

CHAPTER 1

On a shrill, shouted command, two hundred gleaming metal arms raised upward. A hundred fluorescing ray guns pointed at the cloudless sky of the Gobi Desert. One hundred steel fighter robots poised motionlessly; their mechanical inner workings were operating, but this was not outwardly detectable.

"Let's give our guest the full dress treatment," Colonel Freyt advised, with an ironic glance at the human commanding officer of the robot guard troops standing at attention. Captain Klein coughed discreetly. He squinted across at the ship that had just landed. "Looks kind of familiar," he said. "Will you take care of the ceremony, sir?"

Colonel Freyt, chief of the Space Fighter Force, moved forward stiffly like a marionette. On the mighty tail unit of the landed jet bomber gleamed the emblem of the U.S. Space Force. Freyt stopped before the escalator.

The figure emerging from the narrow hatch was huge and impressive. General Lesley Pounder, space force commander, looked about him silently. For a moment his gaze rested on the dress formation of the fighter robots. He acknowledged Captain Klein's salute distractedly. Far above the airport thundered ghostly shapes in the blue May sky of the Gobi Desert. It was shortly after 1300 hours. The sun's heat bore down oppressively. Crackling blasts of thunder confirmed that the ships up there, whistling toward outer space, had pierced the sound barrier. Before the sonic booms reached the ground, the silvery dots of reflected light had disappeared.

Pounder cleared his throat "Quite a show," he acknowledged appreciatively. Then, "Hello, Freyt. It's been a long time, hasn't it?" Even Pounder found the first moments of their meeting a bit distressing. "About three years, sir," Freyt agreed diplomatically. "You sent me to the moon in a Stardust-class rocket. The mission went as badly as the landing we made. If the chief, Perry Rhodan, hadn't arrived with the space sphere, you'd have had to add three more test pilots to the crash list." Pounder, square built and always on a sharp edge, pressed his lips together. "That's right," he confirmed coldly. "For three years now you've been wearing the uniform of the Third Power. Hm-m-doesn't look so bad. A bit Utopian. I see you've been promoted, too." Colonel Freyt decided not to answer the innuendoes. Pounder had come here to the sanctum sanctorum of the Third Power as a visitor. It would be senseless for Freyt to argue with his former superior.

"The car is waiting, sir," he parried. "The chief is not here yet. We received a message from him just a half hour ago. He's somewhere near the orbit of Mars in a fighter ship, making a test flight." General Pounder also swallowed this pill. His former subordinate spoke casually of things that were still incomprehensible to mankind. "Near the orbit of Mars," he murmured to himself. "That sounds strange. You've come a long way, lad. Definitely further than would have been possible in the space force. You've really been building up around here." Pounder took a look around. Far to the north, near Goshun, the towerlike structures of Galacto City loomed skyward. He had not been here for three years. At that time the Third Power had possessed only a few provisional buildings. And now this! The two flight centers alone could serve as showplaces for any major power—but the port was the mightiest installation ever created by man. "We have further plans," Freyt told him expressionlessly. "The land area we've bought from the Asiatic Federation now amounts to exactly 14,400 square miles. Galacto City, according to the latest census, has 230,000 inhabitants. If you please, sir, our people will service your ship." With a glance at the mighty bomber, he added casually. "That old cow is a bit primitive, you know. Are you still using the old-fashioned nuclear propulsion?"

"That's the propulsion that sent you to the moon, Freyt. Are you trying to rub in how terribly far behind you we are? Just remember that you and Perry Rhodan got your start in the space force. If I hadn't sent Perry to the moon he wouldn't have come across the Arkonides. That is what you call the aliens, isn't it?"

"Precisely, sir," Freyt nodded.

Pounder snorted. "Without this alien intelligence we wouldn't have made another step of progress. Rhodan lucked out when he gained their confidence. It's the only way the Third Power could have come into being. Well, enough of that. How is Rhodan making out as chief of state?"

"Do you mean the president, sir?"

Pounder fumed silently for a moment, then blasted out, "Freyt, for me your president will always be Major Rhodan, the shavetail I promoted and drilled personally until he was placed in that momentous expedition. You straighten him out on that!"

"He hasn't forgotten it, sir." Freyt grinned. "But all barbs aside, I'm glad you're here. Are you going to negotiate with the chief about the pulse drive system?" The general paused in his stride. At the distant spaceport the weird roaring rang out again. Flashing shapes rode the skies on barely perceptible pulse streams. He waited until the infernal sound subsided.

"That was the second squadron under Derringhouse," Freyt explained. "He's made good. You didn't select any bad candidates, sir."

"Naturally! Otherwise, Rhodan wouldn't have taken them over as officers. And I wasn't happy to lose you, either. What do you know of my plans?" This was a sharp change of tactics. Pounder's glance was hard. "The chief has discussed some of this with me. Sir, I think it would be foolish to try to talk him into a delivery of the complete propulsion system. Faster than light spaceships are constructed only by the Third Power. Give it up, that's my advice. I'm authorised, if you wish, to show you through our new federal shipyards. Normally, nobody gets in. You see, sir—we want to do what we can for our old commander." Pounder turned away without a word. The younger man's subtle smile had got to him. Still silent, he clambered into the open turbo car. His eyes sought the gleaming energy shield not far from the airport. The great dome, six miles in diameter, was very conspicuous. Freyt squeezed his long frame in beside the general. Pounder involuntarily made a comparison. His secret glance took in the big, lanky man with the tiny wrinkles of humour at the corners of his eyes. Freyt and Perry Rhodan could have been brothers. Somewhere they had the same background; they were from the same school—hard and relentless. Pounder sensed a certain wave of pride. These youngsters—Freyt was only thirty-seven—had created an institution that appeared to exceed all previous human standards. Freyt nodded toward Captain Klein. "He used to be attached to the NATO Secret Service under Allan D. Mercant. Amazing, isn't it? Men appear capable of getting some sense into their heads once in a while. I can still do a playback on that moment when I gave the order to fire the three H-bombs. That was the time we destroyed the Arkonide cruiser. The old moon got cooked in a few places. Things have changed a lot. As I say, man seems to have comprehended a few things a little better."

"Comprehend?" echoed the general hollowly. "Did you say, comprehend? If any idiot succeeded in wiping out the Third Power, the world would become a madhouse overnight. People would tear each other apart in a scramble for your technical and scientific developments. Nations would be 'regrettably compelled, in the interests of self-preservation, to adopt grave new measures.' That's the way it would go in diplomatic language, wouldn't it?" Freyt contracted his thin lips. The stern lines in his face deepened. The commander of the first space fighter force seemed suddenly to have lost all traces of humour. "Don't speak of the devil, sir," he said pensively. "That energy shield over there has been fired upon by over 6,000 artillery pieces of Earthly fabrication. Not only for hours at a time, but for weeks. All of them failed. Only an alien power can overcome us, a power that has not yet developed on Earth. We should all realise that the existence of highly developed alien intelligences is now an irrefutable fact. If we don't all wake up and take a proper attitude toward this, someday we're liable to get it in the neck. People are going to have to become basically more discerning than they have been. Perry Rhodan is proposing a Central Terrestrial Government, whose representatives will be assigned by existing nations of Earth. The distribution of parliamentary seats will have to be arbitrated."

"I think you're nuts!" asserted Pounder. "Freyt, you may be a good soldier and an outstanding astronaut, but you don't know diddley about these matters. Say, what's that over there?" Freyt thought, The old boy is getting evasive. Something was in the air that didn't smell just right. He looked across at the emerging outlines of the shop buildings. There were countless hangars and towers; yet there were no smudgy signs of the usual industrial pollution.

This clinically clean complex was capable of the greatest production in the world.

"This is the plant for final assembly and staging," Freyt announced in clipped tones. "The federal spaceship yards of the Third Power. We carved that out of the ground in a little over three years, sir."

"Complete industrial plants in only three years!" Pounder asked incredulously. "Rocket plants, test stands, final assembly shops?" Freyt, other people would only be finishing up the foundations of such a giant installation in merely three years."

"Here 10,000 special robots have been put to work," Freyt explained with a slightly arrogant smile. "The machines we used accomplished all grading jobs with the help of high intensity antigravity fields. Normally, a job like that would have taken twenty years. It's hard to comprehend the magnitude of Arkonide resources." General Pounder gave up. It was foolhardy to argue with people who thought in superhuman concepts and utilised extraterrestrial machines.

The car stopped at the red line. Before him, barely visible at this close range, the wall of inconceivable energy arched upward.

"That's a five dimensional field structure," Freyt grinned. Pounder ignored the professorial remark. "Who's on the inside that I can negotiate with!" he asked. He peered into the land area enclosed by the energy shield. It was fruitful and blooming. Only a few buildings loomed inside, but they were tremendous. The Third Power government palace was a marvel of Arkonide architecture. White and immaculate, the gigantic structure shone upon the observer.

"His Excellency the Minister of Security will probably condescend to receive you," Freyt said with the hint of a devilish smile. "The Minister of Security, Mr. Reginald Bell, has been most favourably disposed to your imminent visit."

"Reg!" groaned the space force chief. "That's all I need!" That grinning, addle pated, undisciplined dunderhead—the kid that was always on the brink of being demoted to second lieutenant—you say he is going to condescend to receive me! Well, you tell 'His Excellency' that I might just possibly be inclined to recognise him as a spokesman for the Third Power, provided that he can scrape up the respect that a rookie should pay to a general!"

Homer G. Adams was on the telecom, his expansive brow filling the width of the three dimensional colour screen. The mysterious director of the General Cosmic Company, or GCC, was calling long distance from New York.

"The chief is still en route? That's not good at all!" The man's voice rang coldly from the speaker. "Listen to me, Mr. Bell—I don't like the idea of you and General Pounder being alone together on this. You'll have to excuse my scruples in this matter, but I consider myself a pretty fair psychologist. Pounder is an outstanding officer. That fact in itself isn't so dangerous, but he's also a hell of a swell guy to whom you are indebted, and a man you hold in awe, whether you admit it or not. I say you are categorically unqualified to handle this; you've got to wait for the chief." The stocky man in the pastel green uniform of the Third Power twisted his mouth into a smile. Reginald Bell actually did feel unqualified in this instance. On Adams's distant picture screen his water blue eyes appeared like colourless flecks of light. "I'll bow to that opinion," he said, nodding. "What do you want, Adams? You're the one who set up this visit."

"That's right, but I didn't know at the time that Perry Rhodan would be making a test flight. Mr. Bell, try to stall the general, or better yet, wait until I get to the Gobi. I don't think you're capable of handling a sharp negotiation like that. Pounder can wrap you around his finger."

"You may be right; but then, that's why you're the Finance Minister," Bell grinned. "I'll admit I'd prefer to hug the old fire eater. It's been four long years since I've seen him. Are you available right now?" Adams hesitated. "Hm-m... bad. I'm tied up in conferences with a Latin American mining corporation. You're in need of cheap copper, aren't you?" Reginald Bell remained silent. Unconsciously, he fingered the shining rank insignia on the left breast of his flight uniform, meanwhile confessing to himself, with a feeling of uncertainty, that the deal with Pounder was becoming elusive already—and they hadn't even started it yet. "I'd feel subordinate to him, all right—emotionally so, I'm afraid," he said with unaccustomed gravity. "I'm fond of him. Pounder has gone through hell for us. He's taught us everything that we are putting to good use now. Without him we'd never have got started to the moon. Forget what you're doing and get out here, Adams. You've become the number one business tycoon, so you ought to be able to stash one of your own confabs." Homer G. Adams, the mutant with the eidetic memory, a man known as the greatest financial genius of all time, revealed a warm, human smile. "That's why I called you," he said. "We don't want to make any mistakes, right? I'll get started at once. Is there anything else?" But then Adams tensed as he noted the other's suddenly rigid countenance. Simultaneously over the perfect sound system came a shrill howl. Reginald Bell changed abruptly into the man with the cold eyes. Something was up. "Mr. Bell!" shouted Adams, alarmed. "What's happening?"

"Abort that trip for now, Adams. Stand by till you hear from me. This is an alert—over and out!" Adams watched the concave picture screen of the telecom fade. He remained motionless behind his desk. His office suite in the giant skyscraper suddenly seemed empty and desolate.

Seconds later, he heard the high pitched siren howl. It rang out less harshly here in the city than in the government palace of the Third Power, but its impact was the same.

Homer G. Adams was not a man who could be unnerved by a mere blast of sound. Most definitely not in this age when the young Third Power under Perry Rhodan, former major and test pilot of the U.S. Space Force, was now the economic, political, and military center of the planet Earth. The fact that this great conglomerate of power was the result of the productive capacity and superior intelligence of an alien race from the stars was of secondary importance. The main reality was that a relatively petty pigmy state in the center of the Asiatic mainland, after its initial difficulties, had already been recognised.

Because of this, the General Cosmic Company was on a very firm footing. Adams was in the process of revolutionizing the entire global economy by means of Arkonide technology and production. According to last reports, the share capital of GCC had climbed to 200 billion dollars. Newly subscribed issues in the amount of still another 70 billion were imminent. It was a sound business institution, clear and clean, which Homer G. Adams had brought into existence.

Even for the fraction of a second, there was absolutely nothing that could cause this man to lose his head or his nerve. Therefore, it was doubly strange that he now listened to the howling notes with trembling body and wide staring eyes. Moments later the visual confirmation came through. A violet light began to flicker. Gradually its disturbing glow replaced the natural light inside the half darkened office.

Homer G. Adams started as though coming out of a deep trance.

"No!" he whispered, as his lips paled. "Not that! Good God—not that!"

CHAPTER 2

"Move back, there!" shouted the young officer of the guard. "Are you blind or something? You can't come any farther. Back, I say! Get that car at least thirty yards behind the line!" The youngster was dripping with sweat. By the time the whine of the alert sirens subsided, the enclosed area of the Third Power looked as if all hell had broken loose.

To make things worse, just now, of all times, a motorized transport column with a shipment of Mongolian machinery had arrived. But the lieutenant at the border station could not help the arriving Asiatics now. The Arkonides' fabulous positronic robot brain had taken complete control of the border. This was a machine that knew no compromise. From the instant of its first activating signal its programmed responses allowed humans exactly two minutes to get located safely. Then the energy gates were switched on. Now the circular fence of energy glowed and flamed along the borderline. It was absolutely deadly. Nothing could penetrate it, and any attempt to fly above the mysterious barrier of interwoven energy lines and spirals was inadvisable. The robot brain was connected to numerous radar stations, and it would not hesitate a second to pluck any flying infiltrator from the sky with concentrically positioned ray gun emplacements. Because that danger existed, a general warning had been broadcast. The lieutenant scurried back into a concrete bunker inside the energy screen. The heavy fighter robots, powerful machines with flexible weapon arms and miniature atomic power packs inside their body shells, now refused to accept human commands. They had been switched over to the robot brain's control. Moments later the automatic announcement came to all border posts and other control stations that the Condition One Alert had been established. No one could either leave or enter the area of the Third Power. The great dome of the force field, visible in the exact center of the 14,400 square mile land area, awakened with a blinding intensity. Its glistening brilliance pained the eye. It was as though a synthetic sun had come into existence there.

From the now invisible spaceport, new fighter ships of the space fighter force peeled off into the sky. General Pounder, whose car had passed through the force screen with seconds to spare, found himself suddenly deserted. A lone, watchful fighter robot stood near the vehicle. Pounder was pale. His questions went unanswered, and his consternation was completely ignored. Everyone seemed simply to have forgotten him.

Colonel Freyt had emitted a single shouted oath and disappeared. He was probably racing to his command post, which lay at the edge of the spaceport. So Pounder could only arm himself with calm and patience. Somewhere someone must be looking out for him. If he had had any concept of the functioning of a positronic robot brain he would have known that the huge automaton was aware of his presence. It wasn't without purpose that the nonhuman fighter machine stood by the car. When the Arkonide computer brain registered the fact that the general was harmless and that, in addition, he had been announced, an inaudible data link signal was directed at the robot. Pounder winced as the car leaped forward and raced at high speed toward the still distant government palace.

When it arrived, an officer of the Intelligence Corps was waiting for the general. Pounder hesitated for a moment, then recognized the politely smiling man. Three years before, Li Tschubai-tung had achieved considerable international notoriety. Now he had come to be an official intelligence liaison between the Third Power and the Asiatic Federation.

Wordlessly, Pounder touched a finger to the peak of his service cap. One certainly ran into a lot of old acquaintances, he thought.

"Please wait in the reception lobby, sir," he was directed. "At the moment, none of the top officials may be contacted, which I hope you can appreciate."

"Why the alert?" the general asked briskly. "What's happened? Are you able to tell me anything?"

"I have been explicitly authorized to do so, sir. Please come in. Don't let the threatening posture of the robots disturb you. It's all part of the alert plan. They are under fully automatic control." Pounder looked around in the great hall, which presented a combination of synthetics, glass, and light effects. Here, too, there was intense activity. In the background he recognized the scintillating shafts of the fabulous antigravity elevators. Everywhere there was evidence of the most modern architectural technology, materials, and furnishings.

About a 120 million bucks, he calculated roughly to himself. He had a nose for such things.

"Mr. Bell will attend you later. That you happened to be present here at this time is very fortunate. I've been commissioned to give you a briefing. Under present circumstances we are going to have to ask you, under the agreements of Emergency Condition One, to convene the World Security Commission immediately. If agreeable in Peking, which is centrally located. Please work out the necessary decisions as quickly as possible. Our communication facilities are at your disposal."

"Pounder spoke with difficulty. "Okay, Lieutenant—I've got the message. But...are we really in it so deep again? I was thinking of a similar case that happened three years ago. Alien life forms tried in some fiendish way to take over the bodies and minds of our most important politicians and scientists. So now what is it? And have you informed the secret service yet?"

"The classified code signal was beamed out automatically. We do not waste time here, sir. Up until now, we didn't have many details to go on. Our robot sentinel station on the planet Pluto merely transmitted the locator data from our space warp sensors."

"Friend, you're looking at an inoffensive, harmless sort of man who's asking himself how come he can call himself a general and chief of the U.S. Space Force," Pounder retorted disparagingly. "We play around with balky rockets while you people are riding faster than light spaceships. Now, what the devil is a space warp sensor?" Li Tschubai-tung smiled politely. Outside, an infernal roaring sound was heard. It increased to a crashing fortissimo that died away in echoing rumbles. Pounder knew what it was, but had never heard it in such volume.

The Chinese agent explained casually, "The Good Hope has just taken off, under command of the two Arkonides. You recall the auxiliary ship of their cruiser that was destroyed on the moon?"

"Auxiliary!" groaned Pounder. Mister, to me a sixty yard diameter spherical Spaceship is a colossus! But I'm asking you—what is a space warp sensor!"

"It is an Arkonide locator device. Its purpose is to sense and determine four dimensional structure changes in the normal cosmos. It is based on a measurement of gravitational displacement. Since gravitation is a manifestation of hyperspace energy, the warp sensors respond at translight velocity. When they emit a signal, it means that somewhere within a radius of about fifty light-years the curved structure of space has been ruptured by a powerful force. In our experience this can only mean a hyperspace jump by a faster than light spaceship—a so-called transition. However, when this occurs at such close range, the defence center of the Third Power instantly goes into action. Because then, as you say, it could be our necks, sir!" Pounder felt deflated. He hadn't understood a word. "I got about as much of that as a caveman," he said. "You and Rhodan are the most capable scientists. Okay, lieutenant, say no more. I've always supported you, first against my orders, then against my oath as a soldier, and finally with the sanction of my government. You go; I'll wait. You've probably got a few things to do. Just don't forget, a very dumbfounded man is here waiting for you."

"Sir, when mankind is truly united, all this will be fully explained to you. Although the peacefulness of the world is constantly improving, it's still in everyone's best interest that Perry Rhodan alone holds total power in his hands. It also makes him duty bound to protect his world and ours. Please consider my words. The chiefs of intelligence of the three greatest world powers will arrive no later than one hour from now. Now you will have to excuse me. I have to get busy." Li Tschubai-tung hurried away. He left behind him a deeply disquieted man whose only refuge was in watching the clock.

Just then a small girl grasped him about the legs. She was accompanied by a young woman whom he recognized, but he had only heard of this delicately structured child with the pale face and the great, burning eyes.

"How are you, Mrs. Manoli?" he inquired mechanically of the young woman—but it was the child who captured his attention. There was something incomprehensible in her eyes. Hastily, he reviewed the situation. That's right—the child would be about nine years old now. For dead certain little Betty Toufry was a member of the Third Power's super-secret Mutant Corps. Ponder swallowed hard. He was well aware that Betty's father had worked in a nuclear laboratory, and the alteration of his genes had manifested itself in the child. Strangely, the result had been, not deformity, but rather an abnormally brilliant mentality that no normal human being could hope to have. In fact, he wasn't sure just what capacities the girl did possess. He made a decision to speak to the Western sector intelligence chief about it. Ponder didn't especially like the idea that Perry Rhodan not only sheltered such monsters but schooled them, as well. He started as the girl turned from him abruptly. She went and stood close to the shimmering force field of the anti-gravity elevator.

"You should not think such things, sir." Her words came to him like a gentle wind across the great hall.

Ponder sank down into his seat. He knew that he was witnessing a true natural telepath, a being before whom one's most secret thoughts lay bare. Suddenly he felt chilled to the spine.

A phantom raced through the deep blackness of space. The high pitched whine of the pulse drive engines working at full thrust was hardly noticeable to the man who sat almost unmoving behind the controls. But Perry Rhodan's thoughts were racing. He traversed the lunar orbit at high velocity. The Earth glowed already across the bow of the little space combat ship. The reversed field tubes spewed a stream of particles ahead of him, against his direction of flight. In this manner the small, torpedo-shaped machine braked itself with a deceleration of three hundred miles per second. Rhodan checked the automatic approach indicator again. When he reached the altitude of the satellite orbit he would have to be at reentry velocity. Glimmering flecks of light appeared on the screen of the translight speed hypersensor. From the speaker of the voice link system crackled fragmentary words, but he paid no heed. The objects shooting toward him now had been built by human beings, and those who sat in the narrow pressure cabins of the fighter ships were also human.

On the small picture screen of the telecom, a young man's face appeared. His brief nod was accompanied by a smile. "Deringhouse to Comet One—second alert group taking off. We're going into picket position. Do you have any orders, Chief?" Perry lifted the microphone to his lips. Before him the Earth grew out of the void like a gigantic ball. The continents of the Western Hemisphere and a large part of the Pacific were clearly discernible. The European coastline merged into the dark shadow crescent of night.

"None. At least, not yet. Keep the traffic down, please. I've already got the reports, Has the alert been established?"

"As programmed, All hell's busted loose down there." Rhodan broke off the communication.

Major Deringhouse's fighter group shot past into space as the incoming ship made its

reentry manoeuvres. Moments later, Rhodan went into his braking orbit. This took him once around the Earth, until he dipped with a flaming heat shield into the upper layers of the atmosphere. The white glowing gases of the displaced air masses roared in the vacuum created by the fighter ship. It was as though a meteor hurtled through the thickening strata of the skies. Rhodan used a fast approach landing technique of the Arkonides. All the power of the repulse projector was concentrated on an ionization of air molecules, which could thus be repelled out of the path of the plunging ship. This, too, was a development of which a capable man like General Pounder would hardly have dared to dream. Perry Rhodan put it to use with the casual confidence born of his special knowledge.

He took little notice of the screaming turbulence created by his penetration of the thicker layers of the atmosphere; his thoughts were concentrated on the significance of the Condition One Alert, an eventuality he had worked with an almost clairvoyant anxiety to prepare for. And now the long dreaded emergency was upon him.

He still did not know precisely what had happened, but the fact that the positronic robot brain had set up the alert was an indication that the existence of Earth and its position in the galaxy were in danger of being discovered. For three years Rhodan's thoughts and plans had revolved around this point. Three years previously, shortly after the establishment of the Third Power, extraterrestrial beings had succeeded for the first time in getting a foothold on Earth. After that crisis was past, weeks, months, and years had passed without untoward event, so that the feverish building activity in the area of the Third Power might have been considered overaccelerated. He had been given just three years of time. During this brief period at least a firm stabilization of world peace had been achieved, and he had been able to unite the great powers of the world into a single defence coalition.

How futile that would all be if the Earth should again be discovered! What would happen in this still embryonic stage of preparation, if the presence of alien intelligences were to be confirmed and they were about to move against this island home of mankind and try to land here or launch a surprise blitz? Rhodan's darkest fears had been confirmed by the advent of the Condition One Alert. The northern Siberian coastline came into view. The radiation detectors indicated that he was being scanned by countless radar stations. Down below they knew who this was who came shooting out, of space in this seemingly reckless and crazy flight.

Mongolia came into the field of vision. As the gleaming energy shield surrounding the center area of the Third Power blossomed out on his observation screen, Rhodan recalled the emergency landing he had made here three years ago, returning in an Earth rocket from the moon. He and his companions had been the first men to make a lunar landing, and what they had found there had made it necessary to set down in an isolated area of Earth. They had brought the Arkonides with them.

That had set off a chain reaction of violent activity. The heated arguments and fighting had begun. Attack after attack had been launched by the major countries against the center of this new power, until it was realized how over-powering the alien technology and means of defence could be. Then the concept 'Arkonide' had appeared for the first time in the world press. Today it was universally known that there was much to thank the aliens for. On the other hand—and this was a deciding factor—their accidental appearance had opened the definite possibility of Earth's being discovered by others. Probably the planet Earth might have remained a completely unknown celestial body for a considerable time to come, if the Arkonide cruiser had not beamed out an automatic distress signal when it was destroyed by hydrogen bombs. That signal had needled through interstellar space clear to the Milky Way. From that moment on, Earth's lotus dream of isolation was at an end. As Rhodan transmitted his IFF code to the defence triggered robot brain and the fighter was taken over by the remote control station, he was convinced of one thing for sure—the human race was in for a sudden and no doubt terrible awakening. Now men would have to accept conclusively the fact that other highly intelligent beings existed, beings against whom humans had nothing, or almost nothing to compare. The tall, lean man in the narrow pressurized cockpit frowned deeply under the weight of these deliberations. It was up to him and the two surviving Arkonides to do what ever they

could for the safety of the world. The ship landed smoothly. The small high yield reactor behind the cockpit radiation shield damped down and thereby cut off the powerful energy converter systems...

Colonel Freyt saluted briskly. His penetrating glance took in the sinewy figure of his returning commander. Rhodan flipped his pressurised helmet back. In his gray eyes glimmered a subdued tension. Silently, he took the offered cigarette.

The chief would not have led one to believe, by his appearance, that he had just tested a space fighter in the vicinity of Mars about an hour ago. Rhodan remained the man without nerves. At least he had excellent control, having learned to deny the existence of physical manifestations.

"Chief, the Good Hope has taken off under command of Thora and Khrest," Freyt announced, "Deringhouse and Nyssen have taken up about fifty-four ships. I held the third group back on standby. If necessary we can move on fifty seconds' notice. Just before the alert General Pounder arrived; he's waiting in the government building. One question, Chief—what's happened? Down here, we—"

"Bell isn't talking, eh?" Rhodan interrupted, "Then don't ask I'm not cued in myself. Keep your eyes open. Take care of my ship, okay?" Deeply troubled, Freyt's eyes followed the departing helicopter. The chopper, in sharp contrast to the superior facilities of the Third Power, was of normal terrestrial fabrication. In the background he saw the dome-shaped defence screen collapse for a brief second; then Rhodan was inside. Immediately the great bell of energy arched anew into the blue sky of the Gobi Desert.

Rhodan landed on the rooftop helicopter port of the government building. He smiled ironically when the robots saluted him. To him it was petty nonsense to load the complicated brains of the fighting machines with such incidental programming. Rhodan had no patience for grandiose ceremonies.

Only one human appeared, to receive him. The thin faced, dark haired man also wore the new uniform of the Third Power, but the becoming uniform bore no insignia of rank. Instead there gleamed on his left breast an unusual service patch, which on closer inspection revealed a brain surrounded by a shining aura. The mutant, John Marshall, waited until Rhodan's gaze locked with his. He sensed instinctively what was going on inside the cranium of this great man. It seemed to him almost as if Rhodan were deliberately delaying his entrance into the command center. "Hello, Marshall! How goes it with the mind reading business?"

"Not so well, where you are concerned," asserted the other.

"You are expected, sir. Bell is beside himself. The world security leaders will be here in about fifteen minutes. We don't quite know what's going to develop." Rhodan stepped wordlessly into the shimmering field of the antigrav lift, which carried them weightlessly below. Marshall was thinking of how Rhodan might handle himself in this situation. In contrast to the madhouse atmosphere inside the government building, he seemed the epitome of calm and self-possession. Marshall probed cautiously, searching for the thought content of his dark blond companion.

Rhodan's hair was damp with perspiration. He still wore his light spacesuit. "Cut it off, Marshall!" Rhodan said darkly. "You're bumping against a wall. Have you tried probing General Pounder?" Marshall frowned, sudden displeasure kindled in his dark eyes. "He thinks we are monsters!" he growled. "Certain people don't appear willing to realise that we, the so-called monsters, came into being only as a result of monstrous nuclear research." Rhodan smiled grim amusement. "Otherwise Pounder is clean, right? Listen, John, you shouldn't get worked up over monster inferences and similar expressions you may hear. You have to think of the normal human and how he would react to your superhuman gifts. Now as to myself—" His words were drowned out by the heavy thunder of a landing spaceship. At the next floor, Rhodan sprang out of the lift. "The Good Hope has come back!" he exclaimed.

"I should have coordinated that with you. Thora thinks it advisable to leave the ship under the energy screen for the time being. Reg Bell has blocked his mind from me. I can't detect what he thinks of it. I still don't even know what's really happened." Rhodan's lean face, which had become angular under suppressed tension, was relieved momentarily by a fleeting smirk. "So Reg is playing games too. Okay, the time is up. Have you noticed that I've been stalling too?" The telepath smiled. Yes, he had noticed.

"Let's go—and pray to God that we come out of this in one piece! The Earth is still far too weak to sustain an attack by one of the great galactic powers. With our space fighters we would be hopelessly outmatched by a real fleet. Come on!"

CHAPTER 3

She comported herself in a self-possessed manner, cool and arrogant. Nevertheless, whether or not she really had her nerves under control was questionable.

Thora, former female commander of the Arkonide space research cruiser that had made a forced lunar landing and had subsequently been destroyed by Earthmen, was again mindful of her origin. Her manner was brittle; more unnatural seeming than it was dignified. Thus, silently, she observed the scurrying Earthmen in the inner sanctum of their command center.

Rhodan had been unwilling to establish this most important control point underground. If the protective screen were broken through, by whatever power source, then the best subterranean bunker would be purposeless.

Thora's beautiful face, which gave no sign of her age, was like an expressionless mask. She had stated her demands. It depended now on Perry Rhodan to indicate just how ready he was to fulfil them. She felt uneasy among these terrestrials who hurried about so and made hasty calculations and carried on their heated discussions. As a lineal descendant of the Arkonide Empire's ruling dynasty, she had more than once expressed the opinion that the human race was very low on the evolutionary ladder. Her gaze wandered to the founders and rulers of that miniature terrestrial state which was known as the Third Power. Her lips tightened bitterly. Granted, Perry Rhodan was a superior human. Now, after he had absorbed the entire wisdom of the Arkonide race through hypnotic learning methods, he had even evolved to a state that was beyond normal humanity. This was a man who could never again be taken unaware by any event. For this very reason, she thought, he should reflect a little more often on the fact that his knowledge and ability stemmed from the Arkonides. In grandiose fashion and with astonishing casualness he had taken over the total gifts of a science and knowledge that his species had been ignorant of only three and a half years ago. He juggled elementary powers and projects about in a manner that was breathtaking for the Arkonides. Be that as it might, she did permit herself the conclusion that Perry Rhodan was the only noteworthy individual in almost four billion members of his race.

The eager cooperativeness of Khrest, her scientific adviser and fellow being, filled her with scorn. The leading Arkonide scientist, the symbol of the mental superiority of the "Greater Empire," seemed to thrive once more under the influence of Rhodan's will. It was astonishing to what extent Rhodan could dominate the best mind of Arkon. Thora bided her time in the background, absorbed in a strange mixture of love and hate for the man to whom, on the one hand, she would grant anything and, on the other, continue to deny. Boundless indignation and resentment were joined with an unbidden awakening of tender emotions in her.

On the concave output screen of the positronic robot brain, conclusive data symbols

darted and glowed. Rhodan manipulated the controls with a trancelike infallibility. He controlled a machine whose consummate perfection had never before responded to a human command. Nevertheless, it responded.

The hoarse voice of a stocky, broad shouldered man rang out. "Warp rupture number 118!" he announced.

Thora was shaken. Reginald Bell, former captain in the U.S. Space Force and one of the Earth-lunar pioneers, now also demonstrated his legendary coolness under fire, which those who knew him had come to expect.

"Another hyperspace jump, the 119th transition," he announced even louder above the whirring and humming of the vast electronic installation. "That does it! It's senseless to monitor the reports any longer. Gentlemen, what do you say?" His glance darted between Perry Rhodan and Khrest. The two men harboured different opinions. Rhodan got up from the swivel chair. "Do you agree, Khrest?" he asked pensively.

The Arkonide revealed traces of an excitement, very unusual for this completely reticent but amiable extraterrestrial. Rhodan felt that the Earthbound Third Power was at a turning point. So he said, "I believe that the second epoch of our enterprise has just dawned. Think about it. The reports from our robot station on Pluto indicate conclusively that the hyper disturbances detected by the warp sensors are located in the region of Vega. Further, it has been determined that countless spaceships have completed a hyperspace jump back into the normal cosmos. This means that unknown intelligent life forms are equipped with the means and power to investigate a probable Vega system. Be logical, Khrest. I value your understanding and tolerance. You have been of great help to humans and to the Earth in general."

"Then for once consider our special wishes!" Thora interjected from the background.

Doctors Haggard and Manoli quickly exchanged glances. Haggard frowned, perturbed. Undoubtedly, Thora was going to be difficult.

"Your special wishes were not possible to fulfil before," Rhodan retorted sharply. "The position of Earth in the galaxy must always remain secret. Three years ago the incident of the Mind Snatchers was enough for me. Khrest, you and your conjectures are on the wrong track."

"I am going to have to beg and implore you now, as I have before, to launch a flight toward Vega at once," Khrest persisted. "My calculations indicate precisely that the world I have searched for so desperately must be among the planets of that great star. Perry—at least once, heed my wishes! It has been almost four years, by Early reckoning, since we made a forced landing on the moon. That landing was never our intention. We came to this remote region of the galaxy in search of a planet whose inhabitants possess the secret of biological cell conservation. That means eternal life."

"You don't even know for sure if Vega has any planets at all," Reginald Bell interjected. "Your calculations may be right—so what? I see no reason to throw ourselves into this witch's kettle. The ships that have come there from hyperspace are probably not a threat to Earth at the moment, even though their arrival means that the location of Earth will eventually be exposed to discovery." Rhodan maintained his disquieting state of silence. Below in the great conference room sat the heads of the world security and representatives of Earth governments. The alert had been on a global scale—and now this surprise turn of events! "I hold to my opinion that these are Arkonide spaceships whose commanders have also been commissioned to search for the world of eternal life," Khrest asserted excitedly. Rhodan's iron calm seemed to upset him severely. Again, the answer came from Bell. "Khrest, you don't believe that! We've all agreed that the once mighty and active race of the Arkonides was degenerating rapidly. Their mental decline was so bad only four years ago that they put out their maximum effort, just to pull themselves together long enough to equip their own research cruiser. Those characters that have jumped out of hyperspace into the Vega system have nothing in common with your own

people. Trust my instinct in this. I reject the idea of launching the Good Hope on an interstellar mission, which would require a hyperspace jump. If our space warp sensor equipment can locate and take accurate bearings on their points of emergence, why shouldn't they be able to pick up our own hyper disturbance? That could betray the entire solar system. what the hell—what am I Security Minister for?" Bell got up from the control seat. Above him the image screens of the hypercommunicators lighted up, responding to translight speed impulse. The message came in from Major Nyssen of the first space fighter group that the solar system was completely free of alien objects.

"There you are," Bell said bitterly. His water blue eyes glittered with animosity. "Khrest, I'm not going to be a party to sacrificing the Good Hope. The warp sensors on Pluto have now tallied up exactly 222 hypertransitions, all in the near region of Vega. Are you seriously considering the idea of throwing the only major space vessel we have into that chaos? I think it's crazy?"

"Your opinion is by no means the deciding one, Mr. Bell!" Thora said acridly. Her manner had become more rigid, but her mask of inscrutability was gone. Her face revealed her emotions.

She was beautiful, thought Rhodan. It was a mental statement that often repeated itself automatically. He measured her through narrowing eyes.

When she noticed his rare smile, she faltered in midsentence. Her features tensed. She was suddenly nervous.

"Go on," Rhodan urged. "Anything else?"

Bell clenched his heavy fists. "I have nothing to say," he replied bitterly. Perry is the chief. Thora—even if you can't stand the sight of me, you should think of the spaceship at this moment. The Good Hope is our only faster than light vessel. You've got to realize that our luck to this point has been uncanny. When the first alarm signals came through from Pluto, I was already imagining an alien fleet over the Earth. It can't hurt either you or ourselves if we prefer to be a little overcautious. In about one year the new ship construction will be completed; then we can consider further steps. I'll be overjoyed if we're left alone until that time. We are just not armed for a serious engagement with alien intelligences. And under such a situation you want to do the very thing that we have avoided doing for three years, in the interests of safety—namely, make a hyperspace jump. Not to mention your goal of Vega, where at the moment a swarm of alien spaceships has appeared?" Rhodan cleared his throat.

John Marshall grinned. Colonel Freyt, the newly arrived commander of the space fighter group, was amused at Bell's display of temperament during his speech. "You give me no opportunity, Perry," complained the Arkonide. "For three years now you've denied me even short trips in the radius of fifty light-years."

"That's right. My own Curiosity has been restricted by a primary concern for the safety of Earth. You know full well that the quickest way for a newly developing center of power to get itself discovered is by causing a gravitational warp stress, which would happen if we tried a hyperspace jump."

"But we've waited long enough. I maintain again, as I have before, that the ships appearing in the Vega system are from my home planet. The spreading degeneration of our race is the very reason why we are urged and driven to preserve the remaining healthy members by means of a synthetic extension of life. In the ruling councils of Arkon, every last possible resource will have been dedicated by now to the discovery of the planet which holds the secret of cellular preservation." Thora's voice was heard again. "I demand an immediate start! There is no doubt that we will be able to make contact with our own people in the Vega System. The hypnotic treatment you have received has given you all the knowledge that we ourselves possess; you have no further need of us. You can have the Good Hope, as a gift from me. Just be careful how you develop your so beloved mankind into a galactic power. To achieve such a goal you will have to first bring the primitive,

instinctively motivated members of your species into a semblance of unity. You now have the means. So again—I demand that the star trip start at once, so that we can be delivered into the Vega system."

"Your ideas are idiotic!" Bell shouted furiously. "Do I have to say it in plain words? Your proud race of Arkonides has had it! I'm sorry, but it's time you got your eyes opened. I still have a vivid recollection of the gaping, zombie stares of your crew members on the wrecked cruiser. You and Khrest are lucky that your minds are still with you. Apply them, if you will, to some logical purpose, but not to crazy fantasies!" The words were hard, almost brutal in their frankness. Rhodan still held off, waiting.

Thora trembled in every limb. Khrest seemed to crumble inwardly. He sank back helplessly. The command center was blanketed by an oppressive silence. Only the crackling of the galactic comstation penetrated here from the next room.

"Colonel Freyt!"

Rhodan's voice was cold and sharp. Freyt started, then automatically came to attention. Reginald Bell stared, wide eyed, at the face of the commander; he knew that look. Rhodan had been what the space force psychologists had referred to as an instantaneous-adaptive-mercurially, he could switch from absolute calm to effective action. This ability had been pronouncedly augmented by his hypno treatments under the Arkonides. He was now once more the all demanding, uncompromising commander who had no patience with back talk. "Sir!" Freyt responded, swallowing hard.

"Order Major Deringhouse to return to base. He is to land immediately. Nyssen stays with his fighter group in the lunar orbit. Thank you. Captain Klein!"

Klein came to attention. The smoke gray eyes of the chief invited no question. Rhodan wasn't conscious that his will radiated a suggestive power that forced people to obey. "Place emergency squads under Condition Twilight of the Gods. Fifty men are sufficient. You will be in charge. Also, reprogram 100 fighter robots to respond to your individual frequencies. We take off in exactly five hours. Thank you very much!"

Two white-faced officers left the room.

In Khrest's old-young face flickered new hope. He cautiously collected himself. "Thank you, he said in choked tones. "You will receive all the help conceivable in the Vega system. Under the circumstances I can arrange to have a heavy battle cruiser turned over to you. Under all circumstances, the Great Empire will protect the Earth. We will not forget what you have done for us. I—" Khrest broke off under the tall man's surveillance. A spark of compassion glimmered in the remote corners of those bright eyes, which now seemed not quite so grim. "Khrest, I am very sorry, but you won't find a single Arkonide ship in the Vega system. You are in error. Your race is no longer capable of launching such a major project. Remember that we have detected more than 200 hypertransit spaceships. Those are not your people." Bell's husky figure pressed forward. "My thoughts exactly," he said. "So why, if I may ask, have you decided to go? Our detector data shows that we haven't been observed yet. What purpose can it serve to bring ourselves to the attention of this unknown force? I'm asking you, what can it accomplish? You are fully aware that these strangers have concentrated their hyperentry on the region of Vega—not here. We've been wanting to make an interstellar hyper trip so bad we could taste it, but for good reason we've restrained ourselves for years. Has everybody gone crazy around here?"

"If I were a dictator," whispered Rhodan, "that would have been your last card." The disquieting smile was back again. "Has it occurred to you that you, too, have made a mistake in judgment?"

"Who—me?"

"Yes, you. The Good Hope will take off in five hours. Exclusively in the interests of Earth, but only for reconnaissance. As a matter of fact, I find it difficult to remain idle in the face of an alien invasion that is occurring only twenty-seven light-years away. It is definitely an invasion. Merchants and scholars don't appear in a massive commitment of obviously heavy class ships. And another thing..."Perry Rhodan looked grimly about the room.

"One further consideration you missed, gentlemen! Somebody, though well acquainted with the star reaches of galactic space, has tripped over one little mistake. This invasion was aimed at Earth, not Vega. Somebody has made a slight miscalculation. By a fraction of a decimal point, the emergency call beamed out three years ago from the Arkonide cruiser has been mistraced. In terms of galactic distances a small error in hyperspace navigation could result in missing the target by twenty-seven light-years. That's why we will investigate what is going on out there. Gentlemen, the Second Epoch has begun—or you might call it the Second Crisis. Mr. Marshal, announce me to the waiting delegates."Rhodan now in uniform, slapped on his service cap, saluted lightly, and strode toward the heavy bulkhead of Arkon steel. Behind him the room was pervaded by a brittle silence, which was shattered only seconds later by a scornful laugh.

Reginald Bell stood defiantly in front of the complicated scanner consoles, watching him go. "If you're right, sir, then I've nothing more to say. But if alien intelligences are attracted to the Earth through this madness, then I will have to describe the chief of the Third Power as an irresponsible kid. By your leave, Commander—if any subordinate officer made such a mistake, I'd haul him before a military court-marshal on the grounds of wilfully endangering global security!"Dr. Manoli clutched at the arms of his chair. His lips trembled as Perry Rhodan turned around slowly.

Rhodan's gaze was enigmatic, his voice quiet and even. "I'd do the same, Reg," he said. "'Exactly the same."He turned briskly. The armoured bulkhead hatch slammed shut behind him. The saluting Arkonide fighter robots suddenly lowered their weapon arms. The chief was gone.

"God knows you're certainly not a psychologist!" murmured Dr. Haggard. For three years he had been Health Minister of the Third Power, as well as the founder of the world famous Arkon Clinic.The heavily built giant moved toward the armour plate door, and Manoli, former ship's doctor of the Stardust, followed him silently. Reginald Bell watched them gloomily. Then his gaze fell upon the two Arkonides.He was beginning to understand why Perry Rhodan had finally given up his longstanding resistance to a translight space flight—why he had to give it up. The possibility of turning Khrest and Thora into bitter enemies of mankind must have been a greater deciding factor for Rhodan than the probability of being detected by alien beings...

The thundering of the mighty pulse drive propulsion system was like a roll of drums from invisible giants. With a roar of intolerable sound, the Good Hope lifted from its cradle inside the great, domed defence screen. As the upper curved hull of the sixty yard diameter space sphere threatened to contact the gleaming force field of the screen, the positronic robot brain cut the power, with the infallibility of a nerveless machine.The energy field collapsed, the ship glided through, and an instant later the intense brilliance of the shield's incomprehensible alien power was visible. With the replacement of the force shield the raging sound of the departing ship was also cut off. Fractions of a second later it disappeared into the Gobi Desert sky. Rhodan accelerated the ship at a velocity that would have caused an ordinary hull to glow from the air friction.General Lesley Pounder restrained the flood of his emotions. As a rocket man it was for him a grand experience to see the giant spaceship race into the heavens with seemingly unlimited power. By comparison, the nuclear powered rockets of the space force seemed to be futile and awkward—and not only those of the space force!Gregor Petronskij, marshal and chief of the Eastern Air and Space Defence, also wore a solemn expression on his granite countenance. The glances two high officers met.

"Where is our pride?" said Pounder. "We couldn't be smaller and more helpless than if

we were under the foot of a giant!" Marshal Petronskij declined to answer. His bearing and manner were uncamouflaged; there was no more of doubts and secret enemies. By his mere advent, at least Perry Rhodan had achieved that.

"The small, delicately structured man with the crown of gleaming golden hair smiled pleasantly. No one looked upon him as the all powerful chief of a secret service, although such was his identity in the International Intelligence Agency. Allan D. Mercant advanced a few steps forward. The brief emergency conference held by Rhodan had landed like a bomb. Mercant looked at the clock. When he spoke, his voice was as peaceful and pleasant as ever.

"Shall we go, gentlemen? Or is there any doubt remaining that other intelligences than man exist? If not, then may I urge you to acquaint your governments with the results of the conference? During the next few days you will find me in Washington. Shall we fly together, General?"

Pounder nodded briefly.

"What's going to happen if Rhodan's reconnaissance flight ends in a fiasco?" asked someone in the background. This was Kosselow, chief of the Eastern Secret Service. Mercant drew the back of his hand across a perspiring forehead. "Then we can only hope that the Earth will not be discovered. Gentlemen, you must impress forcefully upon your governments that we are no longer alone! It is high time that we abandoned, once and for all, the still lingering prejudices we have against a universal unity. If an extraterrestrial opponent should appear, mankind cannot be divided."

The men departed.

"If it only succeeds," Petriskij murmured. "If the detector indications are correct, Rhodan is going to be shoved into a witch's kettle. How high would you evaluate the fighting capability of the Good Hope?"

"That depends entirely on what the unknown opponents have to offer."

"Well, let's wait and see," answered Petronskij "In my own area of command I'm going to prepare the nuclear attack alert system. If outsiders are going to show an interest in us, I want to know that everything is in as good a working order as possible."

CHAPTER 4

The thick Venusian jungle still trembled in the echoing thunder of the takeoff as the Good Hope disappeared through the roiling turbulence created in the cloud cover of the Solar System's second planet. Only an afterglowing streak of powerfully compressed and superheated air masses marked the steep ascent path of the spaceship, which had traversed the Earth-Venus distance in approximately forty minutes. For Perry Rhodan the touchdown on Venus had been merely a short digression for the purpose of gathering information. However, as it turned out, the side trip developed an almost life and death importance.

After it had been demonstrated that the relatively small robot brain in the realm of the Third Power did not contain information concerning the probable planetary system of Vega, Rhodan had fallen back on the vague hope of utilizing the giant computer on Venus. The mechanical positronic monster, constructed by the Arkonides long ago in the time of their galactic expansion, was able to yield the precise information that Perry needed as a last resort.

Prior to landing on Venus he had let it be understood, accompanied by an unusually amiable smile, that the twenty-seven light-year hyperspace jump to Vega could be

undertaken only if they were in possession of pertinent and demonstrable data concerning the planetary family of the giant star. Khrest and Thora had concealed their annoyance in stubborn silence. The situation on board the Good Hope had seriously approached the state of a feud. Rhodan was confident that a workable compromise solution would be found.

Interrogation of the positronic giant, a thousand times greater in its capacity for data retrieval than the robot brain they had removed from the Good Hope and installed on Earth, was completed with positive results. Yes, the neighbouring astronomical areas of the solar system had been investigated, more than 10,000 years before, when the ships of the Arkonides had emerged into the system and the Venusian stronghold had been built as a cosmic refuge. At that time the Arkonides must have been mentally powerful and free willed, in contrast to their degenerated stage of the present. Naturally, care had been taken to provide information concerning the neighbouring firmament of Earth.

Perry had counted on this. On the other hand, Thora and Khrest were greatly surprised. Inasmuch as the corresponding details about the Vega system had not been established in the robot brain of the destroyed research cruiser, they had taken it for granted that this would also be the case where the giant computer at the Venus base was concerned.

Though he had no stomach for it, Rhodan was forced once more to bring Khrest's attention to a basic error of his race. On the basis of incontestable fact it was a foregone conclusion that the central positronic memory banks on their distant home planet had been far from containing all knowledge. Further, this inferred that many Arkonide expeditions to distant worlds were never reported or registered. Formerly, this possibility had been vehemently denied by Khrest. Armed with his new information, Rhodan took off once more—this time, however, with the distant goal in his sights.

The deep thunder of the drive engines in full thrust was now a muted sound in the control room of the spherical spaceship. Full thrust—this meant the expulsion of a very heavy stream of light speed particles that were uniformly compressed and beam aligned by an energy field generated in hyperspace. Perry Rhodan and the Arkonides designated the drive pulses as "corpuscular waves," which had caused something of a stir in Earthly professional circles. Arkonide technology seemed to be upsetting the established theories and tending to make scientific impossibilities possible. Judging by Rhodan's last lecture at the now world famous Space Flight Academy, it appeared unavoidable that a large segment of Earthly schooling would have to be thrown overboard, or at least some new relationships would have to be established, if Arkonide scientific concepts were to be grasped. Pulse drive propulsion and corpuscular waves—these concepts could he grasped and mastered only by means of fifth dimensional mathematics. The Good Hope accelerated at the seemingly mad rate of 300 miles per second, which enabled it to reach the speed of light in slightly more than ten minutes.

This time span was theoretical, however, because it was based on the well-known maxim of relativistic velocity in accordance with the simple linear relationship: Velocity equals Time times Constant Acceleration. To an observer on Earth, after ten minutes of constant acceleration the Good Hope would seem to have reached only seventy percent of the speed of light. On the other hand, Rhodan was increasingly aware of the "dilation effect," in which an equally relativistic contraction of the given time span occurred. By Earth standards the equations were far too complicated; Arkonides of Khrest's calibre were accustomed to solving them mentally. There were numerous problems connected with the command of an interstellar spaceship. In spite of their outstanding qualities as scientists, Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell had faced insurmountable obstacles if they had not received the Arkonide hypno treatment and training. As the Good Hope raced ever more swiftly through interplanetary space, Rhodan was able to control the ship with confident ease. The controls were highly automated and if necessary could be handled by one person, provided that person had acquired Arkonide technological training.

Khrest and Thora looked forward to the hypertransition with a matter of fact composure. In spite of their successful qualification and training, however, Rhodan and Reginald Bell could not conceal a certain degree of anticipatory tension. Everything was

going smoothly, perhaps too smoothly. The calculations necessary for making the twenty-seven light-year hyperjump were already being closely referenced to the great star that was their goal. The basic data furnished by the direction finders was fed into the galactonautic computer, which took into account such items as ship's mass, distance, and prevailing gravitational field—all as a prelude to deriving the humanly incomprehensible "jump impulse," designated by the Arkonides as the "universal hypertransition velocity." Rhodan well knew that the resolution of such a problem as breaking the "light barrier" could neither be encompassed nor even come close to being explained by Earthly mathematics. Thus, at first exposure he had been admonished to abandon all handed down Earthly knowledge, in order to concentrate solely on the findings of Arkonide science. This was sufficient cause to involve him and Bell in an emotional conflict. It didn't seem to matter what each of them had already personally experienced, tried, or proved. They were like those legendary primordials who became familiar with the use of fire through observation but who could not conceive that the flames could be painful and dangerous. The rumble of the four synchronous pulse drive generators increased to a muffled thunder. The closer the Good Hope approached the speed of light, the more intensely the unEarthly machines responded to the demand on them. Earth's orbit had already been crossed. The ship accelerated swiftly away from the sun in order to trigger the hyperspace jump while still inside the solar system. As the speedometer readings indicated within nine-tenths of one percent of light speed and the audible signals of the main autopilot began to howl for additional ionized plasma injection, Rhodan suddenly released the controls. His high backed swivel chair swung around. Only the leaders of the small crew had appeared in the control room. On the numerous observation screens glittered distant suns, many of which must have possessed planetary systems.

Thora cocked her head curiously on one side, her eyes bright with a sudden alarm. "You stopped the acceleration! Why!"

A flick of Perry's hand extinguished the signal lamps on the hyper sector panel. He got slowly to his feet. Bell studied him. Something was wrong. "Your very thorough hypno training has planted the fact in my mind that it's not especially advisable to make a hyperjump from inside a planetary system," he explained slowly. "We'll coast in free fall to the orbit of Jupiter at just under the speed of light. I don't want to produce any unfavourable magnetic disturbances in the Earth's magnetic field. May I ask you to join me at once in the personnel mess?" Bell switched the hypersensors over to the defence screen projectors for instant recognition and analysis of any possible foreign bodies that might appear. Then he, too, got up. The fully positronic autopilot was more reliable than any human.

The mutant John Marshall probed telepathically across to the two Arkonides. When he failed to get through their mental shields he turned for help to the pale, delicate girl with the overlarge eyes. Betty Toufry bestowed a slight smile on him, which was not the smile of a child at all. She indicated with a shrug of her shoulders that she had also failed to pick up the thoughts of the aliens, although her powers were greater than Marshall's. The diminutive Japanese mutant, who had been standing next to Bell, suddenly disappeared. As a part of his continuous practice and training, Tako Kakuta, the man with the astonishing capability of teleportation, had again chosen to take a shortcut.

Besides Betty, Marshall, and the small Japanese, there were still two other people he had hardly known before the take-off. Rhodan had ordered two ultrafast space fighters to pick them up from the Venus base, where they had completed their final schooling.

People claimed that Wuriu Sengu, a plump, powerfully built Japanese, could see through solid matter by the strength of his will alone. Before he was discovered in Japan by the Mutant Search Corps, he had been employed as a miner. His fellow workers had always been deeply mystified when he predicted with infallible accuracy whether a new gallery would yield coal.

Ralf Marten, offspring of a German merchant and a Japanese woman, possessed even more conspicuous talents. He, too, belonged to that endangered generation which saw the light of day shortly after the bomb over Hiroshima. The way Bell heard it, this tall, slender

man was supposed to be able to shut off his personal identity temporarily and, in a parapsychic sense, see through other people's eyes and hear through their ears. Any target of his choosing could never escape his penetration, in spite of the most secret precautions. This seemed to explain Ralf Marten's enormous success in business. The addition of the five mutants to the already unusual personnel roster completed an uncanny crew. To the Arkonides, whose more advanced development had accustomed them to such phenomena, the mutants were to some extent bearable. However, to the normal human crewmembers they were plain monsters. Though they refrained from voicing such an opinion aloud or, if possible, even thinking it, emotionally the idea was dominant.

As everyone arrived in the crew mess, which had been rebuilt to human requirements, a notable rift built up immediately between the mutants and the fifty commando emergency troops who had been signed on. Mixed glances of cautious respect, awe, mistrust, and curiosity passed back and forth. The mysterious Mutant Corps, created by Perry Rhodan and officially known as the Special Unit of the Third Power, represented an almost frightening safety factor. In spite of their outstanding training, the fifty specialized soldiers could not avoid feeling at a disadvantage. On the other hand, Perry Rhodan knew very well that in the present generation a bridging of the schism between mutants and normal men was not possible to any significant extent. It was enough for him in the meantime to achieve a tolerable relationship between those who were involved.

An atmosphere of high voltage tension, excitement, and involuntary resignation dominated the mess. The latter condition applied to Bell, whose objections to a hyperspace fight were now completely ignored.

Rhodan made his speech short. His glance at the clock gave everyone to understand that any protracted questions were futile.

"As soon as we reach the orbit of Jupiter, we'll make the first hyperspace jump ever attempted by Earthmen," he explained quietly. Nevertheless, his inner tension was felt. "I am urging you to adhere precisely to all instructions you have received. Doctors Haggard and Manoli will check all of you right after the completed jump. It can of course be assumed that no harm of any sort will result. If this thing were dangerous, the Arkonide race would have died out more than 10,000 years ago. During the transition, keep yourselves completely relaxed. It is in the nature of things that you will not remain in a material state during the penetration into fifth dimensional hyperspace. This means that in passing over your physical organism will be disconnected from you because in its present state it cannot exist in the so called supernatural plane. However, you can be sure that when you pop out again into the normal four dimensional cosmos your appendixes will be found in the same spot where Nature intended them to be. Now, there is another item...." Rhodan looked about him laconically, deliberately inscrutable. The robot brain on Venus contains precise particulars concerning Vega. According to the data, about 10,000 years ago the giant star possessed a system of more than forty-two planets, which isn't so amazing when you consider its gigantic size. Before the time period mentioned, Arkonide explorers took a look around in the Vega area and brought home fairly complete information. Intelligent life was found only on planet number eight, which is called Ferrol, and its inhabitants are referred to as Ferrons. These people are supposed to be very humanlike in form—that is, they have two arms and two legs, they walk upright, they have only one head, and so forth. "When the Arkonides visited Ferrol, its inhabitants had just discovered gunpowder. That can mean that today, after 10,000 years, they may have nuclear weapons or may even have achieved interstellar space flight. Either we'll find an outstanding race of people there or a planet sized radioactive slag heap spinning a lonely course around its sun. Prepare yourself for any variation of surprises and keep yourselves under control. That's all I wanted to tell you for now. If you can, try to sleep another hour. It will be to your best advantage if you can pass through the transition while sleeping." Rhodan tapped a salute against the peak of his cap and left the room. Captain Klein dismissed his men, and Major Deringhouse, who was responsible for the two space fighters that had been brought along, decided to check his machines again. As the bulkhead door of the hangar slid upward, he said to himself, "So help me, this whole thing has a tilt to it!"

Reginald Bell was preoccupied with similar though. Avoiding the antigrav lift, he clambered up the spiral emergency stairs to the control room above. As he entered the bewilderingly instrumented room, he was confronted by a shimmering phenomenon directly before him. Out of emptiness emerged the outline of a human form, which split seconds later evolved into the unmistakable frail shape of Kakuta.

The teleportationist's childlike face broke into an amiable smile. "You forgot your hat, sir!" he said. "Here you are!" Bell counted automatically to three, then swung a heavy fist. Of Kakuta there was, however, nothing left to see, so he swung wild. Air thudded audibly into the vacuum created by Tako's disappearance. Bell went over to the copilot's control seat Rhodan received him with a poker-faced expression, but the twinkle of a smile was in the corners of his eyes. "The mutants have been ordered to practice their unusual powers as often as possible and at every opportunity," he said, rather tongue in cheek.

Bell stared sullenly at the forward view screens. The red planet Mars was recognizable in the upper right quadrant of the starboard screen. The Good Hope had already reached its maximum speed. Thora, tall and stately, sat in front of the galactonautic computer. Her gaze was enigmatic.

"How do you feel!" Rhodan asked her.

"Excellent, thank you. Perry... you look like an unstable force field that's about to collapse at any moment." Perry did not reply but looked ahead of him where, somewhere in the depths of space, that point lay whose coordinates had already been calculated by the computers. It was absolutely essential that the hyperjump should occur precisely at the calculated split second.

Thora looked helplessly over at Khrest. She did not know why she felt so depressed...

CHAPTER 5

Everything happened in a flash; far too fast for adequate human comprehension. Nevertheless, they sensed the wild tempest of the hyperfield converter as it built up the spontaneous jump through. On the view screens, violet light became visible; then everything changed. The control room changed incomprehensibly and seemed to be like the red glaring eye of a pagan giant. The control panels and peripheral equipment faded into mere outlines, gradually became nebulous, and finally disappeared completely. The rising sensation of pain was raw and excruciating. At its highest point it cut off, as if the nervous system had thrown an automatic switch.

Inside the warp field, built up with all available power to screen out four dimensional energy influxes, the Good Hope was converted into a structure that could no longer maintain its stability. The phenomenon was referred to in advanced Arkonide physics as the "Sublimation effect." Simultaneously the propelling corpuscular waves of the pulse drive converted themselves to fifth dimensional energy units, since they, too, were unable to maintain their normal characteristics within the spherical absorption field. They were like water that, under the influence of an enormous heat source, must turn to steam, since under the transformed conditions it could no longer remain in a fluid state.

Rhodan attempted to experience the transition in a conscious state. Yet in this instance there was apparently not the slightest difference between the human and the Arkonide brain. His last thought before entering into hyperspace was his concern for their rematerialization. Granted, it wasn't difficult to change matter into energy, but no one had ever succeeded in creating physical substance out of pure energy, no matter what its state or condition. But in the case a transition this very effect occurred

inevitably, reverting everything back to its precise original state and form.

The whole thing seemed to last for only a few moments. The previous relativistic time concept had lost all validity. A reference point or relationship of years could become seconds and vice versa. The brooding red glare became more pronounced as the raw pain returned inexorably. The sharp sensation of disintegration set in again, but simultaneously the outlines of the control room reappeared.

The return into the normal universe happened spontaneously, without the former train of crossover sensations. Vision cleared abruptly; the normal senses took over as if they had never been turned off.

However, the picture reception of the outside scanners had changed completely. On the front screens glittered a mighty star that could not conceivably be compared to the Earthly sun. It was too big and too hot and too bright in its colourations.

Perry Rhodan's thoughts were interrupted by the buzzing of the alarm system. With a groan of pain he became fully animated. Beside him, a solicitous voice rang out. "Pretty rugged, wasn't it? Are you all right, sir?" Rhodan looked up into the face of Tako Kakuta. The teleportationist stood by the controls, apparently completely unruffled.

"You're not kidding," he answered. "But what's with you?"

"I've been long accustomed to this kind of thing, sir. Rematerializations are all the same, whether you're dealing with physical or psychic phenomena. You get used to it. But, sir—the alarm system. The sensors have picked up something!" Rhodan took little notice of his loudly cursing copilot, who staggered about in pain, testing his limbs. The next alarm buzz brought him abruptly to a state of sober alertness. Khrest and Thora also showed signs of life. Reports of all clear came in from the various sections of the ship. Dr. Haggard and Dr. Manoli were reporting over the intercom that the crew was in good shape.

The alarm had been activated by the ship's own warp sensors, which had registered strong disturbances along the curvature of space. It lasted a few moments; then the registrations subsided, and gradually the warning lights died out. Rhodan looked around him silently. Thora's pose revealed such an experienced adjustment to the whole experience that he withheld his burning question. Bell did not have such good control. He staggered over to the viewscreens. Expressionlessly, he asked, "Are we there—all in one piece?" Is that Vega? Somewhat too coolly, the Arkonide answered, "What did you think? Our ships always make successful hypertransitions."

"A transition of twenty-seven light-years?" Bell swallowed hard, then mumbled an oath under his breath. Without another word, he went back to his seat and started collecting the reports that were reeling out of the control console. So everything was all in order. What had been a world shaking experience for the crew had come off with the ease and precision of a fine watch. No one seemed to be very excited by it, least of all the Arkonides.

Khrest stood anxiously in front of the warp sensor calculators. The fully automatic output indicated bearing on the first planet. Countless green flecks of light appeared on the screens, and these objects attracted the Arkonide's burning interest. "Our ships!" whispered Khrest, enraptured. "A small fleet. Look at the warp sensor data. More than fifty units emerged simultaneously from hyperspace."

His gaze met Rhodan's expressionless eyes. "When?"

"Precisely concurrent with us."

"Excellent!" said Rhodan. "In that case, they will not have detected our own warp disturbance. Coincidence, don't you think?"

"I think a mutual detection would be desirable," Thora put in heatedly. "I do not intend to search any farther. Please start the galactonautic calculators on the course equations for the eighth planet. I guarantee you we'll find our research ships there."

"You could have a point there," Rhodan said slowly. Then came the sharp command, "Bell! All hands to battle stations! Thora, you take the scanner controls. Bell, you're in charge of the weapons control center!" The clamour of alarms rang through the various sections of the Good Hope. Men sprang to their feet and stared at each other.

Deringhouse announced himself over the intercom. His two space fighters were clear for takeoff.

"Have you gone mad?" Thora trembled, her eyes raging with anger. She drew herself up haughtily before the long, lean man whom she believed she actually hated at this moment.

"Maybe," Rhodan said calmly. "And maybe not. In any case, I'm not so crazy that I'm going to go joy dancing into an unknown solar system without good reason. Didn't I tell you that I don't believe there are any Arkonide ships? Please go to your defence post." He watched her silently as she turned from him in a rage. "Captain Klein, climb onto those direction finders! Wuriu Sengu, stand by. We will be through the system in about eight hours. There are forty-two planets to cover. The distances between them are very great. Thank you, I believe that will be all."

As he took his control seat again the isolated flux reactors started to howl. Around the outer hull, after a brief shimmer, the defence screen began building up extradimensional energy quanta. Then came the repulsion field for protection against materially stabilized bodies. Thus the Good Hope became as well secured as was possible with the Arkonide technology.

The little points of green light still flickered on the sensor screens as before. They were still at some distance, more than three light-hours, which could be traversed under the Good Hope's normal velocity. "I demand a short span transition!" Thora's voice shrilled. Rhodan did not answer. Though she held herself under control, she nevertheless persisted. In the rear of the control room the five mutants sat grouped together. Betty Toufry and John Marshall listened to thought streams that an ordinary mortal could never have sensed.

After a moments the girl said tonelessly, "I hear the crying of souls. Someone is dying. Space is filled with whispered grief and sobbing. Despair, pain, death!"

Her eyes seemed of boundless depth. Bell looked askance at the girl. On the detector screens of the interstellar spaceship, still more green flecks assembled. Rhodan established full alert on board. The positronic fire control system came on. On the screens that were receiving the image of Vega, the great star gleamed at them like the blue cycloptic eye of a great dark god...Far ahead in the depths of the mighty planetary system, something was happening that was as yet incomprehensible...

The cry echoed hollowly through the control room. No one had actually anticipated what was going on now, and that which ensued overtook them with the impact and speed of a charging beast of prey. Gigantic Vega, principal star of the constellation Lyra, hung like a monstrous iridescent soap bubble in the normal range observation screens. It was a giant type star.

So it was that some time passed before anyone began to discern the distant hairlines of light rays and exploding light blobs. The wide screen scanners with their enormous magnification were the first to make it clear that terrible events were occurring in the vicinity of the fourteenth planet.

Five minutes after positive detection, the hyperfast field sensors responded. Their

shrill clamour still continued. The highly sensitive equipment, which reacted to the presence of energy discharges had not been activated in vain. It was too late, because the Good Hope still maintained its near light velocity. So it would have been impossible to turn aside from the unheralded ships appearing so suddenly or to avoid crossing their confused trajectories.

The space sphere's twin starboard drivers roared into a blazing thrust of power. A small course deflection even at this mad velocity would still suffice to bring the Good Hope out of the immediate area of danger. But then the inertial absorbers began to scream their complaint. They were wolfing in a part of the available power that only moments before, Rhodan had channelled exclusively into the projectors of the overlapped defence screens. The alien finger of light that raced now toward the Good Hope could not have been propagated at the speed of light. If it had, the optical visisopes would have discerned it only at the moment of contact. It approached swiftly enough, however, to bring a bellow of alarm from the men in the control room. They recognized this gleaming phenomenon, which for all its seeming harmlessness carried the sting of death.

Rhodan turned up the variac control of the starboard drivers still more. Try as it would, the Good Hope could not be torn out of its course. Even Arkonide science had its limitations; the mass of a near light speed object could not be retarded. Deviation manoeuvres could never be made abruptly and certainly not at right angles. A course deflection curve of 1,200,000 miles radius was all that could be hoped for. Mass in motion remained mass in motion, and nothing could change it.

The matter straining crash manoeuvre was sufficient to pluck the space sphere out of the centre line of danger at the last moment. The finger of light, which was nothing less than a sharply focused energy beam of obviously high intensity, snapped past the swerving ship only a thousand yards away in the emptiness of interplanetary space.

"A fine reception!" shouted Rhodan, giving vent to his anger.

The white faced Arkonides stared at his hard lined face for a moment. Then, what could only be inevitable in this swarm of ships occurred.

On the visiscreens what had been points of light before had now become mighty shapes that hung rank upon rank in space and filled the deep darkness with an endless filigree of varicoloured lines.

It had been Khrest who had burst out with the cry of anguish. He stared at the screens where two basically different types of spaceships were revealed in stark detail. Captain Klein had one of them greatly enlarged on the screen of the short range detector. It was one of the egg shaped units that were heavily represented in the area. The ship's stern propulsion system generated extremely intense bursts of light, the brilliance of which pained the eye of the observer. Although these ships were there in great numbers, they were being swiftly decimated by the other ships. The interplanetary space of the Vega system was filled with catastrophic nuclear explosions, in which more and more of the egg shaped vessels perished. They seemed to be completely helpless, which seemed to a great extent to be due to their obvious bulkiness. From the automatic calculators Rhodan had been aware for some time that the alien vessels possessed only a trifling rate of acceleration, so that their manoeuvres were painfully slow. Again and again the height fingers of light struck the dark looming egg hulls, which instantly became exploding bombs.

"They don't have any protective screens!" Klein yelled excitedly. "No energy detection system, sir! They're snails they don't have a chance!" Rhodan concentrated only on his daring course deflection. If the Good Hope maintained its present trajectory, it was inevitable that it would plunge right into the thickest part of the war and chaos.

Then Khrest's second outcry was heard. On the extra large bow screen, new shapes emerged. In complete contrast to the rotund, cumbersome units they had seen, these ships possessed long, delicate, rod shaped hulls but were conspicuous because of their large

center bulges. They looked as if someone had stuck a thin pencil through a chestnut.

"Faster—increase the deflection!" Khrest cried in a panic. His famous composure had fallen from him completely. The Arkonide scientist was in this moment nothing more than a quivering bundle of nerves. Rhodan's answer wasn't needed. The Good Hope raced away from the battle center with flaming deflection drivers, yet still drew fire. Too many of the mysterious alien opponents were distributed over a giant sector of the Vega area of space. Again, when it was almost too late, they saw the lightning finger of death reach toward them. The positronic detection system took over automatically, but no further thrust could be expected from the drivers. The ray beam flashed. In the same instant the Good Hope was grasped as though in a giant claw and whirled off its course. A titanic discharge of energy crashed and blasted so mightily against the extradimensional outer screen that the spherical Arkon steel core began to reverberate like a bell in the direct transmission of the resulting vibrations. In a moment the phantom thrust passed on. In the distance one of the rod shaped ships darted through space, the ship from whose weapon cupola the shot had come.

Rhodan could be seen laughing, although there was no possibility of hearing him above the echoing reverberations of the deflected lucky hit. Khrest still stood before the visiscreens. The flaring crucible of the apace battle fell behind, and the individual definitions of ships became mere points of light, The relatively small space sphere ceased to draw further fire. Far behind it the cumbersome egg shaped ships still exploded, but with diminishing frequency now as new enemy units emerged out of hyperspace.

The last incident of immediate danger occurred when they shot through a flaming ball of gas at their extreme velocity. In this spot one of the cumbersome ships had exploded from a hit. The outer defence screen shrieked its complaint again; then the Good Hope was through. Before them shone the fourteenth planet of an unreal seeming solar system. This world appeared to be a giant sphere of gases of the Jupiter type.

Rhodan finally cut off the roaring starboard drivers, and the Good Hope glided toward the still distant planet in free fall.

"They don't have much to offer," Reginald Bell commented with the reassuring calm of a man in complete self-control. "That was no ray beam—just a gentle brush of the hair. Anybody have any comments?" He squinted across at Rhodan, who was just getting up from his control seat. Slowly, he approached the two Arkonides. Khrest seemed to shudder under the commander's smiling gaze. Rhodan was again the uncompromising test pilot who refused to deal in vagaries. "When we were under fire, you wanted to say something," Rhodan's voice said. "What was it?" Khrest presented a pitiable spectacle. Thora, pale and shaken, had sunk back into her chair.

"I was in error!" sobbed the great scientist. "I really made a mistake. Forgive me!"

"Mistake? Well, that's no world shaking piece of news. But what did you want to tell me when we were attacked?" Khrest's reddish eyes implored. He was greatly disturbed. "Those long, rod shaped ships with the conspicuous center bulge—! know them! Every Arkonide knows them. There can be no doubt. There is only one race in the entire galaxy that builds that extreme type of hull."

"And where do they come from?"

Khrest groped for support. Dr. Haggard led him wordlessly to the nearest chair. From there the Arkonide explained brokenly, "Naturally, not from Arkon. The race of the Topides has evolved from a reptilian phylum. Highly intelligent, unyielding, and fierce. Absolutely nonhuman! They dominate three small solar systems. We call their principal world Topid. By Earth reckoning, their system is located about 815 light-years away in the vicinity of Orion. The planet Topid circles Orion Delta, a double star. The prime star is white; the secondary one is violet I don't understand what the Topides are looking for in this region. They were the very first colonial race to revolt against the

might of the Greater Empire. About 1,000 years ago we made several punitive expeditions against them." Rhodan emitted a low laugh. "A thousand years ago," he repeated. "That's just like you, my friend. And nevertheless you claimed that your people had pulled themselves together to make a mighty research expedition. You know, I can even tell you what these characters are after."

"Us?" Captain Klein interjected anxiously.

"Exactly! And we fools even flew in front of their ray projectors for them. We are dealing with a galactic great power, and the Earth has desperately little to oppose it with. No need to frown so, Thora. Your so-called Great Empire is dying. It's time that people on Arkon took a look at what's going on along the rim of the galaxy. Do you still think it's a good idea to give them a shout on the radio? The Topides undoubtedly have super light speed ships. Maybe they've gone home assuming that everybody recognises them as ruling Arkonides." The words hurt. The Arkonides reacted to them with a bowing of their heads. Rhodan turned away, but Khrest's question followed him. "But to whom do those other ships belong? Did you see how rapidly they were being destroyed?"

"Naturally. They are like helpless, bleating sheep, which incidentally we might have been on a larger scale, if these Topides had attacked our solar system. Reg! Kindly get your fingers off the weapon controls! If anybody slips up now we'll have these lizards swarming over the Earth tomorrow. They probably haven't detected their slight error, and they won't as long as the indigenous Vega intelligences around here carry on just as we would have. They defend themselves, that is all. But they are hopelessly outmatched. I don't doubt that these others are the inhabitants of the planet Ferrol, which was discovered more than 10,000 years ago by an Arkonide exploring expedition. They have progressed from primitives to capable space travellers. Now they've got to swallow what was actually meant to be dished out to us." Rhodan fell silent. The Good Hope hurtled unmolested through space. The arena of the space battle lay far behind.

"And now?" asked Bell. "Do we disappear? And if so—how?" Rhodan settled into the control seat reflectively. "In the interests of Earth we've got to disappear, but unobtrusively. We'll cruise out of this system at normal sublight speed. Then we'll have to risk a hyperspace jump. It was very fortunate that our incoming warp disturbance wasn't detected during all the excitement. Khrest, do you have anything to say?" The Arkonide shook his head. Rhodan began to program the board. Again the starboard drivers of the Good Hope roared into life. It was going to take considerable time to face the ship homeward again, because Rhodan preferred to maintain velocity rather than decelerate to a halt.

Orders came in clipped precision. In the upper hemisphere of the ball shaped vessel, Major Deringhouse clambered in disgruntled mood from his fighter. He had counted on a pursuit launching.

Later, when they had achieved an opposite trajectory, the sensors began to warn of objects ahead. Far ahead and dead on course, were countless pieces of wreckage and debris. The area was close to the fourteenth planet, in the area where the space battle had occurred.

"Interesting," remarked Bell. His brow furrowed querulously. "Do you think there are any survivors? Those Ferron people are bound to have developed space suits—I hope! We really ought to make an attempt to talk to one of them." Rhodan did not answer for several moments. First, he made a slight adjustment of the controls. All four drivers of the Good Hope began to thunder, this time, however, with the propulsion field tubes set in reverse. Khrest suddenly froze. This lanky, mysterious man had just finished saying that it was necessary to disappear from the Vega system as quietly as possible, and now he was locking the entire drive system into a braking manoeuvre. Rhodan was something more than a phenomenon. Khrest had to admit that there was also no one left now in the Greater Empire who could approach this man in his swift dexterity at the ships controls.

"Weapon controls secured," Rhodan said briskly. "You know, that isn't a bad idea,

Reg."

"Apparently it's easy for anybody to change your mind for you," snapped Thora. "Just a slight suggestion and you do exactly the opposite of what you just finished deciding you would do." Rarely had anyone ever seen Rhodan smile so scornfully. Thora reddened under his gaze.

"There's been a slight error," he advised. "Bell's suggestion wasn't the cause. It was the final data runout from the positronics. Look at the information on the screens! These beanpole Topidian ships are way behind the Good Hope in their acceleration rating. By the time any of them could even approach the speed of light, we'd be gone into hyperspace ten times over. The egg crates of the Ferrons are still slower. The computer brain has determined the nature of their propulsion. Ultrahigh concentrate photon generators. You can't expect fast pickup from that kind of system. So we'll just have ourselves a look at what's going on out there."

"Wreckage—uncounted swarms of debris!" whispered Dr. Manoli. "Just look at all of it—sensor readings from all directions. There must be survivors somewhere!" With a quiet smile, Betty Toufry looked at Rhodan. She had read his thoughts. The fact that the Good Hope had a speed advantage over the enemy aliens wasn't the only reason why he was slowing down. He, too, was thinking of the living entities who might be struggling for their lives out there in space. The ship developed a deceleration rate of three hundred miles per second. In the hangar, Major Deringhouse forced his long frame once more into the cramped cockpit of the space fighter. Several crew members pulled down and fastened the hood over his head...

CHAPTER 6

The manoeuvre had not been easy, inasmuch as it had been carried out deep within the heavy gravitational pull of a giant planet. Even Khrest was amazed at the size of this world, which must have measured three times the diameter of Jupiter.

The wreckage of former spaceships had already started the slow, inexorable drift downward into the grip of the heavy gravitation by the time Rhodan could match the Good Hope's speed and course for salvage operations. After a protracted search in the vacuum of space they had found one survivor. That, and only that. There was nothing more. When they pulled the creature in through the airlock with the traction beam, they found it close to death by asphyxiation. Also the body of the alien displayed a number of burns, evidently caused by the ultraviolet rays of mighty Vega. The entity had initially cowered in its seat in the control room, intimidated and shaking with fear, until the helpful attentions of Doctors Haggard and Manoli demonstrated that no one here was intent upon taking its life.

Yes, it was a Ferron, they decided; a descendant of those beings which the Arkonide search expedition had discovered 10,000 years before. Of course, its race had long since outgrown the age of primitive gunpowder weapons. Rhodan thought that actually the Ferrons should have developed further than was apparent. Humankind on Earth had required only five hundred years to graduate from fire to the first satellite rocket. By that yardstick the Ferrons should have long since conquered interstellar travel.

Their means of propulsion had developed only to that stage, however, which required a furtherance of the principles involved in order to progress. The fact finally emerged that the Ferrons lacked the mental capacity, by their nature, to think in fifth-dimensional terms and to work out a corresponding system of mathematics. They were simply not so constituted. Without a high order of mathematics, which ultimately required an exceptional power of the imagination, space travel beyond the speed of light was not possible. So they utilized their extremely reliable quanta propulsion system, which at

least had permitted them to achieve the speed of light.

On the other hand they had developed such a marvellous technology of micromechanics that Rhodan's cursory examination of ship parts they had picked up caused him to whistle softly. All in all it had to be recognized that the Ferrons were far ahead of Earth in every respect. It would be some time yet before the intelligent race of Earthmen might reach such a state unaided. Of course, the Ferrons were immeasurably behind the superior technology of the Arkonides. When the Ferron was brought on board and his thinking processes emerged from the lethargy of total exhaustion, Rhodan made an announcement over the ship's P.A. system. "He's coming to. With the help of telepathy the mutants will try to establish rapport as a basis of understanding with him. Nevertheless I must insist that everyone avoid the concept or expression of 'Earth' or 'Terra.' Don't forget the location of our home planet must remain a secret. Watch yourselves on that point! However these creatures may seem or whatever they may call themselves, to them we are Arkonides. The Good Hope itself can support that. Besides, we are physically similar to the Arkonides. Therefore, from here on in you will forget that you have come from Earth and where the Earth is. That is all!" The order was clear and distinct. With a sense of bitterness, the two genuine Arkonides perceived that Perry Rhodan was thinking exclusively of his world and humanity. In this respect he seemed to be a monstrous egotist. In spite of this, however, even Thora was forced to admit, against her will, that the camouflage was absolutely necessary. For her the sudden appearance of the reptilian people had represented a severe blow.

A miraculous special positronic extension of the Arkonide computer equipment served as an instantaneous translator. Once it had registered and classified the first sounds and semantic groupings of Ferron speech, the process of communication proceeded much better. Since the Ferron's rescue, three hours had passed. Voluminous data were provided by the telepaths Betty Toufry and John Marshall and fed into the translating machine, so that the task finally became relatively simple. Khrest and Thora, who possessed the advantage of eidetic memory, were now beginning to speak haltingly in the other's language. Meanwhile, the Good Hope fell free in an orbit around the oversized fourteenth planet Perry Rhodan held aloof from the discussion group, although the alien's gaze frequently turned to him. Apparently the creature had readily discerned that the power of decision rested with this tall, lanky man. Rhodan surveyed him carefully. The Ferron was relatively small, though tremendously muscular and broad shouldered. His home planet of Ferrol was supposed to have a gravity reading of 1.4 G, so the stocky bodily structure was to be expected. Arms and legs were entirely humanoid, as well as the head with its uniformly bushy hair and very small eyes deepset under an extremely forward arching brow. The mouth proved to be remarkably small. The most essential difference from humans was his pale blue skin coloration, which contrasted strangely with his copper coloured hair. With it all, the Ferron was no monstrosity. There were anatomical differences, to be sure, but nothing unusual.

Rhodan listened to the incomprehensible words that were being spoken. In so doing, he strove in vain to analyze a nameless premonition that was nagging at him. In the back of his brain a faint shred of thought plucked at him, warning him of immediate danger.

John Marshall hurried over to him. The Ferron's watchful gaze followed him. As Rhodan turned, looking at him, the alien came to attention and saluted with a right hand over his chest. Rhodan nodded briefly. The Ferron's space suit was of excellent quality, so precise in its details of fabrication as to present a complete perspective of the technology that had produced it. It was depressing for Rhodan to realize that normal humans were outmatched by these people. All the while, the rescued Ferron appeared to accept the impression that he was dealing with immeasurably superior beings. "What's going on?" Rhodan asked. "Problems? I don't like the look on your face." The telepath snorted angrily. Khrest is pumping him full of overblown exaggerations of the power of the Great Empire," he complained.

"I know. He's following my instructions. Anything else?" Your instructions—that's great! But did you also tell him to dodge all the important questions so that he can chase down clues about the so-called planet of eternal life? There are other things now

that concern me more. He never gives up, does he?" Rhodan muttered. "Is the communication method working?"

"Excellently. The machine is a phenomenon, and Khrest has already built up a tremendous vocabulary."

His eidetic memory. That figures. What does the Ferron say about the attack?"

John Marshall glanced across at the alien. Haggard was administering a second injection, which the creature received calmly. "He calls himself Chaktor and was commander of a small ship that was destroyed about twenty-four hours ago. Here, at the fourteenth planet, the first line of defence was set up. The second line was also destroyed. We were witnesses to that. The third front is sitting right over the home planet, that is, planet eight. He says that the first enemy ships appeared about a week ago. Nobody ever expected such a thing. Panic broke out on Ferrol, and their space fleet seemed headed for doom. Chaktor is frantically pleading for help, and his pleas increase in proportion to Khrest's unlimited exaggerations. Chief, maybe that's not so wise." Marshall was biting his lips, apparently deeply disturbed.

"What else do the Ferrons have?" asked Rhodan.

"Hardly anything more than that. They don't have any concept of faster than light space travel—that's why his boundless respect for us. Chaktor regards you as a sort of miracle being. They have absolutely no type of defence screens. When their ships get hit by a ray beam, they are lost. They have a giant space fleet at their disposal, mostly commercial ships, which have also been armed, incidentally. They have no energy projection weaponry. Principally they use a sort of rocket artillery with atomic contact heads that have a peculiar method of operation. In the beginning they started to meet with success." Khrest says that the invading Topides have a really miserable defensive armament. At first onslaught, their defence screens didn't mean much. The Ferron confirms this, but he says that the Topides gradually learned how to avoid the rocket bombardment. The things travel at only a third the speed of light, and that was their downfall. Once you're on to that weakness, you can do something about it. Mostly the oncoming shots were met with ray beams and detonated harmlessly. Chief, you know, we ought to—" Rhodan interrupted him with a brief wave of his hand. "Wait a minute, John. How come the Ferrons have such a space fleet? Are there other intelligences around here?"

"Underdeveloped, yes. Aside from their home planet the Ferrons have settled planets seven and nine—mainly the ninth one. They are oxygen breathers, of course at higher temperatures than we're used to. Number eight must really be hot. We might find number nine a bit more pleasant. The Ferron requests that we make a landing on planet nine, which is called Rofus." Rhodan thanked the mutant. He had learned enough. Thoughtfully, he looked at Bell, who sat beside him, apparently detached.

"Well? What do you think?"

"Thanks for asking," Reg grumbled. "You know all this puts a damper on our disappearing act unless we secure this solar system, the Earth won't be safe either. For these Topides a mere twenty-seven light-years would be a milk run! I'd sure like to do some closer snooping around, especially to pick out the enemy's soft points. Under the circumstances I think touching base with the Ferrons would be advantageous. They seem to have all sorts of things that Earthmen could put to good use. Their methods of production and fabrication have got me fired up. Terrific workmanship and technique. There's also something else to consider. The Good Hope outclasses the Topides in velocity and weapons. Any time we want to we can duck into hyperspace and outrun them." Meditatively, Rhodan got to his feet. "Your think pot is still working, I see. You took the words out of my mouth. Take bearings on planet eight and feed the data to the hyperpositronics. I don't want to lose any time. It jolts me to think that the Topides really had us in mind. Let's have a closer look at these characters. Get on the P.A. system and pass the word." Moments later, Rhodan stood before the squatly built Ferron. Chaktor humbly bent a knee to him. Then he began to speak rapidly. The simultaneous analyser translated the words in meaningful

context.

Khrest whispered hastily, "I've determined some astonishing contradictions in these people! In some things they are backward, but on the other hand they have what they call material transmitters, which can only be based on fifth dimensional principles. But they are entirely incapable of converting such equipment so that it can transport dematerialized matter faster than light. There are an obvious indication of the existence of a superior technology in their midst! He speaks of such a contact in the dim past ages. By all means you must go to the home planet of the Ferrons. I've got to have more information. I am certain that the world of eternal life exists in the Vega system. Those matter transmitters probably come from there!"

"Equipment like that just could be of interest," Rhodan commented gravely.

"How well we read you, Perry!" Thora put in with irony. Mankind über Alles—right?" Rhodan turned to Chaktor who faced him in grave formality. Rhodan was aware of a strange sensation. Exactly four years ago he had known essentially less than this Ferronian space commander. Had he met him then, it was he who would have been the grossly inferior one. Thora's reddish eyes watched him scornfully. She seemed to divine his thoughts. He spoke into the pickup of the instantaneous translator. "I will bring you to the ninth planet of your system," he said. "Can you arrange for your own ships not to attack us!"

Chaktor waited until the end of the translation. Then his flat face began to beam. Again came the bended knee, which was distasteful to Rhodan.

Bell broke through with an announcement. "Distance to number eight, slightly over eleven light-hours."

Chaktor confirmed the measurement. In so doing he used symbols that the translator had already learned. The Ferron stared uncomprehendingly at the relatively compact apparatus. Gradually he seemed to look upon the humans as gods. Then his reply came through. Yes, he could transmit the required code signal, if they would place a transmitter at his disposal.

Oh, is that all?" said Captain Klein sceptically. "What kind of transmission do these fellows use?"

"Familiarise him with the terrestrial gear—we've installed a few units on board. He'll be able to use normal ultrashort wave. I'll guarantee you they won't have hypertransmission." In three hours of ships time the experiment was concluded. Chaktor did not appear to have any difficulty in comprehending the Earthly installations.

A bit facetiously, Betty Toufry informed Rhodan, "Chaktor is wondering where in the name of heaven you dug up such crude, primitive equipment."

Thora burst out laughing. Rhodan looked at the alien, startled.

Reginald Bell took heated exception. What the hell! That's the most advanced micromin transmitter that we ever produced! What'd he say? Crude and primitive?" Captain Klein started to grin as Rhodan, after a deep breath, concocted a diplomatic reply. "Betty, inform him that we obtained the equipment from underdeveloped savages for the purpose of exhibition. Tell him we thought of putting it in a museum."

Dr. Haggard could hardly conceal his amusement. Chaktor was put in his place as an inferior when he received the explanation.

"That was a bitter pill," said Rhodan. "Doctor, stop laughing—it could give us away. And as for you, Thora, you can get off that kick of trying to show how lost we'd be without Arkonide technology. After a while, you know, it might just set me off." He plugged in the all stations communication system and stood in front of the TV receptor.

"Attention! Commander to an hands! We're getting underway to make a short hop hyperjump—about eleven light-hours of distance. That will bring us out of hyperspace between the eighth and ninth planets of the system. You will maintain full battle readiness and disregard the slight sensation of pain during the transition. It could be that we may land in the middle of a full scale engagement. Lock on and fire permission for all weapon stations. Show the Topides your teeth if you have to. Major Deringhouse—stand by with Captain Klein for a launch manoeuvre. You will be shot out as soon as we arrive. Set your direction finders on the ships sensors so that you can find us again. In emergency, you will land on Rofus, the ninth planet Chaktor will announce us. You'll find a large city in the equatorial zone. Rofus is a Ferronian colony planet and it has only the one metropolis. That is all!" Ten minutes later the Good Hope had reached the speed of light. The giant planet, number fourteen, dropped far behind. There was nothing to be seen, far and wide, of any enemy action. The interplanetary space of giant Vega seemed to have been swept clean.

CHAPTER 7

If they considered the previous space combat severe, they now found that they had jumped into a veritable hell. The disagreeable signals from the detectors were neverending. The Vega system seemed to swarm with ships, but it did not appear as though a friendly contest were going on between two advanced cultures. The suddenly appearing Good Hope was received by a shower of gleaming force beams. Before Rhodan had managed to recover from the pains of transition, the ship was already caught in cross fire.

The ninth planet of the Vega system shone from the viewscreens. At least the short distance transition had succeeded with a hairline precision. However, Rhodan would have preferred to emerge from hyperspace a million or two miles farther away. On the other hand, it might not have changed the basic situation very much. The uncanny battle ensued almost on a defined plane, but because of that, the contending units were spread over several million miles.

Rhodan's shouted commands rang through the control room as Bell opened fire on the enemy. In the hellish noise of the ray beam impacts, the extended weapon turrets of the Good Hope went into action. The weapon control system was fully automatic. After each successful coordinate compilation and signal all Bell had to do was press a button. It was another example of Arkonide technological efficiency. Under full power propulsion, Rhodan had brought the Good Hope out of the immediate area of cross fire from the bluish energy beams. Once again the extradimensional defence screen had shown that normal energy weapons could neither break it down nor neutralise it. But the raging discharges could not have been prevented. The shock of impact was so great as to be transmitted fractionally to the outer hull, along with high intensity thermal effects.

Apparently the Topides did not possess any light speed remote controlled weapons, or else they preferred to work exclusively with their ray projectors. As the strident clamour of a final hit rang out, the sound of their own weapons came through. In this respect the Good Hope definitely had more to offer than several Topidian battleships put together. As an auxiliary vessel for an exploration cruiser it was sufficiently armed for defence to give Bell all the choice of weaponry that a fire control officer required.

John Marshall had taken over the detector station. As the first line of the long, rod shaped spaceships fell behind the hurling Good Hope and the pursuing ray beams failed to overtake the swift as light ship, Marshall announced the appearance of the next units. They were more deeply deployed and were engaged in battle with a tremendous swarm of egg shaped spaceships in the midst of a continuous flashing of explosions.

"Change targets!" Rhodan called over the tiny radio phone system of their special helmets. Normal communication in this inferno of sound had become impossible. "We have to

blast through or we'll never get out of this kettle. Thora give Bell a hand. Activate the gravity bombs. Let's see what they can do." Bell glanced briefly to his left, where the Arkonide woman was taking over the control switches. Gravity bombs, he thought with a slight shudder. The most powerful weapon that the Arkonides had ever created. Actually they were not bombs in the true sense of the word. At least, he felt it was inadequate to refer to a light speed spiral field of stabilized energy as a bomb. These fields were extradimensional energy quanta with the remarkable characteristic of breaking up normal matter and tearing it out of the structure of curved space.

Red lights flashed on Bell's target screen. The automatic coordinators had spotted three targets. As he pressed the fire buttons, the three pulse cannons began to roar. Again the Good Hope was shaken by its own recoil. Violet traces of energy raced with absolute light speed through the eternal blackness of the void. They left the opponent no time for detection. Before their gleaming approach could be observed or detected by instruments, they were already at their goal. The enemy still lay about 1,200,000 miles ahead. After precisely seven seconds, lightning struck through the thick rows of the long Topidian ships. The hits were registered first by the hyperspeed field sensors. Then seven more seconds passed before the blinding flash of the explosions was visible. John Marshall had taken over the heavy neutron ray projectors. Their effect was detectable whenever enemy space vessels fell out of their course and drifted helplessly through emptiness, due to the lack of hands at the controls. The ultraconcentrated neutron rays attacked only organic life.

Thora fired two gravity bombs. She saw the will-o'-the-wisp spiral disappear into the darkness. Two enemy units died in the midst of piercing blasts of light. Rhodan had never seen this tall alien female in such a situation. Absolutely motionless, moving only her fingertips, she sat behind the fire controls of the terrible weapons, with only her eyes showing the inner fire that consumed her. Her uncompromising training came to the fore now, and she operated according to the maxim of the ruling Arkon Dynasty—enemies who oppose the almighty power of the Great Empire must perish. In impersonal, metallic sounding tones, she spoke through the helmet phone. "They should know by now with whom they are dealing! They are hollow in their heads! They will be destroyed before they can get out of the way!"

Rhodan shouted a new series of commands. The curving course they were committed to couldn't be changed. The Good Hope was going to have to charge into the rapidly thickening lines of the enemy at full velocity. "Deringhouse! Ready for launch!" he yelled through the radio phone above the noise. "Make a breach in the lines and then cover our flanks. Keep close to the ship—is that clear?" Deringhouse avidly confirmed the order. He had not previously believed such events possible. While the Good Hope maintained fire in full flight and the reduced answering ray fire of the totally confused enemy was neutralised by the defence screens, the two fighter escorts carrying Deringhouse and Klein swished out of the launch tubes. They had acquired the velocity of the mother ship and added to it a much greater manoeuvrability. They scattered from it at a sharp angle, and seconds later their built in bow guns began to flame. These were heavy caliber pulse projectors, which half filled the fast little airframes with their bulk. At only two light-seconds of distance from the Topidian ships, both fighters scored first hits.

Then the Good Hope was there with them and they raced together through billowing clouds of flame that had represented heavy spaceships but a moment before. Once more it was only a few seconds before they broke through the wide lines. All weapons concentrated their fire now in the area they had just travelled. The crew was subjected to an uncontrollable state of elation, augmented by the wildly raving Ferron, who greeted every shot with a shrill howl of delight or encouragement.

Rhodan knew the danger of runaway confidence. Such situations could change very quickly. The mutant Tako Kakuta must have read his mind. He pulled the blue skinned Ferron away from the screens and hauled him in front of the warmed up and ready long range radio phone equipment. Rhodan hit the control console with quick, deft hands. The ship's four running drivers increased the clamour of the weird battle. "He must give his signal!" he shouted at Betty Toufry. "Quickly! His own ships are coming up ahead of us

there. God, are they slow! I'm decelerating." While the Good Hope slowed its light speed pace with the maximum power of its repulsion, Chaktor began to speak rapidly into the microphone. It was still questionable whether he would be heard immediately. Because of their diminishing velocity, a strange phenomenon occurred. The ray beams of the far outdistanced Topidian ships, though slower than light, were now catching up. It could be seen how they pressed on closer and closer to the steadily decelerating Good Hope.

During the braking manoeuvre an elusive course was hardly possible, so Rhodan deliberately received the two hits with a stoic calm. The man without nerves; the commander who supervised with steel trap reaction and who missed nothing. The spherical ship began again to gyrate. In spite of the attenuation of distance, the ray beam impacts came with a jolt. But the thermal destroying force did not get through to the hull. The men at the power control station reported a temporary overloading of the separate current reactors. The high tension hyperfield gobbled up monstrous power yields, which could hardly be satiated even by the Arkonide equipment.

"Don't get too rough!" Khrest moaned. "Remember that this is only an auxiliary vessel; it isn't a heavy duty cruiser!" Rhodan laughed agreeably. Khrest had peculiar concepts of relative power and destructive effect.

Far behind the Good Hope, all hell broke loose. Thora had also brought the disintegration guns into play. These were capable of totally disrupting all crystalline structures, and their target strikes were soon registered by the untiring positronics.

"Breakthrough," Bell announced calmly. He was bathed in sweat. "Their defence screens can't measure up to a single one of our weapons."

"We've made contact!" cried Tako Kakuta, waving his hands excitedly. "Chaktor has contact! His people are aware of us now. We have clearance through their lines if we need it." Rhodan turned. On the large screen of the visiphone the beaming face of an elder Ferron was discernible. Obviously it was that of a high ranking officer. Chaktor pointed across to the controls and shouted into the microphone. His words could not be understood over the deep thunder of the ship's weapons and the hard thrusting drivers. Only the two telepaths were able to pick up the gist of Chaktor's flood of thoughts. Through her helmet communicator, Betty put an explanation together. "It is the commander of the Ferron fleet. He is relaying the news of our arrival to the command station of the ninth planet. Chaktor is putting together a supplementary code signal that relates to us especially... Wait! The commander is making an urgent plea, that we keep giving him support in the battle. Perry, he says he's prepared to turn the entire command over to you!" Rhodan cursed under his breath. The wild course of the Good Hope could hardly be halted in the front lines of the egg shaped ships. A deceleration of more than three hundred miles per second just couldn't be expected of the already overloaded drivers. "Tell him to defend himself," Rhodan answered. "I will attack the enemy on the flanks and at a higher level. Tell Chaktor to advise that it's not possible for me to build a stable defence front with a single ship. Our strength can consist only of a running diversion." Thus the dilemma occurred that Rhodan had feared in the background of his thoughts. The neutral observer who was only going to take a quick look at the situation had now become an active participant in events that, though not immediately endangering mankind, imposed a responsibility to take preventive measures and do what he could against the Topides.

They were not human. As this thought pressed itself forcefully upon him, he well knew that his very humanness demanded a part in the battle. For the first time in his life he understood the Arkonide motto, which said that non-human intelligences cannot be tolerated except in the rarest of circumstances. Nonhumans like this had a basically different ethic, an entirely incredible and alien concept of existence. If they appeared with malevolent intent, there was no alternative but an all out defensive effort.

The Good Hope was only a few light-seconds removed from the wavering line of Ferron ships when a terrible roaring emerged from the alarm system of the hypersensors. It was such a palpable thundering, combined with the shrieking loudspeakers, that the swishing light symbols on the data screens were distinguished, after one blinding flash.

Something of monstrous proportions must have shaken the normal curvature of the universe in the immediate vicinity. In the laminated defence screen of the Good Hope a coalescence flamed up. For several seconds the force field collapsed completely. The current reactors raced free without load. Intermittent discharges of lightning flashed from the overload breakers of the energy converters.

The highly sensitive warp sensors melted through. Their acrid stench filled the control room and moved Rhodan, in an instinctive appraisal of the situation, to order space helmets closed. The transparent spheres clicked into place in the magnetic collar rings of their space suits. Air conditioning, oxygen, and radio systems switched on automatically.

The Good Hope, travelling now only at a quarter of the speed of light, found itself instantly in an invisible energy discharge of unbelievable force. Blue fire engulfed the Arkon steel outer hull. Everything that the invading spaceships had thrown at them became as nothing compared with this mighty power.

Everyone heard a sudden shrill outcry. It broke through the space helmet speakers, kindling in the brains of the humans a spark of panic. Rhodan saw Khrest run to the hypercommunicator console. The Arkonide scientist began speaking into the lighted transference screen even as the trembling of the ship's hull subsided. Until that moment, Rhodan had been occupied in maintaining some semblance of control over the Good Hope. Now suddenly he saw the monstrous shape of steel and energy that had emerged from hyperspace at best only thirty miles away.

"No!" he groaned. Then he yelled, "Thora, is that...?"

"An Arkonide battleship!" she interrupted hastily. "Imperial class, the latest design of the Empire. I'm thoroughly familiar with it. With one of those I could conquer entire solar systems. Perry, our people have come! Khrest is transmitting the recognition code signal. They must have found out on Arkon what was happening in the Vega system. Just look, Perry! An invincible giant with magnificent equipment and weapons. It must have a diameter of 2,400 feet, by Earthly measurement. I— What are you doing?" Rhodan's knuckles whined as he gripped the step switches of the four main drivers. Blinking control lights indicated a 180 degree reversal of the field tubes. In the middle of the turning manoeuvre, the ship sprang into maximum flight Rhodan's face was drawn tight. Reginald Bell was the first to comprehend. His hoarse cry of warning rang through the radio coms. Only the two Arkonides continued to rejoice. But after a few moments, Khrest drew back from the hypercommunicator, deeply disturbed. "No contact!" he cried out. "The main computer brain of the battleship should have responded at once to my valid code signal. I don't understand. What—"

"Haven't you realized yet that your Arkonide battleship is not manned by Arkonides?" Bell shouted impatiently. "The spaceship is turning about, opening fire on the Ferronian defence line," came the voice of the mutant Ralf Marten, who had taken over the detectors.

Rhodan could do nothing more than he had already. The space giant, a product of the supreme pinnacle of Arkonide technology, loomed up ponderously in the wake of the fleeing Good Hope. In spite of its gargantuan size it arrived at an equal acceleration. When a violet bolt of lightning shot out of the great, massive sphere, it was far too late to dodge it. With the absolute velocity of light, the pulse ray was almost instantaneous. The battleship's fire control officer had not given the tiny auxiliary ship the slightest chance to escape. The titanic ray beam was of the highest focused intensity; yet its cross-section must have measured a good 120 feet. If it had made a direct hit, the Good Hope would have been converted into atomized gases. But they survived the deafening clamour of the glancing blow. Crackling lightning discharges came from the collapsing defence screen, which had no resistance to offer such ravaging forces. Degraded now to a mere speck of dust, the space sphere became a helpless plaything of a raging tidal wave of energy that the giant battleship generated by its close pursuit.

Perry Rhodan watched the indicators tell him that almost all machinery of the auxiliary vessel was suddenly ceasing to function. The echoing clang of bulkhead safety hatches closing also indicated that even the glancing blow had been too much. Before Rhodan was torn from his control seat he was aware of the force field main switch booming over. It was designed, in case of a catastrophe, to switch all emergency power into the inertial absorbers. If this had not occurred, no life could have continued to exist on board the ship, which had been torn with such powerful force from its course.

Major Deringhouse, who had approached within nearly a mile of the Good Hope in his swift fighter as a result of the mother ship's breaking manoeuvre, suddenly witnessed the conversion of the space sphere into a hurling ball, as though it had been struck by a bat. He was in the best position to observe that the weird energy beam had only glanced off the lower hemisphere of the hull; yet it left a bright white glow. The Arkon steel melted down like butter in the piercing heat. Glistening metallic vapours billowed from the underpart of the ship and threw a flaming comet's tail of burning gases into its wake. The bright gleam of the defence screen was extinguished—all he could see was that white glowing underhull. He called desperately to Rhodan and others of the crew on board the Good Hope, but there was no answer. It was all he could do to follow the ill fated, reeling hulk that fled from the terrible punishment it was taking. Far ahead glided the spherical super giant, its weapon turrets flaring destruction. It was transforming the semiorderly Ferron defence line into a scattering confusion of dodging, panic driven shapes, which were being decimated by the terrible onslaught of this immeasurably superior firepower.

It spelled a death blow for the Ferrons. White faced and dry eyed, Deringhouse stared at the visiscreen of his fighter. The Good Hope was racing toward the ninth planet, the mortal scar on its hull still glowing fiery red.

"Apparently they must have survived that hit," said Captain Klein's voice over the intercom from the second fighter ship. "Let's wait it out. That was only a flesh wound. If I have to I can try to anchor onto the upper launch tube. They're only travelling at thirty percent of light speed."

"A flash wound?" Deringhouse laughed bitterly. "Where in the devil did this space monster come from?" Suddenly, there it was, with no warning at all. Come on, close in. They're flying straight toward the planet!"

CHAPTER 8

The Good Hope required eight hours to complete the journey with its two remaining utility drivers. It would have gone faster if the badly damaged inertial neutralizers had been working. Since they were out of action, deceleration was limited to the absorption capacity of the intermittently operating projectors.

The entrance into the thick atmosphere of the ninth planet was like a high dive into water. Rhodan was forced to subject the crew to an extremely high G deceleration, because the inertial forces generated could no longer be absorbed. Also, he had to pour on the rough retropulsion fast, because at first contact with the air molecules the recoil and shock field projectors ceased to function.

So it was that the auxiliary craft hurtled downward through the thickening air masses like a glowing meteor. If the antigrav units had also given up the ghost, undoubtedly the Good Hope would have been violently shattered. It was barely possible to break the fall of the almost weightless vessel, but the landing completed their disaster. The gear on

the hull's underside had been destroyed. During the wearisome deceleration they had not dared to attempt repairs because aside from high temperatures deadly gamma radiations had been detected emanating from the injured area. The fact remained that in the fraction of a second out there the Good Hope had become a hopeless wreck. There could be no further thought about faster than light space travel now. The hyperconverters, indispensable to the generation of a protective warp field, were totally destroyed. Repair crews in protective suits had found only fused clumps of metal later when they broke into the converter compartment. Other gear might have been returned to a workable condition, but the essential equipment was beyond hope.

Even before Perry Rhodan entered the atmosphere under Chaktor's guidance, he was aware of the incontrovertible fact that he had become a prisoner of the Vega system. Following their landing in the ninth planet's main city, they were very frigidly received by the Ferronian space officers. The precaution was taken to remove the badly damaged Good Hope from the unprotected landing field. Now it lay in a deep bunker, the most practical place that could be found on this distant world, still cooling slowly and popping like an iron. Klein and Deringhouse made perfect landings in their swift space fighters, but Perry sent them back up to cover the returning Ferronian fleet's landing, since he considered this much contribution to the defence as indispensable. After Deringhouse reported over hyperwave that the strange giant battleship had closed ranks with the Topidian invasion fleet, a cold smile touched his lips. From then on he didn't have much to say. They found themselves on a strange world among alien people who seemed to regard the heavy damage to the Good Hope with strongly mixed feelings. Dr. Haggard's psychological analysis of the situation was superfluous. Rhodan well knew that the initial storm of enthusiasm for him and the valiant Good Hope had been toned down conspicuously. Chaktor, the Ferron they had fished out of the void, sat sombrely in the control room. Bell and the technicians were there, trying to make at least the more essential controls functional. Khrest seemed to be inwardly broken. He sat in a corner, dull and apathetic. Thora, more sensitive than the Arkonide scientist, struggled against an incipient nervous breakdown.

The mutants hovered about, attempting to evaluate the situation. Ralf Marten, who possessed the most unusual gifts among the group, probed the immediate and more distant surroundings. He had been sitting for about an hour in one of the control seats as though entranced. From time to time he revealed what he had seen and heard through the eyes and ears of the Ferron leaders. It seemed that the general mood in relation to the landed humans was not malevolent. There was merely a general disillusionment after their initial faith in the Good Hope had come to such an abrupt end. The telepaths confirmed Marten's findings. In view of this, Rhodan finally issued instructions to return the fighter robots to their compartment. Reginald Bell emerged from the narrow manhole of the emergency stairs. The antigrav lifts had ceased to function. Cursing softly, Bell peeled himself out of the heavy protective suit and reached immediately for a cigarette. Meanwhile, those present in the control room had developed the impression that Perry Rhodan had changed into a silent dreamer. He had hardly spoken a word, after issuing the orders concerning the robots.

Now he raised his head. Thoughtfully, he got up from the control chair. Glances were exchanged all around.

"Sol?"

The single word seemed to hang in the air, threatening trouble.

Bell shrugged his shoulders. He ground out the barely lit cigarette under his heel. "Finished,~ he said, with no trace of emotion on his broad face. "We've done what we could. That ray beam from the super giant did us in. I'm finally grasping what Khrest always meant when he insisted on calling this an auxiliary boat. Against a real battleship we couldn't show any teeth at all, and we always thought we had a powerful fighting instrument in our hands."

"We had enough teeth to put the Topides in their place."

Granted, but we would have been a ridiculous nonentity against Arkonide cruisers. And if you bump into a superclass battleship with ray beams bigger than the Good Hope itself, then..."He interrupted himself with a harsh laugh. After a moment he concluded curtly. "So, what is there left to say about it? We're stuck. It's a real miracle that we were able to land at all. The pulse drive system needs a complete overhaul. Hyperjumps are no longer possible. Since the Ferrons don't know anything about the principle, maybe we'll have to stay in the Vega system forever. To put it mildly, this is the worst blow that the Third Power has been hit with to date. Our hypertransmitter is still working. We're repairing the power source. At least with that we'll be able to send a report to Earth. It'll be up to Colonel Freyt now whether Terra remains strong and unified or not. In spite of our own disgraceful luck, at least our people will be able to complete the new ships. It's possible with good conditions that they could pick us up in about two years."

"It's a tempting idea and well taken, but it's untenable," Perry advised with granite calm. "The new ships will never fly without our own special knowledge." Bell suddenly looked crestfallen. An oppressive silence pervaded the control room. Only the special robots continued their repair work undistractedly. The incapacitated detection system had to be put back in service as quickly as possible.

"I sense strong excitement in neighbouring space," announced Betty Toufry. She sat with closed eyes and continued speaking. "Very great consternation among the Ferrons. Confused thought streams. A very high ranking person seems to have abandoned them."

"Abandoned?" Rhodan stressed the word, as though it might have several connotations. "Can you furnish any specific data?"

"No. Their thoughts are too confused—all worked up. There is a mood of panic."

"Marten, see if you can grab on to a cognizant Ferronian consciousness—somebody in the area she's talking about. Betty, work with him. Marshall, plug yourself into this, too." Between Rhodan and Bell, the air began to shimmer. Teleportationist Tako Kakuta appeared. His small child's face showed the first symptoms of exhaustion. Since the landing he had been flitting about continually. "There is chaos on the whole planet," he reported. "But it looks like the Topides are avoiding a direct attack—just a few recon ships in wide orbit. The planet is young, Earth climate, still only sparsely settled. There are oceans, mountains, and wide plains. Just like at home. This city is called Jugnor, the only large settlement on the planet of Rofus. The main space port is here, but there are hardly any Ferronian ships left. Almost all of them have taken off. Only a few damaged units are lying about the countryside. Any further orders, Chief?"

"Take a breather, Tako," Rhodan murmured pensively. "You look tired. For the time being we couldn't care less what our surroundings look like. This planet is probably like 10,000 others of the same type. It's strange, but I'm gradually beginning to think in cosmic terms." He laughed, then added cryptically. "No more extracurricular activities, Take. I'll soon have to send you on some difficult missions." Only Reginald Bell detected the nuances in Rhodan's voice. He seemed to be listening to his own inner sensors. Finally he looked up and his eyes narrowed. Dryly, he whispered, "You're cooking something, old man!" A hypertransmission report came in. Major Deringhouse appeared on the visiscreen. It spared Rhodan from giving Bell a direct answer.

"We're standing close to the central planet," came Deringhouse's filtered voice. "The last Ferronian defence line has been smashed. We've destroyed ten Topidian ships, but now Big brother out here is beginning to give us the look. He seems to think maybe we're a hit too playful. What shall I do, sir? He's turning our way—I have him on the survey sensors. Shall I attack?"

"You've lost your marbles," replied Rhodan. "Set down immediately—full power! Make a diversion path like a pretzel, and don't you let that gorilla swipe you with a ray beam! I still have plans for you, buddy, so get down here on the double!"

"Sir, that won't make friends and influence people in Ferronialand. Our two fighters are worth a hundred of their egg crates! Maybe it sounds corny, but we've become the backbone of the Ferronian fleet!"

"You and Klein pull out of there. When that battleship loses interest in you, maybe you can return. In the mean time, disappear. How do things look to you on the eighth planet?"

"The Topides have started landing operations, but it's not a planetwide blitz—their attacks are only against obvious military defence centers. The cities are being spared. We can count the nuclear blasts down there—none of it very strong." Rhodan switched off. The situation had developed as he had suspected. He smiled grimly. "I had a good hunch in not landing us on Ferrol—that's become the hot spot now. Those lizards are landing there—they're going to knock it into line, Topide style, and then strike out at the colonial planets. So for the present, we have a sanctuary. What's the matter with him?" He looked across at Chaktor. The blue skinned Ferron stood in front of the short range visiphone and carried on an obviously excited conversation with another man of his race.

Betty Toufry put herself in rapport with them. Khrest remained in his state of dull apathy, the victim of ultimate resignation.

For the time being it seemed that no untoward event was to be expected, at least not here. Deringhouse supported this consensus by reporting excitedly that the giant battleship had turned its attention from the small space fighters and was apparently set for a landing on planet number eight.

"We weren't faster than they were, just more nimble and frisky. I am continuing reconnaissance." At this moment Rhodan switched suddenly from his apparent lethargy to his old self, galvanized for decisive action.

"Khrest!"

The sharply spoken word brought the Arkonide abruptly out of his stupor. He looked into a pair of eyes that glistened with hard decision.

"Before you get lost in yourself, I'd like to request a bit of information. Are you certain that that space monster is actually a space battleship of your own race?"

"Naturally," Khrest answered. "Otherwise, nothing could have conquered us."

"It isn't logical that Arkonides would take part in or give support to an invasion by nonhumans. Therefore, the ship must be manned by Topides. One small question—how did those freaks get hold of a ship that is the most powerful class of battlewagon in the whole imperial fleet?" Khrest shrugged helplessly. He seemed to have no answer. Thora stared blankly at the wall.

"There are two possibilities," Rhodan continued. "Either the battleship has gone over to the Topides under control of decadent Arkonide officers or it was simply captured. Considering the carelessness and lethargy of your people, God knows that wouldn't be surprising! In either case, however, the further question arises—how can the Topides manage to handle the complex Arkonide instruments and equipment with such an expert touch? Captive Arkonides have handed over their knowledge."

"That is an insult!" said Thora.

"I'm recalling our own experiences with you. You were in trouble yourselves, and so you trained us. The main difference is that you fell into the hands of humans, not Topides. Thora, I want you to start training our men immediately." She drew herself up haughtily. He moved over to the Ferron, who was still speaking excitedly into the visiphone. On the screen, in addition to Chaktor's countryman, a large vaulted hall was visible. "What training are you talking about?" asked the Arkonide woman, amazed. Khrest's

features tautened. Bell grinned knowingly. He knew his former captain like a book. For Rhodan there was no such concept as "impossible."

"Seven of my men were killed in our recent skirmish. Therefore, in your capacity as a former cruiser commander, you will see to it that the forty-three surviving crewmen are placed in readiness to operate the most essential control units of a super battleship—or are they manageable by only one person?"

"Impossible! In spite of a high level of automation, at least three hundred fully trained people are mandatory. You are insane! You simply can't—"

"I shall, and what's more—soon," Perry interrupted. "Or did you assume that I was going to spend the rest of my life on a planet of the Vega system? Ferronian spaceships are limited to light speed and are therefore of no interest to us. We could probably never unsnarl lizard logic sufficiently to figure out the Topide system of hypertravel. So the only choice remaining is to dig into that Arkonide battleship, where we'd eventually have a chance of understanding its operation. We're going to take the whole hog. You will start the training without delay. Thank you." That was all. All persons present exchanged significant glances. Only the two Arkonides remained troubled and confused.

Finally, Thora half whispered, "Has it occurred to you that the battleship has probably landed on the eighth Planet by now?"

A fleeting ironic smile touched Rhodan's lips. "I'm starting on that problem now," he said softly. "Have you noticed a few background details in that visiphone screen that Chaktor is talking into? Take a look at those heavy, pillar-shaped pieces of equipment with the heavy duty cable connections. You should remember that Khrest mentioned something about some s-called matter transmitters the Ferronians have, which are able to convert any kind of matter into energy and transmit it. Very well—what you see glimmering in those force fields may well be organic life!" They became aware of the dull, heavy humming sound coming out of the loudspeakers. Chaktor pointed excitedly at the screen and shouted several words at Betty Toufry.

She turned immediately: "in his thoughts I see a high ranking personality. It's getting clearer. He calls this high person 'thort'—its not a common name, but a title. That's it—a title, like emperor or king, but it seems even more than that The Thort is the supreme ruler."

"They're abandoning a sinking ship," Rhodan muttered with narrowed eyes. "Women and children are also arriving. That means the ruling family has made an exodus from their besieged home planet to seek refuge here. Things are getting interesting." Chaktor addressed him in great perturbation.

Betty paraphrased from his consciousness: "The Thort requests an immediate conference with you, The chief of the Ferronian fleet gave him a complete report hours ago. The Thort has been given exact details of our participation, including our getting shot down. You won't have to take up time explaining all that." Whereas Rhodan restricted himself to a thoughtful clearing of the throat, Bell gasped in sudden excitement "Good Lord! If the supreme ruler himself has climbed into a transmitter just to talk to you, that really means something! These people are way out ahead of humankind on Earth If you can wrangle a good deal out of him! Man! Save your credit cards!"

"There's the slight detail of getting back to Earth first," Rhodan retorted. "Right now we're going to keep up the role of superiority with these people. In fact, there's no other choice if we don't want to pull a major deception on these fellows when their back is to the wall. We and the Good Hope are apparently their last hope. Besides that..." Rhodan paused to reflect a moment, then said, "Besides that, there's an advantage in dealing with people who are hard pressed and in retreat. In most cases you can approach them with reasonable arguments. Understand, I want the Thort here in the control room—outside I'm not on as firm a footing. Bell, plug in the automatic translator. We're going to have to

do something right away about learning the Ferrons' language. Khrest can help out there with a crash hypno course. We've got all we need already in the data banks of the translator." Rhodan looked at Chaktor, who seemed to wither in awe of the situation. Apparently this was the first time in his life that he had been confronted with a chance to be in the presence of the Thort.

"Take it easy, Perry," Bell cautioned. "This is the ruler of an entire planetary system. How can you tell him—" Rhodan went over to the instantaneous translator, followed by a flustered Chaktor. "Betty, make it clear to him that the commander of this spaceship requests the visit of the Thort in these quarters, because the equipment is here to overcome speech difficulties. The representative facilities are unfortunately not portable."

The telepath spoke over the translator to Chaktor, who immediately transmitted the information over the telecom in his own language. It required only a few moments before. The Thort's acceptance was returned. An elder Ferron appeared on the visiscreen. "It is Lossos, the leading Ferronian scientist," Betty announced.

Rhodan spoke softly into the command transmitter on his wrist. In the cargo hold of the ship, the Arkonide fighter robots awoke. Ponderous yet surprisingly agile, the special automatons stomped through the large cargo ramp into the open.

Bell rasped out an oath. "What the devil! What do you think you're doing!"

"A little psychology is all. We're making an impression," Rhodan advised him. "Marshal, you have a splendid uniform. How loud can you shout?"

"If you want, I can bellow like a bull, Chief!"

"Then go out there on the ramp and take command of the robots. I want high protocol—the whole bit, with a full military salute, although a few days ago I considered such things as nonsense. There's a reason for it here, and I want the Thort to be received with all honours." The mutant disappeared.

"If you get away with the introductions," sneered Thora, "what are you going to say to the Thort? You are dealing with an advanced race of people."

"Naturally. They know and can do more than humans, ourselves excepted," Rhodan admitted. "I'm requesting you urgently not to contradict me in what I tell them. For the Ferronians we will all be Arkonides who have come from a planet that is 34,000 light-years distant."

"As you please," she answered, sarcastically.

Rhodan adjusted his uniform. Two fighter robots standing in the control room were given special instructions. The screen field projectors of the mighty pulse generators began to shimmer. The machines were ready for action.

Everything must appear in working order," said Rhodan. "Bell, is the simultaneous translator ready? Thank you. Betty, scrounge around in the supreme ruler's consciousness. I want to know what kind of wheels are turning behind his words." The girl failed to suppress a brief smile before she nodded her acquiescence.

The distance between the local transmitter room and the Good Hope was apparently not very great, because the Thort's party appeared quickly on the scene. Outside they heard Marshall's bellowed command: "Pre-e-e-sent arms!" It was as though he were trying to be heard throughout the planet. A deep roaring sound of a landing ship was heard. In the same moment, on another screen, those in the control room observed the reaction of the robots outside. On command, their weapon arms raised up high in a precision salute. It was an

impressive reception for the Thort and his entourage of high officers and officials. Marshall's officious greeting and salute would have made General Pounder himself respond instinctively if he had been there. The Thort recognized the ceremony with both hands extended in imperial salute. It was a magnificent spectacle. Then the party was signaled on board. Rhodan spoke swiftly to his companions. "Gentlemen, never forget that you represent the human race! Comport yourselves graciously but impressively. Don't let the Thort ever get the impression that we feel inferior to him. Bell, you do the reception formalities and introductions here."

"Well, what or whom should I introduce you as?" Bell asked worriedly.

"As the ruler of the Third Power, same as if it were the Great Empire itself. The term 'President' will mean as much to him as anything else. It's as strange a word to him as Thort is to us. Here he comes!"

"How impudent!" whispered Thora.

Only Khrest began to smirk appreciatively. The top Arkonide scientist seemed now fully aware of the strategy.

Rhodan stood motionlessly beside the translator. As Bell's formal announcement and introduction emerged from the loudspeakers in the Ferronian language, the Thort received his next shock of surprise. He observed the ultradvanced translator machine with obvious amazement. Rhodan exhibited a friendly smile, but it was essentially more casual than Bell's. Then the two intelligent beings from widely separated cultures stood facing each other—the Thort old, small, and drawn with worry and Rhodan tall, lean, and in command of every nerve fibre. "You are welcome, sir. Won't you be seated, please?" The two fighter robots stepped silently between the two commanders. The fluorescing muzzles of their weapons remained pointed at the ceiling. After taking a long look at them, the Ferronian ruler sat down in one of the control seats. Rhodan spoke a few more courteous words into the translator for the sake of protocol.

The Thort waited until he had finished. When his reply came, it was extremely brief and surprising. This man surmised the significance of the demonstration he had witnessed, and he accepted the implications. Although well aware of the alien differences between his own kind and the human race, he gave full recognition to the fact that these aliens had come to the defence of the battle pressed Ferrons.

"Your spaceship is severely damaged," came the translation. "You know that we are lost without your help. Therefore, what can I do for you? My empire stands at your disposal. Can your ship be repaired?"

The statement was clear and unambiguous, which didn't surprise Rhodan. The Thort appeared to be anything but a weakling. Obviously, he was a strong, logical thinker. It suited Rhodan's character to be even more brief and succinct. In this situation there could be no misunderstandings. Before he could answer, however, an announcement came over the hyperwave communicator that the now famous giant Arkonide space sphere had landed on the eighth planet. Major Derringhouse was on the hookup. Rhodan instructed him to continue surveillance and to keep detailed reports coming in. Then he cut the connection.

"Was that one of the pilots of the small fighter ships?" one of the higher Ferronian officers inquired excitedly.

Rhodan confirmed that it was.

"But how can the transmission operate that fast?"

"We have not only ultralight speed space travel, but ultra-speed visiphone transmission. Distance is immaterial."

When the translation came through, the officer looked at his companions in triumph.

Apparently he had expressed this theory to them and had been met with disbelief. Rhodan could appreciate the impact of these things on the Ferrons.

From then on the officers remained very silent. The Thort continued to examine his surroundings with a penetrating eye.

"Sir, did you arrive here by means of a matter transmitter?" Rhodan asked. He caught a fleeting, strange reaction on the part of the blue skinned ruler.

"Of course. I was forced to leave the eighth world precipitately. What do you know of the transmitter? Do you know anything of its operating principle? To us it's the greatest mystery of the universe."

"Absolutely nothing," Rhodan replied gently. He did not pursue the subject any further. The Thort was disturbed enough. "Sir, you offered me your assistance. Yes, my ship is unflightworthy. You do not have the technologies necessary to repair. It The surprise shot we received from the battleship was a mortal wound."

"Then—I must resign myself to being without you?" Rhodan saw the blue skinned features of the other sag with despair. A dull pain of hopelessness was apparent in the deepset eyes of the Ferron.

"By no means!" he said. "It is merely necessary that you place your transmitter station at the disposal of myself and my people. You've just heard the report that the supership has landed on the eighth planet. You simply have to make it possible for me, with the help of your transmitters, to land there in the quickest and most unobserved manner. If that is not permissible, I'll have to take the more complicated alternative of using my two small fighter ships to get there." The Thort was astonished. Nevertheless, he immediately agreed to the request, followed by another question. What~ will you do there? The planet is under enemy occupation."

"I will take the battleship. Then we will make further plans." Rhodan said easily. "As stated, this ship is no longer usable. I was on a short exploration trip, for which this vessel was quite suitable. If I had suspected that a Topide invasion was going on, I would have come here with a fleet. I'm very sorry." Bell would have liked to at least clear his throat, but he controlled himself. Excited interrogations followed. Rhodan explained clearly who the Topides were, where they came from, and their capabilities. The Thort again pledged every possible assistance. Rhodan received permission to use the transmitters. Then came the touchy question

"Will you be able to operate the supership?"

Rhodan replied calmly, "Sir, it is a battleship of my own race."

This elicited a strong reaction among the Ferrons. The officers froze. Only the Thort remained calm. Obviously, he was self-possessed and shrewd.

"But certainly it is not manned by people of your race?"

"Naturally not. It's a mystery to me how the Topides got possession of it. I am urgently requesting that no pains be spared to bring me a living Topide. Have you taken any prisoners?" "No, they had not been able to salvage a single Topid. However, one young officer added that a Topidian lifeboat had been shot down and had made an emergency landing in the north polar region. The Ferronian soldiers couldn't get near it because the alien crew was equipped with unknown superior weapons and their defence was impenetrable. Rhodan did not hesitate. "Sir, I would like to have you transport two of my people to the landing place and have your troops draw back. I want those fellows alive."

"They have terrible weapons," interjected Lossos, the leading Ferron scientist.

"Ours are better. Sir, please issue the orders and furnish my people with your

fastest aircraft or a small spaceship. We have no time to lose."

While the Thort issued instructions, Rhodan turned to search his own people carefully with his eyes. Finally he said, "Tako Kakuta and Betty, get ready. Each of you take along a psychoradiator and convince those shot down Topides to come out like good fellows from under cover. I need the officers especially--there should be a few among them. Tako, in an emergency you could pop in behind them. But just take care of yourself." The mutants prepared themselves, Tako with a smile and Betty with casual resignation.

The Thort was startled. "But...how can those two manage to disarm a heavily armed crew like that?" The colour of his skin turned to a pastel blue. Rhodan noted that he was agitated for the first time. "They are entirely adequate. We have forces and powers that are unknown to you. Sir, is the transportation ready?" Tako winked and disappeared. The Thort sat down slowly.

"This is beyond me," he whispered into the translator. "Who are you? Where do you come from? You are a fearful people. Your capabilities seem to be unlimited."

Rhodan supplied them with complete details as to their origin, without, however, making any mention of Earth. For the Ferrons they were all advanced Arkonides. And all his assertions were unhesitatingly accepted.

Perry utilized the waiting period by finding out more about the Ferrons. An excellent relationship was gradually established with the Thort, whose office, as it was revealed, was not inheritable. After his death a new Thort would have to be chosen from among the most capable leaders. There was little evidence of political intrigues. Rhodan perceived a shining future for these people, but something undefinable seemed to be missing.

After two hours, ship's time, Tako announced himself over his portable microtransmitter. "We have them, Chief. Five live ones, two of them officers. It was no sweat Betty located them for me, and I jumped into working distance from them. They responded immediately to the psychic ray. We'll be there in a half hour. This flier is very fast"

"Now we shall see," said Rhodan in cold, impersonal tones.

The Thort tensed. He suddenly looked upon this tall, lean man with a new perspective. All Rhodan's former equanimity was gone; there was no more of courteous protocol and friendly formality. "I am beginning to understand that in comparison to your high station I might best be considered a small provincial office holder," the Thort said. "Command me as you will--all I ask is that you help my people." Rhodan had never been so deeply moved. Bell compressed his lips tightly. Dr. Haggard struggled to conceal his own embarrassment.

CHAPTER 9

"When we're dealing with Topidian space officers," Khrest advised, "we must use the Inter-Cosmo language, which is universal to all Systems of the Great Empire. Each Topidian officer must learn it of course, the instantaneous translator is automatically programmed to handle Inter-Cosmo, so there will be no problem there." Moments later the prisoners were brought in, completely under the dominance of the mutant Kakuta's will. The deep posthypnotic effect of the psychic ray had changed them into obedient automatons. With a sudden horrified outcry, the Thort rose from his chair. Never before had he seen a Topide, nor had anyone on Ferrol known exactly the physical nature of their attackers. Instinctively, his officers drew their weapons. They carried excellent ray guns, operating on the principle of ultra-high intensity light quanta. The creatures who entered the control room in their passive state were looking at a bristling array of needle bore ray muzzles.

After a slow, deep breath, Rhodan said carefully, "Please put your weapons away—it might precipitate an accident. Your people are edgy, Your Excellency. Please advise them that I will take care of the security here." The Thort transmitted the order. The small ray guns went back to their holsters.

The cross examination of the prisoners proceeded in the damaged control room. Doctors Haggard and Manoli were momentarily absent while procuring certain medical equipment from the infirmary. There could be no doubt that these intelligences were strictly nonhuman. Nor could anyone refute the obvious fact that they had evolved from a reptilian phylum of the tree of life. Rhodan examined them very thoroughly. They wore close fitting uniforms that emphasized the unusually slender form of their physiques. Rhodan made a signal for Thora and Betty to leave the room. He used the Inter-Cosmo translator.

"The Topidian officer on the left will disrobe...and hurry it up!" he said. Then, to Tako Kakuta and John Marshall, keep your feelers out and watch his thought processes for me." Tako focused the fanned out beam of the psycho weapon on the indicated Topidian officer. With unusually agile movements, the latter began to remove his uniform.

Rhodan clamped his mouth tight in order to suppress the same horrified outcry that the Ferronian ruler had made. Here for the first time was a revelation that the returning doctors would no doubt be able to verify.

"My God!" whispered Dr. Haggard, his forehead reddening with shock. I had not considered this!"

"Dress yourself again," Rhodan ordered curtly, through the translator. "Bell—Betty and Thora can come back now. The thing is finished. Tako, switch to mass hypnosis. Give them a standing order to answer every question with absolute truthfulness." While Tako converted the psychic ray and administered the hypnotic instruction, Rhodan took one last searching look at the alien figures. Although they possessed two arms and two legs and walked erect, they were not even humanoid. They were oxygen breathers, but there the similarity to humans ceased. Their dark brown scaly skin was enough in itself to confirm this, and Rhodan didn't care to speculate on their metabolic processes. Their lizard skulls were hairless, broad, and low, their wide, thin lips were needle-toothed, and their large, startlingly protruding eyeballs possessed independent movement like those of chameleons. The intense light of the Vega system was probably a strain for them. Their enormous intelligence was no camouflage for the fact that they were of a totally inhuman character with utterly alien concepts of tolerance, ethics, and morality. The idea of sympathy or compassion was unknown to them. On the other hand they possessed other principles or concepts of ethic that, to humans and Ferrons alike, were strange and in some ways ridiculous. One could only negotiate with these six fingered descendants of reptiles on the basis of the most extreme caution. As Khrest had explained, treaties and other agreements made with them never retained validity for long.

Rhodan began a cross examination of one of the two officers. The prisoner answered in perfect Inter-Cosmo and dispelled any last doubts of his identity. After a few routine questions, Rhodan turned quickly to the core of the problem.

"You have told us that your ship was shot down by a small Arkonide space fighter near planet eight. You are the commander, so you must know where that imperial class Arkonide battleship came from so suddenly. How did your people obtain possession of it? Who is manning it? Are there Arkonides on board?"

"They were killed," explained the officer in dull tones. His great eyes were unseeing and waxen while under the continuing influence of the psychic ray.

"We captured the battleship on Topid. It had landed there to obtain fresh water. The crew was asleep and we overpowered the guards with gas. We forced the Arkonides to train us. The battleship is the spinal column of our fleet"

The explanation was more or less stammered out, interrupted by much cross questioning. Finally, Rhodan had learned enough. He allowed the prisoners to be taken away by Ferron guards.

"It would have been much more interesting to learn why they chose the Vega system for their attack. That fellow didn't seem to have any idea. The chief admiral of their fleet should know. What's his name?"

"Chrekt-Orn," answered the Arkonide scientist. "It's a well-known name, apparently a fast rising personality among the Topides. He should be watched." As soon as the last Topide had been led from the room, Rhodan immediately made contact with Major Derringhouse. The two fighter pilots were already on their return flight to the ninth planet. The Thort listened attentively to the conversation.

"All's quiet along the whole line," reported Derringhouse. "The battleship has landed on a supersized landing field. There is hardly any more resistance to the invasion. On the ground there are some hard battles going on, but the Ferrons won't be able to hold. In the space sector I have in front of me there's not a trace of an enemy ship. They have concentrated their forces exclusively on the main planet. About 150 of the defeated Ferronian fleet, large ships and small, are together with us on the return flight. We can't come in any faster or we'll leave them behind. So we'll be taking longer than usual, sir. And man, were pooped out!" Derringhouse waited for some moments on the space voice com for an answer, and finally Rhodan said, "They apparently don't need any cover just now, so don't wait for them. Pour on the gas and get here on the double. Are your fighter ships damaged?"

"Clean as a whistle—except Klein got a light side swipe from a ray cannon; just smudged up his polish job a bit." Derringhouse's broad, freckled face broke into a grin. Seeing the Thort on his com scene he nodded to him casually. Rhodan smiled to himself, then cut the communication. "My men are ready, sir," he said, turning to the Thort. "If you will kindly arrange to have them instructed concerning the operation of the transmitters, I'll be much obliged." The Thort replied, "I must say goodbye to you now, but shortly you will be contacted by the chief engineer of a secret desert fort. This is a subterranean fortress that was created at a time when various branches of my race were divided. It may be advisable to fly your damaged ship to that location. The local transmitter has to be disconnected, because it is coupled directly with my palace. My people there are not going to be able to hold out much longer, and that would mean a possible undesirable use of the equipment by the aliens. So you understand you won't be able to use the equipment that is here. However, the desert fortification also possesses a serviceable installation. I'll take care of the matter immediately." With that, the supreme ruler of the Vegan system departed. "Good—this present matter is arranged," said Rhodan. "Khrest, I want you to calculate power and direction for a direct beam to Earth over the hypertransmitter. Ill put the text of the message into the coder. I want this speech to be sent on a very high frequency scrambler—at frequent intervals, since Colonel Freyt must not under any circumstances acknowledge the signal, due to the danger of aliens' detecting the beam. For the personnel of the Good Hope, a long needed period of rest began. As Rhodan walked slowly toward his cabin, he was hailed by Reginald Bell, who looked tired.

"I've been thinking," he said, "that if we get a chance we should dig into the mystery of the matter transmitters while we're working with them I've just come from their control lab. Those things are enormous and they seem to have ultralight speed capability. Don't you think that's something the Third Power could use?" Rhodan chuckled. Resignedly, Bell clenched his eyes shut as the commander sighed, "Friend, while you are cooking up the idea I've already taken care of it. Why do you think I made such a big thing about using the machines? We could have squeezed four of us into the space fighters to get to planet eight, right? Anyway, it's sleep time. When your eyes behold the shining glory of Vega tomorrow, you will have a few things to attend to." Rhodan disappeared. As Bell turned heavily to go to his own cabin, he swore softly to himself.

No, Rhodan was not the kind of man who ever overlook a thing that in its end effect

could serve mankind. But even a foolhardy devil like Bell had to admit that it couldn't be the easiest thing in the world to snatch that Arkonide battleship. Yet it had to be done. Before anything else could be planned or hoped for, a position of strength had to be achieved. Night descended on the ninth planet of the Vega system. Space was as empty as if no Topide had ever appeared. Only the stars were there, but they were eternal.