he gave them a full-power blast from his shock-gun. The master medics crashed to the floor as though struck by lightning. One of them, not quite incapacitated, attempted to raise his weapon and fire at the top of the cooler.

But Pucky won the draw.

The positronically operated fighter robots were not aware of the disaster behind them. In the first hail of fire from overhead, 5 of the ponderous Titans were destroyed in the energy beams of both disintegrators and impulse blasters. But it alerted the remaining 3 as to the location of their nemesis.

They came to a stop and as their turret heads rotated to the rear they failed to see Rhodan come out from hiding. He braced himself while facing them head on, firing freely with a disintegrator in either hand. A fraction of a second later, Bell went into action, just in time to eliminate the Colossus that was taking aim at Pucky.

In the great processing plant there was a sudden stench of molten metal, burned insulation and smouldering high-tension transformers. The remains of the 8 robots lay on the floor in a tangled pile, while a few paces behind them were the unconscious Aras. The ordinary work robots in the plant had taken no notice of the situation. They continued to monitor the ongoing fabrication processes as though nothing had happened.

Pucky and Ras reappeared before the others. “So what *is* this layout, Boss?” asked the inquisitive mousebeaver. “What’s going on?”

“Well, Pucky, to find out exactly, the men we need here are Dr. Koatu and 2 or 3 other medical specialists. Do you think you could get them for me?”

The little fellow straightened up to his full height and met Rhodan’s gaze reproachfully. “What? You don’t think I could handle a short hippity-hop, just halfway around the Earth? I’ll be back in 5 minutes with the eggheads!”

300 ADVENTURES FROM NOW
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7/ IN SEARCH OF MIRACLES

A few seconds later, as Ras Tschubai was about to follow Pucky, Rhodan called to him on a sudden impulse. "Ras, wait! Go to Terrania and see how fast you can bring me Ulland, Kokstroem and Church back here. I don't care if they're in pyjamas or tuxedos, just bring them as they are!"

Ras Tschubai quickly nodded to his chief before he disappeared.

"You're bringing Ulland into this, Perry?" asked Bell with a thoughtful glance.

But the question was never answered. Rhodan's meagre telepathic sensors had picked up some vague thought emanations from several Aras and he immediately advised his companions. "The impulses are coming from our left. I think they're coming from a laboratory section behind that door over there!"

"How many, Perry?" Bell asked.

"3 or 4 of them," was his curt reply.

Solar Marshal Mercant only nodded silently. They went around the junk-pile of robot remains and passed four great conveyor lines where the passive work robots continued uninterruptedly with their tasks. The entire battle had not disturbed them in the least. Their programs were set strictly for monitoring the pharmaceutical processes here.

Just before the door in question, Perry's weak psi faculties enabled him to confirm that four Aras were in the other lab section. "Turn on your deflectors!" he ordered.

"But then we can't see each other!" warned Bell.

"It's a risk we'll have to take. You stay on my left and Mercant you stick to my right. OK, switch on!"

In the next second they were invisible but this protection still had the disadvantage Bell had mentioned: they couldn't see each other. Nevertheless it was only two minutes before two of the remaining Aras were unconscious and two of them were physically caught in Bell's powerful grasp. The aliens did not utter a word. Their thoughts seethed with hatred, rage and fear.

The door to the main plant was standing open and from it suddenly came a squeaky, familiar voice. "Hi, Boss! I'm here with the four pill-pushers! Aha! So Ras was also in Terrania! He's just pulled in with three gents in tow. You putting them to work, too?"

While Pucky was chattering, Rhodan returned into the larger lab. He had a

fleeting recollection of his instructions to Ras Tschubai as he saw that Ulland, Kokstroem and Church were all completely dressed.

He turned to the doctors. “Gentlemen, in medical knowledge I’m just a layman, so I can’t give you any specific instructions. But get to work as fast as you can—go through this subterranean plant and try to discover the cure they must have here which has kept the town of Soisy-sur-Seine free of plasma sickness. The second search objective is to locate what part of this lab has the processing setup for the enteric paralysis culture. There’s clear evidence that the serum ampoule found on the Springer ship was produced on Earth. You now know what conclusions all this has led me to. If you please, gentlemen!”

Rhodan didn’t want to yawn at this moment but the compulsion of his ailment was greater than his will. He was aware of the deep inroads the sickness had made in him, because it was costing him a greater effort than ever to concentrate. But when he finally spoke to Ulland, Church and Kokstroem his voice sounded completely normal.

“Our medical experts in Terrania have suspected that the plasma monster has a food-sensing faculty but so far they haven’t been able to produce any proofs for such a hypothesis. And a case in point is the fact that no case of plasma infection has occurred in Soisy-sur-Seine. What I want you to do is make a search here to see if the Aras have some special device that’s capable of interfering with the monster’s sensing faculty. I know that’s an almost impossible task since it’s only based on hypothesis but in a desperate situation like this we have to sort out even the most hopeless-seeming possibilities. So if you please, gentlemen!”

Mercant and Bell stared at him in thunderstruck amazement. The Solar Marshal remained silent but Bell felt more at personal liberty to express himself.

“Man, you’re sure way out, Perry! Ye gods, what an imagination! What’s come over you today?”

“Nothing much,” replied Rhodan, unimpressed. “Actually, you can thank our Solar Marshal here for the trend of my speculations.”

“What?” In his surprise Mercant twisted his facial features as he normally would have but he forgot the present disfiguration caused by the spongy plasma growths. The sharp pains reminded him of his condition but did not prevent him from speaking. “Sir, back there by that wall by the machine works you also made a similar remark. But I can’t recall having given you the slightest lead on such speculations.”

“However, you did, Mercant. You told me of your conversation with Prof. Degen. You had been inquiring about the status of the ‘stone-belly’ plague on board the Springer ship. Just as we found that the monster swallowed up the paralysis culture in Terrania, you learned that the plague viruses had suddenly disappeared on that freighter. So now let me tell you what I extrapolated from that.

“I avoided the regular trend of thinking in order to cover the side roads, you might say. The indisputable fact that the virus ampoule from the Springer ship

was produced on Earth was the first lead but when I heard there was no plasma sickness in the area of Soisy-sur-Seine it was suddenly like adding 2 plus 2 to get 4. Which in the final analysis meant that here must be some means of defence against the plasma monster! Contrary to information from the Arkon Brain there was one missing fact connected with that ancient case of plasma plague in the Arkonide Imperium. Once again in their usual secrecy the Aras had managed to develop either a cure or a defence against it!”

“Let’s hope your guess is a good one!” said Bell soberly. He happened to see Dr. Koatu standing between two assembly lines. “Doc!” he called to him. “Come on over here a minute!”

Koatu approached them but had to yawn as he did so.

“I have a question,” Bell told him. “This lousy monster thing is supposed to jump on anything containing protein. Since I’m no slouch in the protein department, it sure as heck picked me out in a hurry, but how come it also attacked the robots and stuck itself to the hull of the *Drusus*? That seems to contradict the theory that it’s only on a protein diet!”

“No,” Koatu countered quietly. “You haven’t considered the plasma’s sensing-capability sufficiently. Every robot has a number of protein-base circuit elements in its make-up—albumin or plastic compounds, if you will. In the plasma’s attempt to reach them it was merely blocked by their metallic shells. This doesn’t mean, of course, that we should attribute any intelligence to it. Its sensor mechanism is a kind of instinct. That’s why it didn’t give up and leave the robots, which any modicum of reason would have dictated. So that’s why it also remained on the *Drusus*’ hull. What we had first mistaken for some kind of oxidation turned out to be a monster life-form driven by an intense sensing instinct.”

“Doc, do you have any actual proof of such a sensing faculty?”

The scientist shook his head. “It’s all merely hypothesis, sir—pure conjecture.”

Just then the mousebeaver interrupted with his excited, squeaking voice. “Perry, you’re right! I’ve just tapped the thoughts of an Ara. The dirty crook is afraid that we’re going to find the *thing*. Hey, do you know what an *oska-pulsator* is?”

There was a rising note of excitement in Rhodan’s voice when he answered. “Never heard of it, Pucky. What’s it supposed to be?” The others were also looking intently at the little fellow.

“The *oska-pulsator* is the thing we’re not supposed to find, Chief. Darn it all, he’s shut off again! But man, is that Ara shaking! His fear of its being discovered blanks out everything else in his mind. And the second Ara’s about to have apoplexy, he’s so afraid.”

“Tell Ulland, Church and Kokstroem about that pulsator. It may help them in their search.”

Pucky vanished without a word. Dr. Koatu followed in the direction he had obviously taken. Only his two friends, Mercant and Ras Tschubai, remained with Rhodan.

Chief—are you there?

Rhodan sensed John Marshall's telepathic call. The missing leader of the Mutant Corps reported in.

I'm here with your journalist. Just now we're trying to find our way to the park around all these burning streets. Oh—it's no longer necessary, Chief! Pucky overheard me and he's just arrived. We'll teleport with him!

As this last thought from Marshall came through Pucky appeared with the two men in tow. "Perry, I tipped off your specialists. They never heard of an oska-pulsator, either!" He ignored the fact that he had just performed a lightning-swift mission and brought in Marshall and Ballin. It didn't seem worth mentioning.

"Marshall..." Rhodan deliberately ignored the fact that Marshall seemed to have had a rough time. "Take charge of the two Aras you'll find tied up in the next room. Drag everything you can out of their heads. Every minute we can gain in our discoveries here will help to save many humans from the plasma sickness."

"OK, sir. The Aras will be real happy to see me!" It was not a threat of physical violence. The two Galactic Medicos were not facing a beating session to make them confess. Marshall was not going to harm a hair on their heads, but telepathically he was going to uproot their most secret thoughts.

Meanwhile, Walt Ballin had been looking about him in amazement. He noted the group of half-burned and destroyed robots as well as the work robots who tended their programmed tasks along the conveyor belts.

"Sir," he asked Rhodan, "are we waiting around here for something in particular?"

"For a miracle, Ballin," Rhodan replied gravely.

"Oh—oh!" squeaked Pucky, next to him suddenly, and he disappeared.

Rhodan tried to make telepathic contact with him but the mousebeaver had screened off his thoughts. "Cheeky little rascal!" he muttered half aloud, even as Pucky came back again.

"Perry, I caught a thought from Ulland! Do you know what he's looking at? It's the oska-pulsator! He's found the thing and he's yelling his lungs out for Church and Kokstroem!"

"So once and for all, Pucky, do I get to know maybe what an oska-pulsator happens to be?" Rhodan's tone was noticeably sharp with impatience.

But Pucky was impudent enough to reveal his incisor tooth, even using a patronizing air as he answered. "Perry, it's the *thing*—the thing that keeps the monster away from Soisy-sur-Seine!"

Pucky had practically gotten away with murder with such insolence but at the moment Rhodan might have forgiven him for much worse. "And how does it work, Pucky?" he asked quietly.

But Bell wasn't as patient. "If you leave us dangling any longer I'll wring your neck!"

"Quit bragging, Fatso!" retorted Pucky, responding to the threat. "Perry, if I

understand Ulland's thoughts right, the oska-pulsator is a transmitter of some kind. It sends out some very weird and complex interference pulses that block the monster's sensor fields."

"Aha!"

"Perry?" Now the mousebeaver's voice was almost unrecognizable in his anxiety. "Now can we all get well again?"

Rhodan looked down for several seconds at the faithful little fellow before he finally shook his head negatively. "I don't believe so, Pucky. We've already been infected. I doubt if the oska-pulsator can be of much help to us in particular. Yes, Marshall?" He spoke the question although Marshall had called to him telepathically. "Where? What...? In silo 18? *What* medication are you talking about? An aromatic *decoy* material—for the monster? Marshall, you're losing me—I don't quite follow! Repeat that again!"

The others held their breaths tensely as they stared at Rhodan. So that they could share the message directly, he was putting it into words for them. "The perfumed bait, you say, makes a molecular combination with the monster and inactivates it? I see... by crystallizing its cellular structure."

The micro-telecoms in their spacesuits signalled an incoming call. The Medical Research Centre in Terrania was urgently asking for Perry Rhodan. When he identified himself the message came through

They heard a man yelling for joy through their headphones. "Sir, thanks to the analysis data from Arkon we have found a means of combating the plasma plague! It's an aromatic lure that attracts the monster and converts it into harmless protein crystals! Sir, we did it! Thank God! What a wonderful day this is for all of us..."

John Marshall came back. In spite of everything his disfigured features expressed nothing but bitterness.

"Here now, John, is there something else?" Rhodan asked him.

The Mutant Chief drew a deep breath. "Chief, it's unbelievable what these Aras were planning to do to us! Your suspicions are correct. It's here that they produce the enteric paralysis culture. They planned to use it to decimate the Earth's population and to take over Terra. The case of plague on the Trader ship was their last field test. Within three more days their operation was to begin here. The fact that we were attacked by the plasma plague suited them fine. They had nothing to fear from it. On the one hand the oska-pulsator kept the plasma sickness away from them and on the other hand they had the means to cure it. When you keep running into such criminals it's enough to make you lose faith in everything."

Rhodan broke in on his tirade. "Alright now, John, you shouldn't be talking like that. Not all Aras are criminals any more than are all Earthmen bad but there's always going to be the other kind and you can't judge them all the same way. Now come with me—I want you around when I talk to the Aras."

The parley was a short one.

"Aras, there is no capital punishment anymore on Earth. And it appears that no

Terran has been victimized yet by your plan. There were the Galactic Traders, however, and doubtlessly Ekhonides, Arkonides and other races belonging to the Greater Imperium. I'll arrange to place you under the jurisdiction of the Arkon Imperium. Within this hour, Emperor Gonozal VIII is being informed of this incident and he will certainly see to it that you are brought to Arkon."

One of the Aras tried to make an offer to prevent his extradition. "Rhodan, we are in a position to help the Solar Imperium against the plasma plague."

Rhodan's tone was frigid when he interrupted the Galactic Medical Master. "With the oska-pulsator and the plasma lure in silo 18, Ara? Haven't you learned yet that I've never made deals with criminals and that I never shall?"

With that he went out, completely impervious to the hail of invectives the Aras shouted after him.

* * * *

Perry Rhodan had a half-hour to spare for a conversation with Walt Ballin but that was all his schedule permitted. Nor did Ballin want to take any more time than that because his ship was leaving for Paris at 13:45. At 20:00 he had a date at Trois Poulardes with Yvonne Berclais. He had reserved the table by long distance from Terrania.

"When do we get to, see your report about the plasma monster, Ballin? Until now the Administration has not announced any details. People still don't know the circumstances which enabled them and the Earth to escape destruction. You do it! No holds barred—everything. Even my blunders."

"Wait, sir!" Ballin interrupted energetically. "Who could reproach you for anything? One way or another the Akons would have planted that monster on the Earth. In this case everyone should be grateful to you because you were the only one in the midst of the crisis who was able to guess the true implications and put the facts together."

"That's not quite true, Ballin. If it hadn't been for Jeff Garibaldi I'd never have heard of the little town of Soisy-sur-Seine. Let that be an example to you that no man can be anything alone unless he has capable assistants and colleagues. Teamwork is everything, which includes the entire Solar Imperium. Even your article is a part of it, because it will inform mankind concerning the monster they were dealing with."

"Sir, it's now 4 months since the outbreak of the plague and as of today it's been 3 weeks since any case of illness was even reported. Nobody wants to hear anything about a monster anymore. What's more, I can't take the responsibility of revealing all the details involved. If I did, wouldn't I also have to reveal that at any time we can expect a new attack by the Akons?"

The faces of the two men did not even show any scars. The fungus growths had not left any deformities on either of them.

Rhodan smiled. "It seems I can remember a feature article once that expressed

the opposite point of view. That article demanded that the Administration must inform people about *everything*—otherwise humans would never get to be citizens of the universe.”

“Sir, at the time I didn’t know what I know now. This experience has taught me what a tremendous load of responsibility you have taken over for everyone concerned. I have one request before I leave: At some convenient time would it be all right if I visited Terrania again?”

“Not only is the answer yes, Ballin—I’ll be expecting you,” Rhodan answered and extended his hand.

Ballin hesitated before gripping it. “One last question, sir. Do the monsters out there outnumber us? I mean, is the universe one big bag of horrors or a galaxy of wonders?”

“You give us a hand, Ballin, in making people into citizens of the universe. So long as humans fear, that in itself is the monster. Once their fear has been conquered they will perceive the wonders of creation. It’s a long road yet but at the end of it is humankind, to whom the universe belongs...”

400 ADVENTURES FROM NOW

Clark Darlton will take you to

Digger’s Planet

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

ONCE AGAIN John Edgar Pincer had to revise his notion that the universe was populated by peace-loving entities like himself.

In his laced-up condition he looked thinner than usual as he called out words of encouragement to his wife. Secretly he had to confess that the distance they had gained from the spaceport was now all to no avail. They had eluded the Springers at the cost of being captured by primitive aborigines who seemed to be as pitiless and remorseless as the Galactic Traders themselves. The birdmen picked them up bodily and carried them on into the forest.

Pincer's long-sought cosmic adventure had become a reality.

HORN: GREEN

By

William Voltz