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Time's Lonely One

K. H. Scheer



This is the stirring story of—
TIME'S LONELY ONE



THE ACTION & ADVENTURE HAPPENS WITH

PERRY RHODAN—The One & Only of Space

Atlan—The Lonely Mystery Man of the Ages... alias Phil Holding alias Skörlid Gonardson... alias—?

Lt.-Gen. Peter Kosnow—Chief of the Solar Defence

Tombe Gmuna—Newly commissioned young black lieutenant in Terrania's Space Academy

Dr. Flynn, Prof. Steinemann, Dora, Evelyn Tuniks & Alfons Bonkun—Minor personalities appearing briefly in this episode

Job Malvers, Billy Plichter & "Willy" Fergusen—Are they real or figments of hallucination?

Rico—A Robot

The PERRY RHODAN series and characters were
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Time's Lonely One

by K. H. Scheer

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1/ WHAT FATE, MANKIND?

“THE TIME is up, Master!”

When was the last time anyone had called me Master?

I turned my aching head. It ached from the confusing kaleidoscope of conversations, sounds and sensations of the past few minutes:

The whispering that crescendoed into loud laughter.

People claiming they’d never heard such nonsense.

A woman’s husky voice that caused the laughter to cease abruptly.

“I beg your pardon!” a man exclaimed in consternation. “Are you trying to say that this even remotely resembles the truth?”

The woman’s voice, exploding in anger. Then the roar of laughter again. It could only be Job—nobody laughed as loud as Job Malvers over trivialities. If only he’d inhibit his imbecilic guffawing for once! I never cared for him, now less than ever. He was short and plump with rosy cheeks and cold eyes and whenever something went wrong in my department he was inevitably to blame.

“Shut up!” I cried out, furious. “Why the devil don’t you keep quiet? What difference does it make now whether the landing was voluntary or not?”

“Sure!” Billy Plichter snorted. “Okay, let’s begin again. Where were we, Olaf? Oh, yes—why does the Teftris equation have to be completely wrong? Hey, Olaf, what’s the matter with you? Olaf! I mean you! What’s wrong with the equation? Olaf... Olaf... Olaf!”

The demand grew louder. I listened to the sound of little bells ringing in my brain. I heard myself answer although I didn’t speak.

Olaf—it was obviously I whose name was being called repeatedly and with increasing intensity. The pain in my head grew worse. Billy Plichter was merciless with his insistence. I certainly deserved a rest; I’d earned it!

Somebody began to speak. It was a little while before I understood the words—and then that they issued from my own mouth! I wanted to laugh but the pain intensified again.

A fizzing noise next to me. A stinging pain in my thigh but passing quickly, to be replaced by a pleasant warm feeling rippling through my body.

But what inconsiderate physician would give me such an intimate injection in the presence of other persons? I felt embarrassed because ‘Willy’ Ferguson was in

the room. How could the doctor give me a bare thigh shot while she was looking on?

Fiery veils surged before my eyes. The throbbing pain inside my skull became too much to bear.

When I could see clearly again, I realized ‘Willy’ Ferguson was no longer in the room. Job howled with laughter again—but he was not really there any more.

Close before my eyes the big picture screen radiated brightly. I watched the coloured images with astonishment. My colleagues discussed matters with which I was familiar, I was in their midst—and yet I lay there.

The tableau began to flicker away, to be replaced by a modern clock with a year scale. A voice announced solemnly: “The time is up, Master!”

When was the last time anyone had called me Master? I turned my aching head. “I beg your pardon!” I stammered awkwardly with a thick tongue that had the feeling I had not used it for ages.

“The time is up, Master!” the same voice reiterated. This time the voice reaching my ears sounded less solemn and had a more metallic ring.

Rico’s plastic face was wrinkled in an amiable smile. I blinked my eyes as I looked up at him. “Hello!” I said weakly. “Is that you, Rico?”

“Yes, Master! This is Rico. Time’s up. I had orders to wake you up after exactly 69 years, Master.”

I was annoyed by this servile expression. Such high-grade robots shouldn’t be directed to use titles on every occasion that smacked of submission. But what did he mean when he referred to 69 years?

The thought made me shudder. It was always the same. The recognition hit me with a painful shock.

I sat up and Rico immediately supported me. I felt the hard steel under the plastic skin of his hand. My joints seemed to have become rusty. I looked again at the videoscreen. Only 69 years! I had set it for 70. What happened?

Rico replied, totally unmoved as only a machine could be: “Only 69 years, Master. I received the command impulse exactly 36 hours, 3 minutes and 18 seconds ago.”

Therefore this time it had required 36 hours to rouse me from the death-like bio-deep-sleep.

“Too long, much too long,” my brain signalled. Then I asked myself what tiny error could have caused the time switch to miss one year. It probably was my fault. Everything had had to be done in such a hurry at the time of the atomic skullduggery up there.

A mechanical speaker blared and it startled me anew. The clock faded from the videoscreen. The picture-tape had served its purpose. People like me at the moment of reawakening needed acoustic and visual images from the time *before* the beginning of the biomedical sleep process. Now I remembered that I had the foresight to put the prepared tape into the automatic timer myself.

Job's revolting guffaws had been helpful. Otherwise I wouldn't have recovered so quickly.

Rico's round plastic head appeared in my view. He was one of 4 robots that had been specially designed for the supervision and maintenance of the shelter machinery. His flair for speech was a bit of positronic tomfoolery, using his ultra-rapid evaluation components which transformed mathematical results into intelligible sounds. It also served as a means to stimulate my slowly responding senses. I simply had to talk to somebody, even if it was only a machine. Rico's vocabulary was rather limited.

The activation shower which was remote-controlled by the central brain had been rolled to the right side of my couch. The small chamber resembled a modern operating room except for the absence of surgeons. The biochemical stimulants which activated my body cells were either injected or radiated in various forms. My head was still enclosed in the glistening hood of the frequency generator which had transmitted my first sensory impressions.

I lay still for an hour and reflected on the reasons which led me to go into the deep sleep.

Right—69 years ago those in the responsible positions of the major power blocs had lost their nerves. I had sought refuge in my deep-sea shelter when the first atomic rockets were launched. Apparently I had barely managed to escape the senseless destruction. But what had happened to the great mass of people on the continents of Earth? The thought about the fate of the billions of people was too grim to be pondered coldly and soberly. All I could think of was that I probably was now the last human being on Earth.

“Human being!” I laughed bitterly.

Rico came quickly closer. If his mechanical eyes could profess concern, they did it now.

I remained motionless and enjoyed the touch of the multiple-armed massage machine treating me with soft plastic hands. This kneading of my muscles was a must if I wanted to gain control of my body again.

It took a few more hours before I was able to rise from my couch. Pressurized air hissed through the tiny pores of the couch's foam and the depressions my body had created in 69 years were smoothed out again.

Naked and still weak from the emotional turmoil, I was led out of the sleeping room by Rico. Outside in the pleasantly furnished antechamber the colour organ was in operation, flooding the walls with soothing wave patterns. The gentle strains of an old musical composition induced a comforting feeling in me.

The few steps exhausted me enormously. With a sigh I slouched into the soft cushions of the vibrator chair which continued the intense kneading treatment of the robot hands in a more unobtrusive way.

Rico served me the first liquid nourishment. It was still too early to offer solid food to my stomach. It would take at least 3 or 4 more days before I felt fairly fit again.

Rico rolled the movable mirror before me and helped me to sit up. I had lost only very little weight, a sign that my body had endured the period of the deep-sleep very well.

I motioned him and watched him move the mirror back into its place in the wall. Then the automaton came back and stood in front of me. Rico's face could have looked human if it hadn't been so colourless and waxen.

"My friend, what I wouldn't give if a real person were standing in your place!" I exclaimed feebly. "What does it look like up above?"

"A lot of water, Master," my personal valet replied diplomatically.

I observed him intently. Was his answer only a psychological trick to arouse a certain feeling of ire in me or didn't he really know any better?

"Of course there's a lot of water. We're here at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean near the island Sao Miguel in the Azores where the famous underwater trench with its enormous depths begins. So we have a great mass of water over us. What I wanted to know is what the European continent looks like. What did the atomic war do to Spain and France?"

"This isn't known, Master!"

My blood welled up in my face. Rico's humble plastic smile suddenly looked like a scornful grimace to me. "Why not?" I questioned him sharply. My vocal chords were already functioning flawlessly. "Why didn't you follow my instructions to observe the surface?"

"It's your own fault, Master. All 3 observation satellites were shot down by rockets. We were aware that it was senseless to put the monitor spheres in operation because the space above the planet was swarming with fighter crafts. However we couldn't go against your orders."

A wave of disappointment, shock and rage surged through me. Naturally the robots had no option to react in any other manner after I had given them the premature command to survey the major continents at once. I had been anxious to find out what had occurred during the war as soon as I woke according to plan.

Now I was completely cut off. I was not only the loneliest living being on Earth but also the most ignorant.

Above the steely hull of my deep-sea pressure-sphere rested a tremendous mass of water. Of course it had protected me against the deadly fallout from countless nuclear explosions but this alone hardly served my purpose.

The burning desire to hear a word from human lips became so overwhelming that I felt nauseous.

I sat up and moaned. I looked with dismay at the hideous scars crisscrossing my belly. Nothing could be done about this any more, although I would detest hearing curious questions about them.

Anyway, what surgeon could have removed the stitched evidence of the horrendous cuts in my body? It was highly unlikely that a good surgeon was left on the face of the Earth. The atomic disaster had struck mankind 69 years ago.

The doctors who had finished their training must have died long ago, even if they could have managed to save their lives by some lucky coincidence.

“My clothes!” I barked at the robot.

“Which ones, Master?”

“The ones I wore last.”

“You’re still too weak, Master. The second phase of the recovery period is only just now beginning.”

There was no point in refuting the logical objections of a superb machine and so I resigned myself to his guidance.

With Rico’s support I fumbled my way to the central switchboard and plopped down into the comfortable swivel chair. There I went through the prescribed waiting period and the point-by-point checkout.

The large observation panel showed all departments of my bombproof deep-sea shelter. Not even the effects of an atomic war could be noticed down here.

The main energy-station had always been a little problem. Reactors #2 and #3 were idle and reactor #1 operated at 20% of its maximum output.

I switched on the undersea observation panel. The infrared sensors mounted on the outside of the sphere gave a clear, grainless picture of my shelter on the bottom of the sea.

A huge quantity of mud had accumulated before the southern exit hatch. However the upper airlock was unobstructed. I stepped up reactor #1 to full output to provide enough energy for the thrust-field projectors.

The big machines began to hum for the first time in 69 years. The muffled noise from below disturbed my ears but the mud deposited at the sphere began to move.

The concentrated pressure jets of 40,000 tons thrust per cubic meter easily cleaned away the muck. Within a few minutes the southern airlock was completely cleared.

Subsequently I tried to establish contact with the little television satellite. The 6-foot sphere had circled the Earth in a 2-hour orbit before the outbreak of the war. The excellent technical instruments permitted a magnification that made man-size objects clearly visible.

I failed to get a response. The micro-brain inside the satellite didn’t react.

“TEK-1 was shot down, Master,” Rico stated blandly. “It happened 2 days after you were put to sleep. A pursuit craft of unknown origin mistook our satellite for an American object.”

I made a mute gesture in his direction. I suffered the pangs of self-reproach. I had made too many mistakes when I panicked and fled to save my life in the deep sea.

Now I was cut off from the surface. I consulted the central brain to obtain the results of its measurements. If the continents were contaminated by radioactivity, the possibility that the ocean currents also carried harmful particles could not be excluded.

“No danger in immediate vicinity,” the positronic brain of the shelter sphere reported. “Ultra-range sensors register strong source of radioactivity in the trench of the Azores. Magnitude fluctuates between 6.5 and 35.0 milliroentgen, depending on ocean currents.”

I suppressed a groan. 35.0 milliroentgen were dangerous—and this 950 feet below sea level.

I tried to arrive at a relative determination of the radiation intensity on the mainland. If we had 35.0 milliroentgen down here, it must have been horrible up there.

Which radioactive isotopes did they unleash? According to my calculations the half-life of most isotopes was so short that no appreciable radiation could be expected to last beyond 69 years.

I realized that I had to surface as quickly as possible after checking the entire equipment of the shelter. Perhaps I would be in a position to help some survivors with food and medicine. I had a good stock of supplies and I could have fed, clothed and trained at least a thousand people. It was conceivable that it would be up to me to enable mankind to make a new start. The only question was how much the pernicious radiation had affected the genes of the survivors. Maybe many ghastly mutations had occurred.

Wracked by deep anxiety, I left the control room of the steel sphere. I had come to a definite conclusion: I must ascend in order to find out about the fate of mankind.

The urge to help was uppermost in my mind. I thought of my friends and other people I had known. I even remembered Job Malvers with affection no matter how often he had got under my skin. Now I missed his raucous laughter.

I decided to play the old videotape once more.

2/ UNDERSEA CAPTIVE

The selection of my equipment was a simple matter. There was no need for offensive nor defensive weapons in a denuded wasteland.

On the other hand I took every precaution against radioactive emissions and the reactor of my protective suit was fully charged. I was sure to require plenty of energy.

The cell oscillation activator, my most precious possession, was tuned again by the automatic positronic precision instrument. Due to my extended bio-sleep the individual frequency of my cells had undergone a little change.

The egg-shaped miniature set hung down on my bare chest under the heavy and uncomfortable anti-radiation suit I had to wear and which hopefully would enable me to withstand the terrific pressure of the water above me.

My sole defensive weapon consisted of a harmless psycho-beamer whose hypnosuggestive effect would suffice to make any likely opponent forget his idea of attacking me. This was all I needed.

I put highly concentrated food and radiation-absorbing medical supplies in the backpack of my high-pressure field outfit. If necessary I would have to transport surviving victims of the senseless war to my vital deep-sea sphere since it would be impossible for me to give adequate medical treatment to severe invalids on the surface.

I surmised that I could suffer no harm from the pitiful and handicapped flotsam of war inside my refuge. What could they do to me?

5 days after I was awakened by the robot, I had recovered well enough to risk my ascent.

I examined the airworthiness of my outfit by operating the antigrav aggregate. It functioned perfectly and I floated with ease from the floor to the ceiling of the sphere.

Rico watched my experiments with cold shiny mechano-eyes.

The observation panel still depicted the visual and graphic record of information which had been the latest news 69 years ago. Before I left the sphere I glanced once again at the observation panel and read with ambiguous feelings the item of an American newspaper that the first manned atomic rocket had landed on the Moon.

The commander of the atomic rocketship was Maj. Perry Rhodan, test pilot of

the U.S. Space Force. Before this man had started on his flight I had personally checked his qualifications. He had made an excellent impression on me. How could I have foreseen at that time that this same Space Force Major would be indirectly responsible for the outbreak of the dreaded atomic war? I had also heard something about a rumour that he had made a discovery on the Moon which was of utmost importance to all power blocs on Earth and that he had refused to surrender his secret. After he returned in his lunar rocket to the uninhabited Gobi Desert, the ruckus got started.

The latest reports had mentioned an energy-shield which Rhodan had erected over his lunar rocket but due to the fast-breaking course of confusing events I didn't get a chance to study the curious newspaper and TV reports.

Before I escaped in headlong flight to the deep sea from the Research & Development Centre where I had worked at the time, the first atomic war rockets had been launched abroad. Somebody's nerves snapped and the fatal button was pushed in criminal haste. All parties were convinced that Rhodan's scientific discovery would tip the power scale against them. Each one felt disadvantaged and mistrusted his neighbours. This led inexorably to the war nobody wanted.

I had sat out the explosions in the safety of the ocean's depth. Now I stood in front of the observation panel, attempting to rationalize my instinctive reluctance. I put compulsion to investigate it.

The bell sounded behind me. Everything was ready for me to leave.

Before departing I cast a last look at a telephoto picture which was probably taken from a space station. It showed a glistening object engulfed in fluorescing light in the middle of the hot sands of The Gobi.

I had often wondered about this picture. It seemed so mysterious. At least it seemed unthinkable to me that a primitive rocket could have such a sophisticated energy shield.

It was better to dismiss the thought. What good was it to ponder events of times long gone by. Mankind had dug its own grave and Maj. Perry Rhodan who had innocently started the whole mad mess must have died long ago. He was already over 30 years old when the conflagration broke out.

The observation panel was dimmed. I gave a few more instructions to the programmer and walked clumsily to the receding airlock hatch.

Rico didn't utter a word. I was alone in my undersea fortress and I would probably be just as forlorn up above. The heavy bulkhead closed shut behind me. I activated my protective field and waited till the synchronized circuit of the automatic pressure equalizer showed the green light. Then I pulled down the lever for the flooding valve and the air ventilator.

The highly pressurized, foaming water rushed in through the intake slots in the floor of the flood chamber and filled the airlock in a few seconds. The high-pitched whistling of displaced air diminished. Finally the swirling eddies tossing me around in the chamber despite my efforts to stand fast, calmed down as well. This airlock was designed only as an emergency exit.

My protective shield worked faultlessly. I moved smoothly and safely inside the shell which held enough air to let me leisurely float tip to the surface.

I had to adjust my gravity regulator to a higher value because I was helplessly stuck to the ceiling of the air chamber due to the natural buoyancy.

After a few minutes of careful adjustments I found my balance. The outside hatch slid silently back, opening the dark depths of the sea with its mysterious denizens.

I cautiously stepped out. As my protective shield was rigid and not flexible it would have been futile to make swimming motions. I walked on the bottom which was here virtually flat and merely had to overcome the resistance of the water.

The infrared searchlight in my massive helmet lit up. Through the special glasses I wore I obtained as good a view across a few hundred feet of water as in bright sunshine.

Preferring not to switch on the automatic propulsion I slowly moved over the rocky plateau, leaving the steel sphere behind me in the unfathomable darkness.

I was surrounded by utter silence—nerve-wracking silence. There had probably been only a very few men who had ever been as lonely as I was. I refrained from examining the strong sphere in which I had resisted the elements for 69 years. This was long enough!

Barely 600 feet from the shelter began the tremendous underwater drop. I stepped to the edge of the gorge and leaned over, directing my helmet searchlight into the depth.

A luminous deep-sea fish approached with curiosity. I knew already that many inhabitants of the water were stimulated by infrared light. It was a sheer delight to watch the mostly bizarrely shaped fish perform their ecstatic dances. Everything took place in total silence. No noise interrupted the quiet which, after one had adapted oneself to it, no longer seemed eerie but became a solemn experience. On the other hand it could have been the characteristic make-up of my people to react differently to such impressions than most men.

The first smile crossed my lips when the fish came closer, began to sway and gradually went into a slow dance while its red and blue body shone with dazzling light. "Hello, little friend!" I called out to him.

I listened to my words and imagined the nimble little fellow would answer me. Finally I had to shoo him away because he was getting too close to the high-tension energy field. I didn't want to kill anything, not even a fish. Nothing is more sacred on a devastated planet than the last remnants of life.

This thought stirred me from my absorption. A check of my instruments gave only positive results. My measurements revealed no radioactivity. It probably required extremely sensitive meters like the sensors in the steel sphere to locate the radiation zone.

I adjusted the magnitude of the antigrav field to give me a slight uplift and drifted effortlessly across the wide gorge.

My shell had the effect of a high-intensity light and attracted more and more

fish.

Then I floated a few more miles north till I reached the massive rock base of the Azores where I started to soar upward at 15 feet per second.

Other fish appeared. My searchlight revealed several rocky promontories. The first deep-sea plants came into my view, many of a variety, which were still unknown. Mankind had pushed into outer space before its own planet had been completely explored.

Bemused, I smiled quietly until I remembered the atomic disaster which had befallen them. It quickly wiped the smile off my lips. At this moment the little alarm of the detection device in my protective suit started to buzz.

Some impulses were picked up by my energy shield which reflected them accurately due to its stable structure. For a few moments I was vexed and listened to the buzz of the alarm set which was getting stronger. I thought it could perhaps be one of those deep-sea monsters who located their prey with a wide pattern of ultrasonic waves. It was typical for these predators who had no other way of satiating their considerable need for nourishment in these dark waters.

I was prepared to defend myself when I suddenly realized that these hard waves could never originate from a fish.

After a few moments I could dispense with the warning signal from my buzzer. The impulses striking me from a high-frequency sonar underwater detector made a noise sounding like a high-pitched piiiing-piiiing.

For several seconds I was stunned in my shell. Something incredible had happened, something that was supposed to have ceased to exist long ago. The memory storage of my extra-sense became active. People of my kind never forget.

With a sudden shock I grasped a fact which I had up to now totally ignored.

Atomic submarine, survivors, caution! my extra-sense reported.

In an irrational effort I began paddling with my arms and legs. My limited underwater propulsion field allowed me to move 10 miles per hour at best. This was only sufficient for a leisurely cruise but far from enough to flee from a submarine with a high-speed atomic engine.

The salty eye-fluid trickled down my cheeks, a sign that my senses had been irritated. The impinging impulses grew stronger. Before I could reach the safety of the nearest ravine I was caught in a glaring searchlight. The muffled hum of a powerful engine could be heard and I knew beyond doubt that my equipment was insufficient to cope with the menace.

I stopped my thrashing and looked with blinking eyes into the flood of light.

They probably thought I was a denizen of the sea. What else could they believe? There was no person on Earth who had an anti-radiation suit like mine.

My brain reacted logically and soberly. To fight was useless because I had nothing with which to attack this fish of steel. Moreover I had neither the intention nor the desire of harming survivors of the atomic war in any way. It boiled down to the fact that the only thing that mattered was how to get safely inside the ship.

I reduced my speed, realizing that my body looked at best like a blurred shadow to them. The hull of my energy field gleamed much too bright to permit a good look inside.

My nervous system functioned satisfactorily. I was not afraid. I listened carefully to the ebbing thunder of the engines. After a few seconds I went into a dance, imitating a lured fish and hoping that nobody would entertain the idea of spearing me with a harpoon. I knew very well how big game fish were caught underwater before the war. Any violent impact would be highly detrimental to the equilibrium of my anti-radiation field.

They were hunting me; there was no doubt about it. Now and then I caught a glimpse of the shadowy contours of a small submarine. It happened whenever I managed to dodge the blinding searchlight for a fraction of a second.

By the time I noticed that I was getting close to a steep abyss it was already too late. It was better not to challenge the hunters or to make them suspicious. Hunters can be outsmarted but not in the crude manner I wanted to do subconsciously. Naturally they expected me to disappear in the dark crack at the first opportunity.

I heard a short, sharply hissing noise.

Compressed air launcher! my extra-sense signalled.

Without moving I waited for the strike. It would have been folly to attempt an escape from a self-steering missile.

A glistening projectile raced toward me and reached me after exactly 2½ seconds. I saw the contact tip of the high-tension warhead penetrate into my defence shield, causing it to be deflected and ignited.

Brilliant light enveloped my defence shield. The micro-reactor in my backpack beeped an alarm and the red danger signal on my wrist began to blink. Field overload!

Painful shock currents shot through my body. I screamed and doubled over, desperately trying to stave off the beginning paralysis of my nervous system.

With the last ounce of my strength I flicked the switch of my radio down to call into my throat mike with a failing voice, "Cut out the nonsense, I'll come willingly!"

Their receivers were probably tuned in to a different frequency. Who could tell how long these people had lived in their submarine. They probably boarded it at the time of the global catastrophe.

A second torpedo hit my protective field. Again I was flooded with blinding light and my body was thrown into convulsions. The last impression I had was a feeling of instant acceleration. Then my protective field collapsed. Its capacity had been extremely overloaded.

Everything went dark around me. Something sounded like the gushing of a waterfall.

Waterfall? In the ocean's depths? Ridiculous!

It was a vague impulse transmitted by my extra-sense to my dulled mind.

Naturally no such thing as a waterfall existed in the middle of the ocean.

My screen expired with a final flicker.

It's all over! I thought; irrevocably over!

3/ REVELATIONS

It sounded like the wind blowing through the riggings of a sailboat. Before my escape into the depth of the ocean I had often challenged the forces of nature. But now I was not lying on the deck of a sailboat, dreamily watching the moving clouds. Alas, it was entirely different.

There were 4 or 5 of them. What I had taken to be the blowing of the wind was a loud and fast debate.

They thought I was still in a coma and I didn't care to give any sign of having awakened.

Thus I had already gathered from their conversation that they had indeed believed I was an unknown underwater fish with unusually beautiful luminous organs. They had launched their shots at me and hauled me in through the fish hatch the moment my protective field collapsed. It was my good—or bad—luck.

By quickly blinking my eyes I learned that I was flat on a table in a rather big room. It probably was some kind of a laboratory where the captured living organisms of the deep sea were studied.

They spoke English but the general trend of their discussion confused me. The logical nucleus in my grey matter stubbornly insisting that survivors of a terrible atomic war would have other worries than renting a special submarine for diving into the trench of the Azores under the guidance of a professional deep-sea fisherman on a fishing adventure.

If they had implied that they had done it for the purpose of saving their lives and for obtaining food, I could have understood them. But this...?

I lay stock-still as soft hands fingered my face and the region of my throat and neck. The deep voice of a man said with obvious annoyance: "Balderdash! There's no sign of gills. This is without question a lung-breather and, what's more, he's a human being."

"Cover him up!" another man cautioned. "Dora's coming!"

A soft wool blanket was spread over my naked body. It tickled my perspiring skin and I had trouble controlling the scarred epidermis of my abdomen which had become very sensitive after my operation.

"Did he wake up yet?" the strident voice of a girl inquired.

Hysterical tendencies! my analytical brain-sector signalled.

A warm breath breezed against my face and I savoured the fragrance of well-

groomed hair. From that moment on I knew that the atomic war could not have been as devastating as I had assumed all this time; not if they were still able to produce such expensive perfumes up there!

“A fine specimen!” somebody said with unconcealed mockery in his voice. “At least 6-foot tall and built like a wrestler. Not an ounce of fat and a white blond mane like a Nordic god.”

2 other men broke out in gales of laughter. I began to feel deeply ashamed. These were obviously people who knew neither respect nor decency. They treated me like a rare animal and an object for rude and asinine remarks.

I felt tempted to get up but at this moment a man addressed as Doctor entered the room. I had already instinctively expected this to happen.

He greeted everybody very politely in the manner of a newly hatched M.D. in the presence of very rich and influential persons.

“Did you get the X-rays?” the man with the deep voice asked.

“Yes, sir,” the newcomer replied. “They’re extremely odd, I must say.”

“Is this an amphibious man or not?” the girl interrupted him impatiently.

“Definitely not, Miz. But he’s not a normal human being either. If you’ll allow me to show you the pictures?”

“Lemme see them!” somebody said gruffly. “What the blazes is this? This man doesn’t have any ribs!”

I noticed that they recoiled from me as if in flight.

“You don’t have to draw your gun!” the girl exclaimed. “He doesn’t look that dangerous to me. This is really fantastic! Can you wake him up, Doc?”

“It wouldn’t be advisable, Miz. Maybe in a few hours; he has received a great shock.”

A hand pulled the blanket away from my chest. It must have been the physician. “Will you look at those scars!”

“Gruesome!” the girl blurted. “I’m interested in medicine. I wonder what kind of a bungler could’ve butchered him up like that.”

“I don’t have the faintest notion. Apparently it’s a stomach operation.”

“What do you mean by apparently?” the man with the deep voice mocked him. “Are you a doctor or aren’t you? You ought to know whether it’s a stomach operation or not!”

The physician seemed embarrassed. Little wonder! These people were extremely ill bred.

“Sir, it’s impossible to state with certainty, considering his anomalous skeleton structure. The entire chest cavity is enclosed in continuous and very solid breastplates. This... eh... man should be taken to a prominent research clinic. My resources here are too limited.”

“What’s limited? The resources or yourself?” the deep voice sneered again.

“Listen, my dear friend, if this is neither a monster nor a genuine man, then something is very rotten. The circumstances of his appearance were rather

suspicious.”

“I said already it was an energy screen,” someone interjected with a growl.

“That’s my opinion too, John! I’ve worked enough with energy-fields to have some experience. It looks to me like this fellow wasn’t born on Earth. This is a case for the Space Defence. Send a radio message to the Security Office in Terrania. If necessary we’ll have to inform the Administrator. I don’t want to get mixed up in this.”

“But daddy!” the girl said pouting, “perhaps he’s really an unknown being living at the bottom of the sea. Imagine what...!”

“Bunk!” the loudmouth scolded. “Deep sea man! You do what you’re told! This fellow will be handed over to the Space Defence. Captain, we’re breaking off the trip. Emerge and radio the message. Tell them to send over a fast plane. Under the circumstances we can’t continue on a pleasure trip.”

They went on discussing the matter without suspecting that I understood every word. My scar tissue began to itch unbearably. I felt like scratching with all my fingers at once.

Moreover, the situation became perilous for me. The man with the deep voice not only seemed to be the big shot on board but also had a very energetic personality.

With a feeling of dismay I began to sort out the overhead details. My mind seemed to reject the whole preposterous idea at first. My brain went on strike. The simplest conclusion was difficult for me.

Everything added up to the fact that the atomic war had never occurred. They talked about Space Defence. Consequently they must have spaceships!

If they could even ask a Security Office to dispatch a plane it could mean only one thing: I had committed a horrendous error. But how? I knew definitely that the first atomic bombs had begun to fall on Asia at the time of my escape.

Was it possible that this Air Force Major had played a decisive role in the war? If this was so, he really must have discovered something of critical importance when he landed on the Moon, though it had completely escaped my knowledge.

“You’ve slept 69 years for no reason at all, you fool!” my extra-sense transmitted.

Then I told myself that only part of Earth might have been razed and the reason these people failed to allude to it might have reflected the fact that a long time had elapsed since the event. Nevertheless I had nagging misgivings. The wounds of an atomic war don’t heal in 69 years.

I continued eavesdropping on the conversation. But its topic concerned exclusively myself and I was in a position to learn what had actually occurred.

“That’ll be all!” the boss shouted, apparently angered. “I’ve got a nose for such things. The Solar Imperium can’t permit the presence of aliens in its realm and this one—” a finger poked at my chest “—and this fellow is not from here. Captain, emerge at once! John, do you have a gun?”

“I’ve got an old pistol,” somebody answered reluctantly.

“That’ll do. You stay here in the lab with him and watch any move he makes. Or are you afraid?”

The man by the name of John reassured him hastily that he didn’t have to worry about him. The girl laughed shrilly; she was neurotic.

Several people left the room. I heard a steel hatch snap shut and then a man uttered a subdued curse while a revolver drum clicked. Apparently the man had flipped out the drum to make sure the gun was loaded.

“How much longer will he be unconscious?” John shouted at the top of his voice but the people rushing off didn’t answer him. I was alone with a man whose nerves were on edge.

I remained completely quiet and tried to breathe deeply. I was familiar with the type of people like John. Undoubtedly he would have shot me at the first little move I made.

Disregarding him for the time being, I pondered the meaning of the “Solar Imperium” to which they had referred.

What did it really imply? At the time when I retreated into my steel sphere there existed several great power blocs on Earth. A united world government was unthinkable, let alone a political organization of outer space which deserved the name Solar Imperium.

I was calm and collected again. My kind of people quickly regain their powers of reasoning. However the fact remained that I had committed a stupendous error which primarily stemmed from my knowledge of human psychology. When some lunatic pressed the button 69 years ago I was utterly convinced that those heretofore-normal people would start acting like madmen too.

However I must have been sadly mistaken and I should be able to ascertain the reason for it. My thoughts focused on Perry Rhodan’s name. This fledgling space pilot could hold the key to the big mystery.

I waited till my guard had calmed down. After a few minutes he walked back to the hatch again. I heard him operate the sturdy levers and the hatch door slid open with a slight squeak.

I turned my head and got my first good look at the room. It was indeed a laboratory. John stood in the round door opening listening to the outside. He wore a short-sleeved shirt and tight slacks with a gun stuck in his belt.

“Get me something to eat!” the lanky man shouted through the door. Somebody answered too low for me to understand.

A perfunctory test of my reflexes was positive. I had fully absorbed the effects of the shock rays. My bulky protective suit had been placed at my left side. They had evidently searched my outfit but didn’t seem to know what to do with it. I noticed the slight long bulge of my psycho-beamer in my right thigh-pocket. They had neglected to remove my defence weapon.

John yelled again. Of course he was not really hungry, he was merely anxious

to have somebody else around.

I slipped off the table without making a sound. With 2 quick steps I stood behind the thin man.

Jumping on his back I clamped my legs around his arms and applied my good old Dagor hold. Without choking his breath I pressed my fingers against the arteries on the left and right of his larynx, blocking the flow of blood to his brain. He slumped noiselessly to the floor and remained still. It would be about 3 minutes before he recovered; there was no time to lose.

Now 2 things happened at once: the powerful engine of the submarine began to hum and I heard steps coming closer.

When I saw the man I already had the silver rod of my psycho-beamer in my hand. He was caught in the thin shimmering beam of the hypno-suggestive rays before his mind became aware what happened to him. I could feel the slight vibration of the influence-weapon in my brain. Thus the transference contact with the selected victim had been established. I didn't have to speak a word and merely concentrated on the thought I wanted the man to obey.

The man stopped in his tracks and his eyes became glassy.

Go to the lab and wait till I call you! I formulated the hypnotic impulse.

Wordlessly he resumed walking, passed by me and entered the room behind me. Then I waited till the unconscious man awakened and gave him the same instructions.

My psycho-beamer had a range of more than a mile. By broadening the concentrated beam I was able to sweep a large area at once. I had no intention of entering each room in a dangerous search to put each member of the crew individually under my influence.

I fanned my beamer over the whole ship. It was a small submarine which couldn't have more than a crew of a few men.

Soon the people I had summoned came in one by one. First a burly man whom I believed I recognized as the man with the deep voice and behind him 4 other people, among them a young girl with hair dyed an atrocious green.

I collected them in the large lab and locked them up after directing them not to leave the room under any circumstances.

Half naked as I was I investigated the submarine. Behind several luxurious cabin suites was a parlour with observation screens. The craft had already gathered speed but remained at the same depth of 6000 feet.

Next to the parlour was the control room of the submarine. Then came the quarters of the crew, the reactor department and the transformer station.

Nobody paid any attention to me as I walked through the ship. Returning to the control room, I stepped behind the captain. He was an elderly man with snow-white hair and a ruddy skin.

“Head for the Portuguese coast. Anchor the ship on the bottom near Cape Roca. What's your maximum speed?”

“80 nautical miles,” the captain said tonelessly.

“Okay, bring the speed up to 70 miles and set the automatic pilot!”

The first officer went to the navigation console to determine the course. He and the helmsman followed my orders instantly.

After the course was corrected the instruments in the radio room sounded a beeping noise. Another submarine had been picked up by the electronic detector and we steered around it automatically.

An illuminated cartographic picture showed that we approached a heavily travelled underwater lane. More and more red lines with depth notations appeared. This was one more proof that my assumptions had been all wrong. Nothing pointed to a destructive atomic war.

I decided to end my doubts by asking the direct question: “Did an atomic war devastate Earth 69 years ago?”

“No,” the captain answered in the same toneless voice.

“How old are you?”

“65 years.”

“How come the atomic war failed to break out? Did they teach you this in school?”

“Yes, sir. The New Power under Perry Rhodan prevented the spread of the conflict by deploying the war potential of the Arkonide super-technology.”

I felt my legs tremble. I probably had turned pale. “Arkonide technology?” I repeated with a tremulous voice. Does that mean Perry Rhodan has established relations with the Arkonides? If so, tell me when, where and how this came about!”

Since he was under the influence of my psycho-beamer his answers had to be absolutely true.

“After landing on the Moon, Perry Rhodan discovered a research cruiser of the Arkonides which had crashed there. He helped them and received their help in return. He averted the war and subsequently founded the New Power.”

The interrogation was irksome for me since the man could answer only such questions as were asked directly. I passed over the next period of time. “What is the state of the Earth now? What form of government do you have and what’s Perry Rhodan’s function today?”

“The Earth is a big beautiful world. The deserts were made to bloom. We’re controlling the weather and all ailments have been eliminated. Perry Rhodan is the First Administrator of the Solar Imperium which came into existence after the Terranian World Government was formed.”

Now I had to reach for a chair and sit down. I was shaken by his revelations. I had spent 69 years in my bathysphere and completely slept through the most momentous epoch of the Earth’s development!

I continued my query for the better part of an hour. Then I had learned enough.

This young daredevil spacepilot had had the guts to challenge the major powers

of Earth! Afterwards he had plunged into space in a series of obviously very bold adventures and captured several powerful battleships and cruisers and proceeded to use them cautiously to take a hand in the history of the inhabited Galaxy.

He even said that Rhodan visited Arkon. My heart stood still at the very thought. Since when was it conceivable that a little barbarian could fly to Arkon and start trouble? I would simply have Rhodan's few measly ships wiped off the map in hyperspace with a single squadron!

"What kind of a reception did Rhodan get on Arkon? Does anybody know?"

"Yes, sir. It's well known that the great empire under the hegemony of the Arkonides is falling apart. Nowadays it is ruled by a robot brain. The Arkonides are lethargic, degenerated and unable to manage their own affairs. They're pleasure bent to the point of insanity."

I suddenly became possessed by my subconscious mind. I leaped to my feet and grabbed the old man by the throat. I shouted in wild anger. How did this old codger dare to talk so abusively about the Arkonides?

He didn't defend himself when I shook him hard. After a few seconds I regained my self-control. "Never say that again! Understand, never!" I warned him.

"Yes, sir," the man answered unemotionally. "Never again."

I refrained from asking further questions and walked slowly to the forward deck where the laboratory was located. There I asked the men to hand over their identification papers which I carefully scrutinized.

All of them were from the USA and citizens of Terrania, leaving no doubt that Rhodan had made the old dream of many world reformers come true.

I let the men step forward one by one and studied them intently. One of them by the name of Phil Holding had a figure like mine. His face also resembled mine despite some definite differences. On my first visit to the civilized world of Terra I had to assume the role of Phil Holding, business manager of a canned food company.

I took him to his cabin and let him show me his clothes. His pants were tight and his jackets had loud colours which Phil described as the latest elegance.

I put his clothes on and looked at myself in the mirror. Well, there was no point in arguing with the style in fashion.

From then on I followed the plan I had conceived. First of all I had to find a good library and become familiar with the Terranian history of the past 69 years. This shouldn't take more than 24 hours with my photographic memory.

During that time the submarine and its crew had to stay out of sight. The First Officer informed me that they had enough food for about 4 weeks on board. Drinking water and air was produced by machines.

Therefore it was possible for me to order the men to remain on the bottom of the sea for a month before they were allowed to emerge. I had no intention of letting them starve to death.

We reached the Portuguese coast unseen. I assembled the crew and the passengers in the big parlour where I instructed them by deploying the psycho-beamer not to move from the anchoring place until their stock of food was exhausted and to forget everything that happened when they emerged.

They obediently returned to their cabins. I checked the automatic equipment of the submarine again and found everything to be in the best of order.

I put Phil Holding's wallet in the pocket of my 'new' suit which, according to him, looked so elegant. There seemed to be plenty of money in the wallet although I was not familiar with the bills which were made of high quality plastic banknotes and imbedded micro-wires with coded magnetic impulses, making counterfeiting money virtually impossible.

The time of manifold currencies was over. On Terra and in the so-called Solar Imperium money was counted exclusively in Solars and a Solar had 100 Soli. The purchasing power of the money seemed to be considerable as Phil Holding explained to me.

I took 2000 Solars and made out a receipt. I wanted to pay it back to Phil Holding later on but first I had to make my arrangements.

Before I donned my underwater protective suit I had the steward cut my hair. My long mane was skilfully trimmed after it had grown for 69 years. Now I wore it semi-long with waves.

I caught myself smiling. The trip to the surface promised to be very interesting. I removed the rations and medical supplies from my backpack; they were no longer needed.

Thus prepared I left the submarine through the fish hatch. I surfaced and waited till it got dark. Then I cautiously floated to the nearby land.

Behind Cape Roca I could see the sparkling lights of Lisbon. I experienced a wonderful feeling of relief from my tortuous nightmare and my sense of adventure was rekindled.

There had been no war—so much the better! I went ashore near a small forest not far from a road with a lot of traffic. I hid my underwater gear in a hollow at the mouth of a stream. My only weapon was the psycho-beamer. I realized I would have to return to my shelter after my excursion to Lisbon in order to make the necessary preparations.

I started walking and soon stopped a car on the road. I didn't know the model; it seemed to draw its energy from a high-capacity charger bank.

I made up a little story for the driver, an elderly Portuguese, and he took me in 15 minutes to the elevated streets of the capital. Here I got my first good look at the accomplishments achieved in the last 7 decades and I was greatly impressed by the progress made in the short span. I thanked the driver for his troubles and got off near a high-rise hotel.

The reception was completely automated and performed by robots. A smoothly functioning machine with a permanently smiling plastic face asked my name and that was all there was to it.

Room #123 had an electronic impulse lock. When the mechanism reacted properly to the touch of my hand, I realized they had registered my frequency without my knowledge.

Fool! my extra-sense conveyed.

I stood thoughtfully in the large, luxuriously furnished room, soberly considering the fact that I had already made my second mistake in the course of a few hours. Evidently my normally unfailing instinct had not yet been fully restored. Perhaps I still suffered from the aftereffects of the extended deep slumber.

I had totally forgotten to destroy the telltale X-rays. They were still lying in the lab of the sub. The trouble it could cause me was still 4 weeks in the future and I would be able to return to the ship to remedy the neglect.

The matter with the registration of my body frequency was more serious. The door lock had been automatically coded with my personal identification, otherwise it would not have opened at the simple touch of my hand.

I decided to take care of this problem a little later. It should be possible to demand at the time of my departure that my individual record be expunged.

I sat down in a comfortable-looking chair. It surpassed my expectations because it perfectly moulded itself to my contours the moment I sank in.

These capable Earth dwellers had come a long way. Actually they had gone much too far!

With a frown I inspected the bathroom. It contained a fully automatic massaging machine. The same machine in my deep-sea sphere was not a whit better.

My desire to visit the public library became more and more urgent. It would have been all wrong to approach all sorts of people with inquiries about the past.

If I had known that an Encyclopaedia Terrania describing the history of mankind in the new era had already been published, I would have left my hotel on the spot. Then I would also have found out about the special volume titled 'Mutant Corps' relating its legendary exploits.

Instead I went to sleep. The tiring events of the day had taken their toll.

4/ UNDERWATER HIDEAWAY

I had expected a little too much from my extra-brain. The history of mankind since the great upheaval was more involved and grandiose than I had imagined.

It began with the inauguration of the New Power in the remote wasteland of the Gobi Desert. I learned about events that gripped me with excitement and made me blush in shame.

Perry Rhodan appeared to be not only a tough and resolute fighter but also a skilful strategist who knew exactly what was good for him and mankind with which he identified himself.

I became very pensive upon learning how Rhodan had ventured deep into the Galaxy with a few captured spaceships, although he was aware how tenuous his rear-guard on Earth really was.

The Encyclopaedia Terrania recorded that the second important phase began after the first 15 years. At that point in time Rhodan had succeeded in making the entire Galaxy believe that Earth had been destroyed by an invading fleet. Moreover the intelligent inhabitants of the Milky Way were led to assume that Rhodan himself had become a victim of the struggle.

Since then Rhodan had been able to build his might without interference. The universe was convinced that mankind was extinct. Under these circumstances Terra had attained formidable power.

In the meantime I had taken up permanent residence in the hotel and acquired a suitable wardrobe. My studies in the State Library of Lisbon had drawn some attention. Although the library functioned without attendants, there were a few other people who had become curious.

In a conversation I made a casual remark that I needed the reference books for an exam and that the material was too extensive to be perused in a few days. Naturally I was primarily interested in the military and socioeconomic structure of the Solar Imperium which consisted of the 9 planets of the Sun.

Mars, Venus and several moons of Jupiter had been settled by colonists. Venus was already an extremely strong colony in the Imperium.

Space travel had been developed to an enormous degree. There existed an impressive commercial fleet and I saw pictures of warships that took my breath away.

Although I fully trusted the detailed account of the *Encyclopaedia* I had some

reservations as to the accuracy of the story about the stellar empire of the Arkonides. I simply refused to believe that a robot brain had usurped all power on Arkon.

When leaving the library on the 4th day, I became aware that my time was running out. The situation had become critical for me. As I reached the roof port of the library to call an airtaxi, I got the first warning. The dull tension in the back of my cranium was a familiar sign!

I blocked my mind subconsciously and cast a monoscreen around my thoughts. Somebody made a cautious attempt to probe the content of my mind telepathically.

My extra-brain was alert. I stepped to the railing of the roofport and looked down on the amazing array of circular elevated streets where all expressways extending throughout the length and breadth of the country converged.

The probing impulse came from the right rear side. I noticed the bafflement in the sensory beam of the unknown person. He discontinued his efforts for a few seconds and then resumed them with greater intensity. However he was only a weak telepath and seemed unable to cope with my mono-screen.

I slowly ambled toward an incoming taxi and observed a man with dark kinky hair who acted as a telepathic spy. I brushed so close as I passed him that he stepped back involuntarily. Then I leisurely boarded the roomy cabin and dropped a coin into the slot of the steering apparatus. "Hotel Escorial," I said, loud and clear.

The robot pilot confirmed my instructions and closed the door. The urban transit vehicle obtained its energy from a wireless power circuit. I listened to the hum of the efficient E-motor and pretended I didn't notice the man tailing me.

He tried a last time to contact me but soon gave up. Then my little machine lifted off with me.

"You were lucky this time!" my extra-brain signalled. "If they'd sent a better man after you, you wouldn't have gotten away so easily."

I realized it would have been unwise to return to my hotel and I therefore said into the mike: "Drop me off in Almada on the other side of the Tejo river."

"Where in Almada, please?"

"At the old fishing port."

The machine veered off to the south. The first advertising signs on the high office buildings lit up below me. One of these illuminated signs was particularly impressive.

It spelled the 3 letters GCC. I knew already that these letters stood for General Cosmic Company, a mammoth organization which, according to the Encyclopaedia, was founded by Perry Rhodan. My admiration for Perry Rhodan grew by leaps and bounds.

When we crossed the wide Tejo bay and the lights of Almada emerged, I had the feeling that time was really getting very short.

They must have been wise to some of my tricks if they used a telepath to shadow me.

Of course it could also have been nothing but a routine police check but I quickly dismissed this possibility. Even an inferior telepath was not a normal man. If they had chosen to pick such a specially equipped investigator, they must have considered my case as unusual.

Now that I had eliminated a customary police control, I had to ask myself how they got on-my track.

The frequency registration in the hotel? Impossible! It could have been useful only if they already had my identification data available. There were no longer borders between the countries of Terra. I had moved about as inconspicuously as millions of other people. Where was the catch?

I kept pondering the question till it suddenly hit me, sending a shiver down my spine: *The submarine!* my extra-sense suggested.

I nodded my head inadvertently. This was the only explanation. When I left those people behind in the submarine on the bottom of the sea I had known as yet nothing of the so-called Mutant Corps. Naturally the submarine was bound to be missed. They had probably instituted a search for it and located it by means of their highly proficient detectors. On the other hand there was also a great deal of underwater traffic in the vicinity and the discovery could have been entirely accidental. However it made no difference to me how they had found it; a discovery is a discovery, no matter how!

This alone was still no cause for concern, since the entire crew and the passengers were put under an enduring hypnotic block by me. But now the name 'Mutant Corps' began to play an essential role in my deliberations.

People with parapsychological capabilities were in a good position to lift my hypnotic block and it was conceivable that the men in the fishing boat had given away their knowledge. The wheels began to mesh.

It became very clear to me how dangerous it would be if the X-rays I had neglected to destroy fell into the wrong hands. In this case my existence and true identity were no longer a secret.

With a deep sigh I leaned back in the soft foam pads of my seat.

I was lucky they didn't know my whereabouts. Otherwise they wouldn't have assigned a young telepath with insufficient experience. They probably followed several possible clues at the same time.

The robot pilot requested another coin before he deposited me in the old fishing harbour of Almada. The change of 32 Soli dropped from the slot of the money machine.

I lifted my mono-screen and concentrated on telepathic impulses but was unable to perceive any at all.

The night was mild and the stars shone clearly. The old harbour gave off a typical scent of seaweed, fish and ropes. It was the same as always although they certainly no longer used tar.

I strolled in a crowd of people in good spirits and looked for a boat. My deep-sea suit was deposited not far from the mouth of the Tejo. I found a small boat whose skipper was busy tying it up for the night. I didn't bother to make the proper inquiries. There was no time left for that.

Nobody noticed the ray of my psycho-beamer. It caught 3 men in its beam and made them do exactly what I requested.

5 minutes later we had left the harbour behind us. We crossed the Tejo River which was very wide at this point and docked the boat where the expressway skirted the shore. I put the fisherman under a hypno-block and alighted.

I walked to the expressway and brought my psychobeamer into play again. A car stopped and the driver, an elderly lady, took me about 10 miles west till I found the little forest again.

With some apprehensions I followed the speeding car with my eyes. Everything looked so simple and yet I couldn't get rid of my uneasy feeling.

I found my deep sea suit as I had left it. I put it on, adjusted the antigrav generator and flew out over the ocean. I stayed close to the surface of the water in order to minimize the danger of detection. Nevertheless I paid close attention to my impulse receiver.

Once I was caught in the rotating beam of a surface ship. I plummeted into the water and remained immersed for 10 minutes. Then I cautiously surfaced again.

I made a wide detour around the anchoring place of the submarine, having a hunch they were already waiting there for me. If their people were smart, they must have anticipated that I worried about my X-rays.

I laughed softly and opened my protective shield to let the fresh sea breeze whip my face. I let my wave-vibrator drive me at 150 miles per hour toward west.

Let them wait in vain for me at the bottom of the sea. It was too bad they had gotten hold of my X-rays but there was nothing I could do about it any more.

As I sped westward I contemplated my next moves. First of all I would have to modify the frequency of my body cells, now that they had a record in the hotel. When I later arrived at my point of destination I couldn't afford to be recognized.

Moreover I had to strengthen my weakened body. This required a training program of 4 weeks in my bathysphere. Rico could devise the necessary program for me. If everything worked out, I could emerge in 2 months in Terra's capital as an experienced scientist with the best credentials. I planned to seek a career as a high-energy expert, which actually was my special branch of science.

I shouted joyously into the rushing wind, feeling exhilarated by the thought of my intended game with Rhodan. He probably knew already who confronted him.

If he really had such a brilliant mind, he would not think of me as a sworn enemy of mankind. In the final analysis this was certainly way off the mark. I actually felt a certain compassion for these little proud and undaunted barbarians who were reaching out for the stars.

After awhile the Azores came into view and I had reached safety. However I

had better watch out that nobody mistook me again for a big fish. They might even be patrolling the zone where the subaquatic fishermen had sighted me first.

I carefully submerged in the water and quickly plunged down at the rate of 20G. I sank down into the narrowest deep sea gorge. Here I knew my way around better than any other living soul.

As I had guessed, the surroundings of San Miguel Island swarmed with submarines. My theory was correct. I sneaked along the bottom clefts until I was contacted by the robot brain in the steel sphere and had myself pulled in through the airlock.

Rico had been vigilant. I immediately shielded my shelter against underwater detection devices and buried the sphere under tons of mud.

From now on I was lost to the world for 4 weeks. Let them try and find me, my eager pursuers from Terrania, the Solar capital!

5/ CHIEF OF SOLAR DEFENCE

7 weeks later I was in San Francisco at the airport waiting for the clipper to Terrania. The big game had begun.

I had needed only 3 weeks to toughen the musculature and stamina of my body and to complete my equipment. That way I had 4 weeks 'til today to make the necessary preparations.

It was quite clear to me that I couldn't show up in Terrania as an ordinary citizen. Of course it would have been possible for me to do so but it wouldn't have done me any good.

I had to figure a way of being in a position to gain access to a small and preferably fully automated super-light-speed spaceship. To this end I had to give the appearance of a scientist or technician with immaculate credentials.

Not even then would it have been advisable for me to fly to Terrania and naively apply for a job in a responsible position. Therefore I was compelled to go through regular channels and submit a written application with all kinds of references and copies of diplomas which I had done a week ago. Yesterday I had received the request to come to an appointment with the Personnel Office in Terrania and to present my original diplomas.

I glanced at my briefcase where I carried all the papers I had acquired in one week.

A citizen of Terrania had to have proof where he was born and of what parents. I had chosen the little town of Greenville in the north American state of Maine as my place of birth and used my psycho-beamer to obtain a birth certificate and have it filed retroactively in the register.

From then on my name was Skörlid Gonardson, the son of Swedish immigrants who had come long ago to Maine, and I had seen to it that they had the proper immigration papers.

The registrar of the small town had no inkling of being duped and was ready to swear at any time that I was born in Greenville at the southern tip of the Moosehead Lake.

My next step led me to the University of Portland where I 'convinced' the old president and 2 deans that I had been their best student. My psycho-beamer enabled me to get an authentic graduation diploma 'summa cum laude'.

My 3rd effort entailed a few more complications since I now had to deal with a

specialized branch of a large space academy.

The California Academy of Space Flight—CASF—had already existed earlier but now was organized along Arkonide lines. Rhodan himself had attended it but this was a long time ago.

I had selected this particular academy because of its unrivalled reputation. Its degree opened doors everywhere. Only the academy in Terrania was supposed to be superior but it accepted only students who had already graduated from other institutions and I was reluctant to use my psychobeamer in the capital for fear of being quickly exposed.

It took me 2 weeks to obtain the ‘genuine’ documents. I had to persuade more than 10 scientists, using extreme caution, before I was given the original diploma with a retroactive date.

On the strength of these records I could show that I had taken 15 semesters of high-energy technology and hyper-dimensional mathematics for which I had been bestowed with a Ph.D.

It had been very difficult to seek out the individual teachers and numerous students but I had no other choice if I wanted to gain their confidence and learn the ins & outs of their special academic environment.

Fortified with these preliminaries I had made arrangements for my employment of 6 years in the field. I picked a wealthy scientist who headed his own research company, employing 5 assistants. He was said to have been one of the scientists who had taken part in his younger years in Rhodan’s missions to Arkon.

I had no trouble brainwashing the 5 assistants of the old gentleman and Prof. Steinemann, expert in 5-dimensional field theory, gave me a very flattering letter of reference after completing 6 years of work for him.

I had mailed notarised copies of these documents to Terrania after I had read in the scientific journal *The Solar System* that there was an opening for the position of a test supervisor in Terrania. I applied for the job and had only yesterday received the reply in my small apartment.

So far everything seemed to work out perfectly. I had deposited my luggage in a locker at the airport and carried only my important original documents and some money in my briefcase. I had realized the sum of 15,820 Solars from the sale of some exquisite rubies from the treasure in my bathysphere. This money was deposited in a San Francisco bank. I had figured out that I could have saved this considerable sum from my salary paid by Prof. Steinemann. In addition I pretended to have made some minor inventions which turned out to be very lucrative.

I was convinced that I had made no serious blunders. The oscillation frequency of my cells had been changed and the instruments in the shelter had given constant results. Thus it was no longer possible to identify me in connection with my sojourn in Lisbon.

I refrained from dying my hair and eyebrows. I was familiar with the human frame of mind. They probably expected me to wear a disguise and for this very

reason I preferred not to alter my appearance.

My white-blond hair was also a characteristic of my alleged Scandinavian ancestry. However I had to do something about the reddish tint of my eyes which could give me away and so I had taken the precaution of consulting an ophthalmologist who attested that I suffered from a slight conjunctivitis. Of course I had to influence him a little with my psycho-beamer.

In the wake of my hectic activities I felt somewhat fatigued again. My subconscious kept penetrating the conscious level of my mind with mild admonishments. Perhaps I could have found a small, super-light-speed ship at one of the other spaceports of Terra. But I had the inescapable feeling that such a ship could only be obtained at the Solar Imperium Spaceport in Terrania. I doubted that these ultra-fast spacecraft which were used for Rhodan's space patrol were available anywhere else.

My thorough inquiries had determined that this latest type of 'Space Jets' was the only suitable craft for my purpose.

A muffled droning roused me from my preoccupation. The *Gobi Clipper* was on the verge of landing. I watched the landing manoeuvre of the European machine. It was a long slender missile with tiny delta wings, 2 stabilizers and 2 variable impulse engines which enabled it to set down vertically.

The craft touched down exactly in the centre of the red circle marked on the ground. It touched the ground so softly that the springy landing legs barely rocked.

The robot voice of the flight supervisor rattled off its stereotyped announcement: "Far East Clipper ZACHO, flight 23-1712 to Terrania, start 20:03. Take your seats. Stop limited to 10 minutes."

Now the time had come. I picked up my briefcase and fingered the sunglasses shading my eyes. Then I walked to the automatic passenger control.

My ticket was routinely accepted. A little jetcopter transferred me and the other passengers to the Clipper waiting in the distance. The hull was about 100 meters long. Heavy-duty robot lifters loaded enormous quantities of cargo into the holds of the ZACHO.

I found my seat in a swivel chair near the juncture of the delta wing. The big ship took off very smoothly. I already knew that these machines were equipped with thrust-neutralizers. The gentle vertical start was followed by an acceleration push of at least 10G. However nothing whatsoever could be noticed of an uncomfortable lurch.

The needle-nosed Clipper soared into open space. The flight to Terrania took only half an hour but the landing manoeuvre required almost as much time as flying the whole distance.

The sight of the megalopolis below took my breath away. So this had happened to the old Gobi Desert! Terrania was reported to already have a population of 14 million and whoever lived and worked here was somehow involved with space travel. The tiny base had blossomed into a gigantic Solar centre. It was big,

beautiful and—mighty!

This thought caused me a great deal of anxiety. Something had to be done about it, I reflected, deeply troubled.

The Clipper touched down and soon a young officer approached me. He carried a service gun and wore an insignia of a comet pierced by an arrow on his left shoulder. “Mr. Skörld Gonardson?” he inquired in a raised voice. I confirmed.

“Happy to see you, sir! I’m here to take you to your residence. My machine is waiting behind the hangar. May I have your ticket?”

I handed him the narrow plastic strip. They seemed to be very well organized here. A thunderous roar made me turn around instinctively. In the distance a spherical giant soared into the sky of Gobi. The sound waves arrived after the starting spacer was already lost in the sky.

My eyes followed the ship wistfully.

“Only a cruiser of the *Terra* class, escorting the regular transport convoy to the Vega system,” the lieutenant smiled. “We don’t take any chances with the unarmed cargoships alone.” He winked an eye and grinned wryly.

I thought of the *Encyclopaedia Terrania*, according to which Rhodan was declared to be dead and the Earth destroyed many decades ago.

Some ‘destruction’ this was! The entire Galaxy had been outsmarted by one man!

“Let’s go!” I said. “It’s so infernally hot here.”

“Wait till June,” he grinned with youthful boisterousness. “Then the fat people can fry in their own lard.”

He studied me so intently that I couldn’t help laughing. As if I had an extra ounce of fat!

“You won’t have to worry about it. You look alright to me!” he said condescendingly. “Cigarette?”

“No, thank you. I don’t smoke. I consider it an abominable habit.”

He grinned in dismay and put the pack away again. “That’s what a lot of people say, sir. Since I want to stay on your good side, I’ll have to control my vice.”

I liked the young officer and his cheerful attitude. “Why do you want to stay on my good side?” I asked.

He puffed out his cheeks and tipped up the shield of his cap with his index finger. “I’ll have to pull guard duty in the test zone at the pleasure of my superior and since you’re going to be the boss of T-18, it would be wise for me not to antagonize you.”

I frowned and picked up my briefcase. This was a real surprise.

He chuckled softly and stared at me. “You didn’t know about your luck, did you? Whenever we summon applicants to our citadel they’re as good as accepted. Otherwise they’d never get as far as Terrania.”

“Is that so?” I replied. “And why is it better not to annoy me?”

He looked shyly around and put his mouth to my ear. “There are rumours

around here that the big oil tank in hangar 18 contains grease from the bones of young lieutenants who were so brash as to make a nuisance of themselves and recently one of my comrades zoomed for 3 hours as an energy spiral between here and the Moon. All he did was to refuse to polish the shoes of the head physicist.”

He nodded ominously until my flabbergasted expression stirred his merriment. I couldn't resist joining in his laughter.

They certainly had a sense of humour, these Terranians! Perhaps it was an essential ingredient of their success. This lieutenant, for example, seemed to be the joy of life personified. Nevertheless he was probably a fierce fighter when the chips were down. People like that stopped being funny in a hurry.

I recalled a man I had once known. He shared his last crust of bread with me but when he found out who I was he wanted to murder me.

Upon asking him, the lieutenant told me that his name was Tombe Gmuna and that he was 21 years old. He had just finished the Academy where he had received hypno-training in galactonautics, high-energy weapon science and galactic languages. I was aware that it would have been almost impossible to cram for such studies and finish at the age of 21 without hypno-training.

It revealed to me that Perry Rhodan had already adopted the improved method of training the young recruits for his elite forces. Another reason to aggravate my apprehensions.

People of my origin usually can notice it no matter how discreetly they're scrutinized in an investigation. Gmuna's ebony-black face radiated sheer exuberance of carefree youth. He laughed often and loud, was pleasant and considerate. But now and then he interspersed our conversation with some circumspect remarks which revived my nervous tension of the last few weeks. I soon realized that he had been handpicked as a very capable officer and that I had been under observation even before I stepped into his little jetcopter.

Now I was sure that Gmuna was no ordinary Space Force officer. If Rhodan could command such efficient men, I had little time to pursue my scheme. Unless I managed to accomplish it in the next 8 days my game was bound to fall through. My instinct told me not to exceed a limit of 6 days. Undoubtedly nobody was admitted to the Space Force port without being thoroughly tested.

My answers seemed to satisfy Gmuna. The minute signs of hidden tension vanished from his behaviour and he was his own jaunty self again. I felt that he considered his task at an end.

We flew out of the passenger airport in the helicopter. After a few minutes I sighted the glinting bubble of the energy dome which I recognized from the picture in the encyclopaedia. This must have been the spot where Rhodan landed his old moon rocket 69 years ago.

We neared a spaceport of tremendous dimensions. Despite our high altitude I was unable to see the far border of the port. There was a multitude of gigantic hangars whose enormous size caused me deep concern.

“Final assembly station for battle cruisers,” my companion explained. “Quite a

view, isn't it?"

I agreed wholeheartedly. It was indeed imposing. We flew around the port, making a wide curve to the east to avoid a giant sphere coming in for a landing. We steered toward a complex of high-rise buildings where apparently the administration offices were housed.

We had left the city of Terrania far behind us. This was the base of the Solar Fleet which was headed by a man whose name was nowadays spoken only in whispers.

It was evident that Rhodan was an excellent psychologist. He had wrapped himself in a cloak of silence and retreated into the background, rarely permitting the Terravision cameras to film him.

For some time he had assumed the role of the invisible man behind the power. Obviously he had no desire to be constantly in the public eye.

The result of his well and carefully chosen behaviour was that he gained the nimbus of a glorious hero whose magnificent feats were spread by tales from mouth to mouth. Nonetheless I was convinced that Rhodan was the driving power in the small circle of his assistants. This man would never take the risk of not keeping the closest watch on the mammoth establishment he had created.

We touched down on the spacious roofport of a hundred-story building, just before a radio alarm directed all aerial vehicles to land at once.

When I stretched my cramped legs after alighting from our little machine, Gmuna pulled me behind the copter already anchored by magnetic cable locks on the roof. "Don't look at it!" the officer shouted.

At first I didn't know what he meant but then the first sound waves reached us.

Far to the south, almost below the horizon, a glowing, fire-spitting spaceship became visible. It swelled like a gigantic balloon and raced toward the sky in a wild spurt.

Light spread out across the former desert which now had been transformed into a modern industrial landscape with a sprinkling of a few green oases.

Breathlessly I gaped at the tail of fire fading away in the distance. It was not the exhaust of the impulse engines but the luminous particles of the superheated atmosphere in the wake of the starting giant.

I was stunned. "A ship of the *Stardust* class?" I asked hesitantly.

"Much bigger than that!" Gmuna enlightened me. "*Imperium* class, 1500 meters diameter. I believe it was the new *Supernova* on a test flight. Please, come with me!"

I followed the young man as if in a stupor, hardly noticing the robot control at the high-speed elevator which took us down. All I could think of were the dimensions of the ship shooting up into space. 1500 meters! I had never seen anything like it and I had to restrain myself from asking if this space-giant had been built here on Earth.

But of course it was! There was no other possibility. I was profoundly shaken

and confused, unwilling to believe my eyes and gullible enough to explain it away as a skilfully induced hallucination. However I kept telling myself with all my logic that Rhodan had more than half a century of peace without interference from the outside world to achieve his miracles.

Not one of the intelligent races of the universe had the slightest inkling of the tremendous might accumulated here.

I analysed my own feelings. There was no hate in me for these little and yet so great Earthlings. But I had become dismayed and intolerant. They had no right to exploit the accidentally acquired knowledge of an alien people. If Rhodan had not stumbled on the Arkonide explorers on the Moon, this planet Earth would at best have been able to develop a primitive mode of intersolar space travel.

I felt deep rancour about my fate which had made me sleep through the most crucial years of mankind's progress.

There was another aspect which aroused my burning curiosity. How old was Perry Rhodan? When he occasionally appeared on the television screens he looked like an athletic man under 40.

Looks are deceiving of course but he must have used a mask. My inquiries at Prof. Steinemann's had gained me the information that Rhodan was born 104 years ago. Even if he had applied the Arkonide methods of rejuvenation, he was already an old, worn out man whom I would give only 10 more years under the best of care.

These cold figures spelled out that Rhodan had every reason for spending his life in retreat. A man 104 years old was no longer vigorous and alert, neither mentally nor physically.

I must have smiled a little. The *Encyclopaedia Terrania* had not mentioned this peculiar problem at all. The mass of the people were silently encouraged in their belief that Rhodan was a miracle of creation. Here and there one could hear whispers of his relative immortality but this was the height of nonsense of course.

I was startled from my thoughts when Tombe Gmuna spoke up. "Do you have your original diplomas with you, sir?"

"How's that? Yes, of course. Are we at the Personnel Office?"

"Not yet. First we have to go through Solar Defence."

He gave me an innocent grin but his dark eyes probed me. I exhibited the slight nervousness that always besets the most law-abiding citizens when they are unexpectedly confronted by the minions of the law.

"Oh no, that too!" I remarked. "Well, let's get it over with! Did it ever occur to you that a big man like me gets hungry one in awhile? The trip was rather tiring."

Gmuna laughed. His professional suspicions seemed to have been allayed again.

I walked through the sliding door. If they were to put me now before an ordinary X-ray machine, the game would be up.

This was the unknown factor in my calculations. Of course I had put my

psycho-beamer in my special luggage which I had left at the Terrania airport. I could hardly afford the risk of carrying such an unusual weapon on my very first visit.

Thus I was completely helpless and I had to trust my hope that the inevitable medical examination would not be performed immediately on my arrival. If they gave me only a day my chances were greatly increased.

Most of my luggage was still in San Francisco but I had deposited the special equipment I had taken along in a locker in Terrania. I had laid my plans carefully but I needed a little good luck as well.

I was prepared to come soon face to face with a mutant. If they had assigned such a specialist to the case, it was most likely to be a telepath. I assumed that Rhodan deployed these special experts for the most important tasks in outer space but I couldn't rule out the possibility that I was subject to such an investigation. At any rate, I was ready for it. My monoscreen passed only what I wanted them to know.

I simply was Skörld Gonardson who had never been near a fishing submarine nor laid eyes on its crew.

A heavysset, broad-shouldered man in the uniform of the Solar Imperium rose from behind his desk. He was a Lieutenant General.

“Kosnow,” he introduced himself. “Please sit down, sir! Cigarette?”

He opened a cigarette case made of Zalos and offered it to me with a friendly smile. I declined without betraying any emotion although I instantly realized that this officer must have been at least once on the planet Zalit in the Arkonide Empire, which was the only place where this metal could be found.

I glanced with curiosity at the fluorescing greenish material. To ignore such a rare and beautiful piece might have aroused suspicion. “No, thank you. I don't smoke,” I replied. “May I ask what kind of material this case is made of? It looks so unusual.”

Lt.-Gen. Kosnow coughed slightly and motioned Lt. Gmuna to leave the room. “Of course! I've yet to see the scientist who wasn't curious about it. But please sit down!”

My extra-sense reported: *Not bad! This was a test. They're looking for you. It was a neat trick. You've got to keep yourself under control.*

I was in the presence of a man who undoubtedly belonged to Rhodan's inner staff. Kosnow was in charge of the Solar Defence.

6/ WARNING OF THE EXTRA-SENSE

I waited until Evelyn Tuniks had inserted the program strip into the computer. I had about 5 minutes left.

Less than an hour ago my deception of Dr. Flynn had been discovered. Of course the Chief Medical Officer of the Defence had no recollection of having been under a hypnoblock during my examination.

I had managed to thwart my X-ray exposure unobtrusively. An assistant physician had been involuntarily induced to have his picture taken in my place and to present the X-rays of his thorax as mine.

Just how this deception had been discovered now after 6 days I didn't find out. All I knew was that Alfons Bonkun had told me that a sudden check had been made.

Bonkun was one of the lab assistants under my influence. He had phoned me on a micro-radio that a telepathic woman was in charge of the investigation. Then the connection was interrupted.

I was busy at work in a control bunker of the Test Department T-18. Evelyn Tuniks did the mathematical programming. 4 hours earlier we were given the task of checking out a fully automatic craft of the Space Jet type.

We had already checked off the list of positronic equipment. It was also my job to insure that the high-energy installations aboard the ship functioned faultlessly.

2 hours later special security measures were put into effect. At first I was afraid that they were already on my track and when I was on the verge of leaving for my well-prepared escape the man who had been the subject of my disquieting premonitions appeared on the scene.

I found myself standing before him in utter confusion. The mere sight of him was enough to stir my deepest emotions. I had the feeling he had looked through me at first glance. If anybody here knew my people, he was the one.

However my fear was only partly responsible for my consternation. There was another feature about him that startled me even more: Perry Rhodan, the First Administrator of the Solar Imperium, was either a doppelganger with the spitting image of the real Rhodan, or it was himself in person.

The man who entered the control room couldn't possibly have been 104 years old. He was an athletic and energetic Earthling with buoyant movements, taut skin and cool grey eyes.

He was as tall as I but his shoulders were a little wider. “Why do you stare at me?” he had asked.

“Because I had to think of when you were born,” I stuttered.

I had seldom heard a man laugh so heartily. He threw his head back and showed his amusement in such an infectious manner that I couldn’t help joining in his good-humoured laughter.

Afterwards it took me about an hour to recover from my embarrassment which—in view of my condition—had been quite a shock to me.

However I had not lost my composure as long as he remained in the control room, scrutinizing the vital components of the craft.

Then Evelyn whispered into my ear that the boss wanted to take off in the Space Jet himself. This meant that we had to redouble all marks on our checklist.

It was an unfortunate coincidence that the Space Defence had detected my fraud with the X-rays at this particular time. Somebody must have become suspicious. Perhaps the 2 physicians I had brought under my influence had somehow given themselves away.

Now Rhodan was on the point of leaving the control room. I stared at him with burning eyes. How could this man be 104 years old? *Impossible!* my mind kept telling me.

Could the real Rhodan have died after all? Had they substituted another figure in his image for political reasons?

The brand new machine gleamed on the observation screen in the control room. It was a marvellous ellipsoid construction with super-light-speed engines and automatic transition. I had endeavoured for 6 days to find such a spacecraft. Now they had put one in front of my nose and moreover given me the opportunity of studying it thoroughly.

If nothing had gone wrong I would unquestionably have tried this night to make my getaway in this Space Jet. Now Rhodan had decided to pilot it himself. The preparations indicated that he intended to leave the Solar system. It was now only a matter of a test run for the engines.

I had 2 minutes left.

“Ready!” Evelyn called out.

I pressed the switch of the remote starter. The impulse engines in the body of the spaceship sprang to life. Evelyn increased the energy-field when I went up to a thrust of 40,000 tons.

Now it was time. Several men became visible on the exterior observation screens. They came into the entrance hall of the testing complex with an apparent desire to look unobtrusive. They were followed by a slender woman with blond hair. I had never seen her before but her tense searching expression and the vigilant way she held her head led me to believe she had extrasensory abilities.

Evelyn was busy with the second programming strip. I quickly got up and walked to the heavy armoured doors of the control bunker. Before opening them I

switched on my deflector generator. It hung on my chest next to the cell activator. It was used for a unique purpose.

The diversion of light-waves rendered me instantly invisible to normal eyes. Detection of its energy field was virtually impossible since it operated at a minimal output level and the numerous machines in the vicinity superimposed their effects on my deflection field.

I squeezed through the door crack, ran through the arched walls of the main corridor and reached the gate to the airshaft with a few leaps.

I forced the simple lock open and pushed the wire lattice up. I slipped in, pulled the lattice down again and remained still under the tangled mass of ventilation pipes. In the distance I heard the roar of an impulse engine craft which I wanted to have at the risk of my life.

Moments later the men in uniform came in with raised energy weapons. The blond woman was with them as well as Lt.-Gen. Kosnow.

When I saw the greatly disturbed Chief Medical Officer in the background I knew that he was responsible for my detection.

“Can you make him out?” I heard Kosnow ask softly.

The young woman shook her head. She wore civilian clothing. Nevertheless I was certain she belonged to Rhodan’s Mutant Corps, which was shrouded in secrecy.

I guarded my mono-screen very carefully. A single impulse would have been enough to betray me and everything would have been over. I couldn’t hope to escape her in spite of my visual deflection field.

They continued on their way, exercising the greatest caution. Two Arkonide fighter robots were posted in front of my lattice gate. This didn’t bother me since my path of escape had already been plotted by me.

A little later I reached the upper end of the shaft by climbing the rungs built into the wall. It opened close to the entrance doors to the underground bunker, not far to the left of the massive concrete cupola of the shelter rising from the ground.

Their helicopters were parked about 30 feet away. It all worked out according to my plan. They were not likely to use cars for these long distances.

I reached behind the suction fan and retrieved the blaster I had carefully concealed at this spot a few days before.

If I was right all hell would break loose in a few minutes when they should have been able to discover that I no longer was inside the concrete shelter.

The small lid below the suction fan slid silently back. I had seen to it that the hinges were well oiled. I crawled out just as quietly. The nearest machine was unoccupied. 4 men stood around the other helicopters. They were obviously left behind to guard them. So far so good. But now my real difficulties began.

I sneaked in through the unlocked door and sat down on the pilot seat. My extra-sense advised me: *You must go back. The Lion’s Den is the safest place for you!*

I put my psycho-beamer to work. The waiting guards turned around and cast dubious glances at me. They laid their dangerous weapons down just at the moment the alarm sirens began to wail in the test centre.

There was no time to lose. I started the engine, went straight up into the air and waited for the opportune moment to let them clearly notice that I was in the machine as my logic insisted.

Calm and deliberate in my actions, I leaned out of the side door and opened fire from a height of 60 feet, mowing down 2 robots who rushed out of the exit.

The thunder of the engine undergoing the test had died down and the new silence was broken again by the sharp crack of my weapon. A white-hot energy-beam struck the 2 unprotected fighting machines and caused them to explode with a loud bang.

With my other hand I switched off my deflection field at the same time as several men of the search detachment ran outside. They saw me at once and instantly sought cover as I proceeded to strafe the area before the test facility and turned the waiting helicopters into flaming torches.

It was enough to let them recognize me. I took a last look around to assure myself that I had hurt none of them and slammed down the lever of the micro-reactor. It had not been my intention to kill anybody since I had the feeling that they didn't consider me an enemy who had to be destroyed at all costs. Why should I have wanted to kill them?

I flew over the 3-kilometre-wide security zone separating the test-complex T-18 from the vast construction berths swarming with the men who built those fast spacecrafts of the Gazelle type.

Before anyone had learned what had taken place on the other side of the security belt I came in for the landing.

My light-blue smock identified me as a Chief Engineer. I brought my machine to a stop between the antigrav lifting platforms of the planet. I jumped out and bellowed at some workers: "Drop everything and block off the area. Somebody tried to blow up T-18! Where's your boss?"

The muscular and highly intelligent men reacted without a moment's delay. I didn't expect them to be hoodwinked by me for very long but it sufficed for my purpose.

"At the switch panel, sir!" one of them shouted, already dashing off to warn the other people.

I waved at him and darted away, disappearing behind the next lifting platform on which a huge catalytic reactor waited to be picked up.

As soon as I was out of sight I activated my deflection field, which made me absolutely invisible.

From now on I had to time my actions accurately. It was imperative that I took no longer than 30 minutes to return the way I had flown in the helicopter. Rhodan's start had been scheduled for 13:30 and I considered it very unlikely he would postpone his trip, as Evelyn had informed me that he had to leave on a very

important special mission.

It was no extraordinary athletic performance to do 3 kilometres in half an hour. However I expected to run into some difficulties and to be compelled to make detours.

I started out on my run, jumped over some obstacles in my way and passed through an excited crowd of people who had just learned from a sweat-soaked security officer that they had been bamboozled by the wanted man.

The officer was none other than Tombe Gmuna. I rushed so closely by him that I almost brushed against him. He never noticed me, though. I didn't think anybody would suspect me of going back on foot to the very place I had fled from in such haste.

This was my last chance and I had to make the best of it as long as it was still possible. I was not the sort of man to bungle it by hesitating.

I stopped for a short moment before the low fence surrounding the cleared strip. At my back the search action was already in full swing, following a burst of frightening activity.

Behind the fence sprawled the concrete safety zone bereft of trees or any other vegetation. In the middle of it stood the barely visible dome of the subterranean test installations. More and more machines landed there and I was able to discern hordes of robot commandos looking like little points. I realized that I could no longer afford to carry my precious weapon on my body, as its energy was liable to be traced by detectors.

With apprehensions I threw it down at the fence and resumed my run. There was no more time to return to the carefully prepared hiding places where I had stowed other parts of my special equipment. All I had left was my visual deflector and my relatively harmless psycho-beamer, which had no effect whatsoever on the telepathic mutants. Even mentally very stable people could counteract its influence.

For all practical purposes I was reduced to acting on my instinct that was urging me not to stake everything on one card.

Now there was a machine in my grasp of the type that suited me perfectly and which was ready for service after I had failed to get any other Space Jet ready to start secretly. I had a long journey ahead of me. In order to get to my destination I needed dependable instruments, food and water. In addition I required a versatile positronic for galactonautic transition computations and a few hours to program the co-ordinates and to feed the tape into the automatic brain.

All these things were within my reach in a superb condition inside the spaceship I had been given to test and I really would be in great shape. I had no doubt that I would succeed in slipping aboard, the one-man spacecraft without being observed.

I had attained the desired goal but one factor had cropped up which was of critical significance. This factor was called Perry Rhodan! An adverse fate had led me to the most dangerous man on Earth at a time when I didn't have the slightest

wish to meet him.

While I was running I caught myself laughing softly. I had actually liked this grey-eyed barbarian whose every gesture exuded poised control. He was one of those characters whom one either loved or hated. He probably was a wonderful friend—if he wanted to be!

My respect for him as an opponent increased, provided of course he was still the same Rhodan who had begun his daring game 69 years ago. Something told me however that this was indeed the case.

But this posed the baffling question of how this man managed to act like a physically young and mentally alert person despite his verifiable age of 104 years. If I hadn't known when he was born, I would have taken him for a man of 37 at the most.

I arrived at the underground shelter after 15 minutes. There I had to wend my way through the numerous robots that had been assembled here. I had surprisingly little trouble since nobody expected me to return.

The entire workforce of Terrania seemed to have been mobilized in the background and the sky above the hangars was darkened by planes. I meandered along the concrete wall until I came to the starting pad for small spaceships. It was located in a ground excavation and equipped with a lifting platform. This was the place where the test pilots took off.

Rhodan stood near the machine in a circle of scientists and officers. The blond woman was no longer there, she probably took part somewhere else in the intensive search mission.

For the time being I could be nowhere safer than close to the illustrious man conversing with his closest aides, among whom was also Lt.-Gen. Kosnow.

I went as close as possible to the machine until I succeeded with a few quick jumps to slip between the telescoped supports of the Space Jet whose elliptical form measured about 20 by 35 meters on the outside.

I stopped below the open bottom hatch and listened if I could hear something. Apparently there were a few men aboard.

Rhodan stood barely 15 feet away from me. His angular face seemed relaxed as if my flight had not caused him to get excited. By contrast, Kosnow was extremely nervous. I heard him talk loud and fast. Rhodan didn't say a word. Occasionally his lips were wreathed in a smile and his eyes turned on his troubled security chief with an expression of affable irony. "Close off the spaceport, Peter!" Rhodan finally said patiently. "He came here to take a ship. Appeal to him over the public radio to get in touch with you."

Rarely had I seen such a flabbergasted man. Kosnow's face was drained of all colour. "Appeal... appeal to *him*, sir?"

"Right!" Why do you want to kill him? Ask him in my name to accept our hospitality and request him to wait for my return. But keep him from taking a ship. That's all you have to do."

"But, sir, I'm of the opinion that..."

Rhodan glanced with a sigh at his watch. He was already clad in his spacesuit. “Please don’t make life difficult for me, Peter! He’s alone and he’s desperate. His activities have been very interesting so far. It’s remarkable how assiduously he’s worked to obtain the diplomas. This must have had a purpose. Plead with him to report to you, then we’ll see where to take it from there. I’ll be back in 3 days. Now, please call your men back from the ship!”

I hastily withdrew from the bottom hatch as 12 uniformed men began to jump out. It made me grin when a young captain reported with utmost assurance that the missing man was not aboard the ship.

Rhodan said some parting words to his aides and I used these few moments to climb up the narrow stepladder, being careful not to make any noise. That was all.

The little airlock stood open. Behind it was the gangway leading up to the control room. Despite its size the ship was constructed very flat like a disk. It was equipped with 4 small swivelling jets for vertical takeoff and landing.

I entered the control room through a heavy armoured hatch. The panoramic observation screens were already in operation. It was like facing a transparent wall. Rhodan disappeared under the flat hull. It was time to hide.

Behind the control room was the passageway to the small cabins for the crew. But there it would be easy to find me and I therefore preferred to conceal myself in a large storage cabinet in the wall where I found 4 brand new spacesuits of the same type Rhodan wore. The backpack contained micro-reactors for the energy supply of the climate and air control. In addition the spacesuits contained a protective field projector for creating an energy shield.

After slipping into the cabinet I took a last look around and closed the door. Rhodan came in a few seconds later.

My pulse was perfectly normal. After groping in the dark I found the energy weapon which I had already seen before. It made me feel more secure. The most legendary man of the Solar system was getting ready for the start in my immediate vicinity. He was probably preparing a visit to a commercial or military base in the Imperium founded by him. Evidently he was one of those men who paid personal attention to everything.

5 minutes later the power station for generating the necessary energy fields started up and a little later I could feel the slight pull of the thrust absorber field. Then he was ready.

The muffled roar of the jets gave me a deep sense of satisfaction. My eidetic memory conjured up visions of times long ago. They were beautiful, happy and filled with delightful promises.

Rhodan himself offered me the chance for which I had waited so long.

Just the same you’ve slept much too long, my extra-sense transmitted.

I grimaced in annoyance. These constant reminders! Now that it all had come to pass so gloriously.

7/ THE MOST DANGEROUS TERRANIAN

The terrible torture was almost unbearable. The ache had started in my head and surged down my spine. Now it had engulfed my entire body.

After the 3rd transition through hyperspace I had collapsed in my cabinet and it was my good luck that Rhodan didn't hear me fall because of the loud noise in the machine.

I suffered beyond words. The pain choked my throat and I had the most irresistible urge to vent it with screams but suppressed it with a desperate effort.

The last thought in my mind, as it was fading out of my control, was that I had vastly underestimated Rhodan. He must have had the stamina of primitive men combined with the fitness of a well-trained athlete.

I had already, after the first rematerialisation, begun to groan softly. 5 minutes later Rhodan went through the 2nd transition and now after the 3rd I had reached the limit of my resistance.

I was no longer used to travelling in space under these grueling conditions. I had managed to put on one of the spacesuits shortly after starting from the Gobi spaceport despite the darkness in the cabinet.

That way I had deemed myself well prepared for all eventualities. It had been my intention to wait for the expected hypertransition and then subdue Rhodan by force of arms and make him submit to my wishes. I could have taken my adversary by surprise right after the takeoff but I wanted to wait a little longer since I figured we were still too close to Terra.

Thus I had missed my best chance. Of course I had not foreseen that the very first transition would exhaust me so much that I would be unable to lift a hand.

Now I was confined in an unseemly hideout, wracked by pains and remorse. In my condition it would have been sheer folly to attack a man who was immune to these effects. I was compelled to wait and I hoped he wouldn't turn the tables on me. If he happened to look into the storage cabinet now, I would have been at his mercy without fail.

So I remained immobile for the time being. My rapidly working cell reactivation would enable me to function fully again after an hour. The only question was whether this cold-eyed barbarian would let me rest the 60 minutes I needed.

To make matters worse, I suffered not only intense physical pain but also

experienced an uncontrollable psychological state of fear.

Rhodan had performed 3 hypertransitions in space. To judge from the painful effects, he must have covered a great distance at each transition. Where in the world had he taken me? Would it still be possible for me to find my way between the stars? What would happen if he emerged in a region which was totally unknown to me?

It required all my willpower to combat the revolt of my instincts. If only I had been spared this terrible headache which my kind of people was not supposed to suffer. When the engine began to hum loudly, I permitted myself to moan in pain. Although it didn't help much, I had at least heard my own voice.

I tried to find relief by hating Rhodan. However I found it impossible to nurture such feelings in me. Something inside me refused to consider this man as evil and cruel. No, I couldn't hate him! All I could do was to curse him for causing me such depressing discomfort.

It's not his fault, you fool! my extra-sense chided me.

I waited and began to count the seconds. I was afraid I would have to undergo the torture of transition again at any moment. After half an hour had elapsed I dared hope that Rhodan had reached his destination and that my ordeal was over. If I was a little lucky, he was now entering another Solar system at the simple velocity of light, or he would have made his next jump much sooner, considering the superb facilities of his craft.

After an hour my headache diminished and 30 minutes later the regeneration of my nerve cells was completed. I could feel the strong pulsation of my activator.

New strength surged through my body. The microset had operated at highest capacity and automatically switched on and off as always.

I dozed off and was awakened 15 minutes later by the droning of a high-energy transformer bank which converted the thermal power of the catalytic reactor into its effective form.

Rhodan had begun to decelerate prior to braking which meant that a landing was imminent.

This thought was fraught with perils for me. I could let him discover me anywhere else except on a world where he doubtlessly had assistance. This would have ruined it all.

I hastily got up on my feet and picked up my weapon. What was I to do next? I frantically weighed all sorts of possibilities in my mind.

A high-pitched whistling noise mixed in with the low droning of the transformer bank, It came from the 4 swivel jets under the rim of the hull and was a sign that Rhodan was positioning the craft in the vertical.

I groped in turmoil for the door lock. *Anything but land!* my brain pounded. *Don't let him land!*

Forgetting all caution I pushed the door wide open—and faced Rhodan 10 feet away in his pilot seat.

Rhodan looked me straight in the eye. The shimmering muzzle of his energy blaster proved to me that he already knew I was here before I broke in with all that commotion.

I froze in my position. How could he have detected me?

Your mono-screen, you fool! You didn't keep it up! my extra-sense enlightened me.

This made me realize that my rival also possessed certain telepathic faculties. He had located me by extrasensory perception the moment I had relaxed my guard.

“Drop your weapon and get back into the cabinet, Arkonide!” These words spoken in utter calm hit me with a shock. Rhodan functioned like a machine. He neither showed surprise nor was he hampered by any sign of intimidation.

Furthermore his reaction had been instantaneous as he realized who the stowaway aboard his ship really was. He simply took it for granted that I was the fugitive from the Gobi Desert. I had never encountered a more dangerous Terranian. Rhodan was a fighter with unparalleled nerve reflexes.

When I made no move to obey his order, he touched a lever. The sudden force of at least 5G threw me to the floor. I hit so hard it almost knocked me out.

I heard his sonorous laugh which made me hate him all of a sudden. This barbarian dared to bring me—an Admiral of the Arkonide Fleet and a scientist of the Great Empire—to my knees with such a ridiculous trick!

I was seized by a stupendous rage. It made me blind and deaf to the realities of the situation and momentarily made me forget my weakness and the excruciating pains in my body.

The surface of a desolate planet came into view on the observation screen. When I was poised for my attack we had already descended within 200 meters above it.

Rhodan had spun around for a split second to watch his controls. By the time he turned back I had already reached him. I saw his suddenly taut face and the amazement in his eyes. He probably had believed he had put me out of action.

If he judged me by the image he might have gained from meeting some of my people, he was certainly badly mistaken in my case. All Arkonides were considered to be weaklings and utterly helpless according to the revelations of the *Encyclopaedia Terrania* but I had far superior powers.

I heaved him out of his pilot seat, grabbed his shoulders and sent him crashing to the floor. Then I seized the leg he kicked up and twisted his ankle.

Rhodan reacted very swiftly by throwing his body in a turn, thereby robbing my grip of its effect. However in doing so he rolled over on his stomach.

I plunged forward and applied my Dagor hold, which would render him unconscious in a few moments unless he had specifically learned how to counteract it.

His hands shot up and tried to clutch my neck. I knew what he tried to do. “It

just won't work, barbarian!" When I started to laugh triumphantly the inevitable result of my rash action befell us.

The spaceship smashed into the ground with a thunderous thump. I caught a glimpse of the observation screen which showed for a split second blazing flames and swirling clouds of sand.

An irresistible force pitched me out of my kneeling position, loosened my grip and hurled me backwards. I slammed into the mounting base of the pilot seat, slid around it and was arrested only when my space helmet crashed into the console full of instruments, breaking them into clattering little pieces.

I had lost sight of Rhodan. The force of the impact must have shoved him into another corner. I realized at once that the craft had made a relatively soft landing. It had come down at a slight angle and performed something resembling a belly landing.

I was benumbed. My raging fury abated as quickly as it had overcome me. I tried desperately to extricate my pinned down legs while I listened to the rumbling noise below.

Just as I freed my shoulders I heard a violent crack, followed by the shrill whistling of escaping air. Luckily the automatic system of my spacesuit was in good order. My helmet snapped shut before the explosive decompression could suck all the air out of my lungs.

Evidently we had landed on a planet without an envelope of air.

Dark dense smoke billowed through the cracks torn in the floor. The main engine was on fire. Terrifying sparks flashed from the transformer bank which discharged the energy it had built up over the nearest available conductor.

The undamaged climate control whistled its alarm. It was high time to abandon the burning ship. I couldn't help wondering how it could possibly hum on this world without air. There was not a whiff of oxygen on the planet.

But then I noticed the steady hissing of the tanks containing liquid oxygen which must have sprung a leak. As they were mounted underneath they were feeding the fire. Besides the heat produced by the lightning discharges was enough to melt most of the little spacecraft.

A figure loomed before me. It was impossible to recognize it in the black smoke but it could only be Rhodan.

I felt his grip as he yanked me out of my precarious position. Suddenly my feet were free.

He disappeared to the top where the emergency exit was located. The warning signal in my spacesuit started to buzz. The suit was able to absorb a temporary rise of temperature up to 30°F but no more.

Nonetheless I still was eager to have my weapon and I found it at the base of the pilot seat. Without the raygun I was afraid to face this man waiting out in the open for me. Next time he would not let me take him by surprise.

The warning signal became shriller. A red-hot spot developed where I had lain

a few seconds ago. I would surely have been asphyxiated or burned to death there.

Staggering, I reached for the rungs of the emergency ladder and pulled myself up. The narrow hatch had no airlock. It was only designed as an emergency exit.

I climbed out and slid down the outside of the inclined hull. I dropped into the sand close to the demolished forward end of the incapacitated spaceship.

After being dazed for a moment I opened my eyes; Rhodan had not yet fired a shot.

I looked up into the sky. It was blue-black and a burning, white-hot sun which looked incredibly big to me at the moment was suspended on the horizon. It looked like the glowing eye of a bloodthirsty killer.

I raised my weapon and looked around.

Rhodan was already far away. He had freed me from my trap but then left it to me to escape to a safe place.

He had been very fair and I admired him for that.

Suddenly I recognized his goal and chuckled.

Farther ahead—perhaps 2 kilometres away—I saw a dome of steel arching out of the desert. It looked like a fortress to me.

I switched on my helmet radio and spoke with deliberate calm into the mike: “Hello, barbarian! I’ve got you right on target. You don’t seriously believe I’ll let you get into that fortress?”

I pulled the trigger. The blinding energy shot was clearly audible, a sign that a residue of a former atmosphere was still present.

An explosion formed a crater 30 feet away from Rhodan and splattered liquefied stones around.

I could hear his startled cry in my receiver, he had also turned on his radio.

“Many thanks, barbarian! Now we’re even. You dragged me loose and I missed you on purpose.”

I chuckled again, for I was still able to laugh.

8/ DUEL IN THE SUN

He had already sought cover and I had meanwhile changed my position too.

Rhodan seemed to be anxious to finish me off with a well-aimed energy blast.

Of course he had realized that the downed spaceship was useless and so he had concentrated his fire on it and destroyed what was left of the wreck, thereby depriving me of an excellent cover.

His action had created an extremely unfavourable position for me to battle out our duel.

I had to make strenuous efforts to evade the exploding debris. It was only commonsense that I endeavoured to keep the wreckage exactly between myself and Rhodan in order to avoid his blistering barrage.

I became aware too late that he had put me in a bad spot and it dawned on me that this cool-headed tactician had correctly anticipated my reaction.

The lump of metal which had once been a magnificent spaceship smouldered on a straight line between us. Since I was still close to the ruins, it obstructed my view of Rhodan as well as the steel dome.

It didn't take me long to find the only possible solution. If I judged my opponent correctly, he had started to rush toward the hemispheric pressure dome as soon as he had finished the job of destroying the ship.

I had already wasted 10 seconds since my frantic retreat from the ship when it hit me what he was up to and I hesitated no longer. Maybe I had miscalculated his intentions. If so, I would be cut down by the withering stream of fire from his impulse-beamer the moment I reared my head.

I took a firm grip on my weapon and got up on my knees to look for a vantagepoint.

I found it among some boulders on a little mound where I could be assured of a good view.

I sprang up and dashed forward. I ran as only a desperate man in mortal danger can.

As I leaped around the molten heap blocking my view, I saw the other man in the distance.

Perry Rhodan had behaved exactly in the manner which had occurred to me a little too late.

Breathing hard, I threw myself down into the sand. As I averted my eyes to glance at the white-hot metal, he had already taken action.

I swallowed a curse and gave in to my instinct that told me to look first of all for a good cover. It meant that I had to run a distance of more than 600 feet and that Rhodan would also gain an equal distance in the same time. He couldn't do more because he was no faster than I.

Although he had come through the transitions in much better shape than myself, this had not much to do with the purely physical condition. The hypertransition shock affected the nervous system. I had seen the strongest men miserably collapse from the shortest space-jumps.

My mind performed this assessment with great acuity while I was on the run and keeping my eyes peeled for the best possible cover. However I gave my main attention to Rhodan who darted across the mostly flat desert like a sprinter.

It was a colossal effort to run that fast with quite a heavy spacesuit but so far we were still fresh and agile. Both of us tried to outguess each other's intentions. What if we really anticipated the actions of the opponent and thwarted all efforts at a feint?

Now my extra-brain sent the impulse: *Drop to the ground, take a deep breath and shoot! He's exposed and vulnerable!*

Of course this would have been one way of tackling him. Rhodan had not once bothered to look around. It was a very risky gamble on his part.

Nonetheless I didn't want to stop and open fire. I knew my limits and was afraid to miss the target as my pulse was beating fast and my hands were too shaky to aim straight.

To pull the trigger was simple enough but scoring a hit was a different story. If I missed my first shot, he was sure to seek cover somewhere behind a pile of sand and I would have been caught out in the open where it was much too hopeless.

Who could tell which one of us would get the better chance? I gave him the benefit of doubt and continued running.

If he was so careless as to give me enough time to reach the boulders on the high ground I had already spied, I would be in a much more advantageous position.

I stepped up my speed and was astonished how far 600 feet could stretch. My lungs wheezed as I stumbled up on the little knoll and fell down between 2 huge boulders.

It was hard for me to understand why my body acted up like this after such a short run in spite of my vigorous exercises. Red spots were dancing before my eyes. It took a few precious seconds before I could see clearly again.

Now I was no longer inclined to miss my target intentionally. Rhodan was now my enemy. If he reached the dome before me, I was lost beyond doubt.

The base was likely to be well equipped. There were probably radio transmitters in the dome which he could use to summon help. Once he was inside

and put an energy screen around it, I was completely at his mercy. If nothing else he could let me die of thirst in this wasteland, barren of all vegetation, since I had only 2 quarts of water in my backpack.

If I succeeded in gaining access to the building before him, the situation was simply reversed. Thus the alternatives were clearly staked out: it was a matter of life and death.

I raised my thermo-beamer, ready to shoot. It was unnecessary to adjust my gunscope. The fast thermo-beam followed a straight path unaffected by gravity or air resistance.

When he came into my crosshairs, I estimated his speed and figured that I needed only a lead of 3 feet.

I braced the barrel of my weapon on the rocks and, allowing for the proper angle, I pulled the trigger.

I heard a muffled roar and felt the repercussion of the gun as the muzzle was briefly jiggled up after the ray shot out.

I missed the running man by a hair and burned a fiery crater in the ground next to him. Rhodan was tossed to the side and fell on his face.

If I had better anticipated his instantaneous reactions, I could have avoided the error I now made. It took me 2 seconds till my blinded eyes zeroed in again on the target.

Precisely after this short interval Rhodan bounced up so suddenly that I was unable to stop my fire impulse. My beam came in low and cut a searing furrow through the sand on the spot where he had lain motionlessly.

I pulled the trigger once more, hoping for better luck, but my target had already vanished. He had found a cover where I was unable to see him in spite of my higher vantagepoint. To make things worse I didn't even know where he was hiding out.

I listened with bated breath. He was about 400 meters away, not much of a distance for my energy gun with its precise telescopic sight.

I switched off the transmitter of my radio and turned the receiver on to full volume. I listened carefully but could hear nothing except normal static. I assumed Rhodan had also cut off his own transmitter and probably was trying to pick up my breathing too.

I smiled a little but I was soon disturbed by a sudden thought: how was it possible that Rhodan had escaped injury from my first shot? It had almost struck him and should have wounded him seriously. Now it came back to my memory that these spacesuits were equipped with the latest field generators and that in the heat of battle I had forgotten to activate it.

I almost lost my temper. My unpardonable blunder made me angry with myself. The energy shield was probably not able to withstand a full hit but could fend off the effect of a grazing shot which normally would be lethal. I quickly remedied my earlier neglect.

The control light on my chest went on, showing that everything worked perfectly. The slight shimmering was hardly noticeable.

When I checked the dial, I became alarmed. How could I have already used up 24 kilowatt-hours in the short time after the landing?

With rising apprehension I searched for a possible defect somewhere in the circuit but stopped at once when I heard a click in my helmet speaker and tried to tune in to the sender. However I couldn't do it by ear. It was very unlikely that Rhodan operated with a highly concentrated directional beam. He probably broadcast in all directions. I meticulously checked the setting of my helmet antenna; it was not attuned to a directional signal.

Now it clicked again and Rhodan's breathing was audible. It sounded much too calm and regular to me.

I could see in the reflection of my faceplate that my lips were drawn in a broad grin. If this jester thought he could drive me out of my mind with such transparent psychological tricks, he was on the wrong track. I had to admit though that the idea of deceiving the opponent about one's physical condition was worth trying.

"Hello, Arkonide, can you hear me?"

It sounded terribly loud and I instantly turned the volume down. Then I began to breathe very smoothly and flicked the switch of the transmitter. "I hear you, barbarian! What do you want? To beg for mercy? I've got you squarely in the sight of my gun. I'm going to give you 2 minutes and then I'll move my finger."

Rhodan's burst of laughter made my lips twitch in anger. He was aware of the fact that I had not yet located his exact position.

"You poor sleepyhead," he replied in a gentle tone. "On my mission to Arkon I've handled a hundred people like you all at once without trouble."

His provocative words threw me into a furious rage. He knew where I was vulnerable. I had to change my mental attitude and assume a posture of disdain so I could laugh off such verbal attacks. This was difficult for me because it was contrary to my character and tradition. However it helped considerably that I realized he was using such abusive language only for a deliberate purpose. He wanted to demoralize me.

This sobering thought restored my ability to respond unhampered by my emotions. Regrettably I had already hesitated too long with my answer.

Rhodan laughed again but I broke in calmly: "Save your breath, barbarian. If I spare your life here it's only to put you before a court of the Arkonide Empire."

This was a bold statement designed to divert him in the desired direction and this it did.

"That's very interesting. Are you a cosmic agent of the Empire?"

I was nothing of the sort but it was none of his business. "What do you think?" I countered warily. "Although we deplore the fact that we've discovered 50 years too late that your presumed death was a deliberate sham, now that we've caught up with you and your puny planet-state which you've the impudence to call

Imperium, we're going to settle accounts with you, barbarian!"

Rhodan laughed uproariously and this time there was sincere relief in his voice. I realized I had made some mistake although I did not yet know what it was.

"Arkonide, nobody in the Empire can possibly know how the years in our calendar on Earth are counted."

"Is that so?" I scoffed.

"You didn't come directly from the 3 planets, you daydreamer. You've read in our books all you know about my imputed death and our progress and it isn't enough to fool me."

He disconcerted me seriously. Of course he had learned from Gen. Kosnow in what form I had first appeared among his people. "Never mind how I've found out about you. All that matters is that I've cornered you."

"Would you be willing to take orders from a robot and live like a slave under his yoke?"

I was deeply upset. It was cruel of him to make such unworthy suggestions.

"Well, would you?"

I gnashed my teeth at the revolting thought.

He heard the sound and relented his verbal attack. "Well then, Arkonide, you've made it perfectly clear. Anyone reacting with such disgust and surprise can't have been in Arkon lately. Your Arkonide Empire has been subjected for many years to the absolute rule of a positronic robot and even your Serene Highness, the Emperor, has to dance to his tune."

"That's a rotten lie!" I shouted in a fit of fury.

"You can't see it, but I just shrugged my shoulders. I can't help you if you won't take my advice. Anyway I know that you're a harmless loner. Would you care to tell me your name?"

"I'm Atlan, Admiral of the Great Empire, technological scientist of the highest order, specialist in high-energy research and cosmic colonization. I'll make your solar system one of our provinces, barbarian!"

He was silent for awhile and I was happy that he knew with whom he dealt.

"You sound mighty proud, august Arkonide!" he replied sardonically. "My beloved spouse used to speak in the same haughty tone. What does the name Thora of the Zoltral clan mean to you?"

"I know the name from our history books," I lied.

"She has married me, an Earthman, and has borne me a son. You must admit that an Arkonide woman of her high rank must have had very good reasons for it."

I bit my lips. This was a development beyond my comprehension and I preferred to remain silent.

"Alright, think it over, Atlan! That's your name, right? Listen to me, Atlan!"

I caught myself smiling sarcastically. Now the solemn moment would come when he asked me to surrender my arms.

"Thora consented to our marriage because the Great Empire is now in abject

distress. Her arrogance had become anachronistic and the distinction between our races obsolete. Please accept my offer to surrender as an honourable prisoner!”

“Prisoner!” I exclaimed, outraged.

“Naturally. You don’t believe I can let you fly to Arkon so that you can inform the first person you meet there what happened on Earth after it was supposed to have been destroyed. No way! Be sensible and come out—hands up!”

I rejected his insulting demand. “I want to be your friend, not your prisoner, barbarian!”

Rhodan laughed softly. “Isn’t it very strange, Atlan, that you can call your friend a barbarian?”

I looked angrily at the spot where he was hiding; he had seen through my bluff. “Be glad I don’t call you monster!” I replied with a growl.

He kept quiet after that. It was a strange duel. Finally he spoke calmly: “If you refuse to surrender, I’ll be forced to destroy you. I would regret it very much but you leave me no other choice.”

“Try it!”

“I will. We only have enough water for a few hours and our micro-reactors will last no more than 72. This planet is far removed from Earth. We call it Hellgate because of its terrible climate. Have you looked at the temperature outside yet?”

My head spun around. Suddenly I realized why my spacesuit consumed so much energy and I noticed the red light of the climate control, showing that it was overloaded. The outside temperature was 265°F. No wonder the 200 meter run had exhausted me so much: my protective suit was working at the limit of its capacity.

Now I also became aware of the pain in my lungs. The air I breathed was much too hot. The inside thermometer showed a temperature of almost 110°F.

My people were not the kind to perspire very much. Nonetheless I felt myself breaking out in sweat. This planet was a veritable furnace. It was much too close to its sun which heated it horrendously.

“Well?” Rhodan asked.

He had unexpectedly handed me a psychological weapon. “Splendid!” I uttered, great satisfaction seemingly in my voice. “A pleasant temperature, barbarian. I’ve always been freezing cold on your icy world. You ought to know that Arkon’s gigantic sun is much hotter than yours and I was born and raised in its warmth. I’ll be fresh as a deyzig (* An Arkonian aquaflower noted for its long lasting freshness even when plucked.) when you drown in your own sweat or die from dehydration.”

He called me stupid and I grinned at my own reflection. “I’ll make you a proposition, barbarian. Surrender to me and you won’t get hurt. If you’ve any sense at all, you...”

“It’s not worth an answer,” he interrupted me. “Very well, Atlan. From now on it’s war between us. I mean business.”

“Suits me, ape man! Don’t waste your water. You’ll have swallowed your 2 quarts soon enough. Do you know it’s 265°F out there? Just right for me. Would you like me to give you a quart of water? Atlan is fair, barbarian. I can spare it.”

Rhodan fell silent. I knew I had touched a vulnerable spot. My arguments were irrefutable. It was true that Arkonides were accustomed to much higher temperatures than Terranians. Fortunately he didn’t know how long I had lived on Earth and that I was long ago organically acclimatized to its temperatures.

My throat felt parched and this only after one hour in the sun. I peered wistfully around the rocks before me. There was shade on the other side but Rhodan could have seen me there.

Fiery rings were dancing before my eyes.

“Okay, I’ll take you on,” I heard his voice once more before switching off. I did the same and a silence filled with despair took over. The barren world of sand and stone called Hellgate looked like an ocean without shores.

I looked up at the sky and wished it were night, when it would be cooler. Finally I moved away from the hot stone and turned off my energy field in order to conserve current. The little thermal transformer was nearly breaking down anyway and the protective screen was useless against the short waves of the sunrays.

Not a sound from over there. Rhodan didn’t dare leave his cover and so we began to be in wait for each other. It was the beginning of pure torture.

9/ DUEL IN THE SUN

Suddenly I had become as dazed as if my lungs had been filled with a dose of chloroform. When I was awakened again by the burning pangs of breathing, hardly 2 minutes had elapsed.

Although my blackout was of short duration, it was a warning sign.

Almost 12 hours had gone by from the time I had heard Rhodan's last words.

Since then he had preferred to maintain silence for the understandable reason that he didn't want to give me any clues as to his physical condition.

Neither had I broken our silence. I had already drunk one quart of water and it required tremendous willpower to let go of the suction tube when the water level that was not to be exceeded had been reached.

All I had been able to think of during the last 3 hours was fluids. My mind conjured up all possible delicacies in liquid form but ordinary water played the favourite role.

My body had already perspired for 6 hours. Then the first stage of desiccation set in, making me feel that my body had been drained of all fluids.

Now when I took a few sips, it caused no further perspiration.

I tried to master my all-consuming desire for water, in order to contemplate my dismal situation.

I was exposed to the merciless heat of the glaring sun. The temperature remained constant at 265°F. The sand of the desert was even hotter.

Therefore I had begun to turn my body around at regular intervals of 3 minutes in order to dissipate some of the heat absorbed by the warmer ground.

I rolled over from my stomach to my side and then on my back. The intermittent movements required a great deal of effort and my strength diminished with each turn.

The 12 hours were drawn out into an eternity and I had come to the point where countless Arkonides and Earthlings had arrived before me: it was that moment when the self-preservation instinct comes to the fore and takes over. Logic and a clear mind are pushed aside and a short-circuit occurs in the decisions of the brain. In those seconds of panic, the urge to escape and the frenzied rise of physical reserve energy have turned ordinary people into heroes and cowards into death-defying warriors.

I knew I couldn't hold out much longer in my precarious position. My climate

control, which had to absorb not only the humidity of my body but compensate also for the sun's radiation striking me, began to sputter intermittently.

The cooling equipment for the oxygen supply and the air regenerator couldn't keep up. The maximum capacity of my spacesuit was around 270°F, give or take 5 degrees. This was the absolute limit of my protection.

My micro-reactor's output amounted to 50 kilowatts per hour. This was abundant under normal conditions. Now the device was overloaded. The reflection field of the climate control alone required 45 kilowatts to keep operating.

The air regenerator consumed 2000 watts and the cooling system gobbled up another 3000 watts every hour. This added up to a consumption of current which the small transformer bank could furnish for only a restricted time.

To activate the energy shield for defence against material objects and high-energy ionized beams from rayguns was out of the question. It would have used 50kw for even a medium voltage current and depleted all resources by itself.

A crazy idea popped into my head. If I had a suitable conductor I could tap the micro-impulse converter of my thermo-weapon but I didn't find even a piece of wire in my pockets.

My throat refused to accept the food concentrates of which I had a plentiful supply but I felt no hunger.

I was plagued by the torture of inhaling hot air. The inside temperature had risen to 125°F and the mixture of oxygen and helium I was breathing was almost as hot.

There was enough air for 72 hours but it was questionable that I could survive that long.

Now I had suffered my first fainting spell. I forced myself to concentrate my attention on Rhodan and looked at the place where he was dug into the sand.

I saw the glazed spot left by the last shot of my blaster. According to my best estimate Rhodan could be no more than 100 feet away from this spot. It would have been impossible for him to get farther away than that in the short time. Consequently I had to keep constant watch over a circular area 200 feet in diameter to prevent my antagonist from breaking out. I had searched the immediate neighbourhood with the telescopic sight of my weapon. There were hardly any depressions in the ground Rhodan could have used to crawl away.

I had mulled over a plan to strafe and saturate the fairly small area with my fire. Undoubtedly I could sooner or later have hit my opponent, who must have been lying in some crevice.

After considering the pro's and cons of the plan I came to a negative result. Unless I happened to hit Rhodan at the outset with a lucky shot, my first blast would give my exact position away and he could pinpoint me with his fire.

Therefore I discarded the idea and decided to wait until the barbarian lost his patience.

Due to the slanted crater produced by my beam, it would be easy enough for Rhodan to determine that I was up on a little knoll. He also could see the approximate direction, judging by the lengthwise shape of the impact, but he was unable to measure the precise angle because he was about 100 feet farther away.

If there had been only one knoll in that direction, Rhodan wouldn't have had much of a problem. As it was, there were 3 mounds on which I could be hidden.

As a consequence Rhodan was also reluctant to shoot first since he knew that I only waited to discover his position.

Thus we had come to a stalemate and waited for each other to make a mistake. Neither one of us was able to move from his place. In order to reach the next cover I would have to cross flat and unobstructed terrain.

A low sun-scorched mountain range stretched out in the background about one kilometre away where there must have been not only numerous nooks and crannies for shooting but also shade.

I smacked my bone-dry lips as I visualized in my mind deep dark caves which were a nice cool 200°F at the most.

I became exultant, thinking about a temperature which I would normally have considered to be lamentable. Now a temperature of 'only' 200 meant sheer delight for me. My climate control would have obtained a respite and the reactor would have benefited also.

Fiery veils danced again before my eyes. Suddenly I saw Rhodan leap up and race away, kicking up fountains of sand with his boots and mocking me with shrill laughter.

I restrained myself at the last moment. The barrel of my weapon already extruded through the slit between the rocks when I realized the vision was a hallucination.

The ghostly figure dissolved. There was nothing but desert. A desolate expanse of glaring sand with myriads of reflecting crystals.

I wanted to scream a curse but my throat produced only an inarticulate rasping sound. Again I fought my agonizing desire for water. I still had a quart left.

I hunched my body and beat my fists against my pressure helmet. Only the thought that Rhodan suffered even more kept me going but I knew that something had to break very soon.

Suddenly I received an impulse from my extra-brain that alarmed me. *Remember he's a telepath! Don't forget your mono-screen!*

All my hallucinations ceased. I could see my pale face in the reflection of my helmet's visor. Under no circumstances could I let my thought defences expire, regardless of how my physical condition worsened.

If Rhodan sent out his feelers for me and penetrated my mono-screen, he would spot my position and I wouldn't have a ghost of a chance to fight back.

I mumbled a hoarse curse.

Prodded by the sound of my voice, I suddenly thought of the solution to my

problem. I snapped wide-awake and my senses sharpened.

I devised a ploy—a psycho-plan—aimed at the craving for water of the deprived creature. I conceived an appeal to the most primitive nature in man, where nothing could be mentioned that aroused the suspicion of the still active mind.

I had only to play on the instincts already coming to the surface. Feelings and subliminal desires could never be driven to excess by logical and concise words. It was imperative that I exclusively used concepts which tantalized the thirst of the parched body.

Abruptly I was able to think clearly again. The renewed hope overcame my lethargy. My plan took shape and when it was ready to be applied it would cause Rhodan to betray his position. I had studied cosmo-psychology and knew the behaviour of most people. How I accomplished it was immaterial if it did the trick.

Very slowly, and resisting my rapacious thirst, I began to sip my water. I gargled with every sip till the liquid was soaked up by the dry lining of my mouth. I didn't want to swallow it; I wanted to make my vocal chords supple again.

After each mouthful I enunciated a few words and it was getting better the more I wetted my throat.

I took the chance of wasting my last water but it was a calculated risk.

After I had absorbed almost a pint of water my voice sounded normal again. I began to vocalize a simple little song at a normal sound level until I was sure I could exactly reproduce even the higher notes. Then I took another sip of water, really swallowing it this time.

Meanwhile I had made up some silly lyrics which would serve my purpose. They elaborated with a play on words on the concept of water and drinking. Words to that effect had to be repeated as often as possible in the text. That was all.

I tried my voice again before I switched on my helmet transmitter. It used only 5 watts, which I could still afford. "Hey, barbarian, how you doing?" I called into the mike with a fresh and jubilant tone, attempting to drive Rhodan to the brink of insanity. He probably was unable to utter a clear sound and refused to answer with a rattle in his throat. But he heard me and this was all I cared about.

I burst out in laughter till my voice cracked. "Hey, barbarian! Tears of laughter are rolling down my cheeks and I'm getting all wet. For goodness' sake! It's all your fault. Why do you make me laugh so hard?"

I paused and listened. The word 'wet' had been dropped by me for the first time. I had to proceed cautiously in order to lull his vigilance first. He probably already suffered desperately from lack of water. Earthlings couldn't go as long without water as Arkonides. If my assumption were correct, he had only a few drops left by rationing his supply with the greatest self-discipline. He was unlikely to have swallowed it all at once. I didn't think that Perry Rhodan was the man to

do such an irrational thing.

“Hey, barbarian! Why don’t you answer me?” I called in a booming voice. “Would you like me to give you a little water from my tank? I’ve hardly taken a few sips. Hey, Rhodan, what’s the matter with you? Can’t you answer me? It wouldn’t be the first time. I’ve seen Earthlings die of thirst. Are you all right? Or are you ready to give up? I’ll keep my promise, I won’t shoot at you. Why don’t you answer me?”

I laughed again because I knew he was incapable of replying even if he wished to rebut me. His voice had already given out.

Now I went into the major phase of my harangue which ought to prove disastrous to him. He probably was still thinking about my remark about my ‘wet’ tears. “Hello, barbarian! I’m going to sing a nice little song for you. You’ll know the tune. How about it, barbarian? Listen to the words composed by me, your good friend Atlan, whom you’re trying to ignore so shamefully!”

I listened for a moment before I started to sing:

“The *water* is *wet*,
the *water* is *cool*.
It *tastes* so *delicious*,
it makes me *drool*.
In the *water* I *float*,
so *wet* and so *cool*.
It *soothes* my *throat*
as I *splash* in my *pool*.”

It was a psycho-verse, daffy and nonsensical, but it had the shattering effect of an explosion of feelings.

I repeated the chant again and again: “The *water* is *wet*, the *water* is *cool*!”

I was certain he was listening. He would be much too fascinated by his wishful dreams and hallucinations to shut off his receiver.

I kept pouring it on with the same monotonous text till my throat became dry again.

When I received no response and finally came to the conclusion that my scheme had failed, it suddenly happened. An awful croaking noise came out of my loudspeaker as if Rhodan wanted to scream and bellow with a faltering voice.

A white-hot flash burst about 400 meters away and the searing beam of the energy shot smacked into a mound 100 feet away from me, making a bubbling crater.

Now I had him where I wanted him. His nerves had snapped and he had tried to gun me down.

The point of origin was precisely in my sight. When he fired off his second

shot, I returned his fire. The weapon recoiled in my hand. A glowing stream of atomic energy, produced by catalysis from a few highly unstable atoms in a controlled nuclear fusion, zipped out of the rectifier and reducer field in the barrel of my blaster.

It struck with devastating impact. Rhodan's fire ceased instantly. He stopped after 2 shots. I poured a rain of fire on his position and broke off only when the automatic warning signal peremptorily demanded a pause after the 20th shot. My gun was overheated.

Clumsily I shuffled away. The dome with its alluring treasures was 1½ kilometres away from me and the hills on which the fortress was built began to rise within one kilometre.

I trudged through the burning sand. All feelings seemed to have died in me. Rhodan had rescued me from the flaming spaceship. If he had chosen not to, he would have saved himself all kinds of trouble and escaped this tragic fate.

I could hear myself groaning. I drank the last bit of water, being very sure that I could easily make the short distance to the dome.

It took almost an hour to reach the foothills. When I finally entered the shade of the 50-meter-high cliffs, I tumbled helplessly to the ground.

I simply had to take a rest. I lay flat and still, arms and legs spread-eagled as I had flopped down, dropping my weapon which I no longer needed.

When I wearily turned my head after a few minutes, I beheld a ghost tottering through the desert.

The chimera only amused me until the 'ghost' fell on his knees and his body began to sway. One arm moved up and something glinted in the sunlight.

As I kept staring at the gleaming object as though paralysed, it emitted a flaming blast which slammed into the rock 30 feet over my head. The ghost was able to shoot! He staggered to his feet—incessantly spitting fire—until he reached a jutting rock and disappeared behind it.

I was fit to be tied. What an idiot I had been! Why hadn't I first rushed to his demolished hideout to make sure I had finished him off? Now it was starting all over again!

Undoubtedly he had seen me all the time and refrained from shooting at me. But why? Not because he was softhearted or because my psycho-shock had pushed him over the brink.

None of that, to be sure, for he was simply no longer able to lift a finger. In his state of total exhaustion even a tiny match would feel like it weighed a ton.

Only now that I had turned my face toward him had he begun to attack me with his fire in a last act of desperation although he couldn't even come close.

It defied my comprehension how the lucky devil got away with his life. I admired him—I just couldn't help admiring him.

Seconds later I had pulled back into the cliffs after grabbing my weapon. The heat became unbearable and my water was gone. The safety of the bulwark was

400 meters away and could only be reached over a gradually rising road which had been blasted out of the rocks.

10/ COOPERATION OR DEATH

We were deadlocked for the next 8 hours. Both of us used every conceivable ruse to put each other out of action. Neither one of us wanted to let the other gain access to the fortress because we knew that this would decide the contest.

Alternately, we had insulted and threatened each other and clamoured for surrender of the enemy, but neither of us had buckled under.

We were like fire and water. When he shot a salvo, he did it with trembling hands and failing eyes. He never found the mark. When I caught him in my gunsight as he moved about, I loosed a whole barrage but proved to be no better at hitting him.

The crosshairs of my sight seemed to have taken on a life of their own. Whenever I held Rhodan in the intersection of the hairs, the sight suddenly turned into whirling circles of fire.

The temperature inside my suit had risen to 140°F. My hope of finding a little cooler cave in the hills had been frustrated by Rhodan. He knew no mercy. He probably identified himself again with his beloved mankind whose fate would be doomed if he allowed me to enter the dome.

This conviction seemed to imbue him with superhuman powers. He had become a martyr for his cause. Whenever he thought he had found a way to reach the base, he showered me with a hail of energy shots.

This barbarian was truly indefatigable. He probably was already half delirious and he must have run out of water long ago on his march through the desert.

I had stopped trying to figure out how he managed to survive. Rhodan and I had hit bottom. We were both reduced to physical and mental wrecks.

If we waited another hour, neither one of us would be able to make it to the fortress. I was so utterly worn out by the oppressive heat that my hopes of being able to crawl to the bulwark under my own power were dashed.

I lost consciousness again for a few minutes. When I came to my eyesight had almost completely deteriorated.

I groped for my weapon but was unable to find it. It didn't really matter since it was too heavy for me to lift.

My mind ceased to function. I merely sensed the nearly imperceptible impulse from the 'voice' of my extra-brain. *Give up! He's ready to quit too. Crawl to the dome!*

It took several minutes before I could pull myself together. I greedily sucked in vain again at the tube of the water tank. There was not a single drop left.

My arms and legs had become numb appendages of my body. I didn't know what nerve impulse made my limbs move forward inch by inch.

When I finally had gained 3 feet, the entrance to the dome was still 20 feet away. In the course of the last 8 hours I had been able to work my way steadily closer due to the more favourable opportunities for taking cover but now I was incapable of going on.

I wanted to give vent to my despair by screaming but my throat made only a feeble, gurgling sound.

The climate control was about to break completely down. Every so often it quit working. The air I breathed seemed to consist of glowing hot needles and the metallic parts of the arm & knee joints of my protective suit were broiling hot. They were inadequately cooled and seared my skin.

Unable to cry out and tortured by despondency, I was barely sustained by a slim margin of hope that I could still somehow reach the automatic door-opening mechanism.

Not far from me I noticed another prone figure, creeping inch by inch over the scorching rocks; the head was eagerly thrust forward.

Perry Rhodan had also thrown away his weapon.

We crawled side by side toward the bright-red door of the airlock.

Each yard took about 10 grueling minutes. I no longer felt the urge to stand up to my rival nor did he to me. We heard ourselves breathing laboriously over the radio and we realized that we both had tried to delude the other.

I was unable to perceive anything very clearly with the exception of the bright-red door, entralling my gaze. It radiated a magic power of attraction.

The presence of the Terranian was more surmised by me than consciously seen. After an hour of unspeakable torment Rhodan reached the portal before me, leaving me 2 feet behind.

I had lost the struggle and I lay still, prepared to wait for my death. All my efforts had come to naught. It took many minutes before I understood the inarticulate stammering in my loudspeaker.

Rhodan lay exhausted in front of the door. He lacked the strength to pull down the yellow lever and he was calling me, his bitter enemy! If he could only know that I never was an enemy of his! I had always acted in pure self-defence because I too loved my people.

His call rallied my last ounce of strength. It took me 10 minutes to inch my way next to him. When I finally was at his side, I forced myself to raise my hand. The lesser gravity of the planet Hellgate seemed to have grown a hundredfold.

I didn't know by what miraculous effort I succeeded in lifting my hand. It came to rest on top of Rhodan's fingers and we pulled together.

We antagonists had come face to face but now we had the common goal of shifting the life-saving lever.

After a few seconds which seemed like eternities, and not only to me, we finally succeeded.

A bell began to shrill and a door slid back, opening the way to the airlock.

We needed 10 more minutes to cross the threshold to the narrow room. After we managed together to operate the closing mechanism, I was ready to faint again. I felt as if I had been caught in a centrifuge. Nausea choked my throat and restricted my ability to swallow.

I heard the hissing sound of cool fresh air rushing into the airlock. When the sound stopped and the second door automatically rolled back, I had just enough strength left to touch the switch on my chest.

My helmet snapped back and a delicious stream of air caressed my withered face. My first breath of fresh air felt as if I had sucked in an icicle and it promptly caused me to faint into oblivion.

11/ CAPTIVE OF THE PEACELORD

A splashing sound abruptly woke me up again. When I opened my eyes, I saw the metallic feet of a robot. I painfully rolled my body around.

My eyes became clearer and the last shadows vanished. The robot held a pitcher of water in his hands and poured it over the head of a man.

Rhodan's face was disfigured by burns and scars but he grinned in a broad smile with such obvious relief as I had never seen before in Arkonide or man.

However this was rather unimportant at the moment, since all my aspirations were confined to the water the robot so lavishly doused on Rhodan's face.

I mumbled something I couldn't even understand myself. My hearing was intact again; otherwise I couldn't have understood Rhodan's words. "You gave me a tough nut to crack, brother," he said haltingly. "Open your mouth and the robot will give you some water. I beat you by 10 seconds, Arkonide."

When the first drops touched my lips, I believed I was drinking something infinitely more delicious than mere water.

Rhodan was quiet. He silently watched me as I revived my spirit of life. My body soaked it up like a dried out sponge.

Now and then the robot withdrew the pitcher from me to keep me from gulping it down too hastily. Nevertheless I could feel my alertness quickly return and I regained my ability to speak.

Rhodan laughed softly. It sounded as if he were lost in thought and far away. "Incredible," he said, speaking to himself; "this fellow almost killed an immortal!"

I was so stunned that I splattered a mouthful of the precious water. Suddenly I knew why this man looked so amazingly young and vigorous. Immortal! So the rumours about the fabulous cell shower which preserved his youth turned out to be true after all.

My mouth opened with a hoarse laugh. It was downright tragicomic.

Rhodan didn't know what it was that induced my strange amusement and I wasn't going to tell him, although the laughter still tickled my throat.

"I'll find everything out in due time," he mused aloud. His eyes bore a quizzical look and I was careful to shield my thoughts completely. Let him rack his brains!

I winked at him and looked at the raygun he had levelled straight at me. It

brought home to me that I could not afford to act foolishly. Apparently he had regained consciousness a few seconds before me.

I felt bewildered and confused. The events seemed now like a horrid nightmare. “How much time did we spend out there?” I asked in a rasping voice. My throat still was irritated.

“About 20 hours, thanks to your intransigence,” he complained. “Anyway I’ve got you in my power at last.”

“It was sheer luck,” I rebuffed him against my better knowledge. It was due to his enormous stamina, not mere luck.

He looked right through me and his grey eyes smiled ironically. “Your psycho-trick wasn’t bad at all, Atlan. Your absurd verse about the wet water almost robbed me of my good senses. Where did you get the idea?”

I shrugged my shoulders, already feeling much better. I slowly sat up and leaned my back against the metal wall. Rhodan squatted on the floor.

The interior of the cupola was only partially visible to me but it seemed to be a very well equipped base indeed.

“Where did you get the idea?” he reiterated his question.

“It just occurred to me; how else could I have made you shoot at me?”

I stared at him with newly awakened curiosity. The muzzle of his weapon tilted up ever so slightly. “Take it easy!” he warned.

I motioned with my hand. “I’m no fool. Besides, your robot is watching me, too. One question, barbarian: how did you escape injury from my fire?”

He smiled so gleefully that I felt the warmest feeling of affection rise in me, although I was loath to let him notice it.

“Your first shot missed me by at least 3 feet. Of course you were blinded by your own beam and so I immediately jumped up and ran for cover in another spot I had already picked out. It was a small hollow under massive stones.”

How simple he made it sound but it surely couldn’t have been as easy as that. He must have leaped like a beast of prey. “And then you began to follow me?”

He simply nodded. “You never even looked around. I could have shot you in the back.”

“Oh no you couldn’t,” I laughed. “You were glad you were still able to walk.”

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders and I thought that everything had been said between us. However he abruptly asked with pointed coolness: “And now I’d like to know how you got on Earth and what you want there?”

“Make a guess!” I challenged him.

“I’m not in the mood to indulge in guessing games. My radio call has already been transmitted to Earth. Here we’re on an unpopulated planet 12,000 light-years from Earth.”

“I wish I had known that,” I said with resignation. “In that case I couldn’t have let you land first and then have taken action against you.”

“Tough luck, Arkonide! One of my spacefleet cruisers will land here in 3 hours

and in the meantime I want to find out what your intentions are. I can't allow any aliens to intrude in my Imperium."

"In your *so-called* Imperium," I corrected him. "You aren't that big by a long shot! As to what I want, all I want is to go home."

"I know. I was able to figure that out for myself. Obviously you've been away from Arkon a long time. You still don't believe your worlds are ruled by a robot brain, do you? When did you arrive on Earth?"

"Some time ago," I replied evasively. I was reluctant to tell him anything about my retreat in the Atlantic depths. He was very suspicious. On the other hand I was not anxious to be subjected to a parapsychological interrogation.

We continued our verbal swordplay till we heard the muffled roar of a rocket landing. It was the promised cruiser and its commander soon appeared in the dome, accompanied by 5 heavily armed men.

The commander didn't mince matters: he pulled out a pair of old-fashioned handcuffs from his pocket and snapped them around my wrists. "You don't mind, do you?" he said sarcastically.

"A temporary inconvenience," I replied.

Rhodan addressed me hesitantly. "I sense there's something... wrong... about you. You've a secret you don't want to reveal. I'll be back in a few days and then we'll have a serious talk. Right now I'm short of time. Think it over and let me know if you're ready to tell me the facts."

The soldiers brought me a spacesuit of the type with which I had become so familiar. I grimaced painfully. "Is this the best you can do? Don't you have an armoured pressure suit of something similar?"

"Sartorial style isn't our long suit," the commander replied gruffly.

Rhodan chuckled. He seemed to know his people well. At this moment I decided to give him a small clue concerning myself. I raised my hands and pointed my eyes at the encircling metallic 'bracelets'. With weighted words I said, "These primitive gadgets are not go much different from the ancient style. The metal bands were only slightly wider in the days of the religious wars between Wallenstein and Gustav Adolf."

My intimate knowledge of obscure ancient European history obviously perplexed Rhodan. Did he suspect that I knew it from firsthand and not out of a book?

In the 19th century one would have said the immortal yet very vulnerable man had suddenly 'lost his composure.'

In the 70s of the 20th century, he would have been said to have 'lost his cool.'

In the 21st century the current description for his flustered condition was: 'He flaked his snow.'

But, as Thora has observed of her husband: Perry is not the type to flake his snow for long. Anyone acquainted with him knows he'll have his cool back in his thermo-flask before you can count to 3 in Intercosmo.

Jen, jev, jek!

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