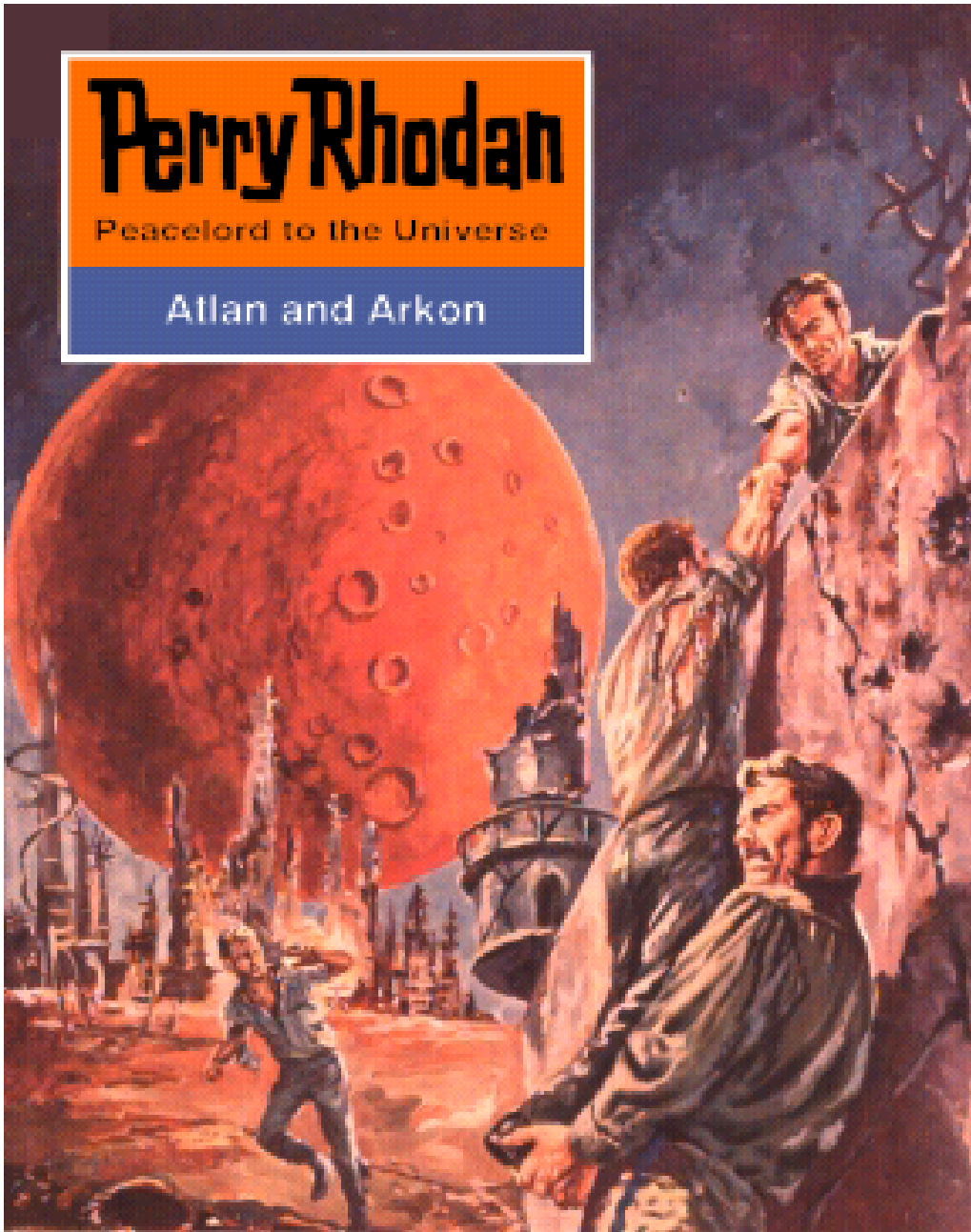


Perry Rhodan

Peacelord to the Universe

Atlan and Arkon



53

UNKNOWN SECTOR: MILKY WAY

by Kurt Mahr



This is the stirring story of—
**UNKNOWN SECTOR:
MILKY WAY**



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Ofaran—Dead husband of Ivsera

Killarog—Young councilman

Irvin, Havan & Ther—Other male inhabitants of the Fenomat bunker

The Sallonians

Malanal—Genius scientist

Garok—Leader of the subterranean attack on Fenomat Feriar & Belal-Political figures

Tolpatch—A soldier

Ifers & Holran—Other males of the Sallon bunker

And Commander Harrings—Of the Earthship *Drusus*

The PERRY RHODAN series and characters were
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UNKNOWN SECTOR: MILKY WAY

by Kurt Mahr

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1/ ISAN REBORN

SUFFOCATING AIR. The foul atmosphere almost took Ivsera's breath away as she opened the door and entered the corridor. She looked in all directions and was happy to discover she was alone.

Swiftly she traversed the 50 yards to the elevator and summoned the lift cage. She entered it and pressed a control button for the lowest level. The cage set itself in motion slowly and complainingly, which was a sign that the compressed air valves were no longer functioning properly.

Nothing worked right any more, she thought. The ventilating system didn't work, democracy didn't work; there was nothing to eat or drink.

If I could just have a new dress, she mused. A pair of trousers, a coat! But there were no new dresses, trousers, coats—no new clothing any more. Nothing but the poor tattered remnants the people were wearing to cover their nakedness.

She looked pensively along the row of sparkling, gleaming instrument panels, expensive equipment that for days now had stood inactive and silent, no longer producing articles of clothing. At least they had been able, before, to convert the organic fibres into synthetic food. But the meagre provisions of Bunker Fenomat would be depleted by tomorrow or the next day.

Ivsera turned round. Behind her Irvin was leaning indolently against a table, a grave expression on his face. "Are you depressed?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. It doesn't make any difference to me."

"But you have to inform Havan, don't you?"

She looked at the young man in some surprise. "Havan? He already knows. For 10 days."

Irvin left the table and approached her a few steps. He wore a short pair of trousers reaching only halfway down his thighs. This was all the clothing permitted any man in Bunker Fenomat.

"He won't remember." Irvin sounded certain.

"But..."

Irvin raised his hand with an air of finality. "No buts! I don't think I have to tell you what kind of man Havan is."

Ivsera lowered her gaze. "Won't you go tell him for me?" —quietly.

Negative shake of head. "No, I'd better not. He'd yell at me and make it

painfully clear that the Chief Chemist herself must report to him.”

Ivsera sighed. “You’re right, Irvin.” She raised her head to face the young man, forcing a faint smile. “Maybe it’s best I take care of it right now.”

“I wish you luck.”

* * * *

If only we could go above! Ivsera thought. Up where no one had lived for 8 years. Outside where the storm clouds of radioactive dust blew, where every single raindrop was so poisonous that it could kill 10 men. Out there in the aftermath of the most terrible war of all time, where the miles-wide glassy fusion of rocks marked the ground-zero point of the Bomb.

Ivsera tried to mentally calculate how many humans had survived the war. In the underground fortification of Fenomat, usually referred to as the Fenomat Bunker, 6000 people had found refuge but in the course of 8 years this number had increased to 10,000. Fenomat was the capital of the land, which was why it also had a suburb containing a 2nd bunker, named Sallon, with the same capacity as Fenomat.

In the whole country there were 5 such underground bunkers. If one were to consider that the enemy on the other continent had an equal number of shelters, then it would appear that about 100,000 humans had survived the Great War of Isan.

100,000 out of 3 billion!

The cage stopped. Ivsera opened the door.

Outside was a passageway similar to the one she had come from. The young woman turned to her left and passed a few doors which bore name-plates on them, stopping in front of the next to the last one. “Havan?” she called out.

She spoke the name with a certain unwillingness. Havan—this was the man who thought she would turn to him only 2 days after Ofaran’s death. Havan was the man who made life difficult for her at every opportunity because she had made it clear to him that she wished to remain single through the widow’s year of mourning and that a man like Havan would never be able to extinguish the memory of Ofaran even in 10,000 years.

Havan shouted an answer: “Come inside!”

Ivsera pushed open the door before her. Havan sat behind a heavy table of synthetic marble. As he recognized her there was no change of expression in his coarse and loathsome features. “So, what is it?”

“We’re all out of provisions,” Ivsera answered curtly.

Havan looked at her attentively. “Why have you waited until now to tell me?”

Ivsera’s eyes narrowed. “I told you 10 days ago that we were out of raw materials!”

“So what!” he shouted. “As a member of the Council I have the right to be kept

continually advised of what's happening." He brought the flat of his hand down on the table. "I'll have you removed from your post if you don't understand your duties!"

Confronted with Havan's attempt to injure and provoke her, Ivsera regained her composure. "Just remember that you're not the only one here who decides on the assignment of duties," she interjected calmly. "We do have a Council and I won't budge unless they order me to."

She turned around, opened the door and went out. While she was closing the door behind her she heard Havan's scornful taunt: "Thus far we have the Council...!" She didn't hear the rest, nor did it interest her in the least.

At the elevator she was met by Killarog, who was also a Council member. He was one of the youngest of the Councilmen and it was Ivsera's opinion that he had been one of the few who had managed to preserve some degree of dignity and decency through the 8 post-war years.

She wanted to pass him by with a brief greeting but Killarog stopped and held her by the arm. "Trouble?" he asked her, not unkindly.

She looked at him. "In these times who is without trouble?"

Killarog kept a straight face but there was a teasing gleam in his eye. "As you know," he said with a contrived pontifical air, "I'm Chairman of the Committee on personal and psychological matters. If something is bothering you it's your duty to report it to me."

He had raised a finger at her but now his sternness faded and he led Ivsera back into the corridor. "What's the matter, girl? No more supplies? The Council has known that for 10 days now. You don't have to beat your brains out over it."

Ivsera laughed bitterly. "That's right," she retorted, "but it's only the Chairman of the Committee on Food & Clothing who didn't know anything about it."

Killarog chuckled. "Havan? Naturally, he knows it. We were just discussing it a few hours ago."

Ivsera explained to him what had happened. Killarog opened the door to his room and let her pass in ahead of him. He offered her a seat and then gestured contemptuously as he went around behind his synthetic marble table and sat down. "Don't believe a word of what Havan says," he advised. "Especially when he's talking to you. If he were to suggest your removal he'd make himself ridiculous in the eyes of the Council."

He regarded Ivsera across the broad table and under his reassuring gaze the young woman lost a certain degree of the resentment she had felt since her meeting with Havan.

"But let's consider another matter," said Killarog. "What are we going to do if we don't have anything more to eat?"

Ivsera waved her hands in a gesture of futility. "If I knew I'd tell you," she answered. "Maybe we could vacate the bunker and take a look on the surface, to see if anything is there?"

It was only a passing remark but Ivsera was startled when Killarog almost jumped out of his chair and narrowed his eyes at her. “Who ever gave you that idea? You know it’s impossible to vacate the bunker!”

Ivsera was confused. “Excuse me. I... I had no idea it would upset you so. Nobody gave me the idea, it’s my own. But don’t you think it’s an easy conclusion to reach?”

Killarog sat down again and heaved a sigh. “Forget it,” he murmured, suddenly weary and dejected. “I’m the one who should ask for pardon.” He put his hands to his face, rubbed his eyes and finally looked at Ivsera through his fingers. Slowly and with emphasis he said, “The fact is, we *were* up on top...”

Ivsera jumped up. “You were *what!*?”

Killarog signalled to her. “Not so loud. Nobody is supposed to know about it because then everybody would want to go out. That’s why I barked at you just now. Besides, your hopes are in vain.”

Ivsera held her breath. “To what extent?”

“There isn’t anything upstairs to eat, either! In the past 8 years not even a single turnip has grown in the area of Fenomat and beyond the city for a distance of 300 miles everything is contaminated. We didn’t go any farther...”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts!” Killarog stood up. His expression was suddenly deadly earnest. “Do you want to see something, girl? Something exciting, something thrilling and... disillusioning?” Ivsera nodded wordlessly. “Then come with me.”

They went out of the room. Killarog turned to his left and they went by Havan’s door. He stopped in front of the end door of the corridor, which was right next to the bright grey bulkhead wall at the end of the passage. He produced a key, unlocked the door and opened it. Ivsera looked into a bare room whose lighting was the same cold colour as in all the other rooms. There was a door in the opposite wall.

“There’s nobody in here,” explained Killarog softly as Ivsera watched him hesitantly. “There’s nothing to fear.”

She went in. Killarog followed her and carefully closed the door behind him. Then he crossed the room and opened the door on the other side.

With anxiously widened eyes, Ivsera stared into a low, narrow passage that obviously did not belong to the regular bunker installation. The walls consisted of naked rocks which gleamed farther on with moisture. Every few feet the ceiling was supported by metal shorings.

Cool air issued out of the tunnel—which was a blessing in the over-heated, foul-smelling atmosphere of the bunker.

Killarog’s voice was penetrating when he said: “Everything you are going to see must be held in strictest confidence. You must not dare discuss it with anyone—it wouldn’t be healthy for you.”

Ivsera nodded without removing her gaze from the mysterious passage.

“I’ll lead the way,” he invited.

She let him go ahead of her. Then she followed at his heels and closed the door behind her. Now she observed that the tunnel was not illuminated from the doorway but by a row of lamps up ahead, which were sufficient to reveal the uneven places on the floor.

Killarog strode swiftly onward and she had a time of it to keep up with him.

The passage proved to be longer than Ivsera had at first imagined it to be. For a quarter of an hour the distant lamps did not seem to be getting any closer but at last they were reached. By the time Killarog came to a halt under the first of them, they had been underway for at least a half hour and considering Killarog’s rate of march this meant that they had put about three quarters of a mile behind them.

“You still with me?” he asked with concern.

Ivsera nodded. Killarog continued walking. The lamps became more numerous and finally in the illumination of the last one Ivsera made out a figure that seemed to lie motionlessly on the ground.

Killarog approached it confidently. The figure moved. Ivsera saw a head come up and a pair of suspicious eyes greeted the 2 newcomers. She did not recall ever having seen the man. The most conspicuous thing about him was that he was fully clothed, in contrast to the short pants that were normally prescribed for the men.

“Anything new, Ther?” asked Killarog.

Ther nodded. “Yes, they’re making headway.”

“How much time is left?”

Ther shrugged and spread his hands in a gesture of approximation. “I’d say 2 or 3 days. What about this girl?”

“I’m briefing her,” Killarog answered curtly.

Ivsera finally overcame her surprise and asked, “Killarog, how is it that this man gets to go around fully clothed? I could produce at least 5 complete dinners out of what he is wandering around in.”

Ther looked at her in puzzlement.

Killarog laughed. “She is our provisioning girl,” he explained to Ther, “Most of the stuff you’ve been eating for the past 4 years has come from her laboratory.” Turning to Ivsera, he continued: “What do you think would happen to Ther if he had to lie around here half-naked?”

“Well, I...” Ivsera considered this in some bewilderment. “Does he do this very often?”

Killarog nodded. “He and 2 others. They rotate 10 hour watches, which is about the endurance span for each of them.”

“And what does he do here?”

Killarog pointed at the ground. “Show her, Ther,” he ordered.

Ther stood up. Ivsera noticed for the first time that a row of apparatuses was arranged near him. She saw small black instrument cases studded with switches, buttons and meters. The subterranean passage came to an end just a few steps

beyond.

Ther connected a thin cord to one of the instrument boxes. The other end of the cord was attached to a funnel-like object which Ivsera recognized as a type of telephone receiver. Ther placed the box in an angle to his left, which was formed by the wall and the floor of the passage. She saw that the small case stood on sharp-pointed little legs.

Ther handed her the cord and the receiver. "Listen in here," he invited.

With some uneasiness, Ivsera pressed the receiver to her ear. She heard a monotonous roaring sound. When after several minutes she heard nothing else, she was about to hand the instrument back to Ther. But in that moment she suddenly heard a dull, repeated booming, as though from a giant, distant drum.

The new sound increased to a crescendo and then slowly faded. Ivsera was startled by it almost to a point of alarm. She was about to ask what it was when it came again.

"Wow!" Ther chuckled. "We don't need any amplifier for that! I can hear it from here."

Ivsera relinquished the receiver. "What is it?" she asked.

Killarog answered with a counter question: "You were just a little girl when the war broke out. Do you know where our present position is located, with relation to the Fenomat area?"

Ivsera searched back in her memory for everything she knew about the bunker layout. The main shaft was beneath the centre of the city but its peripheral passages stretched out for several miles in many directions, in some places to the city outskirts. The main corridors branched north, east, south and west from the centre. The particular section where the Council members lived was served by the eastern main passage.

"I'd guess we're closest to the suburb of Sallon," she ventured.

Killarog nodded. "Exactly. This spot is only two-tenths of a mile from the western branch corridor of the Sallon bunker."

Ivsera wanted to know what the drumming sound she had heard had to do with the discussion.

"I already told you," continued Killarog, "that a couple of us were up above to have a look around. The ones who went encountered a party of strangers. Perhaps they came from Sallon, perhaps from more distant regions. At each sighting they began shooting at our people as soon as they saw them. Our men had to make a run for it because they were not sufficiently armed."

Ivsera was frightened as she listened to him.

Killarog pointed to the wall of the passage. "So here you have listened to the sounds that the people of Sallon are making, in their attempt to bore an underground access route toward the Fenomat bunker. Ther believes that we only have 2 or 3 days left in which to prepare ourselves for their visit. Then they will break through..."

* * * *

It did not take Ivsera long to finally comprehend it all. The inhabitants of the Sallon bunker still lived in her memory as they had been at the beginning of the war: average citizens for the most part, people who didn't want the war but who were glad to have the protection of the bunker.

Killarog was sure that the strangers they had clashed with were from Sallon. He was of the opinion that no one would dare expose themselves to the surface world any longer than was absolutely necessary and the next nearest bunker was a good thousand miles distant.

Moreover, the subterranean concussions had only one interpretation. Ther and his 2 companions had been observing them for some weeks now. With sensitive instruments they had registered the shock waves, which were obviously produced by blasting. They came from the direction of the Sallon bunker and in the course of weeks they had pushed close to the outermost passages of the Fenomat bunker.

Ivsera held to a last remnant of hope that the Sallon people's intention might not be actually unfriendly, until Killarog bluntly spelled it out for her.

"Who are we kidding? Naturally they are coming to steal food. And if perchance they don't find any, it's just possible they might arrive at the old-fashioned idea of cannibalism!"

* * * *

Killarog's analysis of the present discussion was gloomy. "The people that fired on our men were equipped with weapons like an army of secret state police. Apparently they have cleaned out the big Sallon North Depot. On the other hand the most we've got is about 50 hand weapons and most of those are old-fashioned pistols for which we have very little ammunition. So if the Sallon troops can push through more than 20 men they will have secured their bridgehead and we won't have to worry about the rest."

When Ivsera asked what the purpose of their own tunnel here might be, the answer was even more impressive. "You mean you haven't guessed it yet, girl? We started it with the idea of stealing food from Sallon. It's our tough luck that they arrived at the same idea just as quickly and, in addition, are better armed than we are. But..." He raised a finger, suddenly in a better mood. "Just in case we happen to succeed in driving them back, and if we can follow up the thrust at the same time, then we'll have saved ourselves a great deal of labour. Then the people of Sallon will have been building us an access tunnel."

When Ivsera reacted to this by staring at him in horror, he laughed—bitterly and briefly.

"But just get the final picture: only 8 years after the last war on Isan, all that's left is a question of who eats whom! That's the fact you may rely on!"

2/ THE STRANGER WITH THE WHITE EYEBALLS

Killarog had a plan.

It was a bold one and it entailed considerable risk. For this reason it took every bit of Killarog's arts of persuasion to sell his idea to the Council.

The Council authorized 8 men to accompany him and granted him the use of 9 protective radiation suits plus almost half of the weapons that were available in the Fenomat bunker. In addition, based on Killarog's advice, 3 men were posted on guard duty at the surface bunker locks. These 3 and Killarog's detail of men each carried a portable, self-powered radio pack.

Killarog's goal was the surface locks of the Sallon bunker. The time of attack: that moment in which they received news by radio that the Sallon troops had broken through into the Fenomat bunker.

The Council imposed just one condition: Killarog was to return at once if he learned that his force was inadequate for success. In that case his weapons would be needed more urgently in Fenomat than at the ground locks of Sallon.

Killarog searched out the men who were to accompany him. In spite of his youth he was respected throughout the bunker and in contrast to the normal sluggishness of spirit that marked the survivors of the Great War of Isan everyone was immediately ready to join Killarog in the dangerous undertaking.

3 hours after the Council meeting, Killarog had collected his crew but only a half hour before this Ivsera had learned of his plan through Irvin, who was one of the 8 who had been selected.

She traced down Killarog and launched a one-hour discussion to explain why she had to accompany him on this mission in the place of one of the 8 men. Her main argument was that if they actually succeeded in breaking into the Sallon bunker then somebody would have to be present who could determine at first glance where any sources of food were.

In spite of this, Ivsera's importunities might have been in vain had Irvin not finally taken her part. "Take her with you, Killarog," he recommended. "Otherwise she'll never forgive you. Besides, her point is valid. So I will resign in her favour."

It was safe for Irvin to make such an offer because he was widely recognized as being an outstanding exception to the general characteristic of passivity and indolence.

Killarog finally agreed. He was half angry and half amused when he spoke to her. “Young lady, you know I suspect you of harbouring some very idealistic concepts when it comes to the laws of human nature and also when it comes to these very ‘lovely’ people of Sallon. So if you get shot waving a peace flag at them, I’ll chalk it up to your childish instincts.”

Ivsera had not revealed her basic reason: that she was tired of sitting around inactively in the bunker, passively accepting everything that happened. She was convinced that everyone who still had a shred of strength in them was duty bound to contribute something. And it mustn’t always be something that guaranteed success. It had to be something that persisted in demonstrating that the survivors of the Great War were not just so many playthings of Fate.

* * * *

After an hour-long trip in the main elevator to ascend the mile-deep shaft, it was night when Killarog and his commando squad finally reached the surface lock of the Fenomat bunker.

In the lock they put on the anti-radiation suits. Killarog operated the necessary controls and Ivsera took it as a good omen when everything worked as it was supposed to.

In their departure from the lock, Killarog forced a mood of grimness and was as harsh as possible with his commands in order to discourage any transport of sentimentalism. For 5 of the 9 people it was the first time in 8 years that they had stepped upon the surface. of their home world of Isan.

Close above the western horizon, Ivsera saw the giant red ball of their sun, Wilan. She sought to determine whether or not Wilan had changed at all since the war. But Wilan was as big and red as ever before. A few pockmarks were discernible here and there on its surface and the great glowing sphere spread more warmth than brightness.

The stars hung near in a dark red sky. Between the stars, Ivsera observed isolated feathery traces of misty light. She knew that these vapour-like areas were in turn made up of many suns which were infinitely far away and that these nebulous formations of stars represented a stellar system that the astronomers referred to as the Misty Way.

She could hardly suppress her excitement. She appealed to her reason and attempted to be convinced that even after 8 years of subterranean existence it should not be so special to glimpse a few stars.

But she did not succeed. As in a dream she stumbled through the desolation of ruins that the bomb and the wind had made of the once proud city of Fenomat. Only after Killarog’s third admonishment was she able to pull herself together and concentrate on the task that lay before her.

* * * *

From the Fenomat main shaft to the ground lock of Sallon, the distance was 5 miles. 8 years ago it would have been possible to cover this stretch in a passenger bus or a rental car and this would have required at the most three-quarters of an hour. Now, however, in this pathless and dangerous wilderness and weighed down with heavy protective suits, it was a whole day's march.

After 5 hours Killarog called the first halt for a rest. They found themselves in an area of the rubble waste where the radiation was curiously only about half as intense as normal. Nobody could explain it but at any rate it was an ideal place for a rest.

The first bright blue glimmerings of the new day appeared above the southern horizon. Wilan's dull light and the powerful blue flood of illumination streaming over the southern horizon produced an unusual colouration in the sky. The stars paled gradually in the brightness of Wilanet, the small blue sun which was Isan's actual central star.

"We've now covered half the distance," announced Killarog. "From now on we have to keep our eyes open. The Sallon people aren't as dumb as you may have heard. It's possible it could have occurred to them that we might attack them from above."

While the brightness increased, Ivsera tried to recognize what area of the former city they were in. She knew that halfway from down town to the suburb of Sallon the Avenue of the Feno-Kings was located. In that street were the most prominent and expensive stores where her mother used to come shopping twice a year—once on her wedding anniversary and a 2nd time on Ivsera's birthday. She knew that broad, massive, old-fashioned houses had stood here.

But now there was not even a foundation standing. The city had been flattened. Fragments of stone were lying about but one couldn't tell by looking at them whether they were natural stone or pieces of what might have once been masonry.

The ground was covered with grass—but what kind of grass! The stems, once dainty and slender, now pushed up in a thick, fleshy growth to half the height of a man. Mutation, thought Ivsera. The radiation had altered the genetic characteristics of the grass.

And not only the grass. Shortly before resuming the march, they saw a long-legged beetle creeping through the tall stems. Although the grass grew more than hip deep, they saw the giant insect. In spite of its typically jointed and bent legs, the long, slender body was about 4 feet off the ground. Its body was also about 4 feet long.

The largest beetle in existence before the war would hardly have covered the palm of one's hand.

One of the men raised his weapon and was about to shoot the repugnant creature but Killarog struck down the gun barrel and shouted angrily at him. "Stop it, you fool! Do you want everybody to know where we are?"

When they set out again on their trek, Killarog turned to the northeast. He felt

that it was too big a risk to make a direct approach to Sallon. Instead, he preferred to take a devious route, even at the cost of 2 extra hours, so that he might approach the Sallon bunker from an angle that was least expected.

The portable radios had remained silent with the exception of one short message received from Ther: "We can hear them plainly now without any amplifier. I'd say you've got about 5 or 6 hours... then they'll be here. We estimate that they'll be coming through somewhere in the lowest level."

Ivsera thought of Havan. In spite of her resentment toward him, it was not a pleasant prospect to imagine that he might be captured by the Sallon people.

In view of Ther's message, Killarog pushed everyone to a faster pace. Several times he checked to see if Ivsera was doing all right but since she had determined to take her destiny in hand she seemed to know no fatigue.

Wilanet rose high into a white sky and spread its heat, which was the more difficult to bear because no shadows were cast across the grassy plain where the city had been.

After a short rest about halfway into the morning, Killarog ordered a complete silence between all personnel. The transceivers in their radiation suits operated at an extremely high frequency and though it would be a minor miracle if the Sallon monitors happened to pick up their conversations, such a possibility had to be reckoned with.

Killarog gave orders that only the most urgent communications should be made, and even then, if possible, without using the transmitters. In other words, helmet to helmet contact.

The region now began to rise gradually and Ivsera remembered that the suburb of Sallon was located on the southwestern slope of a hill. At least, she thought, the Bomb had not been able to flatten the ridge too.

Toward noon they reached the crest of the rise without having seen a single man from Sallon thus far. Killarog was very pleased about it but Ivsera had her doubts. However, since she trusted Killarog more than herself in the tactical aspects of this civil war, she remained silent.

The entrance or ground lock of the Sallon bunker was on the northeastern slope of the hill. In contrast to all other bunkers, the lateral access passages did not lead vertically downward to the main corridors but horizontally through the hillside.

The Sallon ground lock was marked by a stone, barracks-like edifice that stood lonely and deserted in the noonday glare of Wilanet. Heatwaves shimmered over the ground. The land had an aspect of not having been inhabited by humans for 8 years. The grass on the northeast side of the hill was somewhat shorter than they had seen it in the city. From the eastern horizon, the Ovia River wound its tortuous course. The woodlands formerly marking its bed were now gone. As far as the eye could see were desolate savannahs of mutated grass.

Killarog paid no attention to the unusual view. Through the clear viewplate of his helmet Ivsera could see his eyes light up when the Sallon ground-lock building became discernible.

“We are here!” he announced, in such loud tones that Ivsera, lying next to him, could hear him through the coverings of 2 helmets. “As soon as Ther gives the signal, we will attack!”

* * * *

A few hours prior to this, in a place not far distant from Fenomat, an elliptically-shaped spaceship had landed on the broad grass plain.

The ship’s crew had determined that the atmosphere, ground and oceans of the planet were charged with a dangerous level of radioactivity. At various places on the planet’s surface they had discovered the rubble remains of cities and it was easy to conclude that this entire world had been laid waste by nuclear warfare and that for the most part the population must have been destroyed.

The egg-shaped vessel had landed in an area where the radiation yield was about 10 times less than normal; it seemed to be a circular, closely demarcated spot. Of course the 4-man crew was much better equipped with protective gear than Killarog and his party, who were about 9 miles away without having noticed the ship; however, the craft’s commander was in the habit of weighing his decisions in favour of the greatest possible safety. Thus, instead of landing haphazardly where the average ‘hot’ yield was 100 rems per hour, he chose a place where it appeared to be reduced by a factor of 10.

Measuring 60 by 100 feet, the spaceship was equipped with apparatuses that Killarog or Ivsera, would not have been able to comprehend. They wouldn’t have thought it possible that such things could ever have existed in the history of all galactic intelligences.

Something perhaps more understandable, although complex and capable of exciting the admiration of all high-frequency technicians on Isan, was a frequency detection device which could sort out and isolate all frequencies received by its multiple receivers. Then, accompanied by mathematically programmed instructions, it fed such messages into a positronic computer which accordingly decoded them or, if its register banks of vocabulary were sufficient, it could completely translate an alien language into that of the ship’s crew.

By this means, the conversations between Killarog and his companions had been registered and translated. It was soon determined on board the ship that the language of Isan—at least the one they had picked up—revealed a strong similarity to one that was not that of the crew but which they all understood very well.

The ship’s commander then utilized the remaining time he considered to have at his disposal, in order to, make use of a device that belonged in the ‘miracle’ category. So that he might complete the knowledge he required, he proceeded first of all to assimilate the language of Killarog and his people.

* * * *

The hours passed in unbearable boredom. Ivsera noticed when she kept staring at the stone building of the ground lock that at times her eyes played tricks on her, making her think that the edifice was disappearing or sinking into the ground.

The only relief during the long wait was the fact that the heat began to subside gradually. Wilanet had passed its zenith and now moved northward. The grass began to make shade.

Ivsera considered it suspicious that not a single person of Sallon showed himself in the vicinity of the ground lock. She spoke to Killarog about it and in order to be heard better she took the risk of opening her helmet.

But Killarog dismissed the idea with a smile. "Don't worry, girl. For 8 long years no one has seen anybody in the area of the Fenomat ground lock, either. So why should we expect to catch sight of anybody at Sallon in a few short hours?"

Ivsera wanted to retort that, the Sallon people undoubtedly were more active than the men of Fenomat. Apropos of this was the fact that a Fenomat ground party had been routed just a few days ago by heavily armed men from Sallon. One couldn't compare Sallon with Fenomat.

But she preferred to be silent. For the time being she felt inhibited from expressing herself on things that seemed to be strictly the affair of the men.

Wilanet sank below the horizon and then the red ball of Wilan appeared, rising slowly into a darkened sky transformed by the stars. The host of stars grew in number until they formed a closely woven carpet of cold fire across the night sky.

Then Ther gave the signal. Ivsera heard his excited voice quite clearly in her radio receiver:

"They've broken through! As we expected, they've come out in the lowest level. They're heavily armed and we don't know how much longer we can hold out! Do what you can for Fenomat!"

It didn't sound very encouraging but Killarog seemed to be undaunted. He straightened up to his full height and shouted loud enough for everyone to hear him without the aid of their helmet transceivers: "Okay, let's go!"

They moved down the hillside in a half-stumbling run. In the dark red gloom the ground-lock edifice loomed before them. It did not have any windows. It was impossible to tell whether it was manned or if the Sallon people really had no suspicion of what was impending.

It also seemed foolhardy and puzzling to Ivsera that Killarog didn't spend much time checking out the area first. He placed explosive charges on both sides of the ponderous frame that supported the massive metal doors and in his battle fervour only retreated a short distance before the charges exploded.

Both wings of the door imploded inward. Mixed with the roar of the 2 explosions was the rumble of the heavy steel frame girders as they crashed to the ground.

With his weapon in firing position, Killarog plunged through the cloud of dust.

He had turned on his helmet transmitter again and shouted: “Forward! The lock is empty! Charge!”

The inner lock chamber was smaller than that of Fenomat. The inner access door was opened without effort and Killarog entered without hesitation. He ordered the last man in to close it behind them.

He let out a cry of triumph when he saw the light indicators for the main elevator. At this moment the lift was stationed at the level of the ground lock. He had only to open it and—

When Ivsera saw him reach for the control button, she cried out: “Stop! Think a minute before you jump into the fire! That *has* to be a trap. We haven’t come across a single human here today and in spite of that the main lift has been left at this level...”

“So what!” Killarog interrupted her gruffly. “Don’t get in my way, girl. In a few minutes we’ll have the whole bunker in our hands!”

He hit the call button and the elevator door rolled to one side. He was about to plunge into the lift cabin but at the first step he came to a stop as though he had run into an invisible wall.

With a hoarse shout he aimed his pistol and fired at the group of men who stood with raised weapons inside the lift.

He didn’t get very far. He was met with an answering fire and soon crumpled down in the cross hail of machine-pistol bursts. In the narrow confines of the lock chamber the enemy barrage wounded 5 more men from Fenomat. Ivsera saw them topple. Her 2 remaining companions threw down their weapons and pressed against the wall, crying out in their distress.

Ivsera held her ground but with her gun barrel pointed to the floor. “Stop it, you fools!” she shouted angrily at the Sallon men. “Enough blood has been spilled already. We surrender.”

At this moment she heard the door open behind her. She turned and saw a 2nd group of Sallon men standing there.

“Everything under control?” asked the nearest of the newcomers.

“*Almost* everything,” answered one of the men in the elevator. “This fool killed Ifers and has wounded Holran badly. But the girl wants to surrender.”

“Girl?” laughed the first speaker. “Are they so short of men in Fenomat that they have to send girls?”

Ivsera did not answer. She was consumed by her anger at Killarog whose bad battle fever had brought this misfortune upon them.

She heard somebody asking her: “How many Fenomat troops are still behind you?”

“None,” she answered.

“I don’t believe that.”

“That’s *your* problem!”

“Look, woman, if you—”

“Hold it!” a gruff voice ordered. “We’ll cross-examine her down below. You stay outside until we’re sure that nobody else is following up from Fenomat. There won’t be much action for long because Garok says he’s making good headway.”

Ivsera deduced that Garok must be the leader of the subterranean attack on Fenomat.

The man in the elevator who had last spoken was evidently the leader here of the surface task force, since everyone obeyed his orders. The 2nd group returned outside to their posts and the outer chamber door was closed.

Killarog had mentioned that the grass offered good concealment. And equally for the men of Sallon, Ivsera added mentally.

Killarog was dragged into the lift cabin along with the other wounded, of whom 2 had become still in the meantime. The 2 remaining Fenomat men who had discarded their weapons were pushed in next.

“Surrender your weapon!” demanded the leader of the group, turning to Ivsera.

The young woman obeyed without a word but in spite of his outstretched hand she let the weapon fall to the floor. It was with some wonderment that she heard him laugh.

“Are you proud, girl? You haven’t much reason to be.”

She looked at him for the first time through the viewplate of his helmet she saw an intelligent face that had matured perhaps prematurely. The man looked as if the pressure of the situation had made him forget how to smile.

She felt that she owed him an answer. “If I had had my own way,” she said, “perhaps by now there would be reason enough.”

The man nodded gravely but in a friendly manner. Then, after he had closed the elevator door, he pressed a button which would drop them to one of the lower levels.

The lift cage set itself in motion.

* * * *

During the hour that the elevator required to reach its destination, Ivsera had time to review her situation.

The deeper they penetrated into the earth the more improbable it became that Ther would be able to reach them with his weak transmitter. Up till now he had not broadcast any further message and Ivsera did not deceive herself about it. No news was bad news.

She recalled to mind what Killarog had said about the armaments of the Sallon people in comparison though those of Fenomat. She was impressed by the fact that these men around her were more energetic and spirited than the people she had known in Fenomat. Hunger had placed its mark upon their features and perhaps it was this that motivated their superior aggression.

At the halfway point in their descent, all radiation suits were removed. Ivsera breathed a sigh of relief as the heavy outer apparel slipped off her shoulders. But she was astonished to observe that the Sallon men were better clothed than the men of Fenomat. They wore even more than she, a woman!

The man she had first spoken to turned to her. With a slight bow, he said, "My name is Feriar. I'm sorry your fate turned out so badly. As far as I am concerned, I only wanted to take you all captive. But that man over there..." He pointed to Killarog. "He alone is to blame for what happened."

He intoned the word 'I' so strangely that it alerted Ivsera. In the past half-hour she had regained some of her composure, so now she asked: "As far as you are concerned? And who else is there to be concerned about us?"

Feriar laughed sorrowfully. "I'm only one small wheel in the political machinery of Sallon. During the passage of time there's been some wear and tear on some of the gears around here and some of the cogs have been worn pretty thin. That's why many people are maybe concerned about removing some of them and replacing them with a new set of gears with sharper teeth."

He looked at Ivsera questioningly to see if she understood the allegory. She nodded dubiously and he continued. "Just keep one thing in mind: in Sallon the cogs get sharper as the wheels get bigger. They won't take this thing as easily as I do and I have to turn you over to them as soon as we arrive below."

With a faint smile Ivsera thanked him for the warning. Then she sat against the wall on her radiation suit so that she might the more easily endure the remainder of the journey. She stared into space, apparently lost in her thoughts.

There seemed to be an unspoken understanding between her and Feriar. After not having talked to his men in three-quarters of an hour, suddenly he appeared to have nothing more important to do than to issue orders to this one and that and to jump all over them if they didn't respond fast enough.

Meanwhile the lift cage sank deeper into the shaft.

Ivsera analysed her immediate position. Killarog's cramped, outstretched hand, still grasping the pistol, lay close to her foot. But apparently it would be difficult to open his hand and retrieve the weapon. Besides, if the pistol were to suddenly disappear it would attract attention.

On her right side lay one of the 5 wounded men who had become quiet in the meantime. He had his eyes closed and was breathing weakly. He had not had a chance to draw his pistol from its holster. It hung to one side, its edge balanced between barrel and handle grip against the plastic sheath that held it.

After awhile, Ivsera shifted so that she was closer to the wounded man. After another pause she bent over, pretending to examine her radiation suit on which she was sitting. When she saw that no one had taken notice of this, she finally made a 3rd manoeuvre. She took the pistol swiftly and hid it in the stomach of her dress, which constituted the principal covering of her scanty apparel.

Nobody saw the action.

Nobody?

Perhaps Feriar. But he took no notice of it. He simply stopped ordering his people about so obstreperously.

* * * *

At the elevator exit the prisoners were placed in custody of another group of armed men. Feriar had just enough time to nod encouragingly to Ivsera. Then the prisoners were herded into the broad passage which led in an easterly direction, from the elevator shaft into farther subterranean regions.

The march lasted an hour. Ivsera had to clamp her teeth together to make herself survive the greuling pace. Fortunately, however, the soldiers also tired of the forced tempo and slowed down a bit.

A file of citizens observed the sorry-looking procession. Ivsera noted that all of them, men and women alike, were far better clothed than the people of Fenomat. She cudgelled her brains over this for awhile and after discarding a number of wild theories arrived at the most probable reason of all: the people of Sallon did not have a chemist who knew how to produce food from textiles! Thus there was no requirement for them to surrender their clothing.

But Heaven only knew what they had been living on in the meantime.

Finally the soldiers veered left with their 3 prisoners, leaving the main passage and entering a narrower corridor for a distance of about 100 yards. At last they halted in front of a door that was an exception to the normal doors in the bunker, in that it was as wide as a am entrance. Both door panels rolled aside without any manipulation by the soldiers. Ivsera reasoned that the bunker commander of Sallon enjoyed the luxury of a remote camera system and automated door openers.

As soon as the door was completely open, the soldiers stiffened to attention, in seeming apprehension. Ivsera heard the hard, rasping voice of the commander: "Enter!"

The soldiers saluted and fell into step as they entered the room. The prisoners came behind them. Both of the Fenomat men were simultaneously fearful and curious. But Ivsera moved as casually and slowly as possible in order to demonstrate to the Sallon people that nothing they could show her could make an impression.

In spite of this, the man who commanded such respect from his troops did make an impression on her. From the sound of his voice she had expected to see a tall, stern officer type. What she actually saw was a somewhat stunted and bloated young man whose fat face reflected vanity and conceit.

The soldiers came to a stop in front of the massive table at which he was sitting. "Get out!" ordered the fat man. "But wait outside!"

The soldiers disappeared. The fat one examined the 3 prisoners one by one. The inspection seemed to satisfy him only in Ivsera's case. He smirked and signalled indolently to the 2 Fenomat men, directing them to stand by the wall. In the same manner he indicated that Ivsera should approach him but she did not respond.

This appeared to anger him. “Hey you, girl!” he shouted “Step closer!”

Ivsera made a pretense of casually examining the room and now for the first time she deigned to notice him. “Are you speaking to me?” she asked, affecting surprise.

“Of course I am!” he growled. “Who else?”

She did not reply. Instead, she looked at him gravely. The man became nervous, which seemed only to add to his anger. Finally he yelled at her: “I said you were to approach me!”

Ivsera did not move. The fat man snorted in rage and got up from the table. He came around in front of it and was about to grasp her by the arm.

“Watch yourself!” she advised calmly. “You’re liable to get a busted nose.”

Startled, the fat one dropped his hand, then narrowed his eyes and shouted at her: “Just wait, young lady, and I’ll teach you some manners! Guard!”

The doors rolled aside and the soldiers stomped in again.

“Get these 2 men out of here. Work camp C! No food rations during the first 5 days. They’re fat enough!”

The 2 Fenomat men offered no resistance as they were led out. The door closed behind the soldiers and their prisoners. The fat man was now alone with Ivsera. She feared that the moment was at hand when she would have to make use of her concealed weapon.

The fat one grinned. “Now we are quite alone—just the 2 of us, sweetie,” he said softly. “Do you know what that means?”

“I only know one thing,” she replied dryly. “The Council of the Sallon bunker will hold you accountable for violating the statutes of martial law.”

The fat one listened in amazement; then he began to laugh uproariously. “Martial law!” he snorted. “Statutes! That was a hundred years ago! Who would still remember such things in these days? No, girl... you belong to me... and so does the Sallon bunker. There isn’t anyone who can hold me accountable.”

Ivsera could not resist saying: “Then Sallon belongs to a very disagreeable contemporary.”

In a flash the fat one abandoned his unctuous manner. He came close to Ivsera and snarled at her: “Don’t make me angry! I’m prepared to offer you a life such as no other woman on Isan could have in these times. But I can also prepare one for you that would make you wish you had never been born! Do you understand me?”

Ivsera did not lose her composure. “First of all,” she retorted, “I am my *own* property and not yours. Secondly, I can do without the first offer. I’d rather be dead than with a man like you.”

Somehow she was obsessed by an urge to smash the fat man’s conceit—and in this she succeeded.

He exploded. Practically foaming with rage he grabbed her left arm and shook her so violently that her hair whipped across her face. “You will obey me!” he screamed at her. “You will beg me to even let you live! There is no one who has

ever defied Belal for more than a minute or two!”

In the midst of his excitement Ivsera was able to draw out her pistol. She released the safety catch and took her time to make sure she would hit her target. But her one mistake was to assume that his movements would be as heavy as his body.

Belal saw the weapon and in an angular dive to one side he knocked the pistol out of her hand. Ivsera cried out in her anger and disappointment but Belal rolled swiftly across the floor, grabbed the weapon and came up again with a malicious grin on his face.

“So that’s what you had on your mind!” he shouted. “What were you saying about the statutes of martial law? Prisoners threatening the enemy bunker’s commander with concealed weapons?”

Ivsera finally lost her self-control. “Kill me then!” she cried out to the fat man. “Shoot!”

Belal shook his head. “No, my dear. You are going to remain alive.”

Ivsera rushed upon him with both hands raised for battle but he flung her back easily. She crashed against the wall.

As though she had struck a hidden control button, the doors rolled open at the same moment. Belal, completely intent upon Ivsera, looked up in astonishment.

Ivsera stared at the tall, strangely dressed man who stood in the entrance. After a brief inspection of the room, he entered it and the doors closed behind him.

With a shock of fear, Ivsera noted that his eyeballs were white. Who had ever seen such eyes as these? Ivsera’s eyes had a reddish background colour, as did every person that she had ever seen in her life.

Belal regained his composure. “Who are you?” he upbraided the stranger. “And how do you dare to enter here...”

The stranger waved him to silence with a casual gesture. “Relax, friend,” he answered calmly. “I am daring to do nothing at all. It’s just that I heard your outcries from the corridor and I thought that perhaps there was someone here who might need my assistance.”

Belal seemed to stop breathing. The stranger had time to bend down and assist Ivsera to her feet before Belal found his voice again.

“Alright, fellow, we’ll soon take care of your impertinence!”

Ivsera saw him go to his table and press a row of buttons on a control panel. Through the closed doors came the muffled sound of alarm sirens.

The stranger noted the sound with interest. “Are you calling your people, fat man? Then they will soon see what kind of a wretch their commander is.”

“You are insane!” Belal shrieked hysterically. “In a few moments you will be dead!”

The stranger nodded. “Or you,” he answered calmly.

Belal paled. His confidence deserted him. He supported himself heavily on the edge of the table and asked: “Who... who are you?”

“Of what use is my name to you?” said the stranger. “Call me Perry—that should suffice.”

At that moment the door opened. A gang of heavily armed men proceeded to press into the room.

“Shoot him down!” roared Belal. “He has assaulted me!”

Ivsera saw the man named Perry turn around. He lifted his right arm as a mysterious force seemed to leap from it. The soldiers remained rooted to the spot near the entrance. Even Belal’s frantic voice was stilled.

“Take it easy, friends,” advised the stranger easily “Belal is a liar. He has harmed this girl although she is an official prisoner of war.”

“In the background, Belal laughed sarcastically. He was accustomed to having no one take any accusations seriously that were made against him. He was Belal and Belal was infallible. Everything he did was for the direct benefit of the bunker. This was the platform on which Belal based his political power.

But now here he saw for the first time a disconcerted expression on the faces of his men, who dared to look neither at him nor at the stranger.

“Men, go back where you came from,” the stranger ordered. “Here we will hold court over a man who has been able to get away with his crimes for years without punishment.”

Ivsera could hardly believe her eyes as the soldiers turned about and marched back into the corridor. The door closed behind them. She, Belal and the stranger named Perry were alone again. Belal had subsided into his chair, lost for words.

“You see?” smiled Perry. “That’s the way it goes for people who bite off more than they can chew.”

“But... but... stammered Belal, “that—that is...”

“...impossible, do you mean? Oh no, it’s all quite explainable.”

Belal suddenly recalled that ‘holding court’ had been mentioned. He sensed the uncanny power of the stranger and realized that he had to do something or it would be his neck.

“I—I claim immunity—give me amnesty!” he begged. “I will not do anything that you don’t agree with.”

Perry smiled scornfully. “Now you say this, all of a sudden? Relax, Belal, don’t worry. You may keep your worthless life. I am taking this girl with me to Fenomat. And if you’re so anxious to do the right thing, I’ll just give you a little tip: keep your hands off Fenomat... otherwise you won’t like the consequences!”

Ivsera caught the malicious grin that touched Belal’s lips for the fraction of a second. Had the stranger noticed it?

As though half in a trance she felt Perry take her by the hand.

“Come!” he said. “We will go and leave our friend behind with his problems.”

The door opened. Ivsera and Perry stepped out into the corridor. She looked back and saw Belal sitting motionlessly behind his table. Either it was fear that held him fast—or he was too cautious to let any movement betray his present intentions.

3/ THE MIRACLE MAN

Perry strolled along the corridor as though he had no enemies in the world. It took awhile for Ivsera to recover enough from her surprise to find her voice again.

So far they had only encountered a few unarmed men, who had only stared at them but had made no unfriendly move. Ahead in the main passage it would be different. There they would find more soldiers than citizens.

“Have you...” She searched for the right words. “I mean... do you think that they will let us go out without interference?”

Perry smiled at her. “I don’t think... I *know*...” he said calmly.

Nothing more. It was too little to satisfy Ivsera’s burning curiosity.

“Where do you come from? You’re not a citizen of Sallon, are you? And certainly you are not from Fenomat. Do you come from... Othahey?”

Perry shook his head. “No, I am not from Othahey. If I were, how would I be so well informed about the Sallon and Fenomat bunkers?”

Some of Ivsera’s former contradictory attitude stirred in her again. “It might not be impossible,” she answered. “At least I don’t believe that Othahey is so stupid that it wouldn’t maintain an espionage agency.”

Perry laughed merrily. “It’s possible you could be right about that. Nevertheless, I am not from Othahey.”

He still avoided saying where he really came from.

2 minutes later they entered the main passage and Perry moved right, toward the elevator. What Ivsera had feared occurred a few moments later. A military column consisting of 5 heavily armed soldiers wearing white armbands confronted Perry, blocking his path. Meanwhile, before Perry stopped he managed to collide with the leading soldier—and on top of it he scolded the man.

“Tolpatch, can’t you watch where you’re going?”

The soldier seemed to have a sense of humour. With raised weapon, he stepped back a few feet and regarded Perry, who towered at least a head above him. He looked at him from head to foot and then laughed. “Excuse me, General, sir, but would you be so kind as to tell me who you are? Or don’t you have any identification papers?”

Perry shook his head. “No, my friend, I don’t have any I.D. I believe your superior is Capt. Feriar? Take us to him, please.”

Ivsera was as amazed as the soldier at this. The soldiers of Sallon did not distinguish themselves with uniforms. For a stranger it would be impossible to guess who served under whose command, even if he knew a particular officer's name.

The column did an about face and marched with Perry toward the head of the passage and the elevator. Ivsera followed close behind. To her the stranger had become something uncanny.

Feriar had his quarters in the vicinity of the elevator. 4 of the soldiers stood guard before the door and the 5th man led Perry and Ivsera into the small room.

Feriar sprang to his feet as he saw Ivsera. He paid no attention to Perry at all. "Good Heavens!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "Did Belal release you so soon?"

Ivsera nodded and indicated Perry. Feriar now took note of the tall man who had entered with her.

"Who are you?" he asked suspiciously.

Perry smiled. "One who has neither identification documents nor a pass permit, yet who finds it urgent to leave the bunker without molestation... and that is, with this young lady."

Feriar gasped. "She is a prisoner!" he blurted out.

He opened his mouth in order to call the guards but Perry cut him off with a swift hand signal. "Let's not have any hullabaloo!" he said sharply. "I detect that you are a reasonable man. Why do you wish to work for this shoddy character, Belal?"

Feriar gaped at him. "You *detect*..."

"Precisely. You are opposed to Belal's totalitarianism, not only on principle but also because he uses his power to private advantage." He spoke swiftly and gave Feriar no time to answer. "I have a proposition for you: come with us to Fenomat. I will guarantee you that nothing will happen to you."

These words seemed to be strangely compelling to Feriar. As he attempted to make objections, he did not sound very convincing. "But for several hours, now, Fenomat has been..."

"I know all about it. We shall retake the bunker. Does such a prospect appeal to you?"

Feriar nodded. "Alright, I'll come with you!"

Ivsera thought she must be dreaming. This couldn't be happening. Apparently unarmed, a solitary man moved casually and unhindered through a bunker whose despotic commander he had offended in the most deadly manner. He handled every obstacle with such ease that he could turn responsible officers to thoughts of treason, just with a few simple words.

But it was happening. Feriar put on his gun belt and explained to the guards that he was taking the 2 strangers back to Belal. Then he turned right down the hall to the lift shaft.

The elevator cupola required a quarter of an hour to arrive at their level. When

the door glided to one side, the cage proved to be empty. Perry allowed Ivsera and Feriar to go in first but he called out when he saw Feriar reach for the top level button.

“The other way around, my friend. We want to go down!” When Feriar looked at him in surprise, he continued. “I have no intention of marching for hours through a contaminated region. It will be much more convenient to use the new tunnel!”

Feriar obeyed. He pressed the lowest button and the elevator started downward with an almost lackadaisical motion. At the same time a buzzer sounded and then the howl of countless sirens penetrated the lift cage.

Feriar started. “It’s the alarm!” he gasped.

Perry nodded indifferently. “What did you expect? That Belal would let us get away without opposition?”

A second later they heard a tinny voice blare forth from the elevator’s loudspeaker: “Attention! Alert for all levels! 2 important prisoners have escaped. One is a woman from Fenomat and the other captive is from the surface. Both prisoners have been condemned to death by official court martial. Therefore they are to be brought in dead or alive.”

There followed a description of the 2 prisoners, in which it was evident that the obvious author of the report, Belal, was in error where Perry was concerned. At least Ivsera did not believe that he could be recognized, according to Belal’s information. However alien his clothing was, it was considerably less conspicuous than the way Belal described it.

Feriar became uneasy. “Do you know how many men we have under arms in Sallon?”

Perry smiled. “Let me see... about 55 hundred, isn’t it? Almost 80% of them range from 15 to 50 years old.”

Feriar could only gape in astonishment.

“But do you also know,” continued Perry, “where these men will look for us? Up above, at the ground lock!”

* * * *

Perry turned out to be correct. Without hindrance, the elevator arrived at the basement level. The passage ahead was clear.

Without hesitation, Perry led the way to the left. “You’d better conceal your weapon,” he advised Feriar while en route. “I can cover the 3 of us and if possible we want to avoid any bloodshed.”

Without a word, Feriar complied. Ivsera began to think that since his meeting with Perry he had come under some kind of spell. Did this Perry person wield some sort of power over the thoughts and wishes of his fellow creatures? She searched her own mind in this regard but was unable to detect anything out of the

normal.

The passage ended abruptly at a bare bright grey wall but this did not cause Perry any discomposure. He opened the last door on the right and to Ivsera's amazement she saw a room with 2 doors which was a counterpart of the corresponding chamber that Killarog had shown her not long ago in the Fenomat bunker.

The manner in which Perry found his way about was something to marvel at. Without hesitation he strode across to the 2 guards who stood on either side of the farther door. "Let us through!" he demanded. "We are on an important assignment in Fenomat!"

One of the sentinels seemed to suspect nothing but the other barred the door by sinking his weapon across it. Suspiciously, he said: "Commander Belal is searching for a woman and a man who have been sentenced to death. I recognize Capt. Feriar... but by any chance do you two happen to be the fugitives...?"

Perry reached into the pocket of his suit. He did it casually and with a slight expression of annoyance, as though he resented always having to show his orders. Apparently neither sentinel was thinking of anything but Perry's documentation.

But what he finally brought forth was a thing that was not unlike a small pistol. Ivsera could not make out how Perry operated it but in that instant a jolting pain shot through her skull and the 2 soldiers sank lifelessly to the floor.

Ivsera shuddered.

"Let's go!" said Perry unperturbed. "Too bad they were so mistrustful. They won't come to for several hours yet but in the meantime somebody will find them... and then they'll know where to look for us."

"You mean... they aren't dead?" stammered Ivsera while Perry opened the door.

Perry laughed. "No. As I told you, I don't spill any blood where it can be avoided."

The passage was wider and higher than the one Killarog had pushed through from Fenomat. Ivsera began to comprehend that this 'Tunnel War', as it was called, had been a long-planned undertaking on the part of Sallon. It must have taken at least a year to bore through such an excavation over so many miles.

The tunnel was brightly lighted. They were able to see that, with the exception of the 2 sentinels they had encountered, no one was in the vicinity. Ivsera considered this to be a bad sign for Fenomat. If the war were still being waged, this passage would be swarming with armed men.

Perry started out at a brisk pace. Ivsera noticed that Feriar occasionally studied the stranger in an attempt to figure him out. But he did not appear to have an answer. From time to time he would shake his head and grumble incoherently to himself. She understood his perplexity because she was in the same boat. The stranger had rescued them from a dangerous situation and was apparently using the best possible strategy to defy the despotic regime of Sallon. These were things for which they should all be grateful. But on the other hand his knowledge and

capabilities were uncanny and frightening.

For example, consider the weapon he had used to incapacitate the 2 sentinels—what kind of a device was that? It had not killed but instead it had made them unconscious. Ivsera was certain that there had never been such a weapon before on all Isan.

She was drawn to a conclusion that was rather fantastic: this stranger was not of Isan. He came from another world!

Prior to the beginning of the war on Isan, the 2 states, Othahey and Heyatha, had been striving to make a conquest of space. Owing to enmity between the 2 states it had become a bitter contest. After several satellites had already been placed in orbit around Isan, both sides had impending projects for launching actual space rockets. The goal was Wilan 2, the outermost of the 2 planets that encircled Wilan.

But the war had interfered and it had destroyed everything that had been developed. The only thing it could not destroy was the human knowledge that space travel was possible and even necessary, that on other worlds there had to be other beings, perhaps with intelligence, and that an attempt should be made to make contact with them.

Was Perry such a being?

* * * *

During a 3-hour march they only encountered a few isolated soldiers but no difficulties were experienced with them. Finally, Perry furnished another proof of his supernatural knowledge. He stopped and asked: “Didn’t you say that a similar bore had been drilled through from the direction of Fenomat?”

The question was directed at Ivsera and the young woman was frightened by it. She was certain that she had never discussed the tunnel—other than with Killarog and he was dead. Could Perry even read thoughts?

“N—no,” she answered with an effort. “I—I never said anything about it but nevertheless there is such a passage.”

Perry smiled. “Where?”

Ivsera described the tunnel arrangement as carefully as she could. For a while Perry was somewhat pensive about it. Then he indicated the left wall of the passage.

“If we bore upwards here at an angle of 10° we would cut into the Fenomat boring at a distance of about 100 yards, don’t you think?”

Ivsera didn’t know. Besides, it seemed to be a very fanciful consideration because who wanted to make a connecting passage now and what purpose would it serve?

“Actually it’s the best course for us,” Perry hastened to explain, “if we make ourselves a bit scarce around here. A crowd of people are on our tail.”

Ivsera and Feriar looked around. But the tunnel lay empty behind them as it had been all along.

Perry reached into his pocket and handed Feriar the small weapon that he had used before to stun the 2 sentinels. At the same time he indicated the passage through which they had come.

“If you see anybody in that direction,” he explained, “aim the muzzle at them and depress the red button. That will keep them off our backs. And keep an eye toward Fenomat as well; it may be that Belal will try a pincers movement to catch us between.”

His instructions were accepted without comment. Feriar took the strange weapon gingerly and observed it. Ivsera drew close to him, overcome by curiosity as to where Perry had produced the long-barreled apparatus he suddenly held in his hands. As he turned the device on the left wall of the passage, Ivsera saw a brilliant greenish cone of energy sweep out from the end of the device and the wall began to disintegrate. In a matter of seconds the wide-sweeping green flame had made a deep hole and the atomized rock rolled in a gaseous cloud along the tunnel in both directions.

Perry was deeply absorbed in his work yet he seemed to sense Ivsera’s and Feriar’s astonishment. “On guard, Feriar,” he advised, “or they can be on top of us before we know it.” The mysterious green funnel of force worked soundlessly and with uncanny swiftness.

Ivsera watched in amazement but then she was distracted by a new development. A rumble of footsteps and a clamour of shouting rang through the passage from the direction of the Sallon bunker. In the light of the ceiling lamps, soldiers came into view who were running toward them through the tunnel.

Although already deep into the wall, Perry was aware of their approach. “Hold them off for just a few moments,” he called to Feriar. “Then we’ll have it made!”

Feriar trembled more out of fear for the unknown weapon he held than for the soldiers. As he raised the short, compact barrel toward the Sallon mob, the men recognized the two and stormed toward them with angry shouts.

“Shoot!” cried Ivsera anxiously.

Feriar pressed the red button. The effect of the shot was greater than they had imagined. As though they had run with full force into a wall, the men were thrown back, falling unconscious to the ground.

The ones bringing up the rear didn’t understand what had happened to the advance troops but they perceived the danger. They took cover behind the bodies of the unconscious men and raised their rifles.

Feriar hesitated.

“Watch out!” cried Ivsera. “Get down!”

In the same instant she lunged forward into a prone position while the guns up ahead began to roar. Feriar remained standing and again raised his weapon. He fired and caused another wave of Sallon men to become silent. Only a few isolated shots came through the passage.

Ivsera heard bullets ricochet from the walls in a mournful howl. A few metal fragments fell directly in front of her and came to rest within her reach. Wonderingly, Ivsera picked one up and looked at it. It was a rifle bullet which some incomprehensible force had caused to slow down and fall powerlessly to the ground.

As though through a thick wall she heard Perry's voice. "Come on! I'm far enough!"

Feriar just stood there staring off toward the unconscious men in the main passage. Ivsera was forced to push him gently into the side tunnel that Perry had created. She noted with astonishment that in the meantime the now excavation had become about 50 yards long. Perry stood at the end of it and beckoned to them.

"We have to block their Way!" he called. "Hurry!" As Feriar broke out of his trance and began to walk swiftly, he added: "Come up close to me."

Then he aimed his long-barreled weapon against the ceiling of the new tunnel. By cutting thin slits in the rock with a narrow beam of force, he soon caused the bore to cave in. Finally the side passage was choked tight with debris for a length of about 30 yards.

"That ought to do it," Perry chuckled. "I think it'll take them at least 3 days to clear away the rubble."

Then he continued his labours ahead until in a short time he broke through into the Fenomat tunnel. They were in luck as they saw that the passage was empty. Either the Sallon forces had not yet discovered it or more likely they were not patrolling it because it served no purpose to them.

* * * *

In the lowest level of Fenomat, surprisingly there were only 2 sentinels standing at the exit of the Sallon tunnel, which happened to be precisely in Havan's former office. Ivsera could imagine the expression on Havan's face when the wall behind him collapsed and the Sallon soldiers stormed in upon him.

With a single shot, Perry took care of the 2 guards. Feriar helped him take them into a neighbouring room. He explained that the intensity of the shot should be sufficient to keep the two unconscious for 2 days. Thus it would be in their favour if nobody discovered the sentries before then.

Feriar studied Perry gravely. He hesitated for awhile and finally expressed himself. "We are very grateful to you and we also know that you are some kind of superior being on Isan. But we would be more at ease if you would tell us what your intentions are, and above all, *why*..."

Perry nodded. "Very well. I can take care of the first question very easily: I intend to retake the Fenomat bunker. A partial answer to your 2nd question is: if Belal gets possession of the Fenomat bunker he will have taken his first step toward being the top power on all of Isan. Because as far as I know there's no other place on Isan where 2 bunkers are this close together and accordingly there

would be no other single ruler over 2 bunkers, except Belal. So Belal will try to grab all the power on Isan and since he is the most powerful of them all to start with, he would succeed.” Perry paused to smile sarcastically. “In view of the fact that Belal wants to establish a dictatorship on the entire planet, we’ll have to cut his water off.”

Feriar nodded earnestly.

“And the other part of the answer?” asked Ivsera.

“We have to be together a while longer before I can give you the whole answer. Just now there isn’t enough time.

Feriar intervened: “You’re equipped with a number of weapons that assure you an absolute superiority over any individual opponent. But do you also believe that you can overpower the military forces of this bunker, which are at least a thousand armed men? I mean: a bunker installation and its arrangement are complicated. For a single man, it’s just about impossible to maintain an overall view of the situation.”

Perry smiled patronizingly. “You can believe me when I tell you that I shall have no difficulties in the matter.”

Perry dipped into one of the numberless pockets of his suit. He brought out something flat and square and small enough to hold easily in one hand. Ivsera heard him speak a few words into it as he brought it near his mouth but she could not understand what he said.

However, since there was only one language on all Isan and even the concept of an ‘alien language’ was unknown, Ivsera took this observation to mean that Perry was actually from another world.

It was apparent that Feriar was still far from reaching such a conclusion. He stared at Perry incredulously as the latter spoke into the apparatus and was shocked when a strange voice was heard suddenly coming out of the device, speaking in the same unknown tongue that Perry was using.

* * * *

John Marshall had taken over Perry Rhodan’s post while the latter concerned himself with the course of the undertaking he had overheard Killarog discussing.

The transmission that so astonished Ivsera and Feriar had been directed at him. Marshall received a short briefing on the situation below and then the instructions: “Arm yourself with a disintegrator and a thermo raygun and join me down here. We’ll wipe this place up from 2 sides. Laury stays with Rodrigo. Do you read me?”

“Perfectly. I’ll keep in contact with you, sir.”

“Good,” concluded Rhodan. “Try not to kill anybody.”

* * * *

The re-conquest of the Fenomat bunker was little more than a farce. Perry walked through the corridors and stunned all opposition with his uncanny weapon. It was left to Ivsera and Feriar to segregate the Fenomat people from the Sallon people, to allow the first group to regain consciousness by themselves and to tie up the latter group.

At the start, Perry had closed the openings of both tunnel excavations so that Sallon would have no way, at least underground, to send reinforcements of men or material into Fenomat.

All told, Fenomat consisted of a hundred levels. With his far reaching weapon, Perry required no more than an hour to clean up each level. From time to time he would use his small, square box device to converse in his strange language with another man. The only thing he revealed to Ivsera and Feriar concerning the brief conversations was that a friend had started to mop up the bunker from above and that they would soon meet him at about the 50th level.

Almost more astounding than this event itself was the endurance Perry demonstrated in his work. By the time the 10th level had been swept through, Feriar was so tired he couldn't stand on his feet and had to be spelled off by a Fenomat recruit. 2 levels farther on, Ivsera had to give up also, after she had selected a substitute for herself from a line-up of people who had regained consciousness.

On the other hand, Perry did not show the slightest sign of fatigue. He looked as if he had just gotten up after a refreshing sleep. Ivsera was ashamed of herself in his presence but while she was in the midst of this embarrassment her eyes closed involuntarily.

When she woke up it was deathly still around her. Most of those who had been stunned had come to again but since they had no idea of what had occurred, they remained calm. Here and there, Sallon captives attempted to extricate themselves from their fetters or to get through the steel doors of various detention cells but none of them succeeded. And so they finally submitted to their fate.

Many of them began to recall having seen Ivsera in the company of a man who had caused all of this confusion with his mysterious weapon. As soon as she got up, Ivsera was deluged with questions. But instead of answering them, she hurried to the nearest elevator and went up to look for Perry.

She found him on the 48th level. With him were Feriar and a 2nd man whose eyeballs were as white as Perry's and who carried the same kind of weapon.

Perry greeted the young woman with a smile. "It's all over," he told her. "The bunker is in our hands. Ivsera—this is my friend Marshall. Without him we'd have a few hours more work to do."

Ivsera made a little bow to Marshall with her head and he gave her a friendly smile.

"But can you imagine?" continued Perry. "There was still a nest of resistance in Fenomat. With only a few weapons a handful of young fellows defended

themselves against the attack of the Sallon troops. They had entrenched themselves in the biochemical laboratories.”

Ivsera reacted with interest. “Do you know their names?” she asked.

“2 of them. One is called Ther and the other Irvin.”

Ivsera cried out, “Ther and Irvin! Good Lord, the poor fellows!” But her tone was one of relief.

“Yes, they could hardly stand on their feet, in the end, because of hunger. I’ve arranged to get them some food right away. By the way: the question of provisions seems to be more or less our main problem. Without exception your people are undernourished. Aren’t there any more supplies?”

Ivsera shook her head dejectedly. “No, nothing.”

This seemed to make little impression on Perry. “Well then we’ll have to see what we can do about it.” Apparently it was no great concern to him as to where he could get sufficient food for at least 10,000 half-starved people.

Feriar wanted to say something. “Perry is planning to also take over the Sallon bunker. What do you think about that?”

Ivsera spread her hands in resignation. “Apparently he could take over every bunker on Isan, one after the other, if he wanted to.”

Perry shook his head. “I’m not concerned about the bunker but about Belal.”

Ivsera felt that at this stage she was superfluous where politics were concerned. A greater power had taken over administration and any attempt to either help or hinder would be ridiculous.

With Perry’s approval, Ivsera instructed some of the Fenomat men to strip the prisoners of all but their essential clothing and to bring the pieces of apparel to the laboratory. She estimated that by this means she might be able to prepare a day’s food ration for each Fenomat citizen. That would last them until Perry managed to finally bring help.

In the laboratory she met Irvin and Ther. In his enthusiasm, Irvin threw his arms around her, which was something he had never permitted himself to do before. “Girl!” he cried out. “How glad I am to see you!”

Ivsera extracted herself from the embrace and looked him over. Since she had seen Irvin the last time, he had changed. Evidently the only last thing that had been needed to make a man out of this youth was the battle he had gone through.

“The way I hear it,” she said, “you have become a hero.”

Irvin laughed. “Not on my own power,” he replied, while pointing to Ther. “This slave driver stormed in here all of a sudden with 3 companions. He shoved a rifle into my hands and yelled: ‘The Sallon men are coming! Fire at them, or I’ll fire at *you!*’ All 4 of us did the shooting. What else was I supposed to do? We made a couple of grenades out of the chemical supplies that were here and they gave us a breather. If it hadn’t been for hunger we could have held out forever. But the strange miracle man arrived in the nick of time. Who is he, anyway?”

Ivsera told him she knew as much about him as Irvin did.

“He’s going to clean out Sallon, isn’t he?” growled Ther suddenly. “Let’s hope he finds that traitor, Havan, in the process.”

Ivsera whirled about. “Havan? A traitor?”

“Didn’t you hear about it? Havan has been plotting with Sallon for a couple of years. They say Belal had promised to set him up as a sort of governor after the conquest of Fenomat. It isn’t by chance that the Sallon tunnel came out exactly in Havan’s quarters!”

Ivsera groaned. Havan—a traitor! She had always thought him capable of being selfish, dogmatic and insidious in a great number of things—but that he would become a traitor...!”

She suddenly remembered the last words she had heard him say: “Thus *far* we have the Council!”

So this is what he meant!

Ivsera shuddered when she considered the fate that awaited Havan following his capture. In accordance with the statutes of military law, which were honoured in both bunkers, there was only the penalty of death for treason.

She shook the thought out of her mind and looked along the gleaming row of her equipment. Her gaze fell on the pile of clothing that the collectors had scrounged from the enemy and stacked up in a corner. “Let’s go to work,” she ordered Irvin. “We all need something to eat!”

4/ IN THE MIDST OF LIFE THERE IS DEATH

Originally it had not been Perry Rhodan's intention to interfere with the course of events on Isan in any manner whatsoever.

Together with the mouse-beaver Pucky; the 2 mutants, Laury Marten and John Marshall; and lastly Count Rodrigo de Berceo—who had been freed from the Galactic Zoo—Rhodan had escaped, not without difficulty, from the Ara World of Tolimon, in a small spaceship which was a special type of space jet or luxury yacht. Marshall and Laury had had the assignment to search for the secret of a certain medical development which slowed down cell deterioration and which was nothing other than a true elixir of life.

Laury had contrived to infiltrate the Galactic Zoo, in which the Aras had collected life forms from all parts of the known galaxy. One of the 'inmates' of the zoo was Count Rodrigo de Berceo, who had been captured long ago during Earth's 17th century and was classified in the intelligence range of 'C'. Laury's basic transgression had been to fall in love with him and owing to her consequent emotional involvement she had made certain blunders which had generated suspicion on the part of the Aras. As a result, Rhodan had been forced to take a hand in the mission. He did not quite succeed in obtaining the actual formula for the life elixir but at least he had been able to liberate the 2 mutants and the unhappy Rodrigo and to flee with them from Tolimon. Also, Laury did manage to secure a small flask of the valuable life elixir itself.

A series of hypertransitions had brought the space jet beyond the range of the pursuing ships and had landed it simultaneously in the heart of the galaxy. Thus the vessel found itself outside all known space routes. Rhodan had planned to spend 4 weeks on the planet which was a companion of the blue sun in this double-star system. This, hopefully, would give time for the search for the space jet to die down.

He had not lost sight of the possibility that the events on Tolimon might attract the attention of the ruling positronic brain in the Arkonide Empire, under given conditions. If it were to obtain sufficient data, concerning the Tolimon incident, then the danger would arise that it would conclude that only Perry Rhodan could have been responsible for what happened. But Perry Rhodan had to be regarded by the vast positronicon as a dead man. It was also necessary to maintain the fiction that a certain Springer attack of more than 50 years ago had destroyed the Earth and wiped out humanity.

Thus at the turn of the 21st century it had only been through this great strategy of deception that the Earth had managed to save itself from the pursuit of the Springers and the intolerant jealousy of the central positronic brain. However, now 56 years later, the success of the whole manoeuvre was still at stake.

Had 56 years been enough time in which to prepare Earth for its struggle of survival among the great galactic powers? Had the time now arrived to drop the game of hide and seek?

Rhodan believed this, yet there lingered an element of uncertainty. And so he had preferred once more to cause his pursuers to lose his trail.

During the landing on Isan the instruments had detected an unnatural level of radioactivity in the atmosphere. In various locations on the 2 main continents composing the general land mass, the presence of ruins had indicated the occurrence of an atomic war in recent years.

After the space jet had landed, Rhodan had picked up conversations between Killarog and his companions. He had given Pucky, the mouse-beaver, the task of searching for other war survivors on the surface of the planet. By way of fulfilling his assignment, Pucky had brought his parapsychic and paramechanical faculties into play, including teleportation and telepathy.

Rhodan had taken it upon himself to investigate the 2 bunkers which lay in his immediate vicinity. And so it was that he got into a situation that required direct involvement.

Now after the passage of 2 Isan days following his advent, he had both of the bunkers firmly in hand. Reports from Pucky revealed that a total of 11 bunkers had escaped destruction. 5 others had been at the focal point of nuclear impacts and had not been able to withstand the insuperable force of the giant bombs.

According to this the total population of Isan was in the neighbourhood of 100,000 inhabitants. Meanwhile, Perry had learned that the pre-war population had consisted of 3 billion people.

* * * *

Although the conquest of the Sallon bunker was accomplished without much trouble, it was not to Rhodan or Marshall's satisfaction, inasmuch as neither Belal nor the traitor, Havan, had been found.

They had disappeared and according to what Rhodan was able to pick up from various sources, about a hundred heavily armed men had accompanied them.

Rhodan's first impression was that it would be a simple task to find Belal and Havan and to force their capitulation. But as it turned out, they did not seem to be hiding in either one of the bunkers or even anywhere on the surface.

Rhodan was convinced that the Sallon bunker had a branch section or else there was an extra tunnel leading out somewhere, of which only Belal and a few of his confidants were informed. An intensive questioning of prisoners revealed that

none of those confidants had been left behind.

So it became clear to Rhodan that he would have to locate Belal's and Havan's avenue of escape on his own initiative.

He was not yet entertaining any thought that Belal's flight might bring him into personal danger. But since he wished to limit his stay on Isan, he had to make certain that, after his departure, there would be no possibility that Belal or Havan could return and place the new double-bunkered democracy in jeopardy.

* * * *

Belal was not considered by his men to be in a hard-pressed situation, for in a sense he wasn't built that way. He was the sort of person who never considered a situation to be hopeless until his hands were tied and the knife was sticking in his chest. In the absence of the actuality of such a fate, Belal was a dangerous opponent.

"So what do you make of it?" he asked the older man who stood before him.

This man was Malarial, a scientist and a genius in his field. Because he foresaw the possibility of making use of Malanal in the future, Belal had looked after him and cultivated him from the early inception of his plans. With the resources of the Sallon bunker that were at his disposal, he had provided him with an extensive laboratory that was equipped with a considerable amount of valuable apparatus. The rooms in which the laboratory had been installed had been hewn out of the rock about a year after the war and they had acquired 2 secret access passages. The people who had accomplished this work had either been members of his trustworthy honour guard or they had been recruited from work camps and had been caused to disappear.

When the stranger named Perry began to make his weight felt, Belal perceived that his former foresight had not been in vain. Along with his honour guard and trusted cohort Havan, he had retreated into the laboratory and there he was confident that he would remain undiscovered for the time being.

This 'for the time being' was sufficient for his plans. Belal had no intention of tolerating Perry as master of the situation for any great length of time. And Malanal played an important role in his strategy.

Malanal spread his hands to express that sound and foolproof information should not be expected of him. "I have dispatched 2 of your men to the surface, Belal..."

"It is to be hoped," interrupted Belal angrily, "that you've made sure they won't be seen by the vessel out there."

"No. They've approached this task very carefully. They have not emerged from the upper exit; they merely took a couple of stones from the hole and threw them at the vehicle."

Belal wrinkled his brow. "And what was the purpose of that nonsense?"

“Within a few yards of the actual wall of the machine, the stones bounced back from an invisible barrier and fell to the ground. We have here the same phenomenon that was reported to us by the detail that was chasing the prisoners Ivsera and Feriar. The strangers are able to create a protective screen around them that can’t be penetrated by material objects.”

Belal stared into space. “So you think it’s futile to try to attack this machine?” he inquired, finally.

Malanal shook his head. “From my point of view I wouldn’t say it was *entirely* futile.”

Belal became impatient. “Then out with it!”

Malanal bowed slightly. “The stranger who is called Perry,” he explained, “will eventually have to return to his vessel. Since he himself is a material object, he won’t be able to enter unless the protective energy field is turned off at that moment. If we could manage to place the machine under heavy gunfire at that moment, we could probably *destroy* it.”

Belal frowned. “I don’t want to destroy it!” he shouted. “I only want to disable it, so that I can make improvements on some equipment I have in mind.”

Malanal nodded agreement. “That’s possible, too, Belal. It all depends on the firepower you can bring to bear. But that’s not my affair.”

Belal stood up. “Good. I will provide everything that is necessary. I think a couple of 3-inch rocket launchers will be enough to knock out the machine and either kill the strangers or put them out of commission. I’ll place my men immediately at the upper exit... what a stroke of luck that the stranger landed precisely in that particular spot!”

He left the room, without favouring Malanal with another word.

The secret laboratory section of the Sallon bunker consisted of one main corridor and a total of 20 adjacent rooms. 5 rooms had been provided as living quarters for the scientists who worked here and the rest had been furnished as laboratories. During the 7 years that had passed since this installation, the Sallon scientists had pushed their research forward and achieved results that Belal was certain the other bunkers did not possess.

By means of this strategy, Belal secured himself with an absolute superiority against the day when the inhabitants of Isan again emerged on the surface of their world and began to start organizing.

In one of the 20 rooms, Havan of Fenomat had been quartered with 3 bodyguards which Belal had provided him. This was not because Belal was worried about preserving Havan’s life so much as it was that the latter’s character was too much like his own to be trusted.

In the days following the fall of the Sallon bunker, Havan was in a much more dejected state of mind than Belal and Belal began to believe that he regarded their situation as hopeless. Since this was to his advantage for the present, he only told Havan a few unimportant details concerning the conversation with Malanal, which in actuality had been a hopeful development.

Havan nodded dispiritedly when he heard the incomplete report and then Belal withdrew to his own room in order to enjoy a little nap. Havan took pains to leave his door open so that he could be certain that Belal would not be coming back and then he turned to his 3 bodyguards. "Did you see that? He didn't tell me everything. Malanal has given him more information than he's giving out. Most likely there's actually some possibility of overcoming the stranger. I have to know. See if you can get all the facts. You already know what the pay-off for you will be."

The bodyguards nodded obediently. No doubt Belal would not have fallen asleep so easily if he had known how capable Havan was in proselytizing his own men through the device of promises and threats. The 3 bodyguards had ceased fulfilling the duties Belal had assigned to them, even from the first hour, since Havan had promised to place a bunker and personnel at their free disposal just as soon as the stranger and Belal had been overcome and the state of Heyatha and if possible also Othahey had been brought under Havan's control through the use of Malanal and his technological inventions.

The one weak point in Havan's strategy was above all Malanal. Havan had found out that the scientific assistants were faithful to the old man. There was no other access to the secrets of the laboratory than through Malanal himself.

However, Malanal was a man who knew how to keep his distance. Havan was not of the impression that he was in agreement with Belal in all particulars. But when he tried to use this information as a leverage for breaking up the Belal-Malanal relationship, he ran into some opposition. Malanal had made it clear to him that he would work neither for Belal nor Havan but for science alone.

However he was at least disposed to refrain from relating to Belal his conversation with Havan.

* * * *

Perry Rhodan intended to assign Pucky to the search for Belal and Havan as soon as he returned from his inspection trip. As a teleporter, Pucky was capable of 'jumping' around in the area of the Sallon bunker at random and by this means he would be able to discover the hiding place.

However, 2 days after the take-over of the Sallon bunker, Laury reported excitedly over the space jet's radio that Pucky had come back wounded and was unconscious. Apparently he had used the last dregs of his energy to teleport back to the small spacecraft. He was bleeding from a number of wounds that according to Laury's information had been caused by ordinary rifle shots. Laury had sufficient first aid training so that Rhodan could entrust Pucky to her care with confidence. She assured him that the mouse-beaver would be back on his feet in a couple of days.

For the time being, nobody knew what he had run into. Inasmuch as he was also a telepath it wouldn't have been easy for him to fall prey to a sniper's bullet.

Probably he had run afoul of a mechanical trap. In view of the distrust that the survivors of the Isan War had for each other, it was highly possible that cleverly concealed automatic rifle traps or similar devices existed. If Pucky became too reckless he would be highly vulnerable to them.

Pucky's injuries were a very serious setback for Rhodan. Belal and Havan had to be found, otherwise all the efforts he had made to bring new social and political improvements into both bunkers would probably turn out to be of no avail.

In the meantime the people of Fenomat and Sallon had consumed half of the concentrated food on board the space jet. These concentrates were of a type that would sustain a feeling of satiation for about 4 weeks. During that respite, Rhodan hoped that natural, uncontaminated food resources could be developed or else he would have to summon an Earth ship with provisions.

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On the following day, Marshall made an important discovery. Ever since the 2-man conquest of the bunkers was concluded, Marshall had been in Sallon attempting to find a trace of Belal and Havan. For this purpose he had been making a systematic search of the bunker and he finally reached the main power plant area where energy was generated for the air conditioning, electrical illumination and all other purposes.

Marshall's important discovery here was nothing more than pure chance. The fortuitous circumstance was that he no sooner arrived than Malanal started an experiment in his secret laboratory which required a considerable surge of electrical power.

Marshall made some rough calculations and arrived at an answer that showed the total average power requirement for the bunker to be about 200,000 kilowatts. He wasn't so taken by his abilities that he wouldn't have considered the possibility of even a 50% error in his figures but when he took an instrument reading of the main power line he saw that the energy output indicated more than a million kilowatts. And by his estimate this was an impossibility.

He called Rhodan because he was sure that he had at last found a clue. Rhodan responded at once. For a few minutes he arranged to have all connections to the regular bunker shut off. The output of the power plant should have reduced to zero as a result but instead the residual output stood at exactly 800,000 kilowatts and was evidently feeding into unseen secret conduits. This was 4 times the total power load that Marshall had estimated for the whole bunker.

Rhodan took a quarter of an hour to trace out the power leads that were carrying the current. Shortly thereafter the boot-legged power load dropped suddenly to 100,000 kilowatts.

Rhodan was satisfied. "That does it," he said to Marshall. "You wait here. I'm going to bring a heavy disintegrator from the ship. All we have to do is follow these bootleg lines and we'll come to Belal's hideout." He smiled grimly for a

moment and then added: “It wasn’t very clever of him not to have provided his hideaway with a separate power plant. What I’d like to know is what he’s up to using 800,000 kilowatts!”

Rhodan returned to the surface world by the fastest route. The suit he was wearing, which had filled Ivsera with such awe when she first saw him, was a further development of the Arkonide transport industry. It was even a bit less impressive in appearance than the normal models but this was compensated for by the fact that its antigrav generator was 4 times more powerful. The deflector field and the defence screen operated independently from each other, each with its full quota of energy. Under heavy fire it was no longer necessary to dispense with the function of invisibility in order to repel a bombardment.

As soon as he exited from the ground lock, Rhodan rose from the ground and flew close above the grass at a fast pace toward the space jet. Night had fallen and Rhodan noted its strangeness, considering the low-hanging dark red sunball of Wilan and the scarlet heavens choked with endless stars.

He required only a few minutes to arrive at the spaceship. Using his small portable transmitter he gave the automatic code signal that would cut off the defence screen long enough for him to enter the lock.

* * * *

Originally Belal had wanted to carry out his coup alone but Havan had belaboured him so much that he decided to let him come along. In this decision he had not been influenced in the slightest by the report from Havan’s 3 bodyguards that the latter was due for a serious state of depression unless he could have a change. Of course Belal was fully determined to get rid of Havan as soon as possible so that he would not endanger his personal plans but for the time being it was practical for a number of reasons to take him along and allow him to believe that he was important and on an equal standing. For example, Havan had a few cohorts over in Fenomat who would only obey his commands whenever it came to a decisive showdown.

Elimination of the alien machine—which Malanal now believed to be some sort of spaceship—was considered by Belal to be so important that he stationed himself at the exit of the secret lab in the company of Havan and 2 of his most trusted men. The 2 soldiers had placed the rocket launcher in position so that at the deciding moment there would be nothing left to do but to lift up the hatch cover and open fire.

Belal and his companions were provided with a clear view of the strange vehicle, by means of a stereoscopic telescope that only extended its objective lenses a few inches above the ground. The double lens head casing was camouflaged to look like an ordinary rock lying on the ground. Belal was fairly certain that if things began to happen the people inside the ship would not detect the device.

* * * *

Laury had her hands full with all her duties. The sorely wounded mouse-beaver required her care and attention. Of course any danger of infection from his wounds was eliminated by means of the medications available on board the space jet but Pucky was very weak and the restoration of his physical strength had to be monitored carefully.

The mouse-beaver had been conscious for some time and he related to Laury what had happened to him. As Rhodan had surmised, he had gotten into a trap when he tried to have a look inside one of the bunkers. At the time he had not turned on the defence screen of his transport suit because he was operating under the deflector screen and had good reason to believe that nobody would be shooting at an invisible object. In this he had been deceived and now he ruefully recalled that Rhodan had advised him to take no risks and above all not to enter any bunker.

But besides Pucky there was still Count Rodrigode Berceo to worry about. After Rodrigo had persisted at much length and made it perfectly clear that a man's love involved certain 'arrangements of a personal nature', Laury's emotional attachment to the Spanish-Aztec count had weakened to some degree. In addition to this, when it became apparent that his abduction from Earth of the 17th century and his isolation from all technological advancements, plus his long confinement in a zoological museum and his sudden leap into the 21st century, was causing a considerable number of problems and often seemed to shake the very foundations of his mental constitution, even the last vestiges of her feelings for him had faded, to be replaced by a kind of affectionate pity.

Laury had somehow managed to explain to Rodrigo that it was ridiculous to be running around in top boots, scarf and laced cuffs and since then Rodrigo had been wearing the customary work uniform for space travel. But of course it had taken him a little longer to put aside his sword. She had also managed to dissuade him from thinking that he was entitled to a *carte blanche* treatment by everybody just because he was of noble extraction. She had convinced him that what mattered in the present age was to be shrewder and stronger—especially in a situation where the space jet was in flight from Tolimon.

But Laury had overlooked one thing: deeply rooted perspectives were not to be eradicated from one day to the next. And so it was that a strange mixture of notions dominated Rodrigo's mind and it became more difficult for him each day to adapt himself to his new environment.

For example he had striven with a pathetic eagerness to comprehend what kind of a vessel this was that he found himself in. He had grasped that this was a ship of space in which men could fly around among the stars. Inasmuch as his technical world went only as far as the steam engine—the principle of which had once been explained to him—he had been looking for a steam engine ever since

he had seen the space jet in operation for the first time and no one could get it through his head that the spaceship utilized an entirely different principle for generating its driving power.

Rodrigo had learned how to service various controls by pushing this button and that. He knew that he had to press there to turn on the viewscreens or push here to operate the air conditioning. But he did not know how the equipment operated and Laury was convinced that he never would learn.

For this very reason it was a chore in itself to prevent Rodrigo from fooling with the space jet on his own and attempting experiments in order to increase his knowledge.

One night after she had attended to Pucky, Laury found the count inside the ship's maintenance shaft. With an adjustable wrench he had removed the cover plate from the defence screen generator and with the light of a powerful flashlight he was tracing the colour-coded knife switches.

When he heard Laury's footsteps he straightened up and turned to the girl with a smile. "I don't think I'll ever locate that steam engine," he said a bit sorrowfully.

Laury was very angry with him. "You'll wreck this ship yet in the process," she protested. "Come out of there! You know you're not allowed in this section by yourself!"

Rodrigo nodded and obediently climbed up the narrow plastic ladder. When he came into the bridge, a buzzing signal was heard from the main control console.

"Turn on the viewscreen!" Laury ordered. "I think the Chief is here."

Rodrigo complied immediately. The panoramic viewscreen covering the wall of the control room lit up and revealed a night scene of the dark red plain of grass that spread out on all sides of the space jet. Perry Rhodan was standing about 50 yards away from the main lock. Rodrigo saw him take a small apparatus out of his pocket, on which he concentrated for a moment.

A slight quiver ran across the viewscreen. Rhodan put himself in motion and came toward the lock.

* * * *

Belal did not see the stranger until he was only a few paces away from the vessel. He had not ventured to scan the area with the lens head for fear of being discovered. "Watch out!" he whispered. "He's arrived!"

The 2 soldiers knew what they had to do. One of them bent down under the hatch so that it rested on his shoulders. The other took hold of the rocket launcher and stood ready to shove the weapon out on the edge of the exit hole.

Belal could not determine whether or not the protective screen that Malarial had described was turned off, so he waited until the stranger named Perry had reached the vehicle. Trembling in his excitement, he saw that a port opened in the wall of the machine. Where there had been smooth, seamless metal before, a door now

opened swiftly and soundlessly. When the door opened, a shining conveyor belt glided down to the ground in front of Perry's feet. Perry stepped on the belt and permitted himself to be borne upward to the opening.

"Now!" cried Belal. "Open fire!"

The hatch swung on its hinges, making a squeaking and grating sound. With a groan, the soldier shoved up the heavy tube and braced it on the edge of the opening.

The other man dropped down and turned on the fuse switch. Hissing and spitting through a cloud of smoke, the first shot left the barrel and went shrieking toward the ship.

* * * *

Perry picked up the alien thought currents just as he was about to step into the lock. He whirled around and at his first glance he detected a dark hole in the ground about a hundred yards distant, just as something long and round was emerging from it.

He did not hesitate for a second. He threw himself clear of the transport belt and off to one side—in the same moment that Belal's first shot left the barrel of the launcher.

* * * *

Rodrigo froze in bewilderment and did not know what to do. Laury cried out in alarm but her scream was drowned out by the cracking roar of a concussion that rocked the ship and darkened the picture on the panorama viewscreen.

She managed to get to the control console. "Turn on the defence screen!" she called to Rodrigo.

But Rodrigo didn't even know what a defence screen was, much less how one turned it on or off. Something white flashed across the damaged viewscreen. A second explosion shook the ship. Laury was knocked off her feet to the deck. She crawled forward on her knees.

The space jet suffered a 3rd hit before Laury could throw on the defence screens.

But the viewscreen did not light up again. It exhibited a slight sputter when a belated shot came toward the ship and exploded harmlessly against the defence screen outside; but otherwise it was dead.

The ship was damaged.

Rodrigo suddenly came to his senses. "Rhodan is in danger!" he shouted. "I have to go out to him!"

Laury didn't have time to worry about him. "He can take care of himself!" she declared.

But Rodrigo would not be stopped. In a few quick steps he was at the airlock. He operated the opening mechanism and slipped through before the hatch had opened more than half a yard. In his haste he overlooked the fact that he was weaponless—he didn't even have his sword. True to his nature, all he could think of was to help. He could hardly wait for the inner hatch to close. As the outer one opened automatically, Rodrigo darted out, down the lift belt and out onto the plain. "Rhodan!" he shouted. "Rhodan... where are you?"

The defence screen was not able to block anyone who came from inside its perimeter, so Rodrigo did not feel it. He left the protective shield and ran on farther, shouting as he went...

* * * *

"There comes one of them!" cried Belal. He was lying up on the edge of the exit hole. The rocket launcher had ceased firing since its missiles had splattered uselessly against an invisible wall in front of the ship.

Belal always carried his pistol with him. He raised it and took his time until the stranger who had left the ship came closer to him, still shouting and searching about. Then he pulled the trigger and emptied his magazine.

Rodrigo heard the first report. Something struck him with a terrible force in his chest. He toppled over backward and was dead before he struck the ground.

* * * *

The first hit had blasted Rhodan far to one side. His suit's defence screen warded off the main effect of the explosion, and the antigrav generator prevented him from falling to the ground, allowing him to sink down gently.

But the shock wave of the blast had slung him about 200 yards away from the space jet. It took him some time to extricate the small transmitter from his pocket, which he had used moments before to shut off the defence screen. Valuable seconds passed but fortunately Laury succeeded in the meantime in putting the screen back in action.

As Rhodan sent out his code signal he saw a rocket explode at some distance from the walls of the ship. Breathing a sigh of relief, he let himself sink completely to the ground. In order to keep cover, he retraced the distance on foot.

He saw Rodrigo dash out of the ship and heard him call. He answered but Rodrigo didn't hear him. Then he saw a man rise up partially from the hole he had seen before and he witnessed the shooting. He jerked out his weapon and fired blindly at the sniper.

The scorching energy beam overshot the target. And Rodrigo crumpled under the withering pistol fire.

* * * *

“Get out of here!” screamed Belal in terror. “Here comes the stranger!”

He had heard the hiss of the energy blast that missed him by only a few yards and he had seen Perry. The 2 soldiers prepared to pull the long barrel of the launcher back into the tunnel and close the hatch cover but Belal drove them from it. “No time to lose!” he gasped. “Just run—get out!”

They hurried along through the passage, Havan in the lead. In his excitement Belal failed to notice that Havan had suddenly made an astonishing recovery from his recent state of lethargy.

After about a half mile the tunnel made a sharp turn. Belal remained behind and let Havan and the 2 soldiers run onward. When they were out of sight, Belal reached up for a small ring that protruded from an inconspicuous place in the ceiling of the passage. He pulled out a small length of chain toward him and when he let loose of it the chain and the ring returned upward to their original positions.

Belal waited patiently. After a few seconds he heard a roll of thunder and then a moment later the excavated passageway back of the turning point caved in. Clouds of dust welled forward and enshrouded Belal’s figure.

Then he turned and hurried after Havan and the soldiers. The stranger would have a difficult time of it to clear all the rubble away and pick up the trail that led to the secret laboratory.

Nevertheless, a few minutes later after Havan and the 2 soldiers had reached the actual laboratory entrance, he posted a guard of 20 men there and cautioned them to keep their eyes open.

When he was back in his headquarters he received a report from a middleman who had the assignment of keeping an eye on events outside in the Sallon bunker. The situation was favourable. The accomplice told him that only one stranger was left in the bunker. Belal did not feel that this one man could be dangerous to him so he gave the order for everybody to stand by to move out.

Havan heard about it and went to Belal. “What are you planning to do?” he wanted to know.

“We put that ship out of commission,” Belal explained to him, “and now we’re also going to capture its crew.”

“By the Almighty Soul!” groaned Havan. “Do you think that’s so simple a task? The aliens have weapons that we...”

Belal waved away his objections. “Get off that eternal pessimism of yours. Did you look at the stranger from the spaceship that I shot? Didn’t he seem to you to be out of his mind? I think all this time that we’ve given the strangers more credit than they deserve. So what if they have a few superior weapons? It’s only a small crew and if you corner them in a real emergency they lose their heads. No, Havan, our prospects are very good. In just about 2 more days we’re going to have this situation under control!”

Havan left the room without another word. He deliberately acted as though he considered all their plans to be hopeless but secretly he believed that Belal was right.

But in view of this very fact it was high time that Belal was eliminated. Under no circumstances could Havan wait now until the strangers fell into Belal's hands. The triumph that he would harvest then, not to mention the weapons he'd get hold of, would make it impossible to dislodge him from his new position of power.

Havan started his preparations.

* * * *

The damage that the 3 rocket impacts had inflicted on the space jet was more serious than Rhodan had assumed at first. The explosions had impaired the propulsion system to such an extent that it could no longer be used without extensive repairs. A portion of their energy source had ceased functioning. The space jet was no longer capable of generating an artificial gravity field, or even of keeping lights going in all of the interior cabins.

But for Rhodan the most serious item was the fact that the defence screens, which at first had seemed to be in working order, had started to weaken, until finally they ceased to function, one by one. A stray bomb fragment had penetrated the generator shielding and had wreaked havoc in the very heart of the equipment.

To sum it up, the spaceship was more or less defenceless. With the exception of the still functioning main thermo-guns, the ship was not in a condition to fight off any attacker.

Laury had been reasonably composed about Rodrigo's death. Rhodan was pleased that she had long since come to recognize her quick rash of passion for the Aztec-Spanish count as a girlish infatuation. In the present circumstance he had not found it possible to console her over her loss.

5/ SURRENDER—OR ANNIHILATION

In view of the way the enemy had carried out their attack with such shrewdness and swiftness, Rhodan was convinced that they would not desist in their efforts. Together with Laury he had brought the wounded mouse-beaver to the Fenomat bunker because he felt he'd be more secure there. Laury stayed with Pucky to continue nursing him back to health.

Perry's next action was to investigate the tunnel exit that Belal and Havan and the 2 soldiers had used for sneaking up on the space jet. He did not trouble himself with the hatch cover, which had a complicated bolt system. Instead, he eliminated the obstacle with the disintegrator.

He then determined that the subterranean bore had been caved in beyond the entrance for a distance of at least a hundred yards. To clear a hundred yards of debris out of the way would not have presented any difficulty, using the disintegrator, but Rhodan was quite certain that Belal would have posted an armed force on the other side. So he opted in favour of rejoining Marshall in the Sallon bunker's power plant area, which the latter had not left since he had made his mysterious discovery.

The spaceship was left behind, empty and unguarded. However, Rhodan had taken time out to put through a hypercom message to Earth, in which he ordered another spaceship. The message was sharply beamed and pulse-coded in bursts of 2-millionths of a second. The likelihood of its being intercepted anywhere by eavesdroppers was just about dead zero. In his dispatch Rhodan had furnished the galactic position of Isan and ordered that the ship be crammed to capacity with provisioning.

* * * *

Feriar stood in front of a distillation retort and watched with interest as the greenish-brown fluid boiled persistently over the low flame of a gas burner. The process released a dark vapour into the upper tubing, from which it emerged into a condensing chamber at the end of the setup. Here it gathered into a clear, odourless liquid.

Feriar was interested in chemistry—especially for such nourishing chemistry as was involved here—and would like to have asked a few questions. But Ivsera and

Ivan, who were the specialists, had no time for him. They were very busy. There was still burdened with the task of sorting and stacking the articles of clothing here and there; he might have had time for questions but he was no more an expert than Feriar himself.

While Feriar was still staring at the seething brew in the retort, the laboratory door opened and someone shouted: "There's somebody here who's looking for that stranger named Perry. If he can't be located, the man wants to speak with Feriar or Ivsera."

Without interrupting her work, Ivsera called out: "Send him to Feriar. Feriar—will you do me the favour?"

Feriar's curiosity was aroused. He went to the door and in addition to the man who had called him he saw a strongly built man who wore an expression of almost fierce haughtiness. He was dressed like all men in Fenomat and, recently, Sallon. He was unarmed. Feriar had not seen him before.

"Do you know where the stranger is?" inquired the man.

Feriar shook his head. "No, but I might be able to locate him."

The stocky one took a piece of paper out of the single pocket that remained in his short trousers which were more like swimming trunks. He handed it to Feriar. "Then do it!" he said somewhat harshly. "Read this and decide for yourself if it's important or not."

Before Feriar recovered from his astonishment, the sturdy man turned around and marched back along the corridor. Feriar unfolded the sheet of paper and read:

The words had been written with a typewriter. There was no signature to the note.

"Tonight at 29 hours, Belal will attempt to capture the stranger's ship and its crew."

Feriar read it twice and then looked around for the messenger who had brought it. "Where is he...?" he asked, confused.

"He left," answered the other man who had announced him.

"Run after him!" Feriar ordered. "Bring him back!"

The man hurried away.

Feriar went back into the laboratory and showed Ivsera the note. When Ivsera read it she did not hesitate to shut down the distillation work that she had just finished setting up. "We have to find Perry," she said gravely. "This is important. As far as I know, his ship is badly damaged. He hardly has weapons to defend it with."

"That's right," admitted Feriar, "but where is he?"

"Probably there, in the vessel."

"And if he isn't? Then one of us will stay there until Belal shows up and we'll grab him."

Ivsera pondered this. "Over in Sallon there's that friend of his who is called Marshall. If we inform him about this, he can get in touch with Perry."

Feriar nodded. "Good. You carry on here... I'll try to find Marshall."

At this moment the man entered whom Feriar had sent to look for the messenger. "He's disappeared...!" he panted, out of breath.

Feriar dismissed the issue. "That's alright. I should have been quicker on my toes."

Ther had overheard the proceedings and now he dropped his work and joined Feriar. "I don't know," he said peevishly, "I've always had the impression that anybody else could sort and stack rags as well as I can. But this matter here is more in my line. Why don't you let me go to Sallon?"

Feriar frowned thoughtfully. "You haven't even got a weapon in case you run into trouble over there."

"That figures," grinned Ther. "So give me yours."

Ivsera laughed. "Both of you go!" she advised. "You'll probably have to search for Marshall, anyway... and 4 eyes are better than 2."

Ther made a mock bow. "I always knew," he said, ceremoniously, "that you were a girl with brains."

* * * *

"From here on it goes straight ahead!" called Marshall.

Rhodan put his heavy weapon aside and looked into the cable shaft that had been opened up with the last charge of the disintegrator. "What direction is that?" he asked.

Marshall considered. "I've had time to get a good mental picture of the bunker layout. I'd say if the cable shaft doesn't make any turns, Belal's hideout is less than a mile from the main shaft, close to the bank of the Ovia River."

"Why there, particularly?" queried Rhodan, puzzled. He didn't have to wait for Marshall's answer because he could clearly read his thoughts: *Because Belal is using an independent water source. Maybe he thinks his water bill will be cheaper, so he settled near the river.*

Rhodan measured the cable shaft. It was squarish but fairly flat, about half a yard wide and 6" high. It would have to be enlarged if it were to be used as a crawl hole to get to Belal's hiding place.

"I've been wondering," he said, "if I could wait until our battle wagon arrives. At the most that would be about a day and a half from now, all difficulties considered. I'd prefer to have a few more hands on deck here if I'm going to burrow my way a mile through the Earth."

Marshall nodded. "But you don't know all the mischief Belal might be able to start in the meantime, right?"

Rhodan smiled. "Precisely. And we haven't forgotten Havan, either."

* * * *

“28 o’clock,” grumbled Ther. “It’s time we were finding Marshall.”

Feriar looked about him nervously. In the meantime they had checked out 15 different pieces of information concerning Marshall’s whereabouts and in spite of this they had not yet located the stranger. He seemed to have disappeared. Nobody had seen either one of the 2 aliens in the past 2 hours.

In the process of their search they had gone from the lowest level to the 35th. They regretted the fact that Perry had not considered it necessary to provide them with one of his instruments that he used for conversing with his people.

They were walking along a narrow, dimly lit side passage when Ther suddenly grasped Feriar’s arm roughly to halt his headlong march and shoved him back against the wall.

“Hey—!” protested Feriar angrily.

“Quiet”; whispered Ther. “Take a look... up there ahead!”

Ther’s eyes were sharper than Feriar’s. Up ahead on the right side wall of the passage he had seen the narrow crack that began to open. With Feriar he saw the crack widen to a man-high opening, from which 2 heavily armed men emerged cautiously into view.

In the darkness between 2 dim lamps, Ther and Feriar pressed themselves against the wall. Moreover, they were about 50 yards distant from the mysterious opening. Ther was certain that the 2 sentinels had not seen them.

One of the 2 soldiers turned and beckoned into the opening. Then he stepped aside and allowed another 50-armed men move out past him into the passageway. The last of them was a small, fat, bald-headed man: Belal!

Ther felt Feriar’s startled reaction behind him. “Keep calm!” he whispered. “We can’t do anything about him here.”

Belal marched along in the midst of his men in an opposite direction. Ther and Feriar watched him until he and his troops had disappeared around a curve in the passageway. A few moments later they heard a great outcry up ahead, accompanied by a metallic clattering and the roar of gunfire.

“Belal is pushing through!” gasped Ther. “If we only knew where that stranger is hiding!”

* * * *

For a length of about 100 yards, Marshall had so enlarged the cable shaft that a tall man could stand and walk in it. He had just paused to take a breather and to rest his arm from the weight of the disintegrator when he heard Rhodan call to him. He ran back through the widened shaft.

“Listen!” urged Rhodan, as he lowered himself down out of the cable shaft into the large room of the power plant. “Do you sense anything?”

Marshall concentrated. Somewhere in the vicinity, somebody was thinking

strongly and impatiently of him. “Someone is looking for me,” he said wonderingly.

Rhodan nodded. “I think it’s the man called Ther. It seems as if he wishes to deliver something of importance to you. You’d better contact him!”

Marshall opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. He heard footsteps clattering along a side passage that opened a few yards away and he called Ther’s name. A moment later, Ther turned into the corridor, sweating and panting; he recognized Marshall and threw his hands in the air. “Thank Heaven!” he yelled. “We’ve found you at last!” Then he stopped in astonishment. “Didn’t you just now call my name?” When Marshall nodded, he tried to continue: “How come you knew that...!”

Marshall cut him off. “Later. What’s so important...?”

Feriar pressed past Ther. In his hand was the note that the messenger had brought him. “We thought that with your help we could find Perry. It’s important—read that...”

Marshall read the few terse words of the message and then arched his brows. “Come with me,” he summoned the two. “Perry is right at hand.”

Rhodan read the note carefully. Then he turned to Feriar. “Are you sure this isn’t a trap?”

Feriar spread his hands. “I have no idea. I had no thought other than to give you the note. You will have to draw your own conclusions.”

Rhodan narrowed his eyes in thought. “Who gave you this note?”

“I don’t know.”

“But I do. It’s from Havan!”

Feriar’s eyes bugged wide. “From Havan?” he asked, amazed. “But Havan has a common cause with Belal!”

Rhodan smiled. “Is that so? Are you sure? Who besides Havan could know what Belal’s plans are?”

Feriar didn’t answer. Instead, Ther reported on what they had seen in the other passageway. “To get to your vessel on foot from the bunker exit, Belal and his men will need about three-quarters of an hour,” he added. “With their weapons they’ll be able to push through the bunker here without trouble. They’ll reach their target not later than 29 hours.”

Rhodan nodded. “Good. Well have to spoil their fun. You two come behind us. We’ll be able to use more help, once we’ve put Belal and his men out of action.”

* * * *

The grassy plain presented its usual mood of dark-red gloom as Marshall and Rhodan moved toward the space jet. In their transport suits they moved at top speed, flying low above the surface. They had activated their deflector shields so that Belal would have no chance to discover them before they decided it was the

proper time.

Belal and his men had benefited by a considerable head start. Marshall and Rhodan overtook them when they were already starting to regroup themselves for an attack, within a hundred yards of the ship.

Rhodan saw that they carried rifles and light grenade throwers. Each grenade thrower was operated by a 2-man team. The men piled ammunition in the grass and arranged the weapons so that they would have a clear field of fire.

Marshall and Rhodan shot through the open airlock in the side of the ship. Marshall remained lying in an observation position within the lock in order to keep Rhodan posted on what was going on outside, since the optical equipment was no longer functioning. Meanwhile, Rhodan fired up the heavy thermo-guns and waited for Marshall's first target instructions.

The latter's verbal guidance would not be exact. Nobody could direct such heavy calibre ordnance accurately enough, on a sight basis alone, to be able to hit a bulls-eye. However, this class of impulse-ray weaponry did not require precise targets. Thermo-guns could be fanned out in their coverage so as to sweep a wider area. Moreover the enemy did not possess equal firepower, so that it wouldn't be too dangerous to miss on the first shot.

* * * *

Feriar and Ther were able to observe how Belal and his troops had cut their way through the bunker.

While Rhodan and Marshall were subduing the Sallon bunker, Belal had taken timely action to bring his bodyguard and most of the weapons that were available in Sallon into Malanal's secret laboratory. There only remained in Sallon proper a few old-fashioned rifles and pistols.

When the Sallon people saw Belal appear with half of his forces, a few brave Isanians tried to block his way. A reward has been posted for Belal's capture and also Rhodan had managed to explain to the people what danger a dictator like Belal represented for the new civilization of Isan.

But Belal shot his way ruthlessly through all opposition. The few old rifles available in Sallon were ineffectual against the machine weapons of his men. A few deaths resulted in addition to a string of wounded. After that nobody dared to even get in his way, much less attempt to detain him.

When Feriar and Ther tried to use the main elevator in order to follow Rhodan and Marshall outside, there was a delay. All available lifts were occupied and in motion. It was a quarter of an hour before they could get in and start upward.

In the groundlock were 2 sentinels that Rhodan had posted in anticipation of Belal's attempt to take the bunker. But Belal and his troops had simply ignored them. The 2 men reported that they had marched right past them. The guards had refrained from offering any resistance because it would have resulted in a pointless sacrifice.

Feriar and Ther left the airlock structure and headed obliquely up the hill in the direction of the spaceship. Ther strained his ears but for the present he could not hear any sounds of battle.

“I’d sure like to know,” he said excitedly but his words were cut off by a gasp of surprise.

They had reached the crest of the hill and were about to go down past the former city of Fenomat when a file of men rose up almost soundlessly from the grass. At first glance Ther thought that they were a part of Belal’s forces but then he heard a nagging sort of laugh in the dim red twilight and he saw a small, wizened man approach him.

“Whom have we here?” asked the newcomer scornfully and he pressed close to Ther. “Ah-h-h... good old Ther, friend and champion of Killarog, famed late member of the Council...”

“Watch yourself!” warned Ther angrily. “You’re liable to get hurt!”

The small man stepped back a pace and shouted: “Bind both of them!”

His men charged upon Ther and Feriar. Feriar knew beforehand that resistance here was useless but Ther flailed mightily about him. It was against his nature to let himself be taken without a fight. He knocked a few of his opponents out of the way and freed himself briefly but the odds were too great. Ther finally felt his arms and legs being bound with cords.

“There now!” whined the small man. “Are you still so cocky?”

Ther glared at him in rage. “Wait, Havan! One of these days I’ll settle the score with you!”

Havan did not appear to be impressed by the threat. He turned to his men and shouted: “We’ll take them along. Take care that they don’t drag their feet too much. We have to be at our objective by midnight!”

* * * *

“Half again to the right, sir,” called Marshall. “If you fan wide enough you’ll take 2 grenade launchers at the same time.”

Rhodan took his time. He knew what would happen if he fired too quickly. Belal would perceive his danger and pull back as fast as possible. And that wasn’t what Rhodan intended. Belal had to have his wings clipped, once and for all.

With this in mind he called back to Marshall: “Tell me when they have come within 20 yards!”

* * * *

Belal saw the disc shape of the vessel loom up before him in the reddish darkness. If he considered all angles of the situation, he had to conclude that no more untoward events or surprises would occur. In their push forward they had

long since passed the point where the stranger, Perry, had paused in order to cut off the ship's defensive screen. There was obviously no more such screen otherwise they would not have been able to come this far.

All they had to do was sit here, set up the grenade launchers and pot-shot the vessel to pieces.

This they would have done were it not for the fact that Belal wanted to take the strangers alive and also to pirate the equipment which lay concealed inside the spaceship. But would it be a more difficult task to sneak up on the vessel and force the crew to surrender at gunpoint?

It shouldn't be, actually—and yet Belal was not entirely at ease about it. All at once he wasn't so sure that he was correct in having measured the strangers by the actions of that nervous, flighty fool that he had shot down so easily the previous night.

With a heavy curse he banished his misgivings. "Forward!" he ordered his men. "Let's take the last stretch!"

At this time they were not more than 30 yards away from the ship. With much less caution but moving more swiftly now, they all crept forward. Belal looked around and noticed the short, stubby barrels of 2 grenade launchers sticking out of the grass. He nodded his satisfaction. If there were any resistance, the launchers would go into action.

Only 20 yards to go.

The airlock opening yawned darkly in the hull of the ship. Belal couldn't understand why it had been left open but he did not consider it to be a sign of danger.

15 more yards!

Belal rose up halfway and widened his eyes at the alien ship as a blinding white ray as thick as a man's thigh shot forth from a porthole he hadn't noticed before. He couldn't close his eyes in time to prevent being blinded instantly by the brightness of it. He wasn't able to see.

Filled with terror he fell flat forward into the grass. But in the same instant the ground lurched under him in the midst of a cracking thunder and he was thrown a few yards to one side. Fragments of flak whistled through the air and rained down around him.

When the thunderous report subsided he made out the sound of wild shouting. Somebody yelled that 2 grenade throwers together with their ammunition had been blown to bits but there followed another explosion as the scorching white beam of energy found a 3rd grenade launcher and its stack of ammunition.

Despair gripped Belal. He got up and ran in the direction of his previous spot. He carried a machine pistol under his arm and fired it wildly about him until the ammo belt was empty. He heard cries and didn't know if they came from his men or from the strangers. He wasn't able to see a thing.

He ran, twisted and stumbled until he collided with a cold, hard object. The impact knocked him back onto the ground, where he lay for a while half-

stupefied.

And when he finally tried to get up he suddenly felt a bomb explode in his brain. There was a blinding flash, a clap of thunder and then Belal's battle came to an end.

* * * *

The battle, itself, was over. With one well-aimed shot, Marshall had stunned Belal with his shock-gun. Rhodan had blasted the last grenade launcher out of existence, along with its ammunition.

Inasmuch as the destruction of the grenade throwers removed the major threat, Rhodan left his position and came out to the lock exit. He demanded to speak to a negotiator and since Belal wasn't in a condition to exercise his stubbornness at the moment, Rhodan's request was very quickly complied with.

He was short and to the point. He gave Belal's men a choice between surrender and annihilation. They did not take more than 5 minutes to decide on capitulation. Belal, who would no doubt have objected to this choice, was still unconscious.

His men lay down their weapons and crouched in a huddled group together in the trampled grass, under cover of the shock-guns in the hands of Rhodan and Marshall.

6/ SURRENDER—OR ANNIHILATION

Ivsera hardly noticed when the laboratory door opened. She paid no attention until Irvin emitted a cry of astonishment. Then she jumped up from her stool and stared at the 2 men who stood in the doorway.

One of them she had never seen before. He appeared to be slightly stupid but the machine pistol he carded under his arm in fire readiness served to discourage any laughter over his mental state.

However, Ivsera knew the other one—only too well. He followed her every movement with that same mocking, presumptive grin that Ivsera hated him for.

Havan!

When he observed her shocked reaction, he said, “There’s no reason to be afraid.” He called across the laboratory, “You know in what way you can be safe with me.”

Ivsera knew what he meant but at the moment she was not convinced that she would have to beg Havan for anything. Perry was close by. So was Ther. And Feriar would back her up.

She shouted at him angrily. “Get out of here as fast as you can! Otherwise you will be executed!”

Havan made an ugly grimace. “Do you think so?” he asked and he came into the laboratory. “I have put off this visit until I could be sure that the entire bunker was in my hands. Look there!”

He motioned to the soldier in the doorway. The latter made a gesture to others behind him and a few moments later the bound figures of Ther and Feriar were shoved into the room.

Ivsera paled. She didn’t think of Perry just then. Perry was a stranger and nobody knew what he would do. But Ther was a strong, intelligent man. She had always felt safe in his protection and that was the real reason she had assigned him to sorting and stacking the clothing in the laboratory.

Havan had captured Ther and Feriar. He asserted that the entire bunker was now in his hands. So what hope was left?

Without revealing her inner fears, she stood there motionlessly as Havan approached her. “May your heart burst!” she shouted at him in sudden anger.

Havan stopped and waved to the guard. “Tie her up, too,” he ordered, as he leered at her meaningfully.

* * * *

Laury would have felt better if she were somewhat acquainted with the people she suddenly had to contend with. Everyone was concerned about her and the mouse-beaver but every few minutes she was confronted with a new strange face and it irritated her.

She was waiting for Rhodan or Marshall to come back. But the hours passed without her seeing either of them.

Finally, she was not surprised to see a heavily armed man enter her room and stare at her.

“What is it?” she asked.

The armed man didn’t take his eyes off her.

“Stop looking at me like that!” she demanded. “What do you want here?”

Laury had not taken advantage of the special short training course that Rhodan had set up for the purpose of learning how to speak the language of this world fluently. Laury spoke the more elegant Arkonide tongue that was used almost everywhere in the galaxy but nevertheless the man understood her.

“I’m looking for *you!*” he answered.

“What for?”

“To take you prisoner.”

Laury jumped. In the last moment she remembered the weapon that she was carrying. But before she could move her hand, the man aimed his gun with a warning: “Just relax where you are or I’ll shoot!”

Laury obeyed. She cast a desperate glance in Pucky’s direction but the mouse-beaver lay motionlessly on a couch in the back of the room, sleeping in exhaustion, oblivious to what went on around him.

Laury did not know, now that she was in Havan’s power, that Havan was the undisputed lord of the Fenomat bunker...

* * * *

Rhodan became impatient when Feriar and Ther did not show up at the appointed time. “I have an uneasy premonition,” he said to Marshall in English. “Don’t forget Havan. Heaven only knows what kind of skullduggery he may have cooked up!”

“Hm-m-m,” mumbled Marshall and looked aside. “We might as well let these men go. Without weapons they can’t be dangerous to anybody.”

Rhodan sprang to his feet. “Good. Get rid of them. I’ll try to reach Laury.”

Marshall took care of his chore in a hurry. He pressed the helmet of his transport suit against the anti-radiation helmet of the nearest prisoner and shouted:

“Make tracks, you men! You’re free. But make sure you’re not seen again in dangerous company!”

Using his helmet radio, the man transmitted this information to his fellow prisoners. They hesitated momentarily as though they could not believe the good fortune that had befallen them. But finally they ran off and disappeared into the dark red night.

Marshall did not bother about them any further. They would try to reach one of the 2 bunkers without being seen and they would mix among the people. Deprived of their weapons they would be happy if no one were to recognize them as members of Belal’s bodyguard.

What was of major concern was the fact that Rhodan wasn’t able to contact Laury on the telecom. Laury did not answer.

Rhodan shoved the small telecom instrument back into his pocket and attempted to reach Laury by telepathic means. Although he was capable of this to a small degree and under very favourable conditions, Laury herself was a telepath like Marshall. Rhodan’s mental call reached her, unhindered by all the intervening earth and masonry it had to penetrate.

5 minutes later, Rhodan knew as well as Marshall what had happened in the bunker. Meanwhile, Laury and the sleeping mouse-beaver had been removed with the rest of Havan’s important prisoners to the biochemical laboratory, where they were locked in. Conversation was not forbidden, so Ther and Feriar related what they had learned en route from Havan himself.

Havan had talked Belal into leaving half of his task force behind while the latter was taking possession of the Fenomat bunker. Belal had considered the plan to be useful and feasible and moreover he had been convinced that his half of the bodyguard would be sufficient to take over the alien ship.

Belal had not known that the enemy had been informed about his plan. The note delivered by Havan’s messenger had accomplished 2 objectives at the same time: Belal was eliminated and the strangers found themselves—outside the bunker so that Havan could go about his work undisturbed.

Meanwhile the communication between Sallon and Fenomat had been interrupted. Havan was in complete mastery of the situation in Fenomat and Laury had been able to learn that he was sending a negotiator to Rhodan who would discuss with him the conditions affecting release of his important prisoners.

On the other hand, Rhodan left it up to Laury to undertake any measure within her power to free herself and the others. Laury had been deprived of any weapons but she still had her paramechanical gift of being able to disintegrate matter.

Rhodan advised her: “I’m completely certain that Havan and his people have never heard of parapsychic faculties and similar wild talents such as yours. Their global atom war only happened 8 years ago; there hasn’t been enough time yet for development of mutational changes. But just remember that even a mutant isn’t immune to rifle bullets. You have to avoid any provocation of Havan or his men. You’ll have to make your own arrangements with the other prisoners. At the

moment we can't help them. The minute Havan got wind that we had entered the bunker he would have all of you shot. We have to wait until our help arrives from Earth."

* * * *

Laury began to rack her brains. A number of ideas came to her, which she rejected only to search for more. It was only slowly that a plan began to emerge.

The greatest obstacle was that 3 guards had been stationed in the laboratory. Although there was no restriction against the prisoners conversing with one another, nevertheless the sentinels made it a point to always overhear what they talked about.

Laury rolled on her side so that she was closer to Ivsera. By means of her facial expression she alerted Ivsera that she wanted to say something to her without being overheard by the guards. In some doubt and wonderment, Ivsera returned the signal that she understood.

But Laury turned on her back again; she closed her eyes and concentrated.

She imagined that she was standing in front of the wall that formed part of the passage running parallel to the laboratory. In her mind's eye she attempted to trace out uneven or weak portions of the material within the masonry and the bright grey wall plastering. She visualized each individual joint and seam—then flashed a command to her brain that unleashed the disintegrating energy from a mutant paramechanical portion of the pineal region and concentrated it on the visualized target she held in her mind.

The results were terrifying.

In the wall appeared a needle-thin crack, which the tremendous pressure of the supported earth mass widened in another moment to a long fissure. Seconds later the whole wall collapsed over a length of 10 yards. Fragments of masonry plunged into the corridor and an avalanche of damp, cold earth followed it with a thundering impact.

The 3 guards moved instantly to the door. Laury saw a dark brown mass of loose earth pour in from the passageway and come to rest a yard or so inside the laboratory. The doorway was half-choked with rubble. The guards crawled through and shouted for help.

Laury turned again to Ivsera. "Try to get yourself taken to Havan," she whispered. "Distract him and flaunt yourself at him! I want his attention to be diverted for at least 15 minutes. Try to make him keep his men out while you're with him. Do you understand?"

With narrowed eyes, Ivsera nodded. Laury's assignment was the most repugnant one she had ever received in her life but she didn't oppose it. This strange woman had a definite objective in mind and even though she had not explained it to Ivsera, the latter was nevertheless thoroughly convinced that she had to do what was asked of her.

Their rescue depended upon it and in a situation like this the strangers were the only ones who could bring salvation.

* * * *

The 3 guards finally came back. They had been able to determine that their communication with the rest of the bunker had not been blocked. The caved-in earth had only obstructed half of the corridor. A group of prisoners was put to work shovelling the earth into small carts and hauling it away. Just how the cave-in had been caused, nobody knew.

Ivsera called one of the guards to her. "Tell Havan I want to make him a proposition," she blurted out.

The guard grinned. "Anybody could say that," he retorted inanely.

"Do what she says!" interrupted another guard impatiently.

The sentinel went on his way. In a little while he came back and untied Ivsera, then helped her to her feet. "Come with me," he ordered.

Ivsera turned to look at the alien woman. Laury winked at her encouragingly and so Ivsera permitted herself to be led away, slightly mollified.

Havan had set up his headquarters in the same corridor only 5 rooms away. As Ivsera had suspected, he was surrounded by bodyguards. But after Ivsera was brought in he sent the men away, together with the door guards.

He smiled and offered the young woman a seat. He remained standing but came closer to her. "Well, I hear you've had a change of mind," he said. "Is that true?"

Ivsera shrugged. "I don't know," she answered. "What is it you want in order to free the people who have been imprisoned with me?"

Havan laughed. "For that I want *you!*"

Ivsera shuddered. But she pulled herself together and managed to question him calmly. "Who is going to guarantee that you'll keep the bargain?"

Havan became eager. "If you wish we can put it on paper and sign it in the presence of witnesses."

You old crook, thought Ivsera disgustedly. *The witnesses would be your own men and they'd make sure to keep their mouths shut if you broke the contract.*

However, she pretended to consider the proposition. Somewhere in the other rooms a faint rumble became audible but neither Havan nor Ivsera concerned themselves about it. 15 minutes, she thought tensely. She had to keep him distracted for just 15 minutes.

The door opened suddenly and an armed guard rushed in. But he had not even opened his mouth to make his announcement before Havan shouted angrily at him: "Get out of here! Who told you you could come in here unannounced? Get out, I say!"

The guard hesitated but when Havan produced a gun and aimed it at him he turned about and departed hastily."

* * * *

After the guard had taken Ivsera away, Laury began with her work at once. She caused the right sidewall of the laboratory to cave in and this succeeded in sending the remaining guards out into the corridor in confused, shouting flight.

But now a hole gaped in the laboratory wall that was large enough to admit a full-grown person and which also revealed a portion of the neighbouring room. Laury also broke down a part of the farther wall beyond this. Then she disintegrated her bonds and simply shook them loose. So far the 2 guards had not come back. There was no one other than the other prisoners to see that she got to her feet and passed through the hole in the wall into the adjacent room.

Laury could sense Ivsera's anxious thoughts. She could not be very far away—perhaps 3 or 4 rooms farther on. Laury pushed through the 2nd hole in the next wall and entered an apparently empty room. Outside she heard shouts and calls but when she placed her ear to the next wall over she heard no sound coming from the next room beyond.

Laury concentrated and broke open a 3rd aperture, through which she clambered agilely into an equally empty, dark room. Ivsera's thoughts had become more distinct.

Finally, Ivsera nodded to Havan, as he stood in front of her waiting for an answer. "I believe we can make an agreement," she said, a bit uncertainly.

Havan beamed. He grasped for her hand and she gave it to him—unwillingly and with abhorrence.

"I didn't dream, my girl," he stammered happily, "that you would still consider it. But now..."

He released her hand and ran to the table that he had been sitting behind originally. Impatiently he jerked open a drawer, brought out a stack of paper sheets and threw them on the table. He scabbled in his pocket for a writing instrument.

Ivsera was startled no less than Havan himself when a crack appeared suddenly in the wall on their right, which ran from the ceiling to the floor and then brought the wall crashing down a moment later. Pieces of masonry scattered about in a rising cloud of dust.

Ivsera had jumped up with a cry of fright. Havan had fallen back out of his chair and rolled against the rear wall. Through the dust clouds Ivsera could see him with his arms crossed protectively over his head.

There on the rubble from the wall stood the strange woman, Laury. Ivsera stared at her uncomprehendingly. She saw her motioning to her but she did not understand what she wanted. Laury pointed to Havan, who still lay there motionlessly. Her gestures became impatient.

Then Ivsera finally got the message. With 2 or 3 quick steps she was behind

Havan and before he knew what was happening she pulled his miniature pistol from his belt, released the safety catch and aimed it at him.

“Stand up!” she yelled at him. “Your game is finally at an end!”

* * * *

The rest was easy. In the general confusion it was a simple matter for Laury to free the other prisoners as soon as they were all brought into the laboratory. Ther became his old fire-eating self and overpowered the guard who had appropriated Laury’s stun-gun and only when Ther made his attack did others become aware that things were not in order with the prisoners.

Following Laury’s instructions carefully, Ther made good use of the alien weapon and as the guards came hurrying in one by one he sent them crashing unconscious to the floor of the laboratory.

All final attempts to recapture the prisoners were abandoned. The news that Havan was himself in the prisoners’ hands broke down all remaining fighting spirit on the part of the insurgents. They knew the reins of power had slipped from their hands and now they sought by cooperation to counteract the penalty that they had earned through their collaboration with Havan.

All that the sensational new situation required to make Laury and her former fellow prisoners completely victorious was the appearance of a giant airship over the region of Fenomat, such as no one had ever seen before, and which now manoeuvred for a landing.

* * * *

The Earth had sent the newly commissioned ship, *Drusus*. The vessel was spherical in shape and 5000 feet in diameter. In fact, it was the mightiest ship that had ever been seen on Isan.

True to Rhodan’s instructions, the commander of the *Drusus* had only taken on board a minimum crew and the most indispensable weapons. On the other hand, every available room was crammed full with containers of provisions.

The *Drusus* held 20,000 megatons of food, of which half consisted of high-concentrate nourishment. It was an easy guess that the planet’s 100,000 inhabitants would be able to last a century with these provisions.

But 100 years was enough even for the dangerous, long-lived Strontium-90 radiation caused by the war to subside to a safe level. In 100 years the inhabitants of Isan would be able to start producing natural sources of food without danger. Of course until that time they would have to get by on the gift of provisions which the Earth had provided.

There was something else that the *Drusus* brought with it: bad news. Commander Harrings, who had brought the mighty ship safely and undamaged

from the Earth to the centre of the Milky Way, immediately requested a conference with Rhodan after the landing. This he was granted at once.

Rhodan learned that Earth patrol ships in all sectors of the galaxy had detected a heavy activity of Arkonide and other spaceships. The ship movements had been registered according to course and coördinates and fed into the great positronicon in Terrania, which had just finished absorbing Rhodan's own data concerning the situation on Tolimon. With an astounding probability factor, the computer had arrived at the conclusion that the Arkonide Empire had been alerted by those events and that it appeared to have made a connection between them and Rhodan, who had disappeared from the scene over half a century before. In the opinion of the positronicon, the things that had happened on Tolimon, and above all the way in which they happened and were carried out, constituted sufficient evidence for the Arkonide robot brain to draw a conclusion that everything pointed almost unequivocally to Rhodan as the perpetrator.

The interlude that Perry Rhodan had won for himself and the Earth by misleading the Springer fleet 50 years ago, was at an end. The Empire had begun once more to set out in search of the Earth.

* * * *

For Rhodan this meant that he had to cut short his sojourn on Isan as quickly as possible and return to the Earth.

It was disappointing to him to have to leave so soon. After having fallen so unwittingly into the affairs of Isan he had conceived of many plans for these people, among which the most important was to stabilize relationships in the highest sense of human dignity.

Moreover, he had hoped to satisfy his own curiosity. On the first day of his arrival he had been surprised to hear the inhabitants speaking a form of the Arkonide language—although of course an ancient form. He had assumed that they were descendants of Arkonide emigrants who had penetrated here to the centre of the Milky Way about 10,000 years ago during the first epoch of colonization. Presumably their connection with the home world of Arkon had been severed shortly thereafter. The miraculous Arkonide technology had fallen into oblivion and the population of Isan had fallen back into barbarism. At the start of their great war they had been more or less at the same level of culture as the Earth was a hundred years ago.

Rhodan was convinced that there was some clue to the origin of the Isan people hidden away in the archives of the bunker but now there was no time left to rummage through such records. Earth called.

Rhodan arranged for 2 commuter craft to be brought out of the *Drusus* launching locks, each manned by a 10-man crew. The auxiliary ships were fitted out with weaponry so that the small crews would be superior in fighting power over any surviving force on the face of Isan. These 20 men were also assigned the

task of apportioning the food provisions of the *Drusus* throughout the land in a fair and proper manner.

Rhodan appointed Feriar, Ther and Ivsera as chief commissioners over the Fenomat and Sallon bunkers and ordered the crews of both auxiliary ships to give them military support in the performance of their duties. He enjoined the 3 chief commissioners to make sure that their position of leadership would not be permanent and that they should be replaced as soon as possible by a duly elected governing board.

In this connection, Ivsera commented: “When you came here I had already gotten tired of being passive and idle and I didn’t want to hear anymore about women keeping out of politics. But I had never dreamed that within just a few days I’d become a chief of my bunker!”

Rhodan smiled but before he could reply, they were interrupted by Ther. “Just don’t get so snooty, girl! You’re not alone in this, you know.”

“Don’t worry, this is only temporary glory,” retorted Ivsera. “It’s enough to know at least I made it!”

Rhodan grinned. “You know, you may be looking at this whole thing a little out of proportion. I don’t want to intrude in your private affairs but I’d like to think that what you need is a man who’ll set your head straight once in awhile and show you what it’s really all about.”

Ivsera lowered her gaze toward the floor.

“That’s what I say too!” said Ther. “For the past few days—ever since she brought me into the lab and started ordering me around like a robot—I’ve been trying to attract her attention. But there was only one time she ever even gave me a friendly little smile...”

Both Rhodan and Feriar broke up the little tableau with irrepressible laughter. But Ther and Ivsera remained immobile, with expressions as serious as their thoughts.

* * * *

A few hours later the *Drusus* blasted off.

The Isanians had had their miracle: the population of the planet had been at the point of extinction but thanks to the help of a handful of strangers from another world their demise had been averted and the Planet of the Damned had new hope. Saviours from a distant planet had arrived with incomprehensible and uncanny powers and had spared no effort in applying them to what they thought just. They had re-instituted order and stilled the pangs of hunger. They had made possible that which had been considered impossible but a few short weeks before: Isan’s re-awakening to a new and promising life.

Isan would not forget the good Samaritans. Their reverence and veneration included the dead man whose lonely grave lay where the strangers’ ship had first

landed, a man who actually had nothing to do with the crisis on Isan—Count Rodrigo de Berceo—but who had lost his life merely because he wished to help someone.

For Rhodan a world and an adventure were left behind, both already a part of his past before the *Drusus* transitioned into hyperspace. There was no time to dwell on that which lay behind him; ahead lay more important things.

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

ATLAN the Arkonide wants to go home to his world of the 3 planets.

But one man stands in the way of the fulfilment of his desire: Perry Rhodan.

Rhodan, Administrator of the Solar Empire, his chief concern the welfare of mankind, feels compelled to block Atlan's return.

Can Rhodan contain Atlan on Earth or will the centuries-old alien, with hundreds of years of experience, prove to be superior to his antagonist?

In the fierce duel on the hothouse planet Hellgate, Rhodan came out on top and Atlan became a prisoner of the Solar Security Service. But even now his restless thoughts are gravitating toward the possibility of escape.

When 2 powerful personalities clash, what will the outcome be?
See when you encounter—

AGAIN: ATLAN

by

K.-H. Scheer