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THE FLEET OF THE SPRINGERS

by Kurt Mahr

THE GREATEST SPACE-TIME SERIES-BAR NONE!

300 LIGHT-YEARS FROM EARTH

The aliens cannot believe their eyes—a spaceship of Arkon construction out here, over 300 light-years from the Solar System, in the orange and blue double star system of Beta-Albireo

Perry Rhodan has pursued the pirates who have stolen K-7 to their secret location, deep in space, and now fights against hopeless odds, pitting his handful of ships against 30 alien spacecraft.

This is the stirring story of—

**THE FLEET OF THE
SPRINGERS**

THE ACTION & ADVENTURE HAPPENS WITH

Perry Rhodan—Peacelord of All the Planets

Julian Tifflor—Cadet of the Space Academy of Terrania

Humphrey Hifield, Klaus Eberhardt, Felicita Kergonen & Mildred Orsons—Other Space Cadets

Organs—Alien Springer Captain of the *Orla XI*

Ornafer—Springer sparring partner of Organs

Ferla & Honnap—Springer guards

Harlgas—Commander of a group of Springer ships

RB-013—Arkonide robot

Paradicsom—Springer with rank equivalent to lieutenant

Mernok—Springer of sergeant's rank

Majs. Deringhouse & Nyssen—Officers of Rhodan's Space Force

McClears—One of Perry's men

Reginald Bell—With bellicose grin, he's usually close to Perry,

Khrest—Ancient Arkonide scientist

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by Kurt Mahr

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1/ Prisoners Of The Springers

UNKNOWN TO ALL but the Springers was this secret place. This place where prisoners of the K-7 were confined.

The K-7, auxiliary ship of the Terrestrial spacefleet, measured 200 feet in diameter and was presently bound to the *Orla XI* by a highly effective magneto-mechanical bond. The bond neutralized itself inside the *Orla*, which was one of the gigantic spacers of the merchant fleet of the unique race known as the Springers.

A captive of the alien ship, the K-7 and its crew had gone through hypertransition with the Springers and emerged, after the hytrans process, at this unidentified place in space. Beneath the K-7, parasitic prisoner of the Springer ship, lay a strange cloud-covered world around which parent ship and kidnaped ship had been circling for endless hours.

Three humans stood together in the command centre of the K-7: Humphrey Hifield, Klaus Eberhardt and Mildred Orsons. Hifield and Eberhardt still wore the regular service uniform of Space Academy cadets. Mildred was attired in one of the comfortable sheer spacesuits of Arkonide manufacture, with a helmet that hung on the back like a hood when not in use.

“It’s taking a long time!” Eberhardt growled.

Hifield shrugged his shoulders.

“I hope they don’t hurt him,” Mildred sighed.

The remark seemed to irritate Hifield, who flared: “Why should they do anything to him? He’ll be back in five or ten minutes and laugh at you for being so scared. I wish somebody would make that big a fuss about me!”

Mildred refrained from reacting. Eberhardt looked sideways at Hifield and grinned: “You’re always very careful not to get into situations that would *cause* us to worry about you, aren’t you?”

Hifield was not the man to let such an insinuation pass unnoticed. But before he could retort, Mildred cried out happily: “Here he comes! Over there!”

A hole suddenly gaped in the smooth wall of the strange ship. A human figure emerged, pushed off and floated across the chasm. On the observation screen, the figure was lost from sight when it disappeared behind the curvature of the K-7.

Mildred was already on her way. “Come on! Let’s go meet him!” she shouted.

Eberhardt ran after her. Hifield angrily shook his head, then reluctantly followed.

Posted at the exit of the command centre were two heavily armed Springer guards but these the trio stormed through and ran down the wide corridor to the main elevator.

The two tall long-haired Springers didn't move a facial muscle. They had observed the three prisoners while they were in the command centre and were certain that they hadn't done anything undesirable.

Mildred, Eberhardt and Hifield reached the airlock of the auxiliary ship at the same time as the hatch opened. The man they had seen float across from the *Orla XI* stepped in, pulled his helmet back over his head and let his shoulders drop in a gesture of resignation.

"What's the matter, Tiff?" Mildred asked anxiously.

Tiff—Julian Tiffloor, Cadet of the Space Academy in Terrania on a clandestine mission so secret that he himself had not been informed of its true purpose—waved his hand. "Nothing," he answered wearily. "They've grilled me. And, by Jove, they've got a way of interrogating you that makes you forget how to smile!"

"And how much did you spill?" Hifield asked a little more acrimoniously than he really intended.

"Not a thing!" Tiff shouted, enraged. "I don't know anything so I couldn't blab anything!"

"Says you!" Hifield shot back unmoved.

Mildred gave him an exasperated look. "Can't you stop this quarrelling for five minutes?" she upbraided him. Then she turned toward Tiff to ask him something but Tiff said quickly:

"Let's all go up! I've got to talk to you!"

He led the way. The two cadets and the girl followed him. They rode up in the antigrav-elevator to the section of the auxiliary ship where the cabins and the small mess hall were located. In the mess hall they found six of the 10 cadets on board the K-7, Felicita Kergonen, the botany student and Major Deringhouse who had hobbled down on crutches from his cabin to enjoy some company.

They knew that Julian Tiffloor had been called on board the *Orla* for questioning. When he entered their conversation fell silent.

Tiffloor first raised his hand from his hip in a quick silent gesture. Then he said: "Good morning! How are you getting along around here?"

The reply came hesitantly and in exactly the manner Tiff had expected: dispassionately and unsuspectingly.

They had understood his gesture on which they had agreed a few hours earlier. Raising the hand from the hip meant: *I've got to say something the Springers aren't allowed to hear. Watch the intercom!*

The Springers were anything but fools. They knew exactly what kind of prisoners they had captured—prisoners who would only give up the thought of

escape when their throat was cut. The K-7 was equipped with a very efficient intercom system and the Springers made thorough use of it to survey their captives.

Tiff started some innocuous chatter. A few of the cadets surrounded him and asked him about his experiences on board the *Orla*. The others kept talking to Deringhouse who, with his wounded leg, had pushed together two chairs in order to be comfortable.

The group around Tiff stood shoulder to shoulder. The circle was so tight that Tiff was able to hastily write something on a piece of paper without being detected by the intercom, all the while giving insignificant answers.

He passed the slip to Hifield who stood next to him and was sure that the news would get around within a few minutes.

The conversation continued while the ship circulated. The message read:

“The *Orla* is inferior to the K-7 in equipment and energy output. We can get away if we manage to start our engines. The two girls will have to distract the guards from the command centre. I’ll switch on the controls and set a time delay of about one hour for take-off. Any suggestions when we can start?”

* * * *

The *Stardust* hovered near the outer edge of the Terrestrial solar system between the orbits of Pluto and Neptune. The gigantic battleship—half a mile in diameter—was flanked by the two heavy cruisers *Terra* and *Solar System*. Perry Rhodan kept in constant touch with the two commanders via intercom.

Structure-sensors had detected the transition of the strange spaceship and pinpointed the location of departure. Rhodan had submitted the data of the sensor to the positronic calculator and demanded a rapid evaluation.

Rhodan knew that even the tremendous positronic computer of the *Stardust* would require six to seven hours for the evaluation of the complicated sensor-diagram if the result was to be obtained with an error of less than one percent.

But Rhodan didn’t have time to wait six or seven hours.

He, the *Stardust* and *Terra* were facing an enemy that had been able to keep hidden in spite of all the efforts on Earth. This was an indication that their technical achievements were far from underdeveloped.

Rhodan had worked out a plan according to which Julian Tiffior was supposed to lead him on the track of the adversary. Tiffior had measured up to his expectations. However nobody had foreseen that the enemy would capture the K-7 and take it from the orbit of Pluto into hyperspace so that Tiffior’s cell-transmitter had been transferred from within a second outside the range of reception by the telepaths.

Rhodan was prepared to risk an error up to 10% in the evaluation of the

diagram but he was not ready to tolerate a delay of more than an hour.

“We *must* find the K-7 again!”

Hardly anybody had heard another word from him since the auxiliary ship had disappeared.

Reginald Bell brought the plastic strip printed with the result of the calculations of the positronic computer. Rhodan grabbed the strip out of his hand and studied it. That took a minute.

Bell glanced at him from the side. “Well... ?” He wanted to ask more but at that moment Rhodan lifted his head and shouted:

“Get ready for transition! *Terra* and *Solar System* will come along with us!”

* * * *

“In two hours,” was the consensus of the inquiry. “Shortly after change of guards.”

Tiff agreed. He had made the same proposal. He left the mess hall together with Eberhardt and Mildred. Hifield remained behind.

The intercom receiver-transmitters were installed in the walls of the corridor at regular intervals. The distance between the sets was about 25 feet. As Mildred and the two cadets kept their voices very low there was a stretch of about six to ten feet between two sets where the sound could not be picked up by the intercom.

Their conversation proceeded something like this:

“Orlgans was convulsed with laughter.” Tiff described the situation during the interrogation he had just endured as they slowly walked past one of the sets. “But you know the Springers. They laugh loudly and amuse themselves royally, thinking all the time about the best way to obliterate you.”

“What did they want to know?” Eberhardt asked.

Tiff glanced at the wall. The intercom they had just passed was about 10 feet behind them and the next one 15 feet ahead.

“You’ll have to engage the guards in a conversation, Milly,” Tiff said quickly and softly. “Pretend you want to show them something and lure them away from the command centre for at least three minutes. Three minutes will be enough for me at the worst but more would be a lot better.”

The intercom came closer.

“...nothing, of course,” Tiff changed abruptly. I don’t have the slightest idea what secrets he thinks that I know. He doesn’t give me any clues either. He laughed loudly in my face and said next time he’d apply different methods that would be highly unpleasant for me while he obtained his information.”

Mildred’s face looked frightened. “Do you believe he’ll really do that?”

Tiff nodded. The intercom was behind them again. “He certainly will! You must do your job very cleverly, Milly. Even if I set a time delay, the guards could

discover our operation if they should become suspicious and investigate the command centre closely. You'll have to explain it all precisely to Felicita so she won't do anything silly. And tell her not to be afraid! They're nice guys as long as they're your friends. But look out when you cross them up!"

* * * *

"There's no matter to speak of within a radius of 20 light-years," the rangefinder reported.

Perry Rhodan sat in front of the *Stardust's* pilot console. The observation screen showed the blackness of empty space, overlaid by a contourless veil of cold points of light.

Two blurred, faintly shimmering spots appeared on the screen—the *Terra* and the *Solar System*.

"And what is beyond the 20 light-year limit?" Rhodan asked into the microphone.

The answer came promptly: "Beta-Albireo is 21.85 light-years away from our present location, a double star in the constellation Cygnus."

"What else?"

"Two more suns at a distance of 53.56 and 62.72 light-years, sir."

"Thank you!"

Reginald Bell was leaning against the side of the pilot console. Rhodan looked at him and said: "We've jumped 350 light-years. Beta-Albireo is located about 320 light-years from the Sun. The positronic indicated an error of 9.2% for its calculations."

Rhodan interrupted himself and connected with the rangefinder again. "Let me have the distance of the two unknown stars from the Sun," he requested.

The whirring of the calculating machine was audible in the loudspeaker. Then came the answer: "The closer of the two is almost exactly on the extension of the line *Terra-Stardust*. Distance from Sol approximately 400 light-years. The other one is located at positive Phi from the line. Distance from Sol about 383 light-years."

Rhodan clicked off and looked once more at Bell. "Did you hear that?"

Bell was doing some figuring in his head. "Yes, I heard it," he replied thoughtfully. "350 plus or minus 9.2% means that the goal is within a range of 318 to 382 light-years distance from Sol; 320 could be right, perhaps even 383 under certain circumstances, but 400 must be eliminated."

Rhodan agreed. "Fine. Now we've got two targets to choose from. Which shall it be?"

Bell twisted his face in a bellicose grin. "The more likely of the two: Beta-Albireo!"

* * * *

The Springers were descendants of an Arkonide race. In their technical development they were at least equal to the Arkonides, the rulers of the Galactic Imperium, if not superior.

The Springer fleet, whether battleships or merchant ships, was equipped with structure-sensors which could register the disturbance of the four-dimensional space-time continuum caused by the transition of a spaceship at a great distance.

The *Orla XI* located the severe disturbance produced by the transition of the three Terrestrial warships without difficulty.

And Orlgans, owner and captain of the *Orla*, began to realize that he had become involved in an affair that probably was too much for him to handle.

Orlgans consulted with the man who would have been called First Officer on board Terrestrial ships. The Springers were traders and there were no military titles on their mercantile vessels.

The man's name was Ornafer. A Terranian would have had trouble telling the two men apart unless he knew them for some time. They were both the same height—about 6'6"—and of the same solid build. The colour of their untrimmed hair was indistinguishable and they wore the close-cropped beards which was the current fashion among the Springers.

"Somebody is on our heels!" Orlgans said gravely.

Ornafer laughed defiantly. "So what! We'll teach them a lesson!"

Orlgans shook his head. "They might teach us a lesson instead," he said.

Ornafer was still laughing. "They wouldn't dare touch us. Us, the Springers!"

Orlgans was of a different opinion. "They know the World of Eternal Life. We don't know what technical means are at their disposal."

Ornafer became less adamant. "We can always call in a few warships to help us if you're worried about them."

Orlgans raised both hands in a sign of affirmation. "The latest finding came from a distance of 20 light-years. If they move in any closer, I'm going to request the warships!"

* * * *

Mildred had informed Felicita about their joint task in the same manner as she had received her instructions from Tiff—between two of the intercom sets in the main corridor.

Tiff had seen evidence that the machinery of the Springer ship was inferior to the installations of the K-7. He was convinced that the escape should be attempted under any circumstances—either by ruse or with force.

If he sneaked into the command centre, Eberhardt, Hifield and a few other cadets would lie in ambush and watch to see if the guards returned too early. In

that case they would have to be disabled. Tiff was reasonably certain he could get the auxiliary ship, whose engines had been stopped for hours, ready to start in 10 minutes. They would have to defend the K-7 for 10 minutes against the Springers if the girls should fail in their endeavour.

There was still one matter that remained unclear to Tiff: Major Deringhouse had surrendered the K-7 to the enemy when it was attacked by the Springers in the path of Pluto. He had offered rather ineffectual resistance. The weapons of the K-7 outclassed those of the Springers' merchant ships. Why didn't he put up more of a fight? He could easily have won the battle.

Tiff would have liked to ask Deringhouse this question personally. He conceded that Deringhouse must have had reasons of his own and he was afraid to bare a secret if he asked the Major within earshot of the intercom.

Mildred and Felicita waited in their cabins till the appointed time had come. They acted as if they met accidentally in the hallway, chatted for awhile loud enough so that they could be overheard on the intercom about what to do next and decided to have a little talk with the two guards in front of the command centre.

The command centre was two floors down and they took the elevator.

Tiff saw them pass by the open door of the mess-hall and gave Eberhardt a sign. Eberhardt caught it at once and passed it on. Tiff left the mess-hall. Eberhardt, Hifield and the other three cadets followed him two minutes later.

Tiff didn't go directly to the command centre. First he went down to the bottom of the spherical ship, making it appear as if he were looking for something or other. When he assumed that the girls had finished the first part of their job, he floated up again in the antigrav-elevator and reached the main corridor about 15 feet from the hatch of the command centre and close below the receiver of an intercom set. However he was sure that this particular set was not used for surveillance as the two guards were responsible for watching what was going on there.

The guards were gone. He could bear some soft giggling coming from the recess of a side-corridor. The girls were doing their work.

Tiff whistled the signal. The answer came from farther behind in the main corridor where Eberhardt and his men were posted.

Tiff hesitated no longer. With seven or eight quick steps he stood before the command centre hatch and let it slide open. Impatiently he waited till the crack was big enough for him to slip through. The light flared up as he entered the large round room but Tiff turned it off at once, pushing the override button. Simultaneously he closed the hatch-door switch. The heavy plate of Arkon steel returned with a suction noise into its fitting.

Breathing easier again, Tiff turned on the light, looked around and went to work.

* * * *

Rhodan held the microphone close to himself. “You’ve got the toughest assignment, Nyssen,” he said seriously. “I’ll give you the word as soon as the telepaths have located Tifflor. You may presume that Beta-Albireo has also a planetary system—most double stars do.

“We know nothing about the armament of the alien ship. It may be more powerful than your cruiser. Don’t do anything rash. Your sole task is to distract the aliens to enable the crew of the K-7 to gain their freedom somehow.

“The rest will be handled by McClears and myself. Please confirm!”

Major Nyssen, Commander of the *Solar System*, confirmed the order by repeating it almost word for word.

“Right,” Rhodan concluded. “We’ll go through transition in exactly 14 minutes. According to my calculations the transition will end about two light-years from Beta-Albireo.

“Attention, everybody! First stage alert effective immediately for all battle stations and observation posts!”

* * * *

Ornafer laughed.

Ornafer always laughed when he faced an unusual situation.

He was taken by surprise and a little scared.

The structure-sensor registered a new transition—stronger than the previous one because it was closer.

Only about two light-years away.

Organs was not in the Command Centre. Ornafer called him up and reported to him.

“Alert the warships!” Organs ordered. “At once! And send additional guards over to the enemy ship. They must secure all important corridors. I wouldn’t like the aliens to get away in the confusion.”

Ornafer acknowledged the orders and proceeded to comply with them.

The Springers were a peculiar lot. They had no homes but lived on their ships, travelling through the Galaxy. They considered it their life’s purpose to trade and to prevent anyone who also wanted to from doing so. They claimed a monopoly on intergalactic trade. As worldly and open-minded as they were, they believed with religious fervour that a mythical deity had bestowed the intergalactic trade monopoly on them at the beginning of their history.

In a sense the situation of the Springers in the Galactic Imperium—whose centre was the world of Arkon—was unique. The Arkonides had always considered it below their dignity to engage in trade with anyone. The Springers, who actually were distant relatives, filled the gap and made themselves so indispensable that all those who wished to conduct any business across long distances required their services.

The Springers were always primarily concerned about their own profits. They were the ones who always incited rivalries within the Imperium because they hoped to gain more markets for their business by the creation of splinter groups.

They were tolerant toward all since they had no reason to quarrel with anybody. However there was something they would never permit, namely any infringement on their monopoly. Their formidable fleet of battleships gave them great power and helped them to gain a decisive edge over the Arkonides. The Springers being usually individualists by conviction and having great fun snatching their profits from each other, realized in good time that even individualists had to practice some forethought to protect their common interests. They had built a battlefleet that cruised watchfully in space and waited for the moment it was called to come to the aid of a commercial ship.

In times of danger the Springers, who were normally dispersed throughout the whole Galaxy and competed among themselves, became united, bound by an oath. *Live separately and unite for defence*—a motto that much resembled one on Earth—had become a basic doctrine of Springer policy.

Ornafer, broadcasting his call for help into space by hyperwave, could be sure that assistance would be on the way in the shortest time possible.

Then he took care of the second part of Orlans' order by sending five additional guards over to the captured enemy ship.

* * * *

It took Tiff 20 minutes to activate the machinery of the K-7 in the planned manner. It would now require about one more hour till the K-7 would apply the total power of its engines to free itself from the magnetic grip of *Orla XI* and to flee from the foe.

Tiff was resolved to leave the enemy unhurt again just as Deringhouse had done before. He left the command centre unseen. He began to whistle the song that was the agreed signal and Eberhardt, Hifield and the three other cadets came forward from their niches in the storeroom where they had kept themselves hidden.

The giggling of the girls was still audible up from the right.

“How did it go?” Hifield asked Tiff.

“Without a hitch. The K-7 will cut loose from our opponents in an hour. Until then well have to watch out for the guards.” Then Tiff ordered: “Back to the messhall! We’ve got to give the word to the others.”

He had hardly taken two steps when the alarm sirens began to wail. Tiff stopped and listened to the rhythm. The sound was interrupted at irregular intervals.

Tiff was unable to recognize the signal. He heard the two guards stomp through the side corridor. “Let’s get out of here,” Tiff whispered. “Don’t let ’em catch us here!”

They ran a few steps and changed to a slower, less obvious pace when they noticed the two Springers appearing behind them.

“*Stak!*” one of them shouted. “Stop or I’ll shoot!”

He used Intercosmo, an artificial language which every cadet learned in the Space Academy.

Tiff talked to his friends and kept walking as if he had heard nothing. A shot from the long-barreled thermo-weapon the Springers used whistled over the heads of the cadets and drew a molten hairline crack in the metal of the ceiling.

Tiff stopped and turned around. He distorted his face as if he were frightened. “What’s the matter?” he called.

One of the guards came closer. “I told you to stop!” he growled. “Can’t you hear?”

Tiff shook his head. “I didn’t hear a thing. What’s going on?”

“Alarm,” the guard said brusquely. “Where were you?”

“Just walking. We can’t sit in the mess hall all the time.”

The guard looked back over his shoulder. “Ferla, look into the command centre and see what they were up to!”

Ferla let the hatch slide open and entered the command centre. The light came on and Ferla looked around. “Nothing!” he reported. “Everything’s in order.”

Tiff took a deep breath. It hadn’t been such a bad idea to make the light switches of the engine control panel inoperable.

Somebody came up the elevator shaft, a broad-shouldered towering Springer with a thermo-weapon under his arm. Four others followed him.

“Hoho!” laughed the guard. “What are you looking for?”

“Alarm,” one of the Springers laughed back. “There have been transitions in the vicinity.” Then he pointed to the cadets. “We’ll have to lock these guys up somewhere and watch them closely so they won’t give us any trouble.”

Tiff and his friends were shrewd enough not to raise any objections. They knew that time was on their side and that there was nothing else for them to do for the present but to wait.

One hour to wait.

They were taken back to the mess hall—the two girls as well—and the door was locked.

Tiff raised both arms to let Deringhouse and the cadets know that he had carried out his plan. Then he added: “We’ve got five new guards on board and they’re taking no more chances because transitions have been registered in the vicinity.”

2/ Confrontation In Beta-Albireo

“Marshall claims he’s made contact with Tiff!” Bell reported excitedly.

Rhodan looked up fleetingly from the picture he was studying on the little screen segment in front of him. It was the pickup of the sensor station converted into optical signals.

The Beta-Albireo system consisted of a sun-like, orange coloured central star with a smaller blue companion, even richer in energy, and probably four planets.

There was no doubt in Rhodan’s mind after the conclusion of the transition that the adversary could be found in this system. Bell’s report came merely as a confirmation.

“Of course Marshall can’t exactly pinpoint to the dot where Tiff is located,” Bell added.

Rhodan looked up again and reached for the microphone. A touch of the button brought the commander of the *Solar System* to the picture screen. Major Nyssen stood squarely in front of the receiver.

“We hit it right, Nyssen,” Rhodan said. “Tiff is close by. You can take off now.”

Nyssen nodded in assent. His picture faded and seconds later the *Solar System* veered away from the formation of the three ships with rapidly increasing velocity. Direction Beta-Albireo.

Rhodan watched the ship suddenly disappear at a distance of three light-seconds as it went into transition. Then he ordered acceleration. Within a few moments *Stardust* and *Terra* reached half the speed of light.

“Be prepared for instant transition!” Rhodan directed.

* * * *

Organs had long ago returned to the command centre.

“Nothing new,” Ornafer stated from time to time. “Apparently they’re floating somewhere in space and don’t know where to look.” He had meanwhile regained his optimism.

Organs was still as sceptical as before. “I’m not so sure that you’re right,” he

replied. "I wouldn't be surprised if the next few minutes..."

The alarm cut off his words. The whistling was shriller than Orlgans and Ornafer had ever heard before. The enemy must have emerged in close proximity.

The structure-sensor reacted at the same time but Orlgans paid no attention. He listened to the hysterical voice of the observer coming over the loudspeaker.

"By the lord of all stars, its an Arkonide ship!"

Half a second later Orlgans saw it burst onto the picture screen. It was a spherical ship, as built by Arkonides, and was no more than 6000 miles away.

Orlgans was aware that he was outclassed by the alien. "Full speed ahead," he shouted into the intercom to the engine control room. "Hurry!"

The machinery worked precisely. The tremendous power of the engines tore *Orla XI* out of its circular track and forced the ship into open space.

Orlgans watched the movement from the command centre. He realized that he had underestimated the velocity of his opponent. The spherical ship had emerged from the transition almost with the speed of light and ruined the *Orla's* effort with a mad run.

Orlgans was an experienced captain who had already performed more than 10,000 transitions. He knew what risk was involved in reentering at such high velocity—close to the critical limit—from a transition. He never had dared it himself and knew full well that an Arkonide captain would be even less inclined to risk it.

Who was this daredevil?

So far Orlgans had merely been sceptical but now he was scared.

An Arkonide ship with a strange captain at the helm!

The spherical ship easily caught up with *Orla XI* and raced past. At the position of least distance a pale light grey beam flashed from the mighty body of the hostile ship, shot above the *Orla* and lost itself in the depth of space.

"We're lucky their aim is poor," Orlgans muttered and warned his few gunners to beware.

* * * *

The fact that the *Orla* started to move away with the prisoners in tow went unnoticed in the mess-hall. The neutralizers of the K-7 continued to operate perfectly and would have compensated for far greater acceleration than the ship presently experienced.

Tiff kept glancing at his watch from time to time.

Still 10 minutes till zero.

Major Deringhouse grinned in spite of his pain. It was now rather quiet in the mess hall. One could easily bear him as he said from his cot: "I'd give a year's pay to see their faces."

At first Tiff was shocked. On second thought he realized that Deringhouse was not really pressing their luck. Even assuming that the Springers would submit each of their remarks to the positronic translator, it would take more than 10 minutes before they could see the translation of the English sentence and a little more than that to grasp its true meaning.

About three minutes before zero, one of the cadets began to hammer against the door as planned. In less than a minute the door slid open and the faces of two guards appeared in the frame. "What do you want?" one of them asked.

"We're starving," Tiff answered quickly.

"Make yourselves something to eat!"

"We don't have a thing."

The guard laughed and turned around. "Honnap, get something to eat!"

Honnap's loud voice answered from the main corridor: "I can't go across. It's much too dangerous at this acceleration."

The guard turned again to Tiff. "Right," he chortled. "We've been moving for a few minutes. You'll have to wait till we stop accelerating."

Tiff was greatly surprised but he knew that he couldn't afford to let this moment pass without acting. A second time the guards were not likely to be so careless.

Tiff looked around. He could read the same surprise in the faces of the others. One of them inquired: "Acceleration? Why does the *Orla* accelerate?"

Tiff started to whistle the song again. He saw from the look in their eyes that they began to understand. The *Orla* racing away with the K-7 and nobody knew why. Now was the time to strike!

Tiff leaped forward and clamped both arms around the big neck of the guard. The force of his rush carried him out into the corridor but Tiff braced his feet firmly and quickly pulled the husky Springer through the open door back into the messhall.

The guard went limp and Tiff let him drop.

"Watch him!" Tiff shouted.

And the five cadets who were assigned to guard the defeated Springers took the motionless guard into their custody.

Hifield and two other cadets overwhelmed the second guard.

Meanwhile Honnap had become suspicious. He approached with clacking boots. Tiff and Eberhardt lunged toward him together. Honnap's thermo-gun was useless. He was unable to raise the long barrel fast enough. A wild shot hissed through the wide corridor but a moment later Honnap lay unconscious on the floor.

"Four to go!" Tiff panted. "Let's make a dash for the command centre!"

None of the four other guards were in sight. A throng of cadets stormed down the main corridor.

* * * *

“The ship!” Ornafer shouted in desperation. “It got loose!”

At first Orlgans didn’t get what he meant. The ship? The ship got loose? Then he glanced to the side at the observation screen.

The little sphere of the captured enemy ship had disappeared, not completely disappeared in as much as it was still visible as a little speck in space. Yet it was separated from the *Orla*.

Orlgans started to swear. He felt the urge to pursue the escaping spaceship and to capture it again. However there was still the faintly shimmering spot on the front screen showing the large hostile ship whose disintegrator shot had missed the *Orla* by only a few hundred feet.

There was the greater danger, Orlgans decided.

He didn’t know how his captives had succeeded in gaining their freedom but this was at the moment of secondary importance.

The faint point of light made by the Arkonide cruiser had reached its minimum and was now approaching the *Orla* anew.

“What’s taking our warships so long?” Orlgans groaned. “The second time around they’re bound to improve their aim.”

* * * *

Major Nyssen hadn’t the slightest intention of hitting the *Orla*. Now that the K-7 had detached itself from the tubular Springer vehicle he was only concerned with keeping the Springers off balance till he had corralled them in a gravitation field in the same manner as the Springers had fettered the K-7 previously.

Nyssen was convinced that the strange ship was far weaker than the *Solar System*. It had failed to return their fire when the *Solar System* passed by. Need there be further proof?

Nyssen gave orders to switch all energy reserves to the gravitation generator.

All observers on the *Solar System* were on the lookout for any other adversaries, but none were found. The *Solar System*, the alien ship and the K-7 were alone in this sector of space.

Nyssen buzzed his opponent a second time from a distance of a couple of hundred miles and let go a salvo of shots that were deliberately off the mark. It gave him satisfaction that the other ship began to make evasive manoeuvres as a result. It curved widely and increased its acceleration.

Nyssen turned the *Solar System* around for a third attack on the foe.

And as both ships were approaching each other he gave the instructions: “Grav ready for capture!”

* * * *

“We got away!” Tiff shouted happily.

The K-7 was equipped with acceleration absorbers which not only neutralized the thrust applied for the hasty flight from the *Orla* but also compensated for the effect of tearing away from the grip of the huge ship.

Nobody inside the K-7 who didn't watch an observation screen and the sensors was able to notice the manoeuvres performed by the ship. However it was clearly visible on the receivers in the command centre that the *Orla*, a thin glowing line, was already left more than 500 miles behind them.

They had knocked out two more guards posted in front of the command centre. The two remaining ones seemed to roam around somewhere in the ship. Tiff had distributed his men in such a way that they would run into them sooner or later.

Nothing could go wrong.

Cadet Eberhardt had taken over the observer station. He studied the view for awhile in the careful manner that was characteristic of him, suddenly became amazed and finally shouted with a cracked voice: “There's a third ship!”

Tiff spun around. “Already? Where?”

Eberhardt pointed with a silent gesture to the green light of the sensor screen. Tiff ran over and recognized two fast-moving spots of light. One was oblong and slim—the *Orla* undoubtedly—and the other a point which grew rapidly to a circular disk.

“The *Stardust!*” Eberhardt murmured, trembling with excitement.

Tiff read the position co-ordinates. The spherical ship was approximately 12,000 miles away at the moment Tiff took the reading. If it were the *Stardust* it should have appeared much larger on the screen.

“Hand me the Hycom!” Tiff shouted without taking his eyes off the screen.

“Here it is!” somebody replied.

Tiff whirled around and grabbed the mike.

“Attention! This is an emergency call! K-7 calling all ships of the Terrestrial spacefleet! K-7 calling all ships of the Terrestrial spacefleet!”

Then he waited quietly for an answer. It came within a few seconds.

“*Solar System* to K-7, Commander Nyssen speaking. We'll be right over but first we have to take care of something else.”

Tiff smiled. “O.K. We'll wait for you.”

* * * *

Organs trembled with anxiety as he watched the manoeuvre of the attacking ship.

Ornafer stared motionlessly at the observation screen.

“This time they’re going to get us,” Orlgans gritted his teeth. “They’ve already bungled enough shots.”

The spherical ship had swooped past the *Orla* for a second time, fired a series of shots that missed again and turned around once more in a bold manoeuvre for its third approach.

This time Orlgans ordered his gunners to return the fire. There could be little hope that the relatively small cannons of *Orla XI* could accomplish anything against the strangers but even traders don’t want to die without making an attempt to defend themselves.

* * * *

Rhodan waited impatiently for news from Nyssen and the K-7 but it never came.

“It’s about time we hear from them,” Bell grumbled.

Rhodan glanced at his watch. It was 21:12 hours Terrestrial time. Then he bent over the microphone.

“Rhodan to McClears. Get ready for a transition! We want to take a look at what’s happening!”

* * * *

21:12 hours Terrestrial time on board the K-7.

“The machines are working at 60% of capacity,” Hifield stated.

Tiff replied: “That’s not sufficient for the protective screens.”

Hifield shrugged his shoulders. “What do you need the defence screens for? The *Orla* is almost 20,000 miles away and quite busy with the *Solar System*, Nobody is after us.

Tiff contemplated before replying. “Let’s hope it’ll stay that way. I just can’t imagine that the Springers...”

A shrill alarm signal cut off his words.

“Structure-sensor!” one of the cadets shouted. “Hytrans at close distance!”

Tiff paid scant attention to the report. “It’s the *Stardust*!” he said.

But the observer set him right: “Thirty unidentifiable objects, distance 18,000 miles, Phi 21, Theta 89, velocity 4800 miles per second, component in our direction 150 miles per second.”

Tiff spun about.

“What do they look like?”

“Cylindrical and long.”

“These are Springer ships!” Tiff shouted. “Build up protective screens!”

Hifield answered angrily: “We don’t have enough energy yet. The machines are

working only at 65%.”

“Attention, we’re receiving fire!”

* * * *

Ornafer was so surprised when the structure-sensor indicated a disturbance that it took him awhile to pass the report on to Orlgans. “Strong transition in the vicinity!” he panted. “That’ll be the end of us.”

However, two seconds later Orlgans called out in a thunderous voice: “Our warships have arrived! We’re saved!”

* * * *

The appearance of the 30 alien ships was registered on the *Solar System* without panic. Nyssen muttered only: “Things are getting serious!”

Then he instructed the navigator to hold the ship in standby position and to disregard their erstwhile opponent for the time being. The technical control room was ordered to keep the, gravity generator idling.

Only then did Nyssen inform the *Stardust*. As the transition had probably also been observed by the *Stardust*, he merely gave a description of the alien ships.

They very much resemble the vehicle ahead of us. I’d say they belong to the same people, although those 30 ships look a little more compact. They appear to be more dangerous than the crate here.”

He had barely finished his message when the rangefinder registered the energy release—11,000 miles away.

Nyssen immediately drew the conclusion that the K-7 had been bombarded.

He tried to make contact with the auxiliary ship but failed to reach it. Then he set the *Solar System* in motion and prepared to attack the hostile formation, regardless of the fact that his adversary was many times stronger.

* * * *

The first salvo missed the K-7 by a few thousand feet. Tiff returned the fire but the effect left much to be desired. He had too few men and those he had were hardly trained in the operation of the heavy disintegrators, thermo-beamers and neutron guns.

Nevertheless, one of the hostile ships was destroyed.

The cadets began to cheer but as soon as they opened their mouths the K-7 was struck such a violent blow that the absorbers had barely time to counteract as it was deflected from its course.

“Hit in the engine room!” somebody shouted.

Sirens screamed and the engine control lamp blinked red.

Julian Tifflor sat at the pilot console and gave his instructions calmly, matter-of-factly and resolutely as if he were an experienced commander. "Manoeuvrability?" he asked quietly.

The answer came promptly. "Practically nil! Less than 5%."

"Battle stations! Continue firing and keep the enemy at bay!"

"Will do, Tiff!"

Tiff swivelled around in his chair. "We're getting off!" he suddenly decided.

Hifield asked: "Who is we? We've got only one destroyer on board and it holds no more than three men."

Tiff shrugged his shoulders. "It'll have to hold five. The two girls and three men. I suggest Deringhouse be one of the three men."

"O.K.," Eberhardt replied. "But who are the other two?"

Tiff was already on the way. "We'll find that out. Come on!"

They ran to the mess hall. The hard blow from the first hit had thrown Major Deringhouse from his cot. He had crawled to the table and tried to pull himself up.

Tiff assessed the situation. "We're going to get you out, sir!" he said.

Deringhouse slid down again and waved his hand in a rejecting gesture. "That's completely out of the question," he replied. "I've had time to think about Rhodan's plan. You're on an important mission, Tifflor, and it'll be necessary for you to vanish from the scene. Take the two girls and these two men," he pointed at Eberhardt and Hifield, "with you and don't forget to pick up some weapons. You can use the thermo-guns of the Springers."

Tiff started to protest but Deringhouse cut him short. "No discussions, Cadet Tifflor! It's an order!"

Tiff saluted. "Yes, sir!"

The five subdued Springers lay neatly tied up next to the bulkhead and the thermo-guns wrestled from them were stacked in a corner.

"Take all five guns," Tiff ordered. "We can't have too many of them."

Eberhardt and Hifield collected the weapons. Tiff stopped at the door and looked at Deringhouse. "I feel like a..." he began, but Deringhouse interrupted him at once.

"Shut up, Cadet!" he barked at him, "and get out of here as quick as possible. Try to reach the *Stardust* but first make contact with the Chief, just in case!"

Tiff saluted a second time and left. Hifield and Eberhardt followed him. The two girls were picked up at their cabins.

Tiff gave his last instructions from the hangar of the destroyer.

"Hold your fire and try to save your lives!" he directed the cadets. "There are too many of them to win. Don't do anything rash!"

The two girls had already entered the cockpit. Hifield handed them the weapons. He still held the last gun in his hand when the airlock hatch began to

buzz and slowly opened up.

Eberhardt stood on the left fin of the machine, staring with open mouth at the hatch and what appeared behind it. "Look out!" he shouted.

Tiff simply threw himself down and rolled over to Hifield. A shot blasted into the room and Hifield reacted with remarkable agility. He turned on his heels and fired a few rounds against the hatch. A wild scream came from the opening. A tall, broad-shouldered figure staggered in, tried to stay on its feet and finally crashed to the floor. Hasty steps could be heard leaving through the passage outside the hangar.

Hifield jumped over the wounded Springer and darted toward the door.

"Stay here!" Tiff shouted. "We don't have time for that."

Hifield stopped in his tracks and returned. He turned the unconscious Springer on his back. The man had a burned black wound high in his left shoulder. "He'll pull through," Hifield decided laconically.

Then he jumped on the fin of the destroyer and climbed into the cockpit. Tiff was the last to climb aboard. He squeezed into the pilot seat and made a hasty call to the command centre, informing it that one of the two remaining Springers lay badly wounded in the hangar and that the other one had got away.

Then he commanded: "Secure spacesuits and open the airlock!"

* * * *

Rhodan received Nyssen's message a few seconds before the transition. He passed it on to McClears and impressed upon the captain: "We'll have to slug it out to rescue the K-7 but let's be careful to disable the hostile ships without destroying them!"

Shortly thereafter the two ships vanished from their positions without a trace and went into hyperspace. Two light-years away they emerged again at a distance of three astronomical units from the orange-coloured sun of the twin system.

21:17 hours Terrestrial time.

The battle began.

* * * *

In the military spacefleet of the Springers the 'group' was the smallest independent unit. A group consisted of 25 to 35 ships and was under the command of a man whose rank was equivalent to that of a captain on Earth.

Captain Harlgas had been closer with his group to System Beta-Albireo than all the other units of the Springer fleet when Ornafer broadcast his desperate call for help into space by hyperwave on a special frequency.

Harlgas had acted without delay.

A few seconds after finishing his transition he had formed a clear impression of

the situation. *Orla XI*, which had been in distress, was now fleeing the system at high velocity. Not far from it was an unfriendly ship of Arkonide design. A little farther away was a third vehicle which looked so small and harmless that Harlgas believed it could be attacked without risk.

When one of his ships was turned into dust, he realized his mistake. Harlgas laughed terribly as the loss was reported to him. A few seconds later his guns scored a hit and made the little ship inoperable. Harlgas ceased fire and waited to see what the enemy would do next. At the same time he kept watching the far bigger ship which had been waiting inactively at a distance of 12,000 miles and now suddenly resumed speed. He concluded at once that the adversary was going over to the attack and he formed a defensive position with his own ships.

He would have felt better if he had known what kind of an enemy he was facing. A short talk with Orlgas had warned him that the ships—though apparently of Arkonide origin as he could see for himself—were most certainly not manned by Arkonides.

Harlgas didn't know what to expect and to complicate the situation, an observer reported that a tiny craft had left the badly damaged unmanoeuvrable ship.

Harlgas instructed two of his ships to follow the little craft. The other 27 remained in their assigned positions and Harlgas admonished them not to underestimate the antagonist roaring toward them.

His warning soon turned out to be well justified, as the attacking ship unleashed its initial salvo from a distance much greater than a Springer captain would have dared to fire, with the result that two of Harlgas' ships were immediately burned to ashes.

* * * *

The destroyer finally got off to a good start and shot out into space. Tiff accelerated only moderately.

"Where to?" Hifield asked.

"Deringhouse said to get in touch with Rhodan," Tiff replied. "Although I've really no idea where Rhodan might be, but..."

"...but if Deringhouse says so," Hifield interrupted, you believe it's gospel, don't you?"

Tiff remained calm. "Not quite," he rebutted. "But Deringhouse knows what he's talking about."

They were packed tightly in the little cockpit. There were only three seats and the girls had to sit on Eberhardt's and Hifield's laps. Because of the threatening dangers the spacesuits remained closed and communication took place through the transceivers in the helmets

Tiff could hear Felicita crying softly. He wanted to boost her courage, when suddenly the picture on the sensor screen showed some motion. The sensor had

been following the hostile fleet and depicted it as a swarm of motionless points. But now two points detached themselves from the swarm and began to move toward the centre of the screen.

Tiff changed his course and accelerated rapidly. "Looks like well be busy," he said tersely. "They're chasing us!"

* * * *

"Take care of the K-7, Nyssen!" Rhodan ordered. "Take them back on board!"

The *Solar System* shot away in the direction of the K-7. The *Stardust* kept on its course toward the hostile fleet. The fleet stood about 6000 miles behind the *Solar System*, whose crew now knew that reinforcement had arrived.

"Don't get too close, McClears!" Rhodan called. "They probably can beat us at close range."

The gas clouds from the Springer ships demolished by the disintegrator still floated in space. Two seconds after Nyssen had opened fire the *Stardust* and the *Terra* had shown up from hyperspace.

Rhodan kept following his plan. From the beginning, since the day when Julian Tiffloor was told to fly to New York to report to Homer G. Adams, Rhodan had had no other intention than to apprehend the aliens.

He had no interest in exterminating his adversary by killing all his men. He wanted to know with whom dealt.

With this in mind the two ships approached their targets while *Terra* went to the aid of the K-7.

* * * *

The situation became more and more confusing for Captain Harlgas.

The structure-sensor showed such a strong reaction to the transition that he believed for a moment that the instrument was out of order. Yet the other ships in his group indicated the same magnitude and he soon received the report that two more units had appeared behind the attacking ship, one of them a veritable giant with a tonnage equal to all the ships of his own fleet combined.

Harlgas: ordered retreat. The Springer group started to move away, to leave the system like *Orla XI*. He chose not to go into transition since two of his ships had gone after the tiny craft that had left the first of the ships. Harlgas was aware that his men alone out there would fall easy prey to the enemy when they lost contact with his group.

* * * *

The speed of the little destroyer was almost equal to that of the Springer ships,

which were gradually getting closer.

Tiff assigned duties. Hifield watched the sensor screen over Felicita's shoulder and reported as soon as a change occurred. Eberhardt operated the cannon. This was rather difficult considering he had to reach around Mildred Orsons for each manipulation.

Mildred tried to facilitate his job but there was no room for dodging.

The distance to the nearer of the Springer ships was still about 5000 miles. The range for well-aimed shots from their disintegrator and neutron-beamer was only about 3500 miles.

The question was whether or not their foes had more efficient guns.

Tiff decided to take advantage of the greater manoeuvrability of his small craft. "Change course!" he said succinctly.

Then he pulled the destroyer around, straining the thrust neutralizer to the limit of its capacity. At the same moment Hifield shouted: "The *Stardust* and *Terra*!"

The destroyer was not equipped with a structure sensor. Hifield had located both ships by direct sighting on the observation screen.

Tiff tried from the side to get a glimpse of which way the ships were heading. He could see that the *Stardust* and the *Terra* proceeded toward the enemy's fleet and that the Springers were beating a retreat. He also observed that the *Solar System* split off from the others and sped toward the K-7.

"Damn it!" Hifield muttered under his breath. "We should've stayed on board. It would have been a lot safer."

"Nobody could have known that," Tiff rebuked him.

The two Springer ships behind the destroyer were not adversely affected by Tiff's evasion attempt. They simply followed the curve steered by the little machine with greater mobility than Tiff had expected.

"I've got them so beautifully on target," Eberhardt sighed. "If they'd only come a little closer."

Tiff did some figuring. On the present course the destroyer would race past the blue satellite of the central star at a distance of about 10 astronomical units and after that the flight would go on for eternities unless the pursuer or the pursued exhausted his energy reserve.

Tiff had little doubt that—if that were to occur—it would first happen to the little destroyer.

Tiff made a quick decision and in the style of a commander who doesn't owe any explanation to his subalterns he declared: "We're going to let them catch up with us now. Watch out, Eberhardt!"

He heard Eberhardt take a deep breath. Then came the answer: "O.K. Let 'em come!"

Tiff decelerated as fast as his craft would permit. Within two minutes the small machine had lost half its speed. It was obvious that their pursuers were not prepared to cope with such an unexpected manoeuvre. At the same rate as the

destroyer slowed down, the two cylindrical ships kept rushing closer.

“Three point nine!” Hifield called out.

Eberhardt sweated it out at the control panel of the two heavy cannons.

Felicita became so excited that she forgot to cry.

“Three point seven!”

“Attention, Eberhardt!”

“I’m ready,” Eberhardt replied.

The two enemy ships started to brake.

“Three point six!”

“Don’t be surprised if we have to perform some rough dodging after the first shot,” Tiff warned. “I’ll try to stay within the range of our neutralizer but I can’t promise I can do it. So better brace yourselves for some hard shocks.”

Nobody answered. A few seconds later Hifield shouted triumphantly: “Three and a half!”

“Fire!”

With wide eyes Eberhardt stared at the thin line of light in the centre of his target screen and blasted the first disintegrator shot away with a loud cry.

“Missed!” Hifield shouted disappointedly.

Tiff forced the destroyer into a sharp curve. The crew felt a gentle pressure, no more than one tenth G. Eberhardt’s rangefinder automatically followed the calibrated objective.

“Three point four!”

“Fire!”

This time Eberhardt refrained from shouting but Hifield quickly screamed into the headphones: “Perfect!”

Eberhardt sighed a breath of relief.

Tiff went into a second manoeuvre on the assumption that the remaining ship would return their fire. The turn carried him about 500 miles closer and Tiff realized instantly that this manoeuvre was the most serious mistake he had made.

He later found out that the range of the heavy Springer guns was below that of the disintegrator and neutron-beamer on board the destroyer. Before Tiff executed his last turn he had been outside the reach of the Springer weapons.

His latest turn brought him into the critical range and the Springers were excellent shots.

His craft suffered a terrible jolt. Tiff closed his eyes in pain. When he was able to open them again the picture on the observation screen had changed. The lights of the stars drew wild streaks from right to left against the black background of space. The damage caused the alarm to give off a whining signal but Tiff didn’t need it to know that the destroyer had been hit and its functions badly impaired.

Tiff realized that it was now a matter of life and death. “Eberhardt!”

Eberhardt groaned: “Yes...?”

“Do you have him on target yet?”

“On target? Good heavens, not Our ship’s gyrating. How can I...”

“I know that,” Tiff said brusquely. “The rangefinder works automatically. Start firing when you have him lined up on your scope or he’ll finish us!”

“Yes, I’m drawing a bead on him,” Eberhardt said shortly. “But only for three or four seconds.”

“That’s enough,” Tiff barked. “Shoot!”

Eberhardt got off another shot but it missed again. Instead the destroyer took another hit that made it rotate in the opposite direction. It also considerably slowed down the violent pitching.

Apparently the blow had only grazed them. The alarm signal didn’t even sound. Eberhardt fired again. This time he could see on the observation screen that a part of the alien ship went up in gas. It was impossible to determine which part had been vaporized and if the enemy was put out of action.

“Keep shooting!” Tiff urged.

When the enemy came into view again he noticed a brilliant white needle-shaped energy-beam flash from the undamaged section of the ship. He doubled up in expectation of the jolt but there was none. The shot soared past the incapacitated destroyer into empty space.

However Eberhardt’s last shot hit a bull’s-eye in midship and eliminated the threat once and for all.

“We’ve been lucky,” Eberhardt said dryly. “We’ve just run out of energy for the cannons.”

Tiff whistled through his teeth. “Bad news!” he replied quietly and began to check his instruments.

First he looked at the life system control indicator. The red lamp blinked and a warning sign read: EMERGENCY RESERVE, DURATION 15 HOURS.

The hyperwave-transmitter was knocked out. Tiff switched on the receiver but all he could hear was a faint monotonous hum.

The drive engines were reduced to 2% of their normal energy.

3/ Aboard A Springer Ship

The *Solar System* reported at 21:45 hours Terra time that it had taken the K-7 on board.

Two minutes later the *Terra* scored another hit on a ship of Captain Harlgas' group, turning it into scrap metal.

At 2:51 hours the *Stardust* and the *Terra* observed that the other ships of the group launched small auxiliary vessels that transferred the survivors from the badly damaged warship. Rhodan forbade any interference with the rescue work.

Bell protested. "How are we going to find out whom we're up against?"

But Rhodan answered calmly, "We can learn that from examining the shipwrecks."

Shortly before 22:00 hours the *Stardust* picked off another enemy ship. This time they watched again as their foes made all efforts to save the life of the crew.

Then Rhodan gave orders to slow down. At the same time as the *Terra* and the *Stardust* reduced their speed, Captain Harlgas' fleet fled further from the scene of the debacle.

Harlgas had meantime been informed that the two ships dispatched in pursuit of the little craft were lost. As soon as his group had reached sufficient velocity Harlgas initiated a transition and disappeared a few minutes later from the sky of the Beta-Albireo sector.

Rhodan calmly observed the flight while Reginald Bell stood behind him with clenched fists. "You're letting them slip through our fingers and we're left behind twiddling our thumbs," Bell grumbled.

Rhodan got up. "Have two rescue teams ready to leave in 10 minutes!" Rhodan commanded sharply without paying attention to Bell's complaint. "I'll take charge of one. Tell Khrest that I would like him to accompany me. Nyssen can lead the other one. He's closer to the first wreck."

Bell passed on the orders without delay.

A few minutes later they received the message from the *Solar System* that three cadets and two girls had left the K-7 in a destroyer just before the *Solar System* arrived.

Among the cadets whose whereabouts were unknown was Julian Tiffloor.

Bell repeated the message to Rhodan in a state of extreme excitement. Rhodan,

however, remained surprisingly unruffled and smiled. "That's alright! Tiffloor knows how to take care of himself."

Bell was so outraged that he couldn't utter a word for some time. And when he finally was about to make a remark, Khrest entered the command centre.

Rhodan walked toward him.

Khrest's gait was languid, in marked contrast to Rhodan's stride that was indicative of his boundless energy. Khrest's shiny white hair and reddish sparkling eyes displayed an almost unreal beauty. Rhodan's hair looked like raised bristles, after he had repeatedly stroked it with his hands during the recent commotion. His eyes were half closed as if the bright lights in the large room blinded him.

The Arkonide-descendant of an extremely ancient race and the Earthling-member of a race that had just begun to form a unit.

"I'd like to take a look at one of the shipwrecks," Rhodan informed him. "I'd appreciate it if you'd accompany me."

Khrest agreed willingly.

Five minutes later the rescue team reported its readiness. Rhodan and Khrest rode down to the airlock.

The team used a rather primitive vehicle as transport. It had been specifically designed for use between ships in space and was essentially only a rectangular platform of metallic plastic. The platform was large enough to accommodate 20 people. Underneath the simple platform was a highly efficient engine which permitted acceleration and braking up to 100 G and a shock-neutralizer which created a protective field around the entire platform and its crew.

The field of the neutralizer made other safety measures superfluous since it prevented the men from drifting out into space.

Rhodan maintained communication with Reginald Bell, who informed him soon after the bulky platform had left the *Stardust* that Nyssen and his men had also started out on their mission.

It took the platform 10 minutes to reach the battered ship. The neutralizer produced a directional gravity-field on the upper part of the vehicle which made it immune to acceleration forces and gave the men the impression that the mighty body of the strange ship were lowered upon them from above.

The ship had gigantic dimensions. Rhodan estimated its original length at about 1000 feet. The diameter of the cylindrical hull measured approximately 200 feet.

Rhodan had seen a lot of alien ships but none could compare in size to this giant. The platform carefully nestled against it.

Even now after almost half of the ship had been vaporized it still left an impression of concentrated power and mighty fighting spirit.

Khrest stood next to Rhodan as the metallic plastic quivered slightly under their feet when it bounced against the hull. Rhodan looked at the Arkonide and saw his lips move behind the flexible face shield as he heard him on the helmet radio say

in his Arkonide language. "It's a Springer ship."

Rhodan nodded thoughtfully. As a result of an intensive and protracted hypno-training he possessed about the same knowledge as the Arkonide. He was as familiar with the history of the Springers as the Arkonides and knew that only the Springers built ships such as the one before them.

"What do they have against us?" Rhodan asked.

Khrest thought for awhile. Finally he answered: "Perhaps they've learned about Terra's trade with Ferrol. This is something that is bound to disturb them greatly."

"Because they're of the opinion," Rhodan concluded the thought, "that they're the only ones who are allowed to engage in trade on a large scale and across great distances?"

"Exactly," Khrest confirmed.

The young lieutenant who had crossed over from the platform to the side of the hull to look for an entrance, reported to Rhodan: "There's no hatch in sight, sir!"

Rhodan called back: "Take a look if we can enter through the hole from our gun."

The lieutenant pushed himself away and floated across the hull to the place where the disintegrator-shot from the *Stardust* had left a jagged hole in the wreck.

The young officer disappeared inside and called back: "There's nothing in the way, sir; we can get in."

Rhodan told him to come back. "You're to remain here with three men and wait for us. The others come with Me!"

The seven men drifted along the high wall of the vast ship, carefully pulled themselves up around the ragged edge of the torn wall and shined their searchlights into the darkness of the fuselage.

The layout was simple and easy to survey. A spacious gangway formed the axis of the cylindrical ship, leading all the way to the forward end. Before the destruction of the disintegrated rear end it probably extended back through its whole length.

Rhodan entered first. He took one step and braced himself firmly against the ribbed floor of the gangway to counteract the jolt of gravity in case a neutralizer had been left intact.

However he felt nothing. Weightlessness prevailed in the farthest comers of the dead ship. Rhodan pushed himself away and floated through the gangway with a searchlight in his hand.

Khrest followed him. "Can't you at least tell me what you're looking for?" Khrest inquired.

"Evidence," Rhodan replied. "It's not enough for me to suspect what's in their mind and why they attacked us. I've got to *know*!"

There were a number of hatches and recesses in the walls on both sides of the corridor. Rhodan distributed his men and let each one of them search a few of the rooms behind the hatches.

He received the first reports while he was still trying to reach the forward end with Khrest. "Energy capsules for gravity weapons," one man announced.

"Storeroom for gun repair parts," another reported.

Rhodan muttered softly. "I figured that the most important departments are located up front," Khrest heard him say.

They reached a spot where the corridor became twice as wide. Hatches lead into all directions.

Rhodan called two of the men who had gone through several rooms and found nothing of interest. "Take the left side," he told them. "Khrest and I will inspect the right half."

The first room Rhodan entered appeared to be the navigation section of the hostile ship. Rhodan recognized a number of the instruments and saw a few with which neither he nor Khrest were familiar.

The two soldiers informed him they had found a battle station and probably also the control centre of the ship. Rhodan instructed them to look for written records and quickly explained to them that Springer books consisted of little stacks of plastic strips held together at one end.

A few minutes later one of the two called with the greatest excitement: "I've found a body in here, sir!"

Rhodan interrupted his search and ran with Khrest to the room from which the message had come.

The soldier had turned the bright cone of his lamp on a hulking figure lying motionlessly on the floor.

The dead man was clad in his spacesuit but his helmet was not closed and he apparently had died as a result of the implosion following the *Stardust's* disintegrator shot.

"Tall and robust," Rhodan murmured. "Built for stronger gravitation. A Springer!"

Khrest turned away. The sight was too unpleasant for him. He examined the room further with his own searchlight.

Khrest began to wonder why the Springers had neglected to order the closing of all spacesuits at the beginning of the battle. They must have been out of their mind.

How could it happen on a warship that a member of the crew could be caught by surprise with his helmet open, letting the air for breathing escape?

This puzzle occupied Khrest's mind so much that he paid no attention to the long metal box standing against the side of the room. Finally he glanced at it again and became horrified. His eyes bulged in fright.

Rhodan and the soldier continued to examine the body of the Springer.

Khrest was the first to feel the gentle pull of the returning gravity. A few seconds passed before he was able to control his shock and utter a cry of warning. "Look out!"

Rhodan wheeled around—the searchlight in his left hand and the little thermo-beamer ready to shoot in his right. “What is it?”

Khrest pointed weakly to the narrow box. “There! A gravity time-bomb!”

* * * *

The girls regained consciousness at about the same time. Felicita began to cry again after she realized how precarious their situation had become.

In the meantime Tiff had managed to stop the rotation of the little craft, the spin produced by the impact of the last hit. The destroyer now flew with a speed of about 12,000 miles per second, using the blue satellite of Beta-Albireo as reference point as it was closest to the vehicle. The course was at a right angle to the direction in which the destroyer had moved away from the K-7.

The retardation of the gyration had cost more energy. If it was possible at all to find a place for landing, it would have to have a dense atmosphere for aerodynamic flight or a surface gravity of less than one G.

In any case, the best they could expect was a crash-landing without any guarantee that they would be spared from injury.

Eberhardt and Hifield tried to determine what kept the hypercom from functioning and soon found the cause.

The converter aggregate had been demolished by the shot.

The converter aggregate had a three-dimensional input from the generator side and a five-dimensional output to the transmitter side. What went on in between the circuits was among the most difficult processes to understand. There were only two or three people on Earth besides Rhodan who had the expertise required for the converter aggregate and none of the three cadets were among them.

“No go,” Hifield sighed resignedly.

This was the result Tiff had expected. “Keep the receiver tuned in anyway!” he reminded them.

After awhile he came to see that the destroyer would cross the imaginary line between the centres of gravity of the two suns approximately midway, which meant that they would pass a few thousand miles closer to the surface of the orange-coloured giant since it was considerably larger than the blue dwarf.

So far Tiff had been unable to locate any planets, since some of his most important navigation instruments, especially the long distance rangefinder, had become inoperable.

However, Tiff was not overly concerned about it. He had noticed from aboard the *Orla XI* that this star system possessed a planet. Systems with one planet only occurred very rarely and it was, therefore, fairly safe to assume that there were other satellites present.

The vital question was, though, whether the destroyer would perchance get close enough to one to risk a change of course and to make a landing attempt. Of

course all this would have to happen before the critical time of 15 hours had expired.

Eventually Felicita ceased crying, which provided great relief for everybody.

After an hour had elapsed, Tiff said with a tired voice: "Fourteen hours left. Go to sleep if you can! Later on we'll have to be wide awake."

* * * *

A terrific wave of unchained gravity surged into the small room at the instant Khrest had sounded his warning.

The soldier collapsed, moaning. The floor shook as he went down. Khrest was brought to his knees.

Rhodan alone was able to stay on his feet. Khrest's first shout had prepared him for the worst. Nobody reacted faster than Perry Rhodan.

But the terrible pull weakened him more and more. Rhodan carefully lowered himself to the floor and lay flat on his back. He tried to regulate his breathing

The attempt was successful. Rhodan felt jabbing pains with every movement of his lungs but his breath kept flowing and his life was maintained.

Rhodan tried to remember what he knew about gravity time-bombs.

Gravity time-bombs were insidious weapons whose purpose was to pin down an opponent until the user had gained enough time to return with reinforcements or to slowly torture a victim to death.

How foolish of me, Rhodan thought, wondering at the same time about the slowness with which his mind worked under the influence of the increased gravity. *I should've anticipated that they'd lay a trap in this wreck.*

With a tremendous effort he turned his head around enough so that he could get a glimpse of the bomb. The searchlights of Khrest and the soldier had fallen out of their hands and lay broken on the floor. His own lamp was still shining at his side. Although it was not pointed at the bomb it bathed the entire room in light.

The shell of the bomb was about three feet long. It was cylindrical with a diameter of about one foot.

A ridiculously small object like that can produce such an immense amount of gravitational energy, Rhodan thought.

He estimated the pressure prevailing in the room at about 15 to 20 G. In any case it was too much to let him move a hand.

Rhodan noticed that the gravitational force was still growing. He tried to estimate the rate of increase and guessed that it amounted to about 0.1 G per minute.

He could have erred by a factor of 2 or 3. Nevertheless the time would soon come—and at this point in his deliberation he suddenly thought of Nyssen.

Nyssen! Nyssen was crawling around the other ship. Perhaps he was falling at this very moment into the same trap!

He rallied all his waning strength and spoke: “Nyssen... a G-bomb... concealed... in the wreck. Watch yourself!”

Perspiration flowed from his forehead and ran into his eyes. He moaned and turned his head back to its original position.

His helmet radio crackled. “Nyssen to Commander! We’ve found nothing, sir! Anything wrong with you? Shall we come over to help you?”

Preposterous, Rhodan thought angrily; *he doesn’t even know what a gravity time-bomb looks like.*

“Look out...” he began again, “for a tube... three feet long... one foot... diameter. Be careful!”

He heard Nyssen breathe heavily.

“Cylindrical? Three feet long and one foot in diameter?”

There was a pause. Then Nyssen’s cracked voice shouted: “Commander! We’ve just loaded this thing onto our platform!”

Rhodan fainted for a few moments. When he recovered consciousness, he heard Nyssen still talking: “Why don’t you answer me? Hello, Commander!”

Rhodan muttered something. His vocal chords were no longer able to form articulate sounds. But Nyssen seemed to understand. “We just had enough time to push the thing off the platform at the last moment, sir!” he explained. “It went off when it was about 40 feet away and it pulled the platform behind it. Our engines managed to break away. Now it’s drifting out in free space.”

Rhodan’s brain struggled against the paralysis in which his body was confined. He called out as loud as he could: “Don’t let the bomb get away!”

Then he lost consciousness again.

He didn’t know how much time had elapsed till his mind became clear again. However, he could hear Nyssen’s urgent voice: “Where are you, sir? I can’t hear you! We’ve harnessed the bomb with ropes. It’s floating about 75 feet away from us.”

Rhodan could have hugged him. “Great!” he whispered.

He felt his strength ebbing away. The gravity emanating from the bomb already exceeded 20 G. He had only a few minutes left to explain to Nyssen what he wanted him to do. “Come over... to our wreck!” he panted. “We’re in the forward end... of the ship. Place your bomb... so that...”

“I get it!” Nyssen shouted in sudden inspiration. “You don’t have to explain any more. Save your strength!”

Nevertheless Rhodan said one more word—so weakly that Nyssen had trouble understanding him:

“Hurry...!”

* * * *

Even the chronometer finally ceased to work. It stopped at a time when the

destroyer had nine hours left to find a landing place. Since that failure Tiff tried to guess the passing of time although he had nothing to go by.

A little later the destroyer traversed the line between the two suns. The far more preponderant gravitation of the blue dwarf exercised its dominant influence and forced the craft into a new course. Yet there was no danger at any time that the little destroyer would be drawn into the sun.

Klaus Eberhardt had indeed fallen asleep. Tiff had only managed to doze a few minutes at a time. This was not enough for his body to regain its strength. Tiff felt the point creeping up on him when nervousness and disappointment would make him bawl—just as Felicita had.

He tried to divert himself by imagining the kind of planet on which the destroyer would land and to picture what they could do there.

It was merely a mental experiment. If they really were to find a planet, it would be one nobody had seen before. None of them could know what it looked like.

But musing about it was a welcome distraction.

Tiff also remembered that lie had a robot on board as did all destroyers. He lay deactivated in the small storage room in back of the craft. The robot was equipped with its own generator and Tiff racked his brains to find a way of using the generator as an energy source for his engine. However he was aware of the fact that a robot generator produced only 1/100th of the power required by the ship's engine and was, therefore, useless for this purpose.

If they ever found a place to set down they would be lucky if the robot still functioned. After all it was not the most unlikely possibility that the robot had been damaged in the earlier encounter.

Time and again Tiff checked the wide optical screen showing the space in the flight direction. The black background was strewn with myriads of silently shining coloured points of light. Tiff had no hope whatsoever of finding there what he was looking for. He thought it ridiculous that a traveller in space could find a planet in a sector unknown to him by staring at the picture screen. Even if he had his rangefinder still available, such a body would have made its presence felt by the influence of gravitation on the course of the ship rather than being detected by its luminosity and size surpassing those of billions of other stars.

Indeed in 99 out of 100 cases Tiff would have been right.

Notwithstanding these odds the observation screen depicted a bright constellation which appeared to form, when Tiff first saw it clearly, a Y shaped by seven stars.

Now the left side of the Y seemed to have broken off and the point of light which had a few minutes earlier had been at the tip had wandered into the centre of the fork.

Tiff turned around in his seat. With narrowed eyes he stared at the picture screen.

Fixed stars don't change their positions for an observer, not even if he moves at a velocity of 12,000 miles per second.

Planets, on the other hand, show movements. At the time they became visible they were already close enough to the observer approaching them. From a distance of a few thousand miles and viewed in motion they appeared to shift their positions.

Tiff kept the discovery to himself because he still believed that he could be mistaken.

However 10 minutes later the spot of light had shifted to the other side of the Y and stood within a hair of the uppermost star.

Without breaking his silence, Tiff determined the position of the unknown body. The calculation was not very exact as Tiff didn't know how much the gravitation of the blue sun had changed his course. He had to make a guess by using the generally established values for stars of this type.

The calculation kept him busy for about 15 minutes.

Once he had obtained the result, Tiff acted accordingly. As the neutralizer was still working, due to the emergency reserve power, nobody noticed it when he changed his course again. The stars on the observation screens executed a short, barely discernible turn.

The shifting point of light, however, had moved to the centre of the screen and Tiff made sure that it remained right there.

After the course correction he computed the speed of the destroyer. The propulsion from his engines had ceased for some time and if he assumed that the planet exerted the slightest amount of gravity on his ship he should be able to notice the effect.

Half an hour later Tiff was convinced that he had been right.

The velocity of the destroyer relative to the spot of light had increased by 30 feet per second.

Tiff looked around. "We've found what we've been looking for," he announced via the helmet radio. His voice sounded raspy from the effort to hide his triumph.

4/ Of Time & Bombs & Planetfall

Perry Rhodan fell unconscious again soon after he had whispered his urgent plea to Nyssen.

Nyssen knew what had to be done. He knew little about the mechanism of the time-bomb except that it produced gravity in the same way as the common gravity generators.

He understood that Rhodan desperately needed help. He had no idea whom Rhodan had meant by 'we,' but the fact alone that Rhodan was in distress would have spurred him on to the most impetuous feats anyway.

Nyssen began with the premise that the bomb in the wreck Rhodan had searched was planted in the same room where he had found it himself. This assumption was confirmed after two men from Nyssen's team had probed the gravitation in the neighbourhood of the wreck in which Rhodan was imprisoned.

Nyssen instructed the men from Rhodan's team to leave the hulk and return to the *Stardust*. He dragged the radiating gravity-bomb behind his platform and the manoeuvre was difficult enough without having to take precautions for others also.

Nyssen, with plastic ropes, kept the bomb at a distance of one and a half miles. Even at this distance the artificially produced gravitation was still effective. However, since gravity is a physical quantity acting according to the $1/r^2$ factor of the law, the bomb no longer constituted a direct danger for Nyssen and his men.

He instructed three of his soldiers to open an access to the command centre of the wreck with thermo-beamers. The men burned large metal plates out of the hull to make way for the bomb.

The other men had continued their measurements and determined the location of the bomb near Rhodan within a couple of feet.

Nyssen got in touch with the *Stardust* to obtain a few calculations from the positronic computer based on his figures. When he got the result he knew that success would be his if he managed to manoeuvre precisely the dangerous contraption he had in tow.

Nyssen called the men back after they had located the bomb and completed an access. He took a couple of minutes to brief his men about the job at hand, telling them with great emphasis: "Rhodan's life is at stake as well as a few others'

caught with him. We don't have time to lose but can't afford to do anything rash. We're dealing with the most perilous object we've ever laid hands on."

He waited for suggestions but nobody spoke up.

"Then let's go!"

* * * *

Rhodan was awakened by a violent shock through his body.

For a few seconds he was astounded by the rapid activity of his lungs. He panted as if he had been running for miles.

Finally he realized that his body was compensating for its recent loss.

Rhodan jerked up his right arm, His hand was flung against the hard wall above his hand.

The bomb had ceased radiating!

Rhodan instantly got back on his feet. But he felt a peculiar pull caused by a dissimilar gravity-field: weightlessness in his legs and more than 1 G at the height of his head.

Wrong, Rhodan thought. *The bomb is still active!* But Nyssen had manipulated it properly.

He picked up his searchlight and pointed it in the direction of the counteracting influence. He followed the light-cone past a ragged wall reaching into emptiness.

Or almost into emptiness. Behind the hole in the wall hovered—held by ropes—a cylinder three feet long.

The second bomb!

Rhodan looked around and estimated the distance. The bomb floating there and the one that caused him to faint before were about 15 feet apart and he was almost exactly to the inch in the middle between the two deadly devices.

Rhodan's foremost concern now was how to save Khrest and the soldier. Unfortunately he lacked the means for reaching the bomb in order to bring it close enough to them to ease their situation.

He could hear Nyssen's excited voice shouting in the helmet radio as he directed his men. Rhodan had trouble making himself heard. "Silence!" he finally screamed at the top of his voice. "This is Rhodan! I need a pole with a hook or something to get hold of the bomb!"

Nyssen cheered happily. "Are you alright, sir?" he called back.

"Yes, but Khrest and the soldier are in bad shape. I've got to bring the bomb a little closer."

Nyssen gave it some thought. Then he replied: "I don't believe we can slide in a pole, sir! It can't be pushed past the bomb. The gravity would tear it to bits."

"I didn't tell you to get it in that way. Can you measure the border between the two fields?"

“Yes, sir!”

“Then use a flame-cutter to open the wreck from above and have a man go down directly on the centre-line between the bombs. He should be able to shove a pole through to me.”

Nyssen agreed: “We’ll start at once!”

Rhodan was deeply worried about Khrest. The Arkonide had lain much closer to the first bomb than Rhodan. Nyssen’s bomb was still too far to bring him much relief.

Rhodan’s idea had worked. The effect of the two opposing bombs was eradicated over a small range between them. Each bomb created a field of gravitation with fieldlines vertical to the surface on which the bomb rested, in this case the floor of the command centre. At a height of about three feet the lines curved around describing a semi-circle and leading again vertically into the shell of the bomb. The field vectors of the first bomb were directed toward the floor. Nyssen had examined the field and placed his bomb in such a position that its vectors were pointing from the floor up. Therefore, the effects of the spheres nullified each other wherever they were equidistant from the source of origin.

The problem was now to guide Nyssen’s bomb so close to Khrest and the soldier, who were lying next to each other, that they were midway between the two contrivances.

Then it would be a fairly simple matter to rescue the two victims. The question remained whether Nyssen’s man with the pole would arrive in time.

More precious minutes passed till Rhodan felt the floor under his feet vibrate, a sign that the hoped for assistance was on the way. A little later a plate was taken out of the ceiling. The soldier had done an admirable job, always keeping right on the border between the danger zones.

A long pole came into view and was carefully lowered.

“Is this what you want, sir?”

“Yes, thank you. Now get back as quickly as possible. It’ll get very critical around here.”

The soldier crawled back. Rhodan waited a little until he thought that the man had reached safety again.

Then he didn’t lose another second.

Inch by inch he pulled the floating bomb in. There was a sudden jerk when the end of the pole protruded into the strongest section of the gravitational field. Then the pole stuck firmly to the bomb like a nail to a strong magnet.

Rhodan proceeded cautiously. Whenever he pulled the bomb two inches closer, he moved one inch back to remain in the neutral zone.

This way it took a long, agonizing time till he had manipulated the lethal body into the desired position.

Rhodan carefully put the pole down on the floor. The other end remained fastened to the bomb. Rhodan saw that the tremendous gravity had deformed the

round extremely hard material of the pole into a flat ellipse at the point of contact.

Now Rhodan gently touched Khrest with his foot. He had to repeat his attempt a few more times before Khrest began to move. "Be careful!" Rhodan admonished him. "Don't move, just listen to me!"

"I'm listening," Khrest answered weakly.

Rhodan explained the situation slowly and in detail. In conclusion he said: "Now you must get up and always remain in the centre. You know what will happen if you get a step out of the way. The hatch is located right on the line. You can pass through it and wait outside."

The imperilled soldier had also waked up in the meantime and had heard most of the instructions. Rhodan told him to follow Khrest.

Then he picked up the free end of the pole and touched the first bomb with it. It remained stuck and the two bombs formed a unit. By holding the connecting link in the centre he was able to turn the contraption.

Then he advised Khrest: "Proceed at normal walking speed along the corridor. I'll turn the bombs so that the area where you walk will always be safe. Ready? Go!"

His hope was that Khrest and the soldier would be able to maintain a 'normal walking speed.' On the centre-line between the two bombs weightlessness had been restored and for a person who had to advance half floating and half rowing it was difficult to judge what 'normal walking speed' was.

After awhile, however, Khrest reported that they had reached the end of the undestroyed fuselage. As the ship had been shot apart approximately in the middle, this meant that they had now moved about 500 feet away from the bombs.

Rhodan asked Nyssen to approach the two men with his platform in the direction of the central corridor and to pick them up. The operation was performed without difficulty. Five minutes later Khrest and the soldier had been rescued. From a distance of 500 feet the engines of the platform easily compensated for whatever change in symmetry was accidentally made by Rhodan.

"And what are you going to do, sir?"

Rhodan laughed. "I'll follow in a minute. Stay where you are!"

He lifted the two bombs precisely at the middle of the pole and moved to the side until he stood dead centre below the hole through which the pole had been handed to him earlier. He carefully set down his load, took a deep breath and bounced upward.

He flew a few feet past the hole, high enough to grab the opening in the ceiling of the room above with both hands.

From then on it was fairly easy. The cut out ceiling plates were all strictly lined up in the safe direction. Before long Rhodan stood up on top of the hull, 'up on top' being, of course, a rather arbitrarily chosen definition.

"Attention, Nyssen! I'm coming!" he called on the helmet radio.

Nyssen was unable to see him as his view from the platform was obstructed by

the wreck. Rhodan kept straight on the line from the hole through which he had climbed. As a mark of reference on this line he chose a grotesquely torn spot of the wall since it was almost impossible to keep straight under the conditions of weightlessness without such a fixed point.

With each step he faced the hazard of deviating from his way. He stopped frequently to orient himself by sighting along the mark. In this cumbersome manner 40 minutes elapsed until he reached the ragged rim of the wreck and saw the platform with Nyssen and his crew.

He crawled over the edge and propelled himself toward the platform. Nyssen had expected him to emerge from the corridor. He registered loud surprise when he saw Rhodan come through the sphere of the neutralized field and gently touch down on the platform.

“It’s all over, Nyssen! Let’s go back!”

* * * *

Tiff used up 99% of his energy reserve to decelerate the destroyer and guide it into orbit around the strange planet. It was quite apparent that the world below him had an atmosphere. Whether it was fit for breathing remained to be seen, as his instruments had failed to function.

Tiff had already found out that the planet was almost 600 million miles away from the blue dwarf and about 800 million miles from the orange sun.

He didn’t mention this because he didn’t want to scare his companions unless it was absolutely necessary. The blue dwarf was, as far as its radiated energy was concerned, more like a giant. It was, therefore, still conceivable that livable conditions prevailed on the planet although the distance from its sun was almost seven times as far as the Earth from Sol.

When Tiff started to brake on an elliptical track he noticed that the surface was covered with ice and snow. He had been unable to determine the direction of its axis but he assumed that the equator was located where the ice-masses were coloured a little darker,

Mildred began to moan. “Gosh, this looks worse than Greenland!” It was the first time she had spoken since the destroyer had been hit.

Hifield followed Tiff’s course with narrowed eyes. “The equator is probably where it is darker,” he remarked.

“Thank you!” Tiff answered with irritation. “I’ve noticed that myself.” Then he instantly regretted his petulant reply. His nerves had been strained to the breaking point.

“Why don’t you head for it?” Hifield challenged him. “It’s probably less cold near the equator.”

“I can’t,” Tiff rejoined. “If I make another turn I won’t have enough energy left to make a decent landing.”

Hifield was burned up. “Why didn’t you think of that before, you fool? Now we’ll have to freeze because of you.

Before Tiff had time to reply Eberhardt growled: “Shut your mouth, Hifield, or I’ll shut it for you!” He said it so irately that Hifield pulled in his horns.

Tiff was more amused than angered by Hifield’s outburst. It only proved that Hifield had reached the end of his rope just like himself. As a trained cadet he was perfectly able to figure out that without instruments it was well nigh impossible to fix the equatorial plane of a strange planet in time for an aerodynamic landing.

On the first braking ellipse Tiff dipped dangerously deep into the atmosphere of the alien world. The outside thermometer, which was still intact since it didn’t require any energy, climbed up to 7200° F. But the Arkon steel retained its rigidity and even the emergency climate control managed to keep the temperature in the cockpit from rising more than four degrees.

The velocity of the destroyer, reduced to five miles per second in the initial landing approach manoeuvre, was now cut in half.

The craft shot out again from the icy atmospheric shroud, gained altitude and after reaching its zenith dived again into the atmosphere.

“Watch it!” Tiff called out. “We’re about to brake again!”

* * * *

“Some of you,” Rhodan said thoughtfully looking down at the floor—the safe floor of the command centre in the *Stardust*—“will already have guessed my plans. However, as our present situation no longer permits guess work, I now want to give you more detailed explanations.”

His listeners were the officers of the *Stardust*, *Terra* and *Solar System*—including the mutants—and the two Arkonides Khrest and Thora. Khrest, still exhausted from his narrow escape, and Thora with raised eyebrows and supercilious expression.

“Recently we’ve learned that alien intelligent beings have shown an interest in us,” Rhodan continued. “It was determined that they landed on Venus and sent their agents forth on Earth. They operated so skilfully that we were unable to catch them on Terra or Venus. Moreover they seemed to be such excellent space travellers that we had to draw the inference that we were dealing with a race that was at least technically our equal.

“We also were forced to conclude that they were hostile to us. Otherwise they would somehow or other have established relations with us. This assumption became a certainty when they captured the K-7.”

He looked around to see if anybody already anticipated his conclusions.

“In order to protect ourselves,” he resumed, “we needed to know first of all who are enemies were. The unknown strangers were careful not to betray themselves and consequently we were obliged to take some measures to discover their secret.

“Cadet Julian Tifflor, who is well known to all of you, was the man chosen to uncover the existence of our adversaries. We implanted a cell-transmitter in his body that turned him into a sort of telepathic beacon. Our telepaths are now able to locate his whereabouts as far away as two light-years.

“We exposed Tifflor with a calculated risk and our ruse worked. The aliens got on Tifflor’s track—but in a manner that we came to regret. We had not foreseen that the strangers would be able to harness our ship to their own, as happened in the case of the K-7, and to perform a hyperjump together.

“Well, you all know the trouble we had to find his track again. When we found it eventually, we were thrust into a mess which you have witnessed yourselves.

“The result? We now know who our opponents are. They belong to a branch of the Arkonide race that has not always lived in complete harmony with the Arkonides themselves. They call themselves Springers. I’ll release some information about them which will be helpful to you. just let me mention a few of the more important features:

“The Springers are people with a technology that compares favourably with that of the Arkonides. Since we’re utilizing Arkonide technology ourselves, they must be considered equal to us, to say the least.”

“You’ve experienced how we almost fell into the gravity time-bomb trap they laid for us.”

“All the information which was available to the Arkonide civilization is at our disposal. Yet we don’t know at this time what the Springers conspire to do on Earth. We don’t even know how many of the Springers, whose race numbers 10 billion people, are taking part in these aggressive actions.”

“Thus it’ll be necessary for us to collect more information and to get to the bottom of their intentions.”

“You’re aware that my agent Tifflor fled with a destroyer from the damaged K-7 in the company of two other cadets and two girls from the Space Academy but you don’t know that they’ve been sighted by the *Stardust* and that two Springer ships pursued and fought a battle with them.

“I admit that I have taken a chance with Tifflor’s life by with-holding the report of his detection. I wanted to prevent you from rushing to his aid and thereby ruining my plans, just as I’ve preferred not to help him myself when he was in trouble.

“My reasoning proved to be justified when Tifflor eliminated his pursuers in the clash. Unfortunately his ship suffered some damage in the fight. Meanwhile his ship has moved out of the range of the *Stardust*’s sensors. Moreover, Tifflor’s hypercom seems to have been partially or completely knocked out. However it is beyond doubt that he’ll pass fairly close by the second planet of the system or has already reached it. I hope he’ll be able to land on it.

“Our astronomical department has ascertained that the dual suns Beta-Albireo are circled by four satellites. They follow an eccentric and complicated path characteristic for twin systems. The planet to which Tifflor has steered is more

than 600 million miles from the centre of gravity of the system. It is certain that living conditions are quite unfavourable there.

“However, we want to provide Tifflor with the necessary supplies and make his whereabouts known to the public so that he’ll soon be found.”

A murmur ran through the rows of amazed and puzzled officers. Rhodan smiled and continued: “Let me point out something to you, gentlemen. The gravitation field produced by the two time-bombs had, according to our measurements, a very limited time-gradient. This implies that the bombs had been set to pin down our search teams on board the wrecks. If there had been any intention of killing them, the time-gradient would have been much greater.

“The simple conclusion we must draw from this is that we must expect the return of the Springer fleet in the near future and we can bet on it that they’ll come back with considerable reinforcements.

“We’ll not join battle with them. You remember what I told you about the technological accomplishments of the Springers. In a massive attack the Springers would probably defeat our three ships. The Springers have now learned that they’ve got a super-spaceship to combat and they’ll come prepared for it.

“The Springers are bound to pay close attention to Tifflor and—hopefully—he will be in a position to collect some valuable intelligence. As to ourselves, gentlemen, we’ll have some other business to take care of. I’ll inform you about it at the earliest salient opportunity.

“Now that I’ve brought you up to date...” Rhodan interrupted himself, looked around and smiled. “I almost forgot something important. You are familiar with Major Deringhouse’s report according to which—up to a few hours ago—the K-7 has been restrained by magneto-mechanical bonds to the Springer ship *Orla XI* that latched onto it near Pluto’s orbit.

“The same *Orla XI* quietly sneaked out of the system when the skirmish began. We’re safe to assume that the *Orla XI* will be first to know where Tifflor, whom they consider a very important person, is hiding out. This will assure Tifflor’s reestablishing his contact.”

He dismissed his officers with a nod. They left somewhat bewildered. Only Reginald Bell and the two Arkonides remained.

Bell stood before Rhodan and eyed him with grave respect. His entire reaction was encapsulated in two words: “Wonder Worker!”

* * * *

After braking for the fifth time the machine stopped bouncing out of the frigid atmosphere of the inhospitable world.

The velocity of the destroyer was still pegged at Mach 5—much too high to permit a true reading of the atmosphere’s temperature by the outside thermometer.

The white expanse below the craft furnished no reference points for estimating

distances. Prior to his deceleration Tiff thought he could see that the planet was comparable in size to Terra, perhaps a little smaller.

Now he was afraid that his speed was not sufficient to circle around the polar zone of the planet without more thrust. He wanted to tell Eberhardt to look for a suitable landing place but what good would it do to find one if he was unable to set down his ship?

He had to let his velocity run itself down gradually.

Mach 5; Mach 4.5; Mach 4...

"Is there enough power left for braking?" Hifield suddenly asked.

His voice sounded strained. Now that things became deadly serious he appeared to fear so much for his life that he forgot about quarrelling with Tiff.

"I brake at half the speed of sound," Tiff answered dryly.

Hifield gasped in horror. "The atmosphere will support us only to Mach 1; then we'll sag through!"

He was right. The fins of the destroyer were only designed as steering aids at speeds higher than Mach 1 in atmospheres at least as dense as on Earth. In this respect they could not be regarded as lifting bodies. By design the craft was constructed to stay in the air by the force of its thrust which was effective in all directions as long as the machine was undamaged.

Tiff only could mutter: "Then we'll have to take a dive!"

Hifield started to protest. Tiff was little inclined, nor did he have the time, to engage in discussions. Eberhardt obviously felt the same way and barked at Hifield: "Why don't you shut up?"

Hifield shut.

The destroyer continued on its path. Mach 3... Mach 2.5...

"Are we falling to our death?" Felicita asked with trembling voice.

And Tiff—regretting it later very much—couldn't think of anything else to say than: "Of course! In two minutes!"

Felicita began to sob again.

At the end of two minutes, the ship had reduced its speed to Mach 0.6.

"Eberhardt!" Tiff called. "Do you see a place to touch down?"

Eberhardt looked at the side-view observation screen. "Yes, a vast place," he replied. "The whole planet is one big landing place. The question is what it looks like when we get lower."

He was correct. The white surface showed no contours smaller than a medium-sized bill. The craft still moved along at an altitude of 10,000 feet.

But now it sank rapidly.

"I'm going to land now!" Tiff warned.

He had no other choice left.

A few seconds later the ship had lost enough height for him to recognize bow rough the terrain actually was.

Tiff hoped that the unevenness was caused by nothing worse than snowdrifts. If there was solid rock underneath, then—

Better not think about it!

The destroyer was designed for vertical landing. It was not equipped with landing wheels and they would have done little good under the prevailing conditions.

“Hold tight!”

Numerous little molehills!

“Watch out! Now...!”

There was a grinding and crunching jolt. Tiff had clasped his hands so tightly around the joystick that his wrists almost broke. With a painfully distorted face he pulled the stick back and poured on the last remnant of energy for the brake jets.

They felt a second jolt when the machine hurtled across one of the molehills. For a moment swirling masses of snow blocked out the view on the observation screen; then the screen stopped functioning altogether. And so did the light. It became dark in the narrow cockpit.

The ship had not yet come to rest. For awhile it seemed to turn around its axis and it also had some forward momentum left. Finally there was a loud crash, the ear-piercing sound of tearing metal—then all was quiet.

Tiff hung akimbo in his harness. He sat up and looked around. There was only complete and impenetrable darkness around him. He heard hard breathing on the helmet radio. “Here we are!” he announced.

5/ Iceworld Surprise

It soon was absolutely clear that the machine was a total loss. It was impossible to open the cockpit in the normal manner.

Felicita was knocked unconscious. Eberhardt checked her spacesuit to make certain that it was properly closed.

Then Hifield and Tiff tried to force open the canopy of the cockpit. They finally succeeded and the roof slid back with noisy screeching. In the moist warm air in the cabin the faceplates of their helmets became coated with a thin sheet of ice from one second to the next.

“Turn on your thermal controls!” Tiff ordered.

He waited till the warmth of his spacesuit had reached the helmet and thawed out the covering of ice. Then he pulled himself up and climbed out of the cockpit. Hifield was about to follow him but Tiff snapped at him: “Wait!”

Hifield obeyed. Tiff sat for awhile athwart the rim of the cockpit and tried to figure out what was so peculiar about the surroundings.

The gravitation! It was as simple as that. It was at least 20% less than on Earth, about 0.8 G. Tiff jumped down and sank up to his knees in powdery snow.

Suddenly he was hit with a shock by the realization of how foolhardy he had behaved. The loose snow could have been 50 feet deep and he would have gone down like a rock in water.

He took a deep breath and looked around. A weak wind, which was audible through the outside mike, lazily blew misty clouds of snow across the land. Tiff looked at his right wrist to read the thermometer. He was flabbergasted when it showed minus 170° F. How long could the spacesuits regulate the temperature?

Cautiously he trudged around the destroyer and inspected the damage. Eberhardt called from inside: “What does the ship look like?”

Tiff replied with a bitter smile: “It doesn’t look like a destroyer—it looks destroyed!”

The worth of the machine had been reduced to that of scrap metal. A rocky outcropping had split its underside open from the middle to the engine at the rear. If the rock had slashed it in front it would have been a tragedy for the five in the cockpit.

The jets were no longer visible. Ripped and twisted metaloplastic covered the

apertures.

It would soon be all over unless Rhodan came to their rescue. Life couldn't go on for long in this desolate waste of ice and snow once the energy reserves of their spacesuits and the emergency rations in the cabins were used up.

If Rhodan didn't come and if they found no civilization on this planet...

Tiff laughed at the latter. A civilization in a world like this! If there ever had been life on this planet, it must have become extinct when it moved so far away from the two suns that its mean temperature sank below tolerable limits.

The two suns...

Tiff glanced at the milky sky. The light was dim but much brighter than it should have been in Tiff's opinion.

He saw one of the suns as a brilliant speck of light through the veils of drifting snow. The other was a dull, hardly noticeable red spot.

Horizontally his view was restricted by the snow to approximately 300 feet. Within this radius the terrain was level except for a few little molehills.

Tiff wanted to find a cave that could be made airtight and fixed up so that they could take off their spacesuits. Although they carried emergency rations of concentrated food in their helmets, which could be released from the outside by the push of a button and then ingested, the ration sufficed only for 500 hours. During that time—such, was the idea behind this arrangement—it should be possible for the stranded spaceman to find some protected haven. Tiff was dubious that it could be accomplished.

“Come on out!” Tiff called to the four in the cabin. “Jump down carefully! The snow is loose and deep.”

They came down together with Felicita, who had waked up in the meantime. Tiff looked at her attentively. She noticed it and lowered her eyes. “I'm sorry,” she apologized softly “that I've behaved so childishly.”

Tiff gently patted her on the shoulder. “Forget it, Felicita!”

They plodded aimlessly and despondent through the subpolar surroundings. Tiff was the only one to use his time purposefully from the beginning. He checked the compass on his wrist and determined that it always indicated the same direction from every position. The magnetic field of the planet was just as dependable as on Earth.

After half an hour Tiff suggested that the robot should now be released from his prison. He had little hope that the robot had fared better than the destroyer and he was very anxious to find out what his condition was.

The little storage room where the robot was held had to be opened from the outside. As they had expected, the locking mechanism had indeed become inoperable.

They were lucky that they managed to open the hatch and that the inclined rolling band on which the robot rested was still intact. He slid down on the rollers under his own weight after the wedge under his feet was removed. He struck the

floor with a hard blow and the pressure exerted on a certain spot in his soles awakened the robot from his rigid state.

Tiff and the two cadets stared in wide-eyed amazement as the seemingly clumsy machine jumped nimbly to its feet and turned around to face them. There really was nothing unusual about this except the fact that the robot had not become defective from the various accidents which had befallen the destroyer.

In the normal manner the machine reported acoustically over its built-in ultra-shortwave transmitter: "Robot RB-013 ready for action. Operating control positive. I request assignment."

RB-013 spoke English. It was a simple routine to program an Arkonide robot for English and other languages. The data bank of his small positronic brain required only five to eight per thousand of its capacity for each language.

'Assignment' was the translation of an Arkonide concept which actually meant 'registration of command frequency.' It had to be determined which one of the five who had occupied the destroyer was entitled to give orders to the robot as the last instance.

Under different circumstances Hifield would have been the first to come forward to exchange the code words with the robot which were necessary for RB-013 to recognize his new commander under any and all circumstances. But the despair of the protracted flight, the catastrophic landing and the icy desolate surroundings had subdued his egomania to such a degree that he did not even raise objections when Tiff stepped up to the robot.

"Cadet Tiffloor," Tiff announced. "Julian Tiffloor. The squared number of Schrödinger's wave function ψ gives the probable density of the observed particle."

And RB-013 replied: "By multiplication with the position vector the expected value for the position and by multiplication with the impulse vector the expected value of the impulse."

Of course the procedure was rather ludicrous. The point was not that one wanted to give new information to the other nor that the statements were correct. The exchange of messages had been agreed on before as code. The sentence enabled the positronic data bank of the robot to register the basic frequencies of the human voice whereas his reply reassured Tiff that the robot was in perfect condition. The data bank holding the key to the answer was connected with the main control of the machine which would have prevented revealing the code if anything had been wrong with the robot.

"Very good," Tiff said. "Now we've got that cleared up."

Tiff turned around. just then it seemed to dawn on Hifield that someone else had elected himself commander and he begrudged it. Tiff saw his complaints coming and quickly tried to forestall them: "We're all agreed," he stated, "that we need first of all a shelter, don't we? The emergency rations in the cabin will last us for two years. We've got 500 hours to find a hole we can crawl in and store our supplies."

“We don’t know what elements this atmosphere consists of. It’s not impossible that what we think is snow is in reality paraffin and that the ‘air’ is carbohydrate.

“What we must look for is a cave which we can make airtight and livable with our means. RB-013 will help us with it but first we’ll have to find a cave.”

Hifield had an idea. “Why don’t we use the destroyer?”

Tiff made a declining gesture. “Can you make it airtight again? Furthermore, it’s the only metallic object around here and the engines still radiate a little. If some of the Springers are still hanging around the neighbourhood and get the idea of looking for us on this planet, they’re bound to find the machine at once. That’s why we don’t use the destroyer.”

RB-013 with his long spindly legs and four arms—the two lower ones nothing more than movable cannons trotted through the snow to check his mobility.

Tiff addressed the robot. “We must leave this place,” he told him. He looked once more at the skidmark the destroyer had made and determined the direction. “It’ll be best to go that way.” He pointed toward the darker area he had seen before they went down.

“Yes, sir!” RB-013 replied. And his voice almost sounded human.

* * * *

Organs opined: “They’re very strong but not as powerful as the fleet that’ll soon show up.”

“On the other hand, they didn’t wait for them. Our fleet can’t catch them now.”

Organs gave no answer since Ornafer was right. First the warships he had summoned to help him had vanished from the screen and then the three light spots of the strange vessels.

All that was left behind were the two wrecks. The *Orla XI* had already put a great distance between itself and the constellation but its sensitive measuring instruments still registered the distortion of the gravitational field of the system deriving from the two demolished ships.

“They’ve planted time-bombs,” Organs said. “I’d like to know how these barbarians managed to dodge them.”

Ornafer didn’t know either. Organs was lost in thought for awhile. When he lifted his big, long-haired head again, Ornafer saw his firm mouth twisted into a sly smile. “How long, would you say, will it take our battle fleet to return?” Organs asked him.

Ornafer pondered the question. “Four or five hours, I believe.”

Organs was inclined to agree. “At least, if not longer. Connect me with the rangefinder.”

The request came as a surprise to Ornafer. He grimaced and called the rangefinder on the hypercom.

Organs stepped over to the screen when the man appeared. “Let me have all

navigating data on the course of the little ship that left the K-7 after it escaped from us.”

The rangefinder complied with the demand and a few minutes later Orlgans received the desired data plotted on a sheet of graph paper. Together with Ornafer he began to study it.

“You see!” Orlgans explained, connecting the various measuring points on the co-ordinates with a line as best he could. The positions of the two suns and the four planets were also recorded at the time of the measurements and were shown in coloured outline.

The time was noted at each point.

Whatever one could say about Ornafer, nobody could deny that he was an excellent astrogator. The diagram was not very difficult for him to read and he quickly grasped what Orlgans was getting at.

“Yes, I see,” Ornafer answered. “The little machine has reached the vicinity of the system’s second planet.”

Orlgans laughed for the first time in hours. “Exactly! And if we’ve to wait four or five hours for the return of the battle fleet, we might as well try to find the aliens in the meantime.”

He rolled up the diagram and went to the intercom to issue the order to start. He stopped halfway and looked over his shoulder at Ornafer. “Would you prefer to leave the booty to others?”

“No!” Ornafer declared categorically.

* * * *

Rhodan’s three ships hovered motionlessly in space at a distance of eight light-years from the two suns.

Rhodan was almost certain that the two disturbances caused by the transition—one by going into hyperspace and the other by leaving it—were registered only as a single occurrence because of the short time interval involved.

Let the Springers try to figure it out when their instruments registered the second disturbance! He doubted very much it would occur to the Springers that the three heavy ships had performed a transition across a distance of no more than eight light-years.

Rhodan waited, prepared to intervene in the imminent developments with all his might.

* * * *

It was nothing at all for the robot to carry the two girls on his strong upper arms, as Tiff had arranged. He was convinced that Mildred and Felicita were on the verge of collapsing although they were loath to admit it.

Even with the girls on his arms the robot marched at such a fast clip that the three cadets had trouble keeping up in the deep snow. Tiff asked the robot to slow down.

After a march of five hours Tiff decided to stop and rest. RB-013 stood still and set down the girls. Eberhardt made a dugout in the snow where the girls could stretch out and relax. RB-013 was in a standby position. The sack with the provisions they had taken along from the destroyer swayed slightly in the wind.

Hifield turned to Tiff and looked him straight in the eye. "I'm not tired," he said. "I can go on."

Tiff knew that the time had come for the showdown which he had been expecting. "Go ahead!" he replied calmly.

But Hifield didn't go. At least not in the direction in which they had been marching. Instead he went up to Tiff and planted himself in front of him. "You'd like to get rid of me, eh?" he challenged, full of hate.

Tiff, who was about to sit down in the snow, acted not the least perturbed. "No," he replied simply.

But there was no stopping Hifield now. He put his arms on his hips and fumed: "No? How nice of you! After promoting yourself to commander on your own authority you can afford to show a little tolerance toward your comrades, can't you?"

The altercation was carried on over the helmet radio. Eberhardt could hear it as well as the robot. The two girls had fallen asleep.

Eberhardt got up and moved closer. Tiff motioned him with his hand without Hifield noticing it. Eberhardt stood still.

Tiff looked at Hifield earnestly. "To begin with," he remonstrated in a sharp tone, "I've not set myself up as commander, I've merely acquainted the robot with my voice. It's immaterial whether we five are a democratic unit or not, the robot will listen to one voice only. And secondly..." Tiff's voice became softer and more urgent, "...I want to give you a bit of advice: Keep your silly mouth shut! Your nerves are shot, that's all."

Hifield's eyes bulged. "Oh no!" he laughed scornfully. "You mean, whoever doesn't agree with your opinionated self-righteousness has a case of nerves." He assumed a menacing stance and taunted Tiff again. "Now let me tell you something! If you dare open your big mouth once more without asking us first"—now he raised his clenched fist—"I'll break your faceplate. We don't need any dictators!"

Tiff realized he had to meet the challenge head-on. "Listen, Hifield!" he shot back unhesitatingly. "I herewith open my mouth without asking you first and I'm calling you a childish and stupid bully. Now, go ahead and break my faceplate!"

He didn't have to invite Hifield twice. He leaped the three feet separating him from Tiff in a flying tackle. Tiff saw him coming and instantaneously ducked to the side grabbing Hifield's leg as he sailed past. He was pulled along and fell into the snow with Hifield. He let go of Hifield's leg and grasped him around his back.

Hifield lay still as Tiff squeezed.

“You see, Hifield,” Tiff said calmly, “it’s very simple. All I have to do is move my finger half an inch and press the contact firmly to make your helmet and spacesuit pop open. You know that, Hifield, don’t you? And if the atmosphere isn’t poisonous, you’ll freeze to death—fast. Minus 170° F.—remember, Hifield?”

Tiff suddenly loosened his grip and jumped to his feet. “And now,” he growled, “keep your mouth shut and behave. The next time I’ll press the contact. In our tight spot we can’t afford to let you soothe your bruised self-conceit at our expense.”

Hifield remained on the ground without moving. He sobbed: “You should’ve pressed it... I no longer want to...”

He was interrupted. Interrupted by a voice which seemed totally unaffected by the events of the last few minutes.

It was RB-013 announcing in a low monotonous voice: “Foreign object, sir! 4000, phi 28, theta 67.”

At that moment Hifield faded into the background,

“What kind of an object?” Tiff inquired hastily.

“Spherical, metallic, sir!” RB-013 replied with irritating calmness. “Diameter about 30 feet.”

A minute later RB-013 came through with a new report: “R 3800, phi no change, theta lower.”

The thing—whatever it was—descended.

Mildred and Felicita got tip sleepily. Meanwhile Tiff had regained his composure. “We’ll wait and see,” he declared. “As long as the thing keeps its distance it’s presumably not tailing us. RB-013!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Disintegrator and thermo-gun at the ready!”

“Yes, sir!”

Tiff smiled. He looked at his comrades one by one to let them see that he was smiling. “Easy does it,” he said softly.

* * * *

Organs had located the destroyer on the first try. He had stopped his ship at an altitude of 600 miles. Springer ships were not designed for regular landing. Although they could be set down, a Springer captain was usually reluctant to do it and touched down only in an emergency. Instead he had sent out several small auxiliary ships.

The auxiliary ships reported that the destroyer had been wrecked and abandoned. One of the ships informed him that it had found something believed to be a track. Organs called the other ships back and ordered the one to follow the trail.

The little ships were manned by two people who were in constant communication with the *Orla XI*. The two men in the ship taking up the pursuit were Mernok and Paradicsom. If the ranks of the Springer fleet had had the same titles as on Earth, Paradicsom would have been called a lieutenant and Mernok a sergeant.

"I hope the wind hasn't blown away the track," Paradicsom murmured. He flew higher and studied the observation screen on which the trail stood out as a dark line against the surroundings.

"I don't believe it did," Mernok answered, setting the course.

The little machine moved south at a leisurely pace. From time to time Paradicsom called out that he had lost the trail and Mernok turned around in a tight circle to return to the place where they had seen the track last and to pick it up again.

In this manner they didn't make as much progress as they wished but they knew the fugitives were on foot and hadn't the slightest doubt they would catch up with them the same day.

As far as the Springers knew, the planet rotated on its axis once every 31 hours and it was now 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon.

* * * *

Organs contemplated whether or not to call his clan for help. Up to now he had been reluctant to talk about it with Ornafer. He would have laughed at him.

Of course at times it seemed ridiculous to Organs why he worried so much about a little destroyer which had crashlanded and a crew marching on foot to reach a warmer region.

But his troubles were real and he couldn't talk himself out of them.

For instance it made Organs highly suspicious that the little craft had never shown any intention of turning around and seeking refuge in one of the three larger spaceships. Organs didn't know that the destroyer had lost most of its energy from the bombardment and no longer had the alternative of turning back.

For this reason, he surmised that landing on this world of ice and snow was a cunning trick and he had the impression that it would be far from simple to apprehend the fugitives again.

If he called in his clan with the patriarch Eztat and his gigantic ship in the lead, he would have to share the spoils with the other captains of the Organs clan, but on the other hand he could be sure of the gain.

What if he acted alone?

How do I know, Organs weighed in his mind, *whether there is anything at all in it for me?*

Earlier he had taken it for granted that Tifflor was among the men who had descended to the planet. But was it really the case?

Perhaps it's not irrefutable but it's at least plausible, Orlgans thought.

Yet everything hinged on Tifflor. Orlgans would have turned his back on this world immediately if he had known that Tifflor were not among the fugitives.

Because Tifflor was the man who, according to Orlgans' information, knew the well-guarded secret concerning the location and mysteries of the World of Eternal Life about whose existence the legends had told so persistently for 10,000 years that no reasonable man could doubt them.

Orlgans was well aware that the strangers had knowledge of the World of Eternal Life and probably had already visited it. He further believed that his erstwhile prisoner Tifflor held the key to the riches which had induced Orlgans to undertake this venture.

Information about the position of that legendary world in the Galaxy was a prize great enough to be shared with the other captains of the Orlgans clan, if necessary.

Nevertheless, for the time being he decided to wait for the report of the search ship he had dispatched and to send out his call for the clan only if it became obvious that the matter was too much for him to handle alone.

* * * *

Wanderer was the name given by Perry Rhodan to that artificial world where the substance of consciousness from a physically long extinct race had formed a mental collective being of incredible powers.

Everybody in the Galaxy—with the exception of races who had not yet mastered space travel—knew about the existence of this world. Yet nobody knew its location.

Nobody but Rhodan!

Rhodan had discovered the world and had been granted permission by The Brain to undergo the cell-conservation which, if renewed every 62 years, meant eternal life. He also had been given the right to select worthy earthlings to receive the same treatment.

The cell-conservation was no charm against bullets and rayshots but it arrested completely the aging process.

Rhodan had obtained nothing more than the cell-shower treatment on his first and only visit to *Wanderer*. But he knew that the artificial world harboured many more secrets, secrets of such advanced technological nature that its possessor was assured absolute superiority in space.

Rhodan always entertained the thought of returning to *Wanderer* to seek permission to benefit from its miracles of technology.

Much to his regret it had remained but a thought.

For the present far more urgent matters required his attention.

* * * *

Mernok was startled. He glanced at Paradicsom, who had as yet noticed nothing; he kept staring at the sensor screen.

Mernok studied the picture on the microwave rangefinder a second time. The object slowly moved toward the centre of the screen.

Metal!

He carefully examined it as he was wont to do. The presence of metal was not necessarily connected with the fugitives. It was not unthinkable that a metallic vein had cropped up in this deserted world.

On the other hand, however...!

Mernok called Paradicsom's attention to his discovery. Paradicsom. was far more impulsive than Mernok. Without hesitation he shouted:

"Let's drop right down!"

6/ Paradicsom's Predicament

"Theta is approaching zero..." RB-013 said slowly. "...Zero!"

The robot seemed to listen a few more seconds. "Movement has ceased," he finally stated. "Distance 3200, phi M."

RB-013 stood where the direction from which they had come was phi zero. The angle was measured clockwise. Therefore, the unknown object was, when looking back to the right of their track.

It had been ascertained by the robot that the object in question must have been produced by intelligent beings, because he recognized its shape as a flat ellipsoid.

Tiff remembered having seen such little auxiliary ships on the *Orla XI*. He no longer could doubt that it was one of those vessels.

Somebody was on their heels. The robot's sensor and rangefinder instruments had a range of about six miles for the sensor and 90 for the rangefinder. However the range was restricted by the curvature of the horizon and by uneven features of the ground. It was therefore difficult to determine how many of these lentil-shaped vehicles were in the neighbourhood. But there was probably only one.

"Let me know when anything moves!" Tiff instructed the robot. Then he turned to Hifield and Eberhardt. "Here's our chance," he said dryly. "The only question is, how can we approach the thing without being detected."

Hifield remained silent. His head was lowered and he looked at the ground. Eberhardt groaned in dismay. "Have they already noticed us?" he asked.

Tiff shrugged his shoulders. "I wish I knew. They probably..."

He interrupted himself, whirled around and stared at the robot.

"Of course!" he shouted. "Ninety percent of the robot is made of metal. His mass is more than one ton. They'd have to be blind not to see him on the microwave screen."

This changed the whole aspect of the situation. Tiff immediately prohibited all talking. Only gestures were allowed for necessary communications and speaking was permitted only if unavoidable in the most urgent case.

If the unknown intruders had not landed by accident in the north but because they had detected RB-013, they probably were busy right now trying to find them on the high frequency band so that they could listen in on their conversation.

Although the helmet transceivers operated with very little energy for their short range communications, a sensitive receiver could easily pick them up over a distance of many miles.

Tiff was thinking very hard. He desperately needed a plan.

He remembered that the lentil-shaped auxiliary ships were two-seaters. If the strangers had located RB-013 they'd sooner or later appear on the scene to recapture their old prisoners.

* * * *

"They're not moving." Paradicsom. was puzzled. He stared at the light spot.

"I wonder if it's really them," Mernok reflected.

Paradicsom. grunted. "Who else could it be? The point lies exactly on the extension of their track."

Mernok laughed. "And which one of them is made of metal?"

Paradicsom. furrowed his brow. "Perhaps they're wearing some kind of a metallic suit."

Paradicsom mulled it over for awhile and then decided. "We'll fly there," he said firmly.

* * * *

RB-013 began to stir. "Movement!" he rasped. It was all he said. The word was innocuous and anybody could hear it.

Tiff got up and went over to the robot. RB-013 leaned forward and drew a system of co-ordinates in the snow. He wrote down the present distance and the angle of the vector.

Tiff saw that the auxiliary ship was nearing their position and would soon arrive.

And he had not yet conceived a plan of action!

He told RB-013 to describe the topography of the terrain in the vicinity. Now he cared little whether his words could be overheard, because they gave nothing away.

RB-013 gave a quick description with a few words and explicit sketches in the snow.

Toward the south the ground slowly rose to a hill about 150 feet high at a distance of two miles. The hill sloped gently east, north and west. The ridge was rather irregular and it led RB-013 to believe that the southern side of the hill was a steep precipice.

This gave Tiff an idea. There was only one flaw in it: It was based on the assumption that the auxiliary ship's occupants would not rush to the attack.

In this case his idea had a good chance of success.

* * * *

Paradicsom took over as pilot. Without admitting it, he considered Mernok as too indecisive to let him steer the machine under exacting circumstances.

Instead Mernok watched the observation and rangefinder screens.

Paradicsom covered the greatest part of the way separating him from the fugitives in a few minutes. He would have continued at the same fast clip if he hadn't received a call from Captain Organs to exercise extreme caution.

Paradicsom assumed that the captain had ample reasons for his warnings. Although he was an intrepid adventurer, he never acted recklessly. He heeded Organs' call, veered away from his course and stood by again at a distance of 3000 feet from the metallic object.

He questioned how he would ever be able to nab the fugitives by this method but he reckoned that sooner or later he or Mernok would be struck by a useful inspiration.

"Faster!" Tiff spurred them on. "We don't have a second to lose."

The hole in the snow was getting deeper. The two girls also lent a hand but RB-013 did the biggest portion of the work.

* * * *

Fifteen minutes passed while Paradicsom vainly tried to plot his strategy. He asked Mernok gruffly if he had come up with something but failed to get an answer to his question.

"Hey, Mernok!" Paradicsom yelled.

Mernok spun around. His face reflected great surprise. He panted and it took him awhile before he could stammer: "The spot's disappeared!"

Paradicsom laughed. "The spot? Let me see!"

Mernok leaned back to let Paradicsom view the sensor screen. It was dark green and empty except for the tiny shimmering points of light which were ever present.

Paradicsom gaped in amazement. "Where...?"

Mernok said dejectedly: "It flickered a few times and then it was gone."

"Simply gone? It didn't move over the edge?"

"No. It vanished on the spot."

Paradicsom tried to find an explanation. The metal could somehow have disappeared beneath the surface. Microwaves penetrated ordinary ground only to a depth of a few inches. If there was a cavity near the place where the metal had been the image could disappear the moment the metal was placed inside the

cavity. That had to be it!

Mernok returned to watching his instrument screens and left it to Paradicsom to rack his brains. Paradicsom didn't share his thoughts with Mernok but he wondered whether it would be advisable to take the initiative now. As long as these people were holed up, their freedom of movement was restricted and it should be that much easier to subdue them.

A loud scream from Mernok startled him. "There! Look at it!"

Simultaneously the alarm whistles started a discordant concert.

Now Paradicsom, too, was gripped by panic. He stared over Mernok's shoulder at the screen until the full impact of what he saw hit him.

A brilliant bright-green point traced a line along the upper edge of the screen. The line was blurred where it began on the left and it ended in a fiery burst of light at the right.

"Thermo-ray discharge!" Mernok groaned.

Paradicsom understood the symptoms. The discharge of a thermo-beamer against solid matter created a dense zone of ionized atoms and molecules which reflected the microwave beam even better than metal.

Paradicsom's cool reasoning prevailed again. "Locate the distance!" he barked.

"Two and a half miles," Mernok read aloud.

Paradicsom was baffled. A few moments before the fugitives had appeared to be only 3000 feet away and a thermo-beamer had been discharged at more than four times the distance.

What did they shoot at? Were they really the escaped prisoners he was looking for or did this wasteland hide other groups of people?

The more Paradicsom realized that it was impossible to explain the events from his pilot chair, the more upset he became. When his anger had reached the limit he bellowed: "Let's investigate!"

The auxiliary ship took off with a jolt and shot up high into the atmosphere. The line on the sensor screen faded as the discharge ended but a few moments later Mernok observed another shot in the same direction with the same violent eruption.

He notified Paradicsom but Paradicsom couldn't have been deterred by a thousand thermo-guns shooting simultaneously.

The ship covered the two and a half miles in a few seconds. On the screen Merrick spotted a small hill with three gentle slopes and a vertical wall. "Target area!" he added.

Paradicsom sent his machine higher up and essayed a few circles around the hill.

"Tell me what you can see with the sensor," he nagged Mernok.

Mernok kept looking at the screen. "Nothing except the hill," he replied laconically.

Paradicsom went lower. His altitude was only 600 feet above the ground. "And

now?"

"Same as before."

Paradicsom began to swear. He was still swearing when Mernok gasped in horror and pointed to the sensor screen where a path of light showed another discharge.

The target of the impulse was almost vertically below the ship.

Paradicsom pushed his steering control forward. The ship fell like a rock. Near the ground he straightened out again and flew a few hundred feet toward the target area of the impulse weapon.

He set the ship down roughly. Mernok didn't move.

"Nothing yet?" Paradicsom inquired.

Mernok raised both bands in negation.

He saw the uneven terrain distinctly on the screen. The sensor had a range of one and a half miles. But the irregularities were the same that one would expect to see in any uncultivated area and there was nothing in sight that looked suspicious.

The optical screen showed much less. The wind was blowing with renewed vigour and stirred up the snow in big swirls. The visibility reached only 60 or 70 feet.

Paradicsom did not break his silence. After a while he released his safety harness and got up. "I'm going out!" he said tersely. "Wait here!"

He left the little ship through the airlock. He knew that the air outside contained a high degree of oxygen and was non-toxic and harmless except for the side effects caused by too high an oxygen content. Nevertheless he chose to exit through the airlock in order to avoid the influx of too much cold.

Mernok saw him stalk through the snow and heard his voice in the loudspeaker: "I'll be back right away."

A moment later he disappeared in the drifting snow.

* * * *

"Look out!" Tiff whispered. "Somebody's coming."

Both girls were hiding with him. They crawled deeper into their hideaways in the snow to keep from being detected. Tiff stayed at the entrance of his dugout and carefully scrutinized the grey shadow looming in the veil of snow.

He didn't risk turning up his transmitter enough to notify Hifield and Eberhardt that someone was approaching. If by accident the helmet radio of the Springer operated on the same frequency as his own, all his preparations would have been in vain.

Paradicsom looked for tracks. He had inspected from a safe distance the place where the thermo-rays had hit three times in a row. However there was nothing to see but a smooth sheet of ice formed by the snow melted by the hellish temperature.

Paradicsom failed to understand why anyone would shoot at this spot. However he didn't spend his time guessing about it, instead searched for tracks.

He poked through the snow across the northern incline of the hill and eventually came upon three objects which had remarkably regular outlines. Curious, he went closer. He noticed that someone had gone to the trouble of pressing the snow into building blocks and had formed a long flat tube from them, open at one end.

Paradicsom knelt down and peered into the opening of the tube. Although it was dark Paradicsom perceived that something was inside.

He became frightened and jumped back. Although he was well armed, his first thought was to run away as quickly as possible.

Before he could turn around he was struck by such a mighty blow to the collar joint of his spacesuit that he was instantly knocked unconscious.

Mernok heard his last scream. He didn't hear it very loudly though because Paradicsom had neglected to adjust his transmitter to the distance. Nevertheless Mernok knew something was wrong. "Hello, Paradicsom!" he called into the mike.

No answer.

Mernok began to worry. In his slow manner he tried to think of the reasons which could prevent Paradicsom from answering unless he was injured.

He couldn't rid himself of a nagging anxiety. He called Paradicsom a few more times without result. When he was ready to give up, about to make a report to Orlgans, he received an answer. "What do you want?"

Mernok sighed in relief. The voice sounded muffled, as if the transmitter were too weak, but this didn't disturb Mernok.

"Why didn't I hear from you?" Mernok asked.

"I slipped and fell down the hill," Paradicsom seemed to say. "I'm coming back now."

"Did you find anything?" Mernok was curious.

"No!" the voice replied.

Time dragged on. Paradicsom didn't seem inclined to carry on a conversation and Mernok ceased asking questions. Eventually a light-grey figure appeared on the hill, first on the sensor screen and then visible with the unaided eye.

Mernok opened the outer hatch of the airlock. The figure entered and Mernok waited until the cold air had been pumped out and replaced by the warm inside. Then he opened the inner hatch.

The first thing that emerged was the barrel of an impulse weapon, which elicited some surprise from Mernok. Then the man holding the weapon came into view and Mernok saw that his spacesuit—although it had the same light-grey colour worn by the Springers—was of entirely different cut.

"What...?"

"Nuptyt!" the stranger said in Intercosmo, "Just take it easy! I'm taking over

this ship! You won't get hurt if you behave!"

Mernok raised no objections—he had no other choice.

* * * *

The rest was simple.

They dug RB-013 out of the hole again where they had concealed him in order to prevent his detection by sensors. It was hard work because the channel in the hole through which RB-013 had blasted the thermo-beams with his weapon arm had been thawed out by the shots and frozen again into solid ice. However, the robot was helping energetically.

The operation of the conquered auxiliary ship presented no trouble. It was built according to Arkonide principles and all signs were printed in Intercosmo,

Paradicsom and Mernok were set free. A timelock was put on their helmet transmitters so that they could contact the *Orla XI* in 10 hours.

Paradicsom had fully recovered from the deft treatment meted out to him.

After Tiff had knocked Paradicsom unconscious he had shoved him into Mildred's snow cave and crawled in behind him. Paradicsom's helmet was opened while Mildred shielded him in her arms from the murderous cold so that Tiff could determine the frequency of the transmitter on which Mernok and Paradicsom were tuned in.

Furthermore, Tiff relieved him of the little thermo-gun with which he had threatened Mernok half an hour later.

It was clear to Tiff that they could no longer remain in the vicinity after the events which had taken place there. As soon as the two Springers resumed communications with their ship, they would request assistance.

Tiff put both girls in the little craft and flew southward. After 60 miles he passed over a mountainous area and after a short search found a cave which appeared to be suitable as shelter for an extended stay. He led the girls inside and left them to pick up Hifield and Eberhardt. Finally he made a third trip to transfer the robot to their new refuge.

The robot went immediately to work to make the cave airtight. With his built-in thermo-weapon he melted the rock and divided the cave into separate compartments. The compartment walls had narrow openings for access. During the next few hours RB-013 made plates from molten rock and fitted them into the apertures with such accuracy that the closure was for all practical purposes airtight. He finished his work before darkness fell.

If a slight flow of air should penetrate, it would have to wend its way around the cover plates of several chambers. Besides, Tiff had learned from Paradicsom that the atmosphere on this planet was not poisonous, only miserably cold.

They concealed the captured auxiliary ship in a nearby mountain gap and secured it in such a way that it could not be detected by microwave rangefinders.

* * * *

When Orlgans eventually learned from Paradicsom and Mernok what fate had befallen them, he suspended for the time being all hostilities against the fugitives and instead summoned the Orlgans clan for help.

* * * *

The day after the emergency landing the hypercom of the captured auxiliary ship received and recorded a short message. When Tiff left the cave at noon to check the ship, his heart skipped a beat when he read, repeated 20 times:

COMMANDER TO TIFFLOR. DON'T GIVE UP! HELP IS ON THE WAY!

The jubilant cadet returned with the news and when he shared it with his companions their reaction was loud and long. When their expressions of joy and relief had at last subsided, Tiff said to them, in the longest uninterrupted speech he had had time to deliver in quite awhile:

"I'm sure our peace will be only temporary but at least we can take advantage of it for the time being and relax. We'll stay here as long as possible. We can be comfortable as long as our provisions hold out and nobody attacks us. I imagine Orlgans will renew his search for us in a few days. I don't know what's going on in the Chiefs mind but it's no doubt important.

"So make yourselves at home as best you can and let's hope we'll be lucky and have a few restful days. We don't know what game's being played here but were an essential part of it and must cooperate accordingly. The next move is up to the Chief and the Springers. As soon as it's obvious what it is, we'll do what's required of us, right?"

RB-013 stood erect against the wall. His thermo-beamer was switched on low and radiated a pleasant warmth. The only unpleasant note was Hifield.

In a civilization which had largely outgrown smoking, Hifield was a rare throwback. To the disgust of the others, he now lit a cigarette. Its acrid smoke was as offensive to their nostrils as his acrimonious words to their ears: "I don't know what Rhodan sees in you, Tiff, that he has the rest of us chasing around like snowmen in this super Siberia because of you!"

Fool, thought the young cadet, but he didn't blow his cool. Instead he stood in introspection, wondering how much longer he would be able to conceal from his four companions that as far as Rhodan's future plans went he knew no more about them than they.

He was, in fact, as much in the dark as Earth during an eclipse.

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

For 8000 years the Springers have engaged every means, fair or foul, to maintain their trade monopoly in the Galaxy. To them, it is a way of life. All attempts at competition must be ruthlessly resisted.

Ironically, it is this harsh commercial mentality ingrained in the Springers which holds out Perry's only hope: unfortunately the aliens have discovered Terra, true, but being concerned foremost with their own gain, they will automatically refrain from revealing their discovery to other interstellar traders. So at least there will not be swarms of various invaders all seeking a share of the 'business' represented by Terra. Hopefully, confronted only by the Springers, the men of the New Power will be able to withstand their attacks.

A vital link in the repulsion of the Springers is the handful of space cadets stranded light-years from Terra on an inhospitable polar planet. Danger lurks everywhere in the days ahead in an adventure which must be read—

PERIL OF THE ICE PLANET

by
Kurt Mahr