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ATLAN IN DANGER

Kurt Brand

ANTI-ATLAN!

EMERGENCY in the Arkonide Realm!

The Reign of the Robot Regent is o'er and the power to rule has now at last come to the Crystal Prince, the Immortal Arkonide.

But a dangerous rebellion against Atlan is immediately fermented, a rebellion that is actually only a smoke screen, for behind it is—

Thomas Cardif!

Son of Rhodan!

Avowed enemy of the Administrator of the Solar System.

The hatred of son for father knows no bounds and even goes so far as to place—

ATLAN IN DANGER

AN IMPERILLED ATLAN IS INVOLVED WITH—

PERRY RHODAN—Administrator of the Solar Empire
THOMAS CARDIF—Son of Rhodan... but his avowed opponent
Reginald Bell—Rhodan's greatest supporter
Pucky—The mischievous mutant mousebeaver
Frank Lemmon—Head of Section 1, Solar Secret Service
Alan D. Mercant—Solar System Marshal
Rabintorge—a Hindu regarded as a charlatan
Manners—Stocky 40-year-old assistant of Frank Lemmon
John Marshall—Telepath, head of the Mutant Corps
Kitai Ishibashi—Mutant suggestor
Tako Kakuta—Mutant teleporter
Dr. Small—Replacement for Kakuta
Elvis Artun—Hypno
Tom Sharkey and Pierre Rochard—Suggestors
Horace Edwards—Director of the CHG Co. of Capetown, Africa
Cokaze—A Springer patriarch
Atual and Ortece—Head of the Bank
Col. Michael Freyt—Rhodan's second-in-command
Gen. Conrad Deringhouse—One of Rhodan's closest cohorts through the years
Grossi and Francozetti—Technicians
Aeskul-6—A physician in Medical Emergency
Bradley—A professor in charge of 065-propulsion
Dr. Brigonne—Astronaut
Onkto—A Mounder

CAN THE ANCIENT IMPERATOR HANDLE THE CURRENT SITUATION?

... And the spaceships *Drusus*, *Kublai Khan*, *California*, *Cokaz 2* and *Cokaz 214*

PERRY RHODAN: Peacelord of the Universe

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

ACE BOOKS EDITION

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ATLAN IN DANGER

by Kurt Brand



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1/ THOMAS CARDIF'S REVELATION

SOLAR SECRET SERVICE Section F-1 was engaged in observing the political scene on 21st century Terra.

All reports were handed in to Frank Lemmon.

Frank Lemmon had an attitude towards work that was in keeping with his character and for the past two hours he had been proving it beyond doubt: he was loafing!

He had read the voluminous *Terrania Post*, even taking note of the political articles; he studied the financial section and regarded this activity as important work, although reading the newspaper was by no means part of his official duties.

Frank Lemmon was a North American by birth. His hometown was called Klondike. He had come to Terrania three years ago, passed the final aptitude test with honours and, six months later, was already head of Section F-1 in the Solar Secret Service.

He, though sometimes unable to master the weakness in his character, was still one of the few men in Terrania who chose not to utilize computers for preliminary evaluations. Frank Lemmon preferred to rely upon his instinct or, as was written in his records: *A parasense? Unclassifiable characteristic. Above-average gift of deduction combined with prophetic sensitivity to the extreme importance of apparently insignificant reports.*

Frank Lemmon had arrived one hour late for work. Upon awakening he had already been horrified at the prospect of another boring day. When he got out of bed with that feeling the whole day at work was useless, so he regularly approached this fact with laziness and did not even take care of a few important items.

But Solar Marshal Alan D. Mercant, Head of the Security Service, never reproached his Section Head, Frank Lemmon, on this account. Mercant was very good at weighing the merits of his co-workers against their shortcomings and in Lemmon's case his ability to instantly discern the significance of incoming reports far outweighed his laziness.

Lemmon was slurping his strong, hot coffee with great relish as the viewcom flashed on. The slender, 24-year-old section head hardly glanced at it. Dispatches from Washington, Peking and Lahore.

“Great Milky Way,” Lemmon moaned, still holding the cup to his lips, “that agent in Lahore is writing a whole novel! So much effort for such rubbish!”

As the screen darkened he had already forgotten all the reports. He was about to reach for the *Terrania Post* to read the short story with the intriguing title of ‘Ghanu, Mirror Image of a Soul’ when he jerked back in his seat and swung his feet off the desk. His bored face instantly changed expressions. “Rabintorge... isn’t that the Indian who supplied material about the Druuf linear hyper-propulsion that was such an artful swindle it made a fool of the entire security force and...”

The speaking phase of the intercom connection, switched off during picture transmission, was now activated by Lemmon. “Manners, get me all the data on Rabintorge, that charlatan from Lahore. At once, Manners, it’s urgent!”

When Frank Lemmon used that phrase, things were really urgent. He did not have to wait long. Manners, a stocky 40-year-old, laid a stack of archive prints on the desk for him.

“Is that all?” Lemmon reassured himself.

“That’s all. I compared our records with the main archive’s and...”

Frank Lemmon waved him aside. He wanted to be alone. He could read the perforated cards with their coded symbols like others read a book.

He selected three reports. Sticking them in his pocket, he got up and informed the front office that he had a meeting with Solar Marshal Mercant.

The leadership of Solar Security was located 18 kilometres away in the enormous government skyscraper that had become Terrania’s landmark. However, considering the tasks to be accomplished by the Solar Empire, their administration was not an overgrown octopus that provided thousands of bureaucrats with a comfortable life.

The sporadic hours of laziness Frank Lemmon indulged in were a rare exception; still, due to the phenomenal achievements he sometimes came up with, he replaced a skilled six-man team.

He had to wait half an hour in Mercant’s reception room. “The boss is inside,” he was told by the even-natured, pug-nosed executive secretary.

“Then the boss will just have to hear what I have to say,” Lemmon thought, unaware of how highly he prized himself.

When the 30 minutes had elapsed and there was no sign that the conference behind those heavy doors was drawing to a conclusion, Frank Lemmon again approached the pug-nosed secretary. “Please inform the Solar Marshal immediately that my visit pertains to LH-propulsion!”

The abbreviation LH was his own invention. It had just shot through his head and neither Mercant nor Perry Rhodan knew it. And perhaps neither of them was even able to guess its meaning. However, Lemmon had observed the cardinal commandment of secrecy and in so doing he might influence Rhodan into remaining and hearing what he, Lemmon, had to tell the Marshal.

“Is it really that important, Lemmon?” The secretary was doubtful, accustomed to constant attempts to occupy Mercant’s precious time by claiming urgent business.

Calmly Frank Lemmon replied: “I consider it very important. Emphasize LH-propulsion, OK?”

The echo from Allan D. Mercant followed immediately. “What? LH-propulsion? Who’s waiting? Lemmon? Send him right in!”

Frank Lemmon slowly shut the heavy door. Seated facing each other at the coffee table were Perry Rhodan, the Administrator of the Solar Empire, and his defence chief, Allan D. Mercant. Both were watching him expectantly. Mercant indicated with a swift wave of the hand that his Section Head was to take a seat. Neither of them inquired about the meaning of the abbreviation LH.

Lemmon pulled the three coded strips out of his pocket and placed them on the table. As he raised his head, he looked into Rhodan’s grey eyes, which were reflecting some slight tension.

“Sir, Marshal,” Lemmon addressed both of them, failing to notice that in his salutation he had degraded the boss. He did not comprehend Rhodan’s grin nor did he give it any thought. His concentration was directed at the report he now had to present. He spoke about the Indian student, Rabintorge, who had heard something about the mysterious Druuf linear hyperpropulsion through as yet unknown channels. He spoke about the excitement engendered at Solar Defence by the article, four pages long and loaded with formulas, which had appeared in the student newspaper, *Ars Stellaris*. “...and only two weeks later were our scientists able to say that we had fallen victim to a student gag.”

“These here,” he stated as he slid the three strips into the middle of the coffee table, thus enabling Rhodan and Mercant to decide who would take them first, “are the most important recent reports.”

Lemmon paused briefly, waiting for one of them to pick up the strips. Instead Perry Rhodan said to him: “Go on, Lemmon.”

“Well... an hour ago I received a report from our agent in Lahore, a whole book-load of trivialities with the exception of one item worthy of notice: that student, Rabintorge, who put us on with his linear hyperpropulsion hoax, is supposed to be negotiating with the GHC Company for a position as research assistant. Do we really want that type of man to drift off to our competition?”

Frank Lemmon had spoken to Perry Rhodan several times previously and he thought he knew the Administrator somewhat. But now he felt rather uncomfortable under the penetrating gaze of those grey eyes. Allan D. Mercant was staring at him sharply, too. Both men continued to remain silent, which increasingly grated on Lemmon’s nerves.

Perry Rhodan then leaned back and crossed his arms on his chest. Mercant reached for the strips, staring at them but not reading them. In the spartanly furnished office of the Defence Chief silence reigned. Lemmon interrupted it by clearing his throat but he was unable to get out a word.

“Lemmon, how did you arrive at your suggestion?” Perry Rhodan asked.

His unclassifiable para-perception was awakened in Frank Lemmon, prompting his counter-question: “Sir, isn’t my suggestion the result of a logical deduction?”

Rhodan ignored the remark. “What do *you* know about the Druuf linear hyper-propulsion, Lemmon?”

“Nothing, except for the fact that the Druufs allegedly possess propulsion units faster than light and that upon exceeding the speed of light, transition into hyperspace is not advisable. But whether that version is correct...”

“It is correct, Lemmon!” Rhodan interrupted. “Where did you obtain your knowledge?”

Without hesitation Lemmon replied: “From research team 065-propulsion. We worked together for one week while investigating the Rabintorge case.”

“Thanks!” Rhodan hastily said, turning his gaze to Mercant, who read in it a request for his opinion.

“Sir, we really shouldn’t let any opportunity slip by, especially now...”

Mercant’s position was not extremely clear; at least so it appeared to Lemmon. However, Rhodan must have understood it differently, for he nodded to his Solar Marshal and said in conclusion: “Make all the necessary arrangements.”

“We know more about this Rabintorge than he does about us, sir.” Mercant now presented his information about the peculiar case. “The student has never come in contact with beings of extra-solar intelligence. His skill in mathematics and physics that show traces of Arkonide hyper-mathematics, are inexplicable. Even more puzzling is the fact that he first learned to read and write at the age of 15.”

“And this student is definitely not an Arkonide, Mercant, an Ara or Ekhonide?”

“No. Out of the question. Rabintorge is a Terranian and a first-class physics and mathematical theoretician!”

Rhodan grinned at Mercant. “I’m not accustomed to hearing you use superlatives. But that’s all right! Get me that man and put him to work under unobtrusive surveillance. You, Lemmon, I would like to thank right now for your work.” Rhodan stood up and reached out to shake hands.

“Sir, it was no great achievement,” Lemmon protested, never having expected praise of this sort.

“Naturally not Rhodan remarked and smiled. “Anyone who can sleep as well as you often does not even notice the effort because excessive energy simply compels him to action. Did you sleep well last night...?”

The heavy door was already clicking shut as Allan D. Mercant’s booming laughter filled the office. Frank Lemmon thought it better to join in the laughter rather than to dwell on Perry Rhodan’s remark.

The resolution to improve himself made that moment last for two days.

On the day on which the Indian Rabintorge arrived in Terrania to work on a special project for the Solar Empire, Frank Lemmon first entered his office at 11 o’clock. He had awakened with the feeling that that day would bring no important

new developments.

And the reports he received were very commonplace. Perry Rhodan, however, was staggered by a hypercom message from Arkon.

His son, Thomas Cardif, deserter from the Solar Fleet and his most bitter enemy, had added a new deed to his desertion. Speaking from the planet of Archetz in the Rusuma System, 44 light-years from Arkon, he revealed to the intently listening Galaxy that the robot computer on Arkon 3 had been switched off by Admiral Atlan and would henceforth obey orders from Atlan only!

10 ADVENTURES FROM NOW

Scheer aims right on

Target Star

2/ THE LONELIEST PERSON IN THE SOLAR SYSTEM

Chaos of galactic proportions was brewing!

The Arkonide Empire. 10,000 years earlier already a gigantic stellar empire with the globular star cluster M-13 at its core, was now in danger of disintegrating into several individual national entities due to one clever move on the part of a deserted officer of the Solar Empire.

Atlan, in the solitude of the gigantic dome of the mammoth positronic computer on Arkon 3, was now weaker than Perry Rhodan. The threat from within the Arkonide Empire was one million-fold greater than the threat facing the Solar System.

Atlan spoke from Arkon to Perry Rhodan on Earth. "I need time, Perry! I now need *your* help, barbarian! I must operate with the charisma of your name! Who knows Atlan the Admiral who played a significant role 10,000 years ago? Who still knows my race? But why aren't you saying anything?"

"What shall I say to you, friend?" responded Rhodan, outwardly unruffled but inwardly tense. "Call me back in eight Earth hours. I have to digest the new facts first myself, although neither of us really anticipated anything else. You mentioned the name of Thomas Cardif..."

Across a distance of 34,000 light-years Atlan interrupted him. "Whether I say Thomas Cardif or Galactic Traders is not significant. But the fact that Cardif and the Springers are attempting to split the Empire from the planet of Rusuma is! You asked me to return the call in eight Earth hours. Do you really know what could happen within that period?"

Perry listened intently. Was Atlan driven by panic, Atlan the timeless, the immortal?

Perry Rhodan stared at the face of the Arkonide on his screen. The features revealed no trace of panic; still some unavoidable danger must be preying on the Admiral's mind. But why wasn't he revealing the nature of that danger?

"Admiral, what are you concealing from us?" Rhodan asked across the reaches of space and time.

He watched as Atlan tensed and then broke into weak laughter. "I'm not concealing anything, Perry, but right at this moment I have fully understood you for the first time! For the first time I am in the position you have been in for over

70 years! Don't get me wrong. I have to get used to the idea that the Great Empire no longer wants to follow my orders and I now have no more power than you do!

"How old am I? More than 10,000 years? Only the number is correct, because I am still younger than you, barbarian. You are way ahead of me in experience with situations like this!

"I have to reeducate myself, barbarian! I have to follow your example and..."

"Atlan!" Rhodan called loudly, concealing his dismay over the Arkonide's emotional outburst. "Atlan, please call me back in eight Earth hours!" He did not allow the Admiral to reply. The hypercom connection to Arkon 3 no longer existed. Perry Rhodan had switched off.

Pensively he leaned back in his chair, his gaze remaining fixed on the now grey screen. Slowly he raised both hands and began to massage his temples with his fingertips.

Reginald Bell, who was silently observing him, was familiar with this gesture. It revealed the deep distress within his friend.

Towards the end of their conversation, Atlan had let his heart speak. It was one of those rare conversations in which two men recognize that their friendship binds them until death.

Rhodan turned to face Bell. With no trace of excitement he said: "I need the newest data about the Rusuma System, particularly about Archetz, the fifth planet, at once," he stated casually. "Please arrange for me to have it at my disposal within a half hour. You see about team 065-propulsion."

Bell had expected more, which was why he now looked inquisitively at Rhodan. But he supplied no further details.

"Listen," Bell cautiously began, "was it an error on our part not to send one single agent after the Springer Fleet when it took off in such haste?"

Perry Rhodan's grey eyes widened somewhat. "Why don't you just talk clearly and openly about Cardif, Reggie? What was our mistake? The moment the Patriarch Cokaze was informed by a man from our shot-down destroyer that the Great Empire was no longer ruled by the computer but by Atlan, the entire Cokaze clan knew it, which meant that we could no longer keep that fact secret. If we fail to adjust immediately and completely to the new situation—and the same applies to Atlan—then in a year at the latest the entire Galaxy will be on fire and we will be facing situations that have no comparison in history! But how we should approach the situation I don't know either right now. By gathering exact data about the Rusuma System and sending you to the 065-propulsion team, I'm just groping my way closer."

"Closer to what?"

Perry Rhodan was stumped. "I don't know, Reggie!" He sounded annoyed but his irritation was not directed at his inquiring friend. It stemmed from the feeling that he was facing chaos and was unable to discover a means or possibility to avoid this peril.

Stocky Reginald Bell stood up. "OK, then I'll stop doing one thing and do the

other. If I understand you correctly, you expect team 065 to deliver substantial material soon.”

“Very soon,” Rhodan replied.

Bell’s face contorted with a grimace. “They will love it!” he predicted. “Making Druuf linear hyper-propulsion technology, aided by Arkonide super mathematics, comprehensible to us poor Terranians... and *very soon* at that!”

Rhodan stared at him in astonishment. “We still don’t have the propulsion, Reggie. Could you have possibly forgotten that?”

The red-haired man laughed dryly. “Not a bit. I was just momentarily unfaithful to myself and wanted to forget my right thumb tip. Isn’t the date of today the 1st of July, 2044? Well, we survived the first half of this cursed year by the skin of our teeth; perhaps we shall survive the rest... with or without linear hyper-propulsion. But on the qt., I did hope that our team could get on its track.”

“Reggie...” Rhodan shook his head, almost reproachfully. “Ever since you cut your thumb on that unbreakable glass last New Year’s you have been pessimism personified. But now you expect a miracle when there is nothing to hope for?”

Bell regarded Rhodan with an innocent expression. “Perry, isn’t that some kind of reverse pessimism?” he asked in turn, already grasping the doorknob and hastily leaving the room.

“Incorrigible...” Rhodan said aloud to himself and grinned. For it was Bell who, time and time again in his inimitable fashion, provided a better mood at moments of depression. That in reality Bell was also loaded with problems no one knew better than Rhodan.

Meanwhile Bell had seen to it that the data on the Rusuma System was brought to the boss. He took the glider to Research Tract 18.

In section 065-propulsion he encountered something he called a *mixed double*, although this double consisted of almost 30 specialists, partly theoreticians and partly technicians.

No one took notice of his arrival, a custom which had become habitual throughout Terrania. Bell scanned the team, divided into several groups. His interest was caught by a young Indian who was employing his arms and legs to aid his speech.

“Bradley who is that?” Bell asked the professor in charge of 065-propulsion.

“Oh... Rabintorge, a new man. I can’t cope with him. That Hindu is literally made up of contradictions!” Prof. Bradley declared, obviously irritated.

Bell loved anything that was contradictory. He thanked the professor for the information and unobtrusively approached the group where Rabintorge, gesticulating wildly, was attempting to convince the others of his opinion.

The argument put forth by one of his colleagues: “Where could you have gained all that knowledge? You haven’t even had time to get a complete picture and what you are contending is and remains nonsense!” The Indian with the brown eyes and dark skin crossed his hands on his chest and bowed to the

colleague who had attacked him so vehemently.

“There you have it!” the colleague said with a sarcastic smile. The Hindu interrupted him, however. “You are mistaken. My contention is no nonsense. The space-time structure is shattered by linear hyper-propulsion on one constant as soon as the spacecraft propelled by it reaches the speed of light. Contrary to the hyperjump, in which upon leaving normal space and reentry the structure of the Universe is ruptured on all constants at these points, triggering off the structure shocks in turn, the linear hyper-propulsion pushes one constant out of its natural bedding upon exceeding the speed of light. The propulsion continues to do this as long as the spacecraft is faster than light! Where else could these indication errors originate that remain constant when measuring the space tension?”

Bell had no idea what was to be understood by *natural bedding of a constant in the space-time structure*. Neither was his ambition to discover it very great but he could not escape the impression that this very young Indian was able in a few short words to conceptualize a very difficult matter in physics.

Three colleagues began to argue with the Indian simultaneously but he remained unruffled. Bell heard something about computation results from Hades station; he heard the Hindu mention Ernst Ellert’s name and refer to Ellert’s data.

Bell waited long enough to hear Rabintorge, launch into his proof. Suddenly he rushed out of Section 065-Propulsion.

Perry Rhodan looked up in astonishment as Bell stormed into his office. “What’s up? Something new?” he asked. “I have three conferences within the next hour and...”

“Let them wait!” Bell cried. “Just listen to me and then tell me what you think...”

The stocky man forced himself to report calmly, not forgetting the most minute detail. He concluded with the observation: “Couldn’t this Indian Rabintorge be a disguised Arkonide or Galactic Trader?”

“I asked Mercant that same question a few days ago. Mercant’s answer was no.”

“Then put Pucky on Rabintorge!” Bell suggested.

Rhodan waved this aside. “Pucky isn’t infallible. Think of that Arkonide dachshund spy we all fell for, including the mousebeaver.”

“But that Indian is no Indian, Perry! That guy is totally confusing Section 065-Propulsion with his contradictions. Even Prof. Bradley doesn’t get along with him. Huh, who are you calling now, Perry?” He had noticed that Rhodan had depressed a button but could not see which one.

“Never mind, Reggie. You just mentioned Bradley. If the reports on him are correct we’ll stick him in the sanitarium for the next six months. The professor has exhausted himself in the attempt to develop a tracking device for linear hyper-structure shocks.”

The door to Rhodan’s office opened as John Marshall, head of the Mutant Corps and one of the best telepaths, entered. “Sir, I was supposed to...”

Rhodan motioned him to stop. “Marshall, have a seat. In a few minutes Mr. Bell and I will be finished.” He turned back to Bell. “This young Indian who only passed his exam one week ago must be a mutant in the mathematical-physics realm. Rabintorge is the same man whose bluff...”

At that moment Bell abruptly turned to Marshall. Something suddenly seemed weird to him. He saw Marshall stand up and heard him say: “Yes, boss!”

A moment later Perry was communicating with his Defence Chief. “Rhodan here!... Mercant, you get 4 or 5 of your best people over to Section 065-Propulsion on the double. There’s a strong suggestor in 065! Your men will find the mutant Kitai Ishibashi there. Ishibashi is leading the project. That’s all!”

Perplexed, Bell stared at his friend. He simply did not believe what his mind was telling him and what he gathered from Perry’s words. “Perry, that couldn’t mean that I... that I...?”

Rhodan nodded and John Marshall, who had stepped alongside him, nodded. “Yes sir,” he said, “you are under such a strong suggestive influence that I can’t even *get through* to you.”

“Marshall, say that again...” Bell protested, his voice sounding weary. When John Marshall made an assertion like that, it was accurate. “But where did this happen to me? In 065-Propulsion? Then that Indian is an agent from the other side! Didn’t I say that...?”

The intercom interrupted. Mercant was at the other end. “Sir, the project is in progress!”

“Thank you!” Rhodan replied and a clicking sound revealed that the connection to Defence Central had been interrupted.

“That Hindu...” Bell growled and clenched his fists. He then turned to Marshall again to inquire: “Am I still subject to suggestion, my will still being influenced?”

“No sir. The block that was given you is strong enough. As I said, I can’t even get through to you.”

“Where aren’t you getting through? Will you finally tell me where...?”

John Marshall’s thin face remained controlled. “Sir, I am not in the position to read your thoughts when you are talking about the Indian Rabintorge or...”

“That guy with the doe eyes!” Bell exclaimed and fell back in his chair. “But how do I get rid of the block? Perry, did it occur to you that I had been tampered with?”

“I did notice a small item, Reggie. You almost always sympathize with the person who is staunchly defending a new theory. But you hardly left one good hair on Rabintorge’s head. That was more apparent in your voice than in your words. You were full of hatred towards the young man from Lahore and that doesn’t really fit you. That made me suspicious, which is why I summoned John telepathically. He was to test you.”

“When I get hold of the guy that took such liberties with me...”

“I am much more interested in who is behind the suggestor planted among us,”

Rhodan said, taking the edge off Bell's anger. "And this incident had to come up today, just when I have a thousand other matters to attend to. Time is flying. Soon the eight-hour deadline will arrive and Atlan will call in again."

"What have I been saying since New Year's Eve about this year 2044?" Bell blustered, extending his right thumb.

Ever since the New Year's Eve party celebrating the advent of 2044, Reginald Bell's right thumb tip had become a nightmare to his closest associates. At the party he had accidentally knocked an 'unbreakable' glass decanter off the table. The glass shattered. And—if it weren't contradictory enough that unbreakable glass could shatter at all—while gathering up the fragments, Bell cut his right thumb tip.

From that moment on Bell turned into a superstitious pessimist and, paying no regard to whether one wanted to hear it or not, he proclaimed that the year 2044 would be a catastrophic year for the Solar Empire. Until now he had unfortunately been right!

And now he demonstratively extended his thumb towards Perry, whose grey eyes were flashing angrily. "May I again request that you abandon that insinuation at last, Reggie. It bores me!"

"OK, you're the boss, Perry, but I'm still right. Now Atlan is up to his neck in water and we are supposed to help him! We with our handful of spacecraft! And we must not forget that there are still about 3,000 Druuf battleships cruising in our Universe! Heaven help us if they should one day appear above Earth, as once happened. Then no Arkon robot ships or Springer clan will come to blast us clear. Now why does everything unpleasant have to storm in on us from all sides at once?"

Perry Rhodan let Bell talk. He knew him better than anyone else. It was the cheapest, simplest and most effective method to simply let him ramble on. Finally he would calm down of his own accord.

Atlan's emergency call was weighing on Perry Rhodan's mind like a nightmare. And the disturbing incident in Section 065-Propulsion had clearly demonstrated that the Solar Empire was also vulnerable from within and that the best security measures could be undermined time and time again.

Bell glanced from one to the other, hearing no response to his remarks. "The action at 065-Propulsion is sure taking a long time."

"Even in the Solar Empire miracles take awhile!" Rhodan sharply replied, silencing Bell.

The long wait had begun. Rhodan had issued instructions that he was not to be disturbed under any conditions. The exception was, of course, alert signals.

45 minutes after the alert Mercant reported in on intercom. "Sir, the mutant Ishibashi has detected that the technician, Elvis Artun, is a hypno. Elvis Artun came to us from the GHC Company shortly after the Springer invasion."

Rhodan was immediately struck by the discrepancy between Marshall's information and Mercant's report. "A counter-question, Mercant: just what *is* this

Artun... hypnotist or suggestor? That must be determined at once, because if Artun is positively a hypno, we have not yet discovered the suggestor in 065-Propulsion! Mercant, you put some pressure on Kitai Ishibashi. He can find out which faculty Artun possesses. Mercant, I have very little time!"

Bell didn't dare say a word. He could see that Rhodan was concentrating on the telepath, Marshall. Their thought impulses were moving back and forth in a silent dialogue.

"OK, sir! I reached Pucky; the mousebeaver is already on the way to 065-Propulsion!" Marshall now spoke aloud in order to inform Bell as well. Almost simultaneously Rhodan's microcom to his left became activated. It was the mousebeaver. "Perry, I just spotted two guys. If they could, they would eat me up. But they can't. They are stuck to the ceiling. Can they hang up there until Mercant's people take them in custody?"

The mousebeaver addressed everyone in a familiar tone and the Administrator of the Solar Empire was no exception. However, it did not seem like Pucky at all to ask Rhodan for permission to allow the two foreign agents he had discovered to hang from the ceiling by virtue of his telekinetic power.

"Pucky, you are not up to mischief, are you?" Perry sternly inquired."

"Boss," the mousebeaver squeaked through the microphone, "have I ever been?"

Rhodan didn't wish to become involved in that discussion. Pucky's pranks were well known throughout the entire Solar System. "Lieutenant, who are they? The names, please!"

It was an official inquiry. The mousebeaver understood that well. When Rhodan addressed him by rank he had to refrain from joking.

Pucky responded in kind: "First Administrator, the two suggestors are called Tom Sharkey and Pierre Rochard. At the moment they are cursing me but in between they curse the GHC Company in Capetown and in particular the Third Director, Horace Edwards... but... but..."

It occurred very rarely that the mousebeaver stammered in astonishment; now he even fell silent. The microphone only picked up his excited breathing.

"Pucky, what's going on in 065-Propulsion?" Rhodan refrained from addressing him as lieutenant again.

"Hey, Perry..." Pucky's squeaky voice whispered, "Sharkey and Rochard are by no means real suggestors. Something is unkosh about their brainwave patterns... Perry, later... not now..."

"Well, well," Rhodan wondered, letting his left arm sink to his side. "Pucky switched off. How did his voice sound towards the end in your opinion, Marshall?"

He had not only listened over microcom, Marshall had been in telepathic communication with the mousebeaver and thus knew more. But what he had to report did not sound reassuring. "Pucky had to utilize his last reserves to protect himself against the suggestive influence of the two agents."

At that moment the air glimmered and the mousebeaver entered. He had come to Rhodan's office from 065-Propulsion by teleportation jump. "I gave it to them, Perry!" he reported, proud but exhausted. Then he stared at Bell. "Fatso, what have they done to you?"

Rhodan sharply interceded. "Leave Reggie out of this, Pucky. He's under a strong suggestive influence. What did you find out?"

Pucky bared his single incisor, suggesting laughter. "Plenty, boss! At least as much as Sharkey and Rochard know themselves. That suffices to turn the entire GHC Company upside down and he searched for a Springer hypercom apparatus! I've already sent a security man to Rochard's apartment."

"Why?" Rhodan asked.

"Because there are three ampoules of Ara toxin to be found there. I don't know any more about it. Rochard thought of them once briefly. He was afraid that we might find them."

Rhodan leaned forward. "Ara toxin. That's what you said, isn't it, Pucky?"

"GHC Company, Springer hypercom, Ara toxin; and Sharkey and Rochard are no real suggestors but just doped! And I am willing to bet that Elvis Artun is no real hypno, because wave patterns of the sort those two agents emanate, Perry, are not normal. But Marshall will understand me better..." He turned to John Marshall and asked: "John, have you ever seen a brainwave pattern in which the suggestor strand is barely developed but the person to whom the pattern belongs has command of incredible suggestive powers?"

Pucky's words were partially drawn from a special language. Only telepaths could understand what a brainwave pattern and a suggestor strand was supposed to be. That Marshall had understood the mousebeaver was evident in his face, which displayed undisguised disbelief.

Pucky was satisfied. "I must have looked just as dumb as you do now back there in 065-Propulsion when I suddenly made that discovery. And then the guys wanted to sandwich me in suggestively..." He turned back to Rhodan and assumed a modesty that did not suit him at all. "Perry, I had to... I had no choice... If you call Mercant right away, tell him that the doctors don't have to bother about Rochard and Sharkey for three hours. They certainly won't awaken from my hypnosis any sooner than that."

"Lt. Puck..." Rhodan began, with no special intent behind his form of address. He flinched slightly when the mousebeaver broke in, attempting to give his squeaky voice a military ring: "Yes, First Administrator of the Solar Empire...?"

Rhodan's serious face brightened and the boss regarded the mousebeaver with a grin. "Thank you, Pucky. You paid me back well. But I still have one more chore for you: you teleport over to Rochard's apartment. Try to find the Ara toxin and bring it here!"

"OK, boss!" and the mousebeaver disappeared from Rhodan's room.

Bell was breathing heavily. "Marshall, does the suggestive block influence my other mental processes?"

“No sir! Only your experience at 065-Propulsion has been falsified.”

“Small consolation. Perry, I want to look up Frank Lemmon, the Section Head of F-1. I have a few questions for him.”

“And when do you want to submit to treatment so that the suggestive block can be lifted, Reggie?” Rhodan asked in surprise.

“When we have time for that. I just have to avoid that Indian, Rabintorge. Otherwise that young man might think I’m awfully dumb.”

The door closed behind him. Rhodan and Marshall were alone, waiting for Pucky’s return. Meanwhile Rhodan briefed his Security Chief. Mercant’s face on the screen exhibited neither astonishment nor surprise. He, who had grown up in Security, had been faced with even more improbable facts in his long life.

“All necessary steps will be taken on my part, sir! That was all Allan D. Mercant had to say on the subject.

“The Mutant Corps will be present when the administration building of the GHC Company in Capetown is searched, Mercant. Prepare the mission for that.”

“Yes!”

The screen went grey again. Rhodan glanced at the clock. In three hours Atlan would call again and he had barely found the time to apply himself to the situation confronting the Admiral in his empire.

“Marshall...”

John Marshall looked at his boss. The telepathic communication between them was broken. Perry Rhodan was gazing beyond the Solar System—somewhere.

“Marshall, can you understand my son?”

“Boss...” The moment had come when he had to answer Rhodan’s personal question. “Yes sir. I can understand Thomas Cardif. But I cannot condone what he did...”

“I didn’t want to know the rest, John. But now you have got to explain why you can understand his action. If you want to, that is.”

Before responding, Marshall seated himself more comfortably, crossing one leg. Finally he began to speak. “Your son didn’t have any parents. When he learned who his parents were he was totally unprepared, stricken by the effects of the risk that Perry Rhodan and the Arkonide, Thora, incurred with their marriage. You don’t mind my talking like this, boss?”

Rhodan nodded sombrely.

“Thomas Cardif felt only affection for your wife—his mother, that is. But when he did experience motherly love in small doses, his work prevented him from being with his mother. For Thomas Cardif the word duty must have become a curse word, for he is neither Terran nor Arkonide. I tried never to forget that when evaluating him. When he did experience what maternal love was, his mother died and from that moment on Thomas Cardif was alone. Hate and love—aren’t the two related? Standing beside the grave of your wife and his mother, you offered him your hand. I wouldn’t have taken it either if I were Thomas Cardif and...”

“John!” Rhodan hoarsely gasped, leaning forward.

“Yes, boss. I would not have accepted your hand... and then the insidious rumour started that you had sent your fatally ill wife to Arkon for treatment, against the advice of the doctors. None of us here in Terrania believed it. But what must have gone through Cardif’s mind when he heard that? Only scoundrels break their oaths and become traitors!”

“What else can I say, boss? What good does it do you to learn that I neither consider Thomas Cardif a scoundrel or a traitor? I don’t know what I *do* consider him. I just feel that Thomas Cardif is to be pitied, that he will go to the dogs if he doesn’t find himself.”

“Do you want to overlook that he has also betrayed Atlan?” Rhodan icily asked.

“If I wanted to destroy my father because I was convinced that he had killed my mother, any means would be justified. Boss, if that is what one believes, he doesn’t think of right or wrong. That no longer counts.”

“But one is duty-bound to consider them.”

“Duty, duty, boss! There’s that word again! Doing your duty requires strength. Strength comes from love of your parents. And didn’t Thomas Cardif perform his duty admirably until the moment that he learned who his parents were? Forgive me, boss. I shouldn’t have said that. Forget it, please!”

John Marshall resisted the temptation to use his highly developed telepathic skills to read Perry Rhodan’s thoughts. He remained seated, watching Rhodan’s gaze, which seemed to penetrate the depths of the Universe—and Rhodan was silent.

Just then the mousebeaver returned. “Boss,” he began but immediately fell silent. His mouse eyes wandered between the boss and Marshall until he received Marshall’s telepathic order: “Don’t ask about what is going on. Report on your mission. The more, the better!”

Pucky instantly understood. “Here,” he said, handing Perry Rhodan three flasks. Their shape alone revealed that they were the product of the Galactic Physicians, those Aras who had been disciplined several times by Rhodan because they had misused their knowledge for criminal actions. “But I have not come directly from Rochard’s apartment, Perry. I stopped off at our medicine men’s. Three of them were familiar with the compound. They had come across it before. They said it is a toxin with a sedative character. I had them translate the word *sedative*; it means quieting. And that disquieted me. I ran to the large positronic computer but it was not even familiar with the compound. Then I thought of the Swoon, our dear cucumber men, boss. They even know a bit about Ara medicine! Do you know what you are holding in your hand? Orgualas! A medical term of the Aras. The name, doesn’t signify anything but the Swoon were hysterical with laughter!”

“Pucky,” Rhodan interrupted the mousebeaver’s deluge of detail, “could you perhaps be a bit more concise. Why are you babbling? Just tell us what is in the

vials.”

Pucky swallowed the admonishment without objection. John Marshall had asked him to talk as much as possible and that meant to him that Marshall was trying to gain time for something.

“Boss, the Swoon...”

All at once Rhodan’s look became hard as steel. “Lieutenant Puck!” The ‘y’ was omitted from his name and the mousebeaver knew all too well what that meant. Now he could no longer help Marshall. He stiffened slightly and answered: “The contents of the ampoules have a lethal effect on people of the Arkonide race. The Aras don’t know why. They still have not been successful in discovering which agent in the compound causes brain activity to cease functioning. They have discovered, however, that some intelligent animal races up to level C *and* we Terranians become suggestors as a result!”

“Then if we were fortunate, we might perhaps find an Ara toxin in Mr. Artun’s apartment which turns a human into a hypno after injection. Pucky, if I were you I would have a look in Artun’s apartment.”

“OK, boss. I’m to go? Good, I shall vanish!” The last squeak of the mousebeaver was still heard when he had already teleported himself away.

Rhodan was alone again with Marshall. “John,” he asked, “do you still think my son has a chance?”

Marshall sensed that now he was not together with the Administrator of the Solar Empire but with the person Rhodan—with Thomas Cardif’s father.

“John, tell me what you thought just now, please!” As he spoke, Rhodan had gotten up and walked over to the chief of his Mutant Corps. “Tell me, John, and don’t consider my feelings. I didn’t try to read your thoughts.”

John Marshall was breathing heavily. “Mr. Rhodan...” A pause in which a question flashed through the telepath’s head. How many decades had it been since he had addressed Rhodan as ‘mister’? He did not answer his own question, however, as it was erased by Rhodan’s request, “Does Thomas Cardif still have a chance to liberate himself from those disastrous entanglements? If Perry Rhodan were not his father, I would say “Yes!”

“But Marshall, I don’t hate him like he hates me!” Rhodan desperately cried.

“I know that, sir,” Marshall hesitantly replied, his voice steady. He did not avoid the steely glance of his boss’s grey eyes. “Perry Rhodan, you have always been hard on yourself. You had to be in order to meet your own standards and you will have to be in the future, otherwise...”

“Otherwise, Marshall...? Say it. You must say it now!” The person Perry Rhodan pleaded and ordered at the same time.

“I will say it, boss. But then I will never speak about Thomas Cardif with you in this way again. Never again.”

“You will have to be hard in the future, too. Otherwise you will not be *the* Perry Rhodan who can show humanity the way. And therein lies the tragedy for

you and Thomas Cardif. You both have the highest price to pay.”

John Marshall got up. Slowly he turned away. Slowly he went towards the door. He left behind Perry Rhodan, the loneliest person in the Solar Empire.

Quietly the door snapped shut.

25 ADVENTURES FROM NOW

It's high voltage Voltz with
The Emperor and the Monster

3/ MISSION: FLY SWATTER

Cokaze, patriarch of a Springer clan and the only Galactic Trader that Perry Rhodan knew from the days of the New Power had become a politician. Only he did not realize it; he still considered himself a merchant whose entire efforts were directed towards increasing the wealth and economic power of his clan within the Springer race.

Cokaze had landed on Archetz, the 5th planet in the Rusuma System, with the greatest secret of the Arkonide Empire. His fleet of more than 1,000 cylindrical ships occupied one-third of the space harbour of Titon, the capital of the Springer world.

Only 44 light-years from Arkon, this system belonged to the centre of the globular star cluster M-13, the foundation of the Arkonide Empire.

But an enormous rift between Arkonides and Springers had arisen millennia before that: not only did the process of degeneration by the Arkonides progress unceasingly, the schism between them was apparent in the fact that the Springers almost exclusively used the Intercosmo language and were barely still in command of Arkonide. The fact that the Galactic Traders were born in spaceships and ended their life there bore further witness to the differences.

They were celestial wanderers, whereas the Arkonides were planet people and had to have ground under their feet.

Still, the Springer world of Archetz was not contradictory to the life habits of the Traders. The planet Archetz, had been the jumping-off place for this dynamic people many thousands of years earlier. And it had never forgotten that they had taken off Archetz, to create an absolute trade monopoly in the Galaxy.

Archetz, an oxygen world resembling Earth with 1.19 gravos of gravitational pull, almost 100 kilometres bigger than the Earth in diameter and illuminated by the yellow Rusuma sun, could almost be compared with the war planet Arkon 3.

There was not one city left on the surface of Archetz. Even Titon, a sea of houses sheltering 12 million people, lay 3,000 meters deep. An amazing network of ultra-modern traffic arteries brought Titon within a half-hour's reach of any point on the planet.

The surface of this world was one single industrial centre. But even this impression was deceptive, for almost 4/5ths of their heavy industry lay below the surface and the newest factories had just been completed in the 11,000 meter-

layer.

Archetz was a world of superlatives and the main base of all ships of the numerous Springer fleets. If it was in any way possible, they returned to Archetz to undergo any necessary repairs.

Whatever Arkon had discovered in space travel technique in the last 10,000 years soon became the possession of the Springers. They had created their own moral code, finely tailored to their own benefit. By unrelenting action in the worlds of the Galaxy, with no regard for blood or tears, they had increasingly established their power. But the Galactic Traders had one plus on their side which far outweighed their hard, unrelenting drive: intentional or not, they, who had only thought of trade, profit and economic power, had also become the culture bearers. And with their expansion over the Galaxy they had planted the first trace of civilization on newly discovered planets for the Arkonide Empire.

But Archetz was their point of origin; they always returned to Archetz. It provided everything desired by hundreds of thousands of cylindrical spaceships and their crews.

This world, on which strangely enough other races seldom landed, was hardly known to peoples other than the Galactic Traders; the mighty industrial potential the planet represented was unknown. The Milky Way was totally oblivious to the financial metropolis of Archetz.

When the topic was money and accounts, the Springers only spoke of *the bank*. It occurred to no one to say: *Bank of the Galactic Traders in Titon on Archetz*. There was only one such institution; not even Arkon could boast of the likes. But Arkon knew about it, only it never spoke of it because the mighty Arkon itself at the height of its power had secretly feared this financial giant.

Patriarch Cokaze, having landed in the *Cokaz 2* close to the massive reception building of the space harbour, while his clan fleet had set down to the north, entered the bank of the Galactic Traders with his family members and Thomas Cardif.

Silently the group made its way through the large crowd in the lobby. Cokaze knew his way around here. He headed for the small antigrav lift which was hardly used by the general public.

Eight Springers and one deserter, an officer of the Solar Space Fleet, were carried downward. They had to wait in a sumptuously furnished room. The bank clerk who had inquired about the wishes of Patriarch Cokaze had left with the remark that Atual and Ortece would hardly have time to receive them.

The Springers were still silent and Thomas Cardif, who felt no tension, admired these silent people.

A door in the side wall opened silently. Someone looking typically Springer in a toga-like yellow robe approached Cokaze.

“Patriarch?” the Springer queried, slightly bowing his head.

“Atual?” Cokaze countered in a questioning tone, repeating the head movement.

“Ortece is expecting us.”

Cokaze nodded as if he had anticipated nothing else. But only the richest clan head among the Galactic Traders could think like that. He followed Atual, turning back after a few steps to look at Thomas Cardif and motion to him. “You stay at my side, Arkonide!”

Atual heard him. Surprised, he turned around. When greeting them he had only looked at Cokaze but now he saw Perry Rhodan next to the Patriarch!

“Why that is Rhodan, Springer!”

The Patriarch laughed uproariously, pushing Thomas Cardif towards Atual.

“He does have something to do with Rhodan, Atual! Here, have a look at Rhodan’s son whose mother was a princess of Arkon!”

Atual, a head taller than the Patriarch, bald-headed, which was a rarity among Springers, sharply examined the Terran. “Rhodan’s son?” he said as his critical gaze fell on Cokaze. “I think Ortece and I will not be able to keep our daily schedule today.”

“That’s something one never knows with you bank people,” Cokaze grumbled. Atual, head of the Bank together with Ortece for the past 31 years, did not respond to this insinuation by the Patriarch. A little while later the Springers and Cardif were seated opposite these two powerful men.

“We have heard your dangerous report, too, Patriarch, and we were astonished that you would get involved in that game,” Ortece (unlike Atual, of delicate build) reproachfully told the clan chieftain.

“That is why I have come to you,” Cokaze quickly stated. “Rhodan’s son is sitting next to me. That should give you something to think about. And you know that I have come directly from the Solar System. I cleared it completely before Arkon’s robot craft could cause any difficulty when they suddenly appeared in Rhodan’s power sphere.”

“Cokaze, you are wasting many words. We have no time for that!” the undistinguished-looking Ortece insisted.

“You will have plenty of time for me soon. I am sure of that, Ortece!” Cokaze replied with a slight edge to his voice. “What I just said has surely escaped your attention: I cleared out of Rhodan’s sphere with all of my ships before Arkon’s robot spacecraft could give me any trouble! Ortece, the clan of Patriarch Cokaze has never voluntarily cleared a world occupied by its ships! But Arkon’s ships that suddenly appeared in the Solar System had Terranians on board as commanders...”

Ortece interrupted once more. “You have spoken better on other occasions, Patriarch! We will have to take our leave soon to negotiate with the committee about a loan to the Gutha world...”

Cokaze leaned forward towards Ortece. “You will cancel that. You will stay here with Atual. For a measly few billion do you want to miss the opportunity of letting Springers take the place of Arkonides? The Great Cöordinator has no more say. A certain Atlan is ruling the Empire! Who could have aided that unknown

usurper in outwitting and eliminating the Great Cöordinator? Is the question necessary? The son of that man is sitting right there—Perry Rhodan’s son. With a handful of men Rhodan managed to instate Atlan as ruler over us all.” Cokaze stopped short and stared at Ortece. “Well?” he curtly prompted.

Ortece fanned out his fingers in boredom. “We are finance men, Patriarch. Any time we enter a negotiation and are expected to provide money, we are presented with documents, not pumped full of words. I believe that we have no more to say to each other.”

Ice-cold, the clan head answered sarcastically: “I believe it would be most appropriate for you to familiarize yourself with the most recent reports, Ortece!”

That sounded like an ultimatum. Atual started then threw his colleague a meaningful glance.

Ortece remained objective. Calmly he responded: “The news you are referring to is known to us. Is it news to you that the money market reacts instantly to any political shock, Cokaze?”

“Is it known to you that the Aras have invited me to join the *Council of 10* on Aralon tomorrow? Very well, then. If you as Galactic Traders are not willing to invest in the great trade empire, then I will have to ally myself with the Aras. But now I believe that we have really spoken enough!”

An hour later the Springer group along with Cardif were once again on board the *Cokaz 2*. The Patriarch had uttered no opinion on the fruitless conference in the bank. He was reading the dispatches that had meanwhile arrived, then handing them over to Thomas Cardif. He had realized by now that he could not use this young Terran as a means to an end. This deserter of the Solar Space fleet was not the man to allow himself to be exploited. It had been his suggestion to inform the entire Galaxy over hypercom of the change of government on Arkon after he had comprehended what great opportunities for the Galactic Traders the Patriarch saw in this secret overthrowal.

At first the risk involved seemed too great to Cokaze but he could not disregard Cardif’s forceful arguments.

“Broadcast the news on continuous hypercom!” Cardif had fanatically insisted. “Repeat the dispatch over and over again that Atlan is the new ruler of the Great Empire. Hammer away at the Milky Way with it, Cokaze! Don’t fly back to Archetz right away. Stay in space with your fleet and fan the flames from there!”

“You will trigger off a space hurricane and the Galactic Traders will arise against this usurper, Atlan, and sweep him away!”

“But don’t wait too long, because you don’t want to possess a mere torso. You want to take the place of the Arkonides and possess the entire celestial empire M-13 in its full breadth! That’s why you must be able to strike when the first colonial races attempt to separate from the Confederation of the Great Empire!”

“Atlan will furnish proof that he is the new ruler. He has to do that if he doesn’t want to plunge into destruction with eyes wide open. And, faced with the approaching calamity, he will thus furnish you the proof that he has taken the

place of the Great Cöordinator. Once he has done that, Cokaze, the Galactic Traders will also be Arkon's ruler!"

Cokaze, the richest clan chieftain of the Springers—Cokaze, old and experienced, cunning and expert at business, unscrupulous and wily when need be—Cokaze was appalled by the demonic hatred of this young Terran.

He could see through him!

Cokaze suddenly began to fear Thomas Cardif! The Old Man who had never had any qualms about forcing his will upon newly-discovered worlds populated by intelligent beings, coercing them into signing a trade agreement with his clan—this same man now realized *who* Thomas Cardif was and he was compelled to realize that there was no turning back for the Galactic Traders.

Thomas Cardif had hitched them all to his wagon in order to destroy his father by means of a revolution in the Arkon Empire!

Horror-stricken, Cokaze had asked the young man: "Thomas Cardif, *who* are you?" And what had he heard? What had he seen? He had heard him laughing and seen him straighten up. He witnessed the proud retort: "I am an Arkonide, Springer!"

At that time—it had all happened only a few days previously—Cokaze had shaken his head. "You are no Arkonide! The likes of you has never been an Arkonide! If there were only a thousand of your kind in the Great Empire you would roust us out to the star caves!

"But you are no Terran, either, Cardif! You are playing with worlds, with world empires, in order to... Cardif, you are doing this to destroy Rhodan! For that reason only! I can't stand to look at you any longer, you monster!"

But then the Patriarch later entered the young man's cabin on his own initiative, the young man he had called a monster in a moment of deepest distress.

That is Rhodan himself, Cokaze thought as he entered and was met by the same penetrating gaze that he had encountered when faced with Rhodan at their last talk in Terrania.

"Well? Is the storm turning into a hurricane by now, Springer?" Cardif casually inquired.

"Not yet. But the Aras have called for the third time and urgently requested my freight space. That is so unusual that it can only mean that they want to negotiate with me."

Cardif with a mocking smile for the Patriarch said: "Cokaze, you won't earn anything in this deal for the Great Empire if you don't secure your weak position on all sides. What are your 4000 ships anyway? What does your bank account matter? What good is your knowledge that the positronic computer has been replaced by Atlan? Nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing as long as it is simply listed one after the other.

"Capitalize on it!" Get in contact with the most unreliable colonial peoples. Negotiate with everyone about everything but don't risk your neck in the process. In politics it is very exposed. And don't forget that directly after the storm the

hurricane must follow, otherwise Atlan will withdraw the battle fleet from the Druuf front and you will have the war you don't need at all!

"After all, you don't want a burning empire. You want a ripe fruit to pluck and pocket. Springer, *you* must see to it that the pocket is big enough for the fruit! Have you understood me?"

Cokaze had the impression that Cardif had spoken without any forethought. But when he was alone again in his own cabin he realized that there was no discrepancy in Cardif's suggestions.

Cokaze summoned the *Cokaz 3* and *Cokaz 4*. Both ships moored alongside him. A connection was made which allowed them to board the other ships without requiring spacesuits.

The three strong hypercom stations were working continuously. Cokaze began to spin his web. He did not notice that he was doing exactly what Cardif had suggested, gathering power—political power!

Meanwhile he was still located deep in space with his ships and Arkon was over 6,000 light-years away. That, too, had been a suggestion of Cardif's

As the 3rd day ended, the Patriarch had laid his mines everywhere. More than 900 Springer clans stood behind him; the Aras were still urgently demanding the freight space of his fleet. Through patriarchs of other clans or through trade agencies of the Traders on colonial worlds he had established contact with them.

"Don't expose yourself that much!" Cardif repeatedly warned and Cokaze himself sometimes failed to comprehend why he listened to the young man's suggestions. He didn't understand himself but he knew that Rhodan's son was superior to him in this area.

Now they were sitting together in the big cabin. The gathering storm was clearly taking form!

The hour was drawing ever closer in which Admiral Atlan would have to speak to the Great Empire from Arkon 3 if he did not want to idly stand by and watch the downfall of his enormous celestial realm.

But the *Bank of the Galactic Traders on Archetz* did not call back. Still Cokaze winked cheerfully at Thomas Cardif.

The mines were laid; they only had to be detonated. The Patriarch had the detonator and it was thanks to Cardif that he now had the power which would compel Ortece and Atual to their knees!

New dispatches arrived. Wheat was already separated from chaff. They were only read by Cokaze and Cardif. The eldest sons of the Patriarch were mere stand-ins. They did not show how they felt about the role that had been forced upon them but that Thomas Cardif was not their friend was an open secret in the Cokaze clan.

One person was unconcerned about it: Perry Rhodan's son. He knew that he was the stronger but he was clever enough not to flaunt his strength. Time after time he made a point of demonstrating that he was merely the Patriarch's adviser and all his advice confirmed it. After critical examination it was impossible to

ascribe any but unselfish motives to Cardiff.

But he was not Perry Rhodan's son in vain. And though he did not possess the irreproachable character of his father, he did possess the intuitive know-how to supervise a project from its inception to finale, never forgetting to calculate on unexpected incidents.

He actually acted without reflection; he acted from intuition.

"Springer, shouldn't we acquaint Atual and Ortece with the new facts? After all, the Aras are the second largest family-nation in the Arkon Empire next to you Springers and the *Council of 10* has inquired again in one of the last dispatches when you will arrive on Aralon."

"Isn't it still too early for that?" Cokaze's eldest son dared to ask, earning a sharp reproach from the Patriarch. A moment later Cokaze ordered a connection with the two bank directors.

Many minutes passed until Atual's face appeared on the screen in Cokaze's cabin. The chieftain took no time for any preliminaries. "Atual, I am now speaking in the name of 857 patriarchs, in the name of 126 different shipyards, in the name of heavy industry and weapon production. I am speaking for all the heads of the Mounders. After this I am sending a messenger with the necessary documents by which all of the aforementioned are closing their accounts completely. The documents will indicate where the funds are to be..."

"As you like, Patriarch," Atual interrupted, unaffected. "We are awaiting the documents." He nodded lightly and switched off.

Behind Cokaze's back there was unrest among his sons. No one had reckoned with failure. Springer bankers just seemed to have peculiar natures.

The Patriarch's gaze faltered. Thomas Cardif was smiling with relish. At that instance he was Perry Rhodan, with the slight discrepancy of his albino-reddish Arkonide eyes.

"Don't you want to have the documents brought to the bank, Springer?" Almost in the same breath he added: "We should inform the *Council of 10* on Aralon of our arrival."

But the clan chieftain was not completely adrift in young Cardif's wake. "We shall let Ortece and Atual wait until evening. Let them think we are just bluffing. They will be all the more willing to drop their reserve and I... I could make some connections in the meanwhile!"

Cokaze proved his stature, that he was rightfully the richest Patriarch in the Arkonide Empire. He knew how to conduct negotiations; the ability to endow his words with an air of unequivocal trustworthiness must have been an inborn trait. Time and time again he had instructed his sons that by using tactical lies everything could be lost but riches never gained.

Cokaze managed to meet four industrial tycoons at an appointed place. He negotiated with them alone. When he returned three hours later on board the *Cokaz 2*, he handed Thomas Cardif 9 additional documents to scan.

"Cokaze, for the first time in my life I admire a Galactic Trader!" Cardif

impulsively said, extending his arm for a handshake in Terran fashion.

The Patriarch had encountered this custom on Earth and often made fun of it. Now, however, he did not hesitate to grasp Cardif's hand and return the firm handshake. Cokaze was beaming. He was pleased by Cardif's genuine admiration.

* * * *

At the same time hypercom impulses were flashing back and forth between Arkon and Terra. It was impossible to listen in on this radio transmission and stretch the short impulses to their normal time-span. Furthermore, the antennas beamed them scrambled and coded. But without any noticeable time lag they came out of the hyperradio loudspeaker in clear text at Rhodan's end and at Atlan's.

"But that's not all, Admiral," Rhodan said into the microphone. "I can see it in your face. So?"

Across the distance of 34,000 light-years Atlan looked at his friend. "Right, Perry! I haven't informed you of everything and now I am sorry that I have to be telling you this: the one behind all these intrigues is Thomas Cardif! He is the strategist!"

"Thomas Cardif?" Rhodan sharply interrupted the Arkonide in disbelief. "He has just grown up and..."

From the gigantic domed hall of the mammoth positronic computer on Arkon heavy breathing could be heard. The coloured screen in front of Rhodan showed Atlan shaking his head. Now he changed from shaking to nodding. "Perry, you would be right if Thomas Cardif weren't your son! Do you know which answer the giant computer gave me when I asked: *who is behind the subversive movement?* It named your name. It said: Rhodan! But it didn't say which Rhodan."

"And you believe it?" the Administrator asked more sharply than he had intended.

"Don't you, barbarian? Actually you could be proud of your son, if he weren't out to destroy you by way of driving me out. That, my friend, I wanted to keep from you, but we probably know each other too well to be able to conceal anything. Rhodan against Rhodan... who would have thought it?"

A pause ensued: silence. Only the picture remained.

This call from Arkon had been scheduled. Rhodan had had the time to summon his closest co-workers. Now they were sitting behind him. They could see the hypercom screen and hear every word.

Rhodan against Rhodan—who would have thought it? That last sentence was ringing in all their ears. They were still filled with horror by Atlan's information, according to which the largest positronic computer of the Galaxy had identified the initiator of rebellion in the Arkonide Empire as being a Rhodan.

Mercant, Freyt, Deringhouse, Marshall and Reginald Bell refused to accept it; they did not want to believe that Rhodan's son had inherited these abilities from his father.

"Perry," Atlan began again in the great hall of the mammoth computer on Arkon 3, "I am pulling all the combat ships still flying under robot crews away from the Druuf front."

"Admiral, if I were you I would follow the computer's advice this time. If you yourself intervene, or have your robot ships do so, you will ignite the flames in your Empire that can never be extinguished. I have had an idea ever since your first call but I must still wait until my scientists are finished with one part of the problem of *linear hyper-propulsion*. Now do you understand me?"

Rhodan had purposely not spoken directly. He did not rely very much on the hypertransmission specialists' assurance that transmissions of this sort were impossible to monitor.

"Got it, Perry," Atlan replied after brief consideration, "but I still don't get the entire picture. Does it have something to do with me and the Springers?"

Rhodan smiled lamely. "I hope to be in the possession of a Fly Swatter!"

Sighs could be heard on Arkon. "Perry, at this moment I thank our Gods for having met you, barbarian, but if you think I am a super-Arkonide, I thank you for your faith but I am no such thing. 10,000 years spent on Earth seem to have bestowed human weaknesses on me: I am beginning to be pessimistic and to think of Reggie's thumb and your Fly Swatter..." As he spoke his Arkonide eyes widened. "*That...?* Eternal Gods! Perry! Now it seemed as if Atlan were trying to reach across 34,000 light-years to place his hands on Rhodan's shoulders. "Your Fly Swatter should..."

Rhodan interrupted brusquely. "We have understood each other, Admiral!"

"No, we have not, barbarian! Do you want to drive out the devil with Beelzebub?" Atlan responded even more sharply.

Rhodan replied with calm emphasis: I was speaking about a Fly Swatter, not about the devil or Beelzebub. You can sometimes get two flies with one swatter!"

"I don't understand that either, barbarian. How lucky we are at least that Thomas Cardif does not have your experience!"

The conversation between Earth and Arkon was concluded.

For Perry Rhodan and his associates work began. Only Allan D. Mercant, head of Solar Security, knew about the Administrator's daring plan.

But mission *Fly Swatter* would remain in the idea stage as long as Team 065-Propulsion was still working on their task.

The man who suddenly supplied the required impetus was called Rabintorge—the Indian from Lahore.

4/ A WARNING OF DOOM

24 hours later the major transmitters of the robot computer on Arkon 3 tuned into the most important hypercom news phases. The typical call code insignia of the mammoth positronic computer appeared on screens throughout the realm of the Great Empire. It was replaced by the familiar picture of the domed building and then the metallic voice of the computer could be heard.

The voice was ‘threatening; it was not threatening in tone or in expression, it threatened with its soulless logic, not hesitating to speak openly about the plans of the Springers, Aras, Ekhonides and 50 other large nations within the Arkonide Empire.

The computer did not warn against impending chaos; it did not even indicate it. But it did speak about the Druuf front in the form of an ultimatum without setting any time limit.

“...We shall withdraw the fleets. We shall not undertake anything further to prevent the Druufs from flying into our Empire. We will withdraw our fleets so slowly and inconspicuously that the Druuf battleships will have to find their way into the Great Empire.”

“An Empire that is no longer willing to preserve itself has no more justification for existence.”

In conclusion the large dome of the mammoth computer could be seen on all screens, followed by the wave pattern.

For many intelligent beings in the Arkonide Empire it was a warning of doom!

* * * *

On the return Right from Aralon after their successful conference with the *Council of 10*, Cokaze and Thomas Cardif had heard this transmission. It seemed to impress the Patriarch but not to have the least effect on Cardif.

“Bluff!” That was his opinion. “Atlan is still hiding behind the Robot Brain, Cokaze. Really. If the positronicon had spoken on its own initiative it wouldn’t have given you Traders a chance. But today the Computer is no longer what it used to be. Hasn’t Atlan now offered proof that I have counselled you correctly when I suggested you make contact with the squadron commander at the Druuf front?” Cold laughter crossed Cardif’s face. His voice sounded ice-cold, the voice

that was a dead ringer for Rhodan's. But the father of this young man had never spoken so coldly, so devoid of any feeling.

Instinctive defence compelled the Patriarch to lean back. Cardif discerned the significance of his movement. "I... the monster, right, Springer? You are thinking that again but haven't you overlooked that my plan does not contain any warlike engagements? I do not want to become the monster that brings blood and tears over the Great Empire. I want to destroy Rhodan; eradicate his name so that in 10 years not one person will mention it. After that I will withdraw, be forgotten as well, and until the end of my days I will know that my life has had a purpose! Thus far it has been meaningless."

"Cardif, is Rhodan like you?" Patriarch Cokaze simply had to ask that question. An irresistible, inner urge drove him to it.

The ice-cold smile reappeared on the face of the young man. "Rhodan like me? No, Springer!" Only the face I was given makes us similar. He is a Terranian, a conglomeration of feelings which are in constant contradiction to his insights. I, however, feel and am like an Arkonide!

Now the merchant in Cokaze spoke. "Don't you want to take advantage of Rhodan's downfall in any way?"

"Advantages? For me? I'm not even toying with the idea of becoming his successor in the Solar System. I want to destroy him, to punish him for the murder of my mother. Then I will be satisfied and the knowledge that he got what he deserved is enough for me. But why do you always compel me to talk about Rhodan and myself?"

"Because you sometimes seem weird to me and because, like it or not I sometimes have to admire you. You cannot deny that you are Rhodan's son and I, why I would be proud to have a father like Rhodan!

Thomas Cardif sarcastically replied: "You are remarkably emotional for a Galactic Trader!"

The intercom that interrupted them was louder than usual. The call was from the Com Central of *Cokaz 2*. "Sir, please listen to this," the communications man excitedly insisted. The hypertransmission news memory bank, a small part of the computer system, repeated an Arkon communiqué.

1,529 light-years from Arkon in the Dartol System that consisted of two suns and 36 planets, intelligent amphibious beings, the Rasis as they called themselves, had separated from the Arkonide Empire.

An hour previously 200 Arkon robotships had appeared over the three planets inhabited by the Rasis and, without warning, had transformed one of the many little moons above each planet into gas clouds. Unmoved, the mammoth positronic computer declared: "The strong r-radiation forced the amphibious creatures on these three Rasis worlds to take shelter in the sea in their submarine safety dome. In one of their last transmissions the triple alliance government of Rasis declared they were a loyal vassal of the Great Empire!

"Arkon is striking back!" Cokaze cried out in horror.

Cardif contradicted him. “Not Arkon, Atlan! The Great Cöordinator would have turned the Rasis worlds into suns and demonstrated to the Empire how mercilessly he punishes. Atlan, however, had three tiny moons vaporized and not one shot was fired at the planets.” He leaned forward and said more softly than before: “Cokaze, shouldn’t the Galactic Traders be made aware of that distinction?”

Atual and Ortece came to Patriarch Cokaze. The clan chieftain had proven that he was the stronger and with the general authority document in his pocket according to which Aralon, the main world of the Galactic Physicians, was also prepared to close all its accounts, his position had improved even more.

Ortece and Atual stared at the document. Ortece’s hands were trembling slightly as he returned it to the Patriarch. Uneasily he said: “We have made all necessary preparations, Cokaze, but we cannot help warning you once again.”

“Why?” Cardif cut in sharply.

Ortece and Atual, themselves patriarchs of two clans which had owned the *Bank* for millennia, were startled. Irritation and bafflement were in their eyes as they gazed at the young man. Then they turned to look at Cokaze, penetratingly, unmistakably posing a question. For Cardif’s intervention was contrary to all customs among Springers.

“Cardif is speaking and asking questions in my name,” Cokaze coldly declared, thus expecting them to respond to Cardif’s question.

Eighteen Springers and Cardif were sitting opposite the two financial experts. Eighteen Springers did not dare challenge these experienced bankers but a young man who looked like Perry Rhodan pulled apart one argument of theirs after another, eventually cornering them so that Atual had to meekly admit that Cardif’s viewpoint might be just as valid as theirs.

“Well, then, it’s all simply a question of the risk!” Cardif triumphantly concluded, but his voice remained calm. “The *Bank* cannot even lose any money if you cause inflation in the Arkonide Empire! And an economic blow is of more consequence than a lost battle!”

“When will you set off the inflation? Decide *now* or we will make use of all the documents and the *Bank of the Galactic Traders in Titon on Archetz* will be bankrupt within an hour!”

Never since the Bank had been founded had anyone spoken in such a threatening manner to its two owners. For many generations the clans of Atual and Ortece had gloried in the fact that they had been approached solely with respect.

One person, however, who was Perry Rhodan’s son and had had an Arkonide princess as a mother, confronted them with the alternative of either accepting his plan and causing inflation within the Great Empire or declaring bankruptcy within the hour.

Beads of perspiration appeared on the foreheads of the 18 Springers as well as those of Atual and Ortece. Thomas Cardif was sitting next to Cokaze.

Ortece, the slim Springer, cleared his throat. “Tomorrow, Terran! Tomorrow, three time-units after the new rates have been reported from Arkon, Terran!”

The expression ‘Terran’ sounded like a curse. Ortece’s voice was trembling with helpless fury.

Thomas Cardif spoke. “Thank you,” he said, smiling at the two men. He understood the bankers well. They left without any parting words.

18 Springers regarded him as if he were a deadly peril. In a cracked voice Cokaze asked: “Cardif, where did you acquire that knowledge about financial interdependencies?”

“What knowledge am I supposed to have? I’m supposed to know about financial matters? I can’t answer that because up until these negotiations with Atual and Ortece I’ve never given it any thought whatsoever!”

* * * *

The GHC Company in Capetown was no longer a heavy industrial centre of the African Federation. By declaring a state of emergency, Perry Rhodan had the industrial complex confiscated by Solar Defence. The search mission uncovered so much evidence of traitorous connections to the Springer clan of Cokaze that not even the opposition publication of the African Federation dared to criticize the confiscation.

The Ara toxins found at Rochard’s, Artun’s and Sharkey’s were analysed in the medical laboratory and found to be previously unknown poisons which, when injected in a human, elicited hypnotic or suggestive abilities of phenomenal strength. Their great danger lay not in their toxic quality but in the fact that the effect lasted for over 6 months.

The solar system, startled out of a deceptive calm in the first half of the year 2044 by the sudden appearance of Druuf spaceships, next experienced the invasion by a great Arkonide robot fleet. And it had made the acquaintance of the cylindrical ships of the Galactic Traders.

Suddenly being confronted with these facts and realizing that the enormous might of the Solar Empire was not what they thought it was, made the people excited and led to domestic political tensions of a serious nature. Rhodan had mastered the situation; the Springer fleet of Patriarch Cokaze had left the System. Thanks to Atlan’s generosity, the Solar combat units were stronger than ever but nothing could detract from the realization that there were dangerously loud rumblings within the Arkonide Empire and that the collapse of the Great Empire would also result in the downfall of the solar system.

Once again the destiny of mankind lay in one hand. And once again only a few were aware of it. Not even the men of team 065-Propulsion had any idea why Perry Rhodan had been urging for days that they complete their assignment.

The Hindu, Rabintorge, discovered by Frank Lemmon, section head of F-1 in Solar Defence, had become the team’s motor. He himself was motivated by his

ambition to prove that his daring hypothesis was correct. He was not contradicted nearly as often as in the initial days. One of the largest computers of Terrania, which he had requisitioned, repeatedly confirmed his findings. But before the computer could be fed this unique data it had to be compiled.

Structure changes caused by linear hyper-propulsion was the basic problem, doubly difficult to solve as the propulsion itself was almost a mystery to the scientists, except for a few clues.

In the middle of the night Perry Rhodan was torn from his sleep. The readout screen on the intercom next to his bed flashed on. The dark face of Rabintorge was looking at him—the face of an old man, someone about to have a breakdown.

“Sir, the positioning device is ready...”

And Rhodan saw the young Indian slowly collapse, his face fading from the screen. A moment later he was connected with the main hospital.

“Rhodan speaking! Immediate medical alert with full equipment to Tract 18, Section 065-Propulsion! All men present there need medical attention. Total exhaustion. Over!”

Then Bell was awakened by Rhodan’s call. Reginald Bell’s sleepy face stared at him from the screen. “You...?” he said, disgruntled. “Do you know how late it is?”

“Reggie, the tracking device for structural changes by linear hyper-propulsion is ready!”

Bell was still not fully awake. “Linear hyper-propulsion...” Rhodan saw Bell screw his eyes shut, wipe his hand across his face, yawning heartily as he did so, then instantly become wide awake. “Did you say ready? Who will tell me how the device works and...”

Rhodan hastily interrupted him. “I’ll call you right back.” He had made a mistake. Reconnection with medical emergency. He heard that they were already on the way to Tract 18. “Then connect me with Tract 18!” Rhodan demanded.

A moment later he was speaking to Aeskul-6 of Medical Emergency.

“Listen,” Rhodan hastily urged the physician, “you’ll find an Indian in 065 in a state of collapse. Revive him for ½ hour but only if you can take that responsibility. He has to give Mr. Bell some explanations!”

Rhodan’s loudspeaker clicked. He had already switched back through to Bell. “Reggie...” he called. “Rabintorge will brief you on the new tracker in 065-Propulsion!”

* * * *

Four hours later Bell, on board the *California*, with which he had penetrated space, transmitted only one word: *flyswatter*.

Within the exact minute the *Drusus* took off from Terrania. It was a superbattleship with a diameter of 1500 meters, with Perry Rhodan, Mercant,

Freyt and the great majority of the Mutant Corps on board. An additional 200 specialists of various scientific fields were included in the special mission which bore the peculiar name of *Fly Swatter*.

Far from Pluto's orbit the *Drusus* warned the measuring stations of the structure shock and simultaneously reported the time of their impending transition.

Only emergencies permitted a transition within the System; Perry Rhodan laughed bitterly as he thought of it. Again it was all or nothing!

300,000 kilometres from the *California* the *Drusus* returned out of hyperspace back to the normal cosmos. Five minutes later Reginald Bell, a few companions and a work robot swung over to the *Drusus* cruising alongside them.

The work robot was carrying the new special tracking device. Bell had not even dared carry it himself. It weighed only a few kilos, was light and easy to transport but it was the only device as yet in existence and Bell considered it his duty to entrust it to a robot.

It took his group 10 minutes to get from the airlock of the *Drusus* to the gigantic Command Central. There was no particular reason for haste. While still in the airlock he contacted Rhodan via microphone, stating: "16 25/F 13/S 27, Arkonide sidereal catalogue."

The positronic computer on board registered this information, depositing the perforated strip in the input slot one second later.

The triple group of letters and numbers was the Arkonide designation for a tiny, dark red sun, 8136 light-years from Earth, which had two equally tiny, uninhabited planets. In this system, which lay in the direction of the so-called 'corkscrew', one arm of the galactic spiral resembling a corkscrew, Reginald Bell had located something. Using the newly developed special tracking device for structure change by application of Druuf linear hyper-propulsion, he had positioned those 3000 Druuf spaceships which had disappeared into the depths of the Milky Way after their flight from the Solar System.

The tape that Perry Rhodan thoughtfully held in his hand furnished all the data necessary to fly to this small, dark-red glowing sun that was only 1/8th the size of the terrestrial sun.

At that moment the *Drusus* and the *California* were four light-years from Earth. That, too, had been considered in the calculations of the computer.

Military perfection began to unfold in the large ship Central. Rhodan issued succinct, clear-cut orders, received confirmations from all sides and retained his composure through all questioning.

When Bell and his group, including the robot carrying the special device, reached Central Command, the *California*, a ship of the state class measuring 100 meters in diameter, was already on the return flight to Earth. The *Drusus*, however, was preparing for transition which was to bring it across 8,100 light-years into the vicinity of the insignificant, but for Rhodan now doubly-important, little sun system.

The superbattleship began to accelerate. The computer had set the jump through hyperspace for the 31st minute.

Perry Rhodan left the Central accompanied by Bell, Mercant and John Marshall. He had delegated command of the spherical giant to Deringhouse.

Conferences in Rhodan's cabin were always a signal that significant missions were imminent.

Thus far only Allan D. Mercant had been fully initiated into the plan of *Fly Swatter*. The Administrator never held long introductions. "At midnight the *California* will land in Terrania. At that time we in the *Drusus* will have approached within 10 to 15 light-years of the system to which, the remainder of the Druuf fleet retreated. A courier ship is waiting in Terrania for the confirmation that we have approached the two planets on which the Druufs landed. Upon receiving our message the courier will take off for Arkon 3. The courier does not know what message he is delivering to the Admiral. The ship computer will not receive any word of it, either. But I hope that Atlan will recall something I once designated as the *Ring of the Nibelungs* while he and I were in a spherical ship's command central. That key word is all the courier is delivering." Rhodan noticed that Bell was breathing heavily. "Are you short of breath, Reggie?"

"You couldn't have made it any more complicated, could you, Perry?" he inquired in an equally friendly manner, shaking his head.

"Complicated?" Rhodan slowly repeated. "Not a bit. I'm simply not willing to incur the slightest risk on this mission. Atlan will have the *Ring of the Nibelungs* brought from the courier ship. He will immediately know what I have sent him. Then the courier does not return to Earth but will follow us and wait for notification of a coordinate point. Meanwhile we will have contacted the Druufs..."

Bell and Marshall wanted to get up but they resisted. Bell pensively contemplated his thumb.

Rhodan's grey eyes blazed momentarily but then he overlooked Bell's insinuation. "We shall arrive at an agreement with the Druuf commander!" Rhodan's voice had suddenly taken on a different tone. His assertion, which sounded implausible, lost its unbelievable character by virtue of his positive assurance.

Bell remembered the many *favours* from the Druufs he had experienced firsthand and would never forget. He had no fond memories of them and he was not the man to keep this under wraps. "Perry, we will only reach an agreement with the Druuf boss when he sees no chance of living another second otherwise."

"How well you have comprehended the situation of the Druufs," Rhodan gently chided, "for the Druufs don't have a chance of ever reaching their own universe."

"The overlap zone between their universe and the Einstein Universe has become so unstable that a simple changeover from continuum to continuum is becoming more difficult every day. We know that and Atlan knows that but no other person in the Arkon Empire knows it and a certain Thomas Cardif does not

know that!”

“Our trump card is the fact that the captains of the 3,000 Druuf ships know it. They must have discovered by now that their fantastic hyper-propulsion units do not help at all because speed offers no path from our space into their universe and they do not have our lenticular field projectors.”

“That plus the second, equally unfavourable fact that since they brought along their own time, they are only half as fast as we and only reach 50% of the speed of light in normal space flight.”

“The Druufs one day will have computed where the stable discharge fissure is to be found between our two universes, gliding past one another. But I am willing to bet you, Reggie, that they know as well as we do how distant the day is when they’ll find the point that will take them home!”

“When that day arrives, even the longest-living Druuf will have been rotting for decades.”

“Perry,” Bell asked in his typical manner, “have you ever heard of the desperate man driven by panic and despair into acting like a madman and doing just the opposite of what everyone had expected?”

Perry Rhodan nodded affirmatively, then asked: “And have you ever heard of a straw, Reggie?”

“If we weren’t dealing with Druufs, I would have to say—you are right. But the Druufs and their incomprehensible mentality...”

“If dying is involved... when fear of dying enters, then all creatures are the same, Reggie. That is my basic assumption when I contemplate negotiations with the Druufs.”

The hypercom was activated by Communications Central; the flickering screen demanded Rhodan’s attention.

“Sir, news from the Admiral!” the officer on duty in the large Com Central of the *Drusus* reported.

Atlan’s grim face regarded the men in Rhodan’s cabin. “Perry, I congratulate you on your son. You would be proud of him if he were on our side!”

That was the prologue. Rhodan’s face flushed slightly.

“Barbarian, the largest bank in the Arkonide Empire, the *Bank of the Galactic Traders in Titon on Archetz*, has been coerced by a certain Thomas Cardif into creating inflation!

“You know we have an institution similar to your stock market: for the past three hours it has been the meeting place of men gone crazy because I have not been able to stabilize the dropping exchange rates with the means of the State Bank. My robot computer has given me the advice to undertake nothing against it.

“Our dear friends the Aras have *temporarily* discontinued delivery of any medications under very transparent pretenses. I have learned that Thomas Cardif and Cokaze negotiated with the *Council of 10* for several hours on Arkon, the main world of the Galactic Traders.

“Dispatches are arriving from all sectors of the Empire that not one Springer ship is landing or delivering goods. There are only unflightworthy cylindrical ships docked at the space harbours in the various worlds.

“Three cruiser task forces flown by Galactic Traders have attempted to land on M-13. When I found out about it, the automatic robot defence had already intervened, destroying the three task forces down to the last ship... 362 units!”

“An absolutely reliable source reports that the Mounders are flying security guard around Archetz.”

“The only worlds where revolution is not yet brewing are Arkon 1, 2 and 3.”

“The reliability of the combat ship commanders at the Druuf front was evaluated by the computer at 47.3%.

“Now it is rebounding on us like a boomerang that the giant computer largely replaced the robot crews at the Druuf front with people. If the situation continues to degenerate as rapidly as it has for the next 10 hours, then I will give final warning and blast the planet Archetz into the skies. And if that doesn't deter them, then they will get *just what* they have...”

Rhodan interrupted him. “Atlan, I would like to advise you not to do anything before hearing from me.”

“Don't underestimate your son, Perry! I could really admire him! Alright, I'll wait, assuming that Cardif allows me the time for it!”

Rhodan was not able to explain later how he arrived at his response: “Admiral, he will allow you the time!”

And Atlan on Arkon 3, alone in the gigantic dome of the mammoth computer, suddenly widened his eyes, smiled weakly, then nodded and replied: “Rhodan against Rhodan, friend! Does he know you as well as you know him? And do I know you well enough to place the Empire of my fathers and my descendants into your hands for hours? Haven't you realized that our friendship is being subjected to an unbelievable strain as a result of *your doing?*”

“What did you tell me? *Admiral, Cardif will allow you the time!*”

“Just consider what I could suspect is behind that and don't forget what the Computer answered to my question of who was masterminding the rebellion. It named the name of *Rhodan* but it forgot to mention the first name. It should have said *Thomas Rhodan alias Cardif!*”

Arkon switched off. Perry Rhodan, always able to instantly react and adapt to a new situation, failed this time. He remained standing in front of the darkened screen to prevent the others from seeing his face which mirrored the storm within him.

Indeed, he had subjected their friendship to the most severe test. And with his assertion that *Cardif will allow you time* he had aroused the suspicion that he was covertly working together with Thomas Cardif!

Anyone else in Atlan's position would have drawn that conclusion. Atlan, however, only asked one question: does Cardif know you as well as you know

him?

But how had he come to make that assertion?

Rhodan, the mightiest man of the Solar Empire, screwed his eyes shut and tried to compel himself to think about something else but this time his feelings were stronger. They cried out for Thomas. The father cried out for his only son!

However, Thomas Cardif was on the other side. He did not know any father called Perry Rhodan.

5/ INEVITABLE CATASTROPHE

The dark-red little sun was only a pinpoint on the enormous panorama screen of the *Drusus*. Rhodan had approached within 8 light-years of the system in the superbattleship. For minutes the transmitter that he had used on missions in the Druuf universe was running warm.

From the weapons deck the all-clear came. The *Drusus* was at peak combat readiness. More than 2200 people on board the cylindrical giant were wearing spacesuits. Tension was crackling in the ship. A half hour previously, shortly after transition, Rhodan had informed his men in brief words about the nature of the mission and its perils.

Rhodan's idea had materialized into project *Fly Swatter* but only Marshall, Freyt, Mercant and Bell were able to envisage it.

The cold composure acquired by the men after hundreds of missions could be clearly felt.

Perry Rhodan made the decisive move: he was about to call the commander of the Druuf fleet of 3,000 ships.

Harno, the mysterious spherical creature with the incredible ability of television, was gliding next to Rhodan. Before Rhodan could open his mouth to utter the first word of his message to the Druufs, Harno made the square, bulky body of the over-three-meters-tall Druuf commander visible. Apparently he had found him instantly among the large crews of the 3,000 ships.

The leathery skin of the totally hairless creature gleamed brown-black in the colour picture. Four eyes and the triangular mouth did not enhance the beauty of the noseless and earless round head, which measured 36 meter in diameter. But Rhodan and his men were accustomed to the frightening sight of the Druufs.

Perry hesitated to call when he caught sight of the picture provided by Harno of the Chief of the Fleet. His body was seized by a light shiver. With the aid of that creature and his 3000 combat vessels he intended to carry out a daring plan. But what would happen if this Druuf at some point ceased to hold to their agreements and acted on his own?

Hundreds of reasons pointed toward that possibility. Human motives could be eliminated from the start. The mentality of the Druufs was nonhuman, descending from insects as they did. Fear of the Terran and expediency alone would perhaps make them stick to the agreement—if they arrived at any at all.

“Sighting, sir, on yellow 18!” the lieutenant at the space tracker reported. “80 to 100 ships approaching. Speed 0.4 light; distance 7 light-minutes!”

Rhodan turned his head to the right. There stood John Marshall, chief of the mutants. Part of his Corps was on board the *Drusus*, the flagship of the Solar Empire.

Marshall nodded in response to Rhodan’s, glance. They had communicated telepathically and in the same manner Marshall now informed his group, taking up contact with the hypno, André Noir.

The teleporters prepared for action. One of them was only one meter tall and looked like a cross between mouse and beaver: Pucky.

He strapped on the little set of highly potent special bombs. One bomb ignited in a ship sufficed to turn it into a gleaming atomic sun. The set he had strapped on contained 20 bombs. The human teleporters had a double portion on their backs.

They were only waiting for the command to jump. But they were kept waiting.

The special tracker that measured linear hyperpropulsion alerted them to a menacing situation. Bell was standing next to the device. He reported: “400 Druuf ships exceeding speol at yellow 18. Distance about 3 light-days... Oh! Curses! There’s another swarm of hornets less than 2 light-hours away, 60 ships strong!”

“Then the time has arrived!” was Perry’s comment. He shoved aside all other microphones, leaving only the microphone for the Druuf transmitter.

“Rhodan to Chief of Druuf Fleet! Rhodan to Chief of Druuf Fleet! Come in, please! Rhodan to Chief of Druuf Fleet! Come in...”

He repeated the call 10 times, then was silent. There was not a sound to be heard in Command Central other than the humming of picture tubes, spools and transformers. Suddenly a hissing sound could be heard, gradually becoming louder.

The Druuf receiver was turned up to full volume by Communications Central but still only the hissing sound of unstable tension fields between the stars could be heard.

Now Bell’s voice was added. “The 400 fleet is now flying at about three times speol. Nice and fast...” There was a trace of envy because Terra did not have this fantastic linear hyper-propulsion which enabled them to move between normal and hyperspace above the speed of light and thus never have to endure the shocks of transition.

The weapons deck reported over intercom. “Sir, I’ve switched all reserve power stations to the weapon towers!” The officer in charge had formed an impression of the situation based on Bell’s information and was acting independently. His routine reports to Perry Rhodan often proved to be salvation from desperate situations.

“OK!” Rhodan said. It could be heard via intercom throughout the *Drusus*.

“The Druufs are speeding up *even more!*” Bell’s voice was excited this time.

“How fast?” Rhodan asked intently.

Bell mustered the new positioner for structure shocks by linear hyper-propulsion “The thing is broken!”

“A sighting!” an officer in Central called, pointing at the large panorama screen of the flagship. “Druuf ships reappearing in the normal universe!”

At almost the same second the teleporters jumped over to the approaching formation of Druuf ships.

But Rhodan knew only too well that this mission was not destined for a decisive victory. Confusion and unrest could be engendered in the Druufs by the mysterious destruction of a portion of their spaceships. Never, however, would this force this race of gigantic, cumbersome creatures to take flight with their entire fleet. Hence Rhodan repeated his call to the superior command.

“Rhodan to the Chief of Druuf Fleet! Come in, please!” Rhodan to Chief of Druuf Fleet. Come in...”

The apparatus switched from sending to receiving. Again there was only the loud hissing of fields of tension to be heard.

“Sir, we are being encircled!” Rhodan was informed.

He nodded absentmindedly it seemed. All preparations had been made for a flash transition but that was not what he was thinking about at that second. Nor did he have the danger in mind that was steadily approaching.

There was too much involved! To win everything he had to stake everything!

“Three men, sir...” Marshall whispered.

Three minutes previously the teleporters had jumped. According to their schedule, the first bombs were to be ignited five minutes after the jump. This left a security lapse of 45 seconds to allow the teleporters to leave the ship.

“Rhodan to Chief of Druuf Fleet! Come in, please! Rhodan to Chief of...”

Through Harno he had been able to observe the behaviour of the Druuf commander-in-chief and had seen him swivel around on his clumsy, columnar legs and head towards the device which Rhodan recognized as a transmitter.

“Rhodan, Uong-zterds-klighf speaking, Commander-in-chief. What do you want?”

Druuf names were all monstrous words—impossible to pronounce or remember. The humans had already determined that on their first visit in the Druuf Universe, which is why Rhodan did not make the slightest attempt to retain the name of the Druuf chief. But when his voice was suddenly made audible in the room by preset adapters, Rhodan sent a vital telepathic message to Marshall: *call back the teleporters! No bombs detonated!*

Marshall only had to look at his chronometer to know that it was a race against time.

His agent spacesuit was equipped with the same perfection as the suits of his active teleporters. Instantly John Marshall clapped his helmet shut, switched on the high output telecom of Swoon design and called his teleporters to immediately return with all bombs to the *Drusus*.

The order was just crossing his lips as a squeaky voice, sounding quite irritated, asked: "And what am I to do with my bomb, since the fuse is already lit, John?"

"Do what you can, Pucky!" Marshall sharply replied to the mousebeaver and, sensing trouble, asked: "Where are you?"

"On the flagship of the Druufs! Where else?"

"Pucky, for heaven's sake, nothing must happen, there of all places..." Thereafter he could spare his words. A soft crackling sound informed him that Pucky could no longer be reached by telecom.

Slowly Marshall opened his helmet. He could feel that his forehead was covered with perspiration.

Meanwhile a lively conversation had developed between Rhodan and the Druuf chief. Complicated adapters on both sides were required to enable this exchange, for the Druufs did not have organs of speech in the human sense; they communicated with each other by means of ultra-high frequency which was outside the human range, employing bodily organic receivers and transmitters.

The Druuf repeatedly inquired about Rhodan's fleet. It must have appeared suspicious to him that they had only discovered the one, gigantic ship. It was obvious that he was thinking about the gigantic robot fleet which had compelled him to abandon the attempt to conquer the Solar System and flee to this inhospitable region of the Galaxy.

And Rhodan repeatedly replied: "it is waiting for my orders! My fleet is tuned into our conversation!"

He was bluffing. Rhodan could not tell whether the Druuf was picking up on his bluff. Suddenly there was a glaring flash between their two fronts. Both Rhodan and the Druuf gasped: "What was that?"

Pucky could have told them in detail. It was the bomb exploding that was actually meant to destroy the Druuf flagship which Pucky had grabbed when the time fuse was already lit and, after a teleportation jump, hastily dropped in space.

Pucky's special spacesuit, singed on the right side, testified to how close a call it had been. The mousebeaver was even more explicit in his expressions when he returned "...and then I took off with the thing. There were three seconds left to the explosion! Out of the ship, into space, drop the thing! And when I was about to teleport to the *Drusus*..." None of the mutants laughed at Pucky's wild streak of profanity. Everyone comprehended what risk Pucky had undergone and some were honest enough to ask themselves: *would you have dared to do it?* And to answer the question negatively with equal honesty.

"The explosion of the bomb and my teleporter jump must have been about a 1,000th of a second apart. OK, we lucked in once, but now I'm anxious to know how things will continue. Just take a look at how completely we've been surrounded by the Druufs!"

The Mutant Central was a smaller version of the huge Command Central of the *Drusus*. There was no lack of tracking devices and screens with sliding optical magnification. Pucky was not exaggerating. If the Druufs so desired, the *Drusus*

would soon cease to exist. There were over 2,000 Druuf ships participating in the encirclement and this concentration turned a transition into a hopeless enterprise.

Perry Rhodan did not allow his feelings about the situation to show. "Commander-in-chief," he calmly addressed the stubborn Druuf, "your strength is your, weakness. The existence of your ships is only a matter of a few short days. You can flee wherever you want: we will not lose track of you. The chances of returning to your people in your Universe are nil."

"Commander-in-chief, how many ships did you dispatch to the front to determine at which point you could best penetrate the overlap zone? I don't want to know the number of reconnaissance vessels but I do know that not one of them returned. And every hour that passes allows the discharge fissure to become more unstable and in proportion to its growing instability, the combat strength of the fleet is increased, thus preventing you from penetrating our Universe."

"Words, nothing but words, Rhodan!" the Druuf interrupted. "You wished to speak with me; you have spoken with me and that is the end of our conversation."

"And the end of you and your crews as well, Druuf!" Rhodan had changed the tenor of his approach but not his inflection. The adapters did not transmit the nuances of voice into ultra-high frequencies.

Harno, the creature hovering exactly in Rhodan's line of vision, now showed him the awkward Druuf who was intertwining his fingers, so disproportionately delicate in relation to his massive body. The Druuf appeared to be thinking.

"Rhodan, what do you have to offer?" The question came like a stroke of lightning from clear skies. A few officers in Com Central suppressed a startled cry.

"Druuf, what are you prepared to give?" That was Rhodan's massive counter-question and it did make an impression on the head of the Druuf fleet, even though he could not show any human emotion. He did wave to his staff, assembled behind him, to keep silent.

"What security do we have to guarantee that you will really provide the possibility for our return to our Universe?"

That was the question Rhodan had been waiting for; the question that had to come!

"I will provide you with double security, Druuf," Rhodan declared unemotionally. "Give one of your ships the assignment to approach within 100 kilometres of my vessel. I will direct the ship into position."

"That ship, but that one only, will be able to fly into your Universe. Its commander is to convince himself that he is really in his own continuum and on orders from you he is then to return to this Universe as quickly as possible."

"I will make that possible, Druuf, and that is my first guarantee!"

The 120-man team at the great lens field projector in the largest hangar of the *Drusus* was listening. 120 men waiting for the command to switch on the lens field projector, which by virtue of its power could open the portal to the Druuf Universe at all points that had once before been within an overlap zone.

The time and locality schedule of the overlapping areas had been calculated in an inconceivably difficult communal effort in Terrania including astronomers, physicists and mathematicians.

The bullet head of the Druuf suddenly seemed to be rigidly fixed onto his quadratic rump. Rhodan could anticipate what was now going on in this clever insect brain.

“Druuf, an attack on my ship is pointless! With the first rays, the device that would enable the return to your Universe self-destructs.”

The commander of the 3,000 ships ignored the warning. “And what is your second guarantee, Rhodan?”

“I will send five of my men as collateral on your ship!”

By Druuf standards, this offer was no additional guarantee. But this clever Druuf had meanwhile realized that in this world of little bipeds there was a totally different ethical code which placed a high value on the security and life of the individual.

“And what am I supposed to do, Rhodan?” the Druuf asked, revealing neither acceptance nor rejection of the offer.

“You don’t have to do more than make a flash appearance over a certain planet with your fleet. You will have the right to convince yourself with your own scoutships that I am not luring you and the fleet into a trap. Two of the five men I will place in your command will guide your reconnaissance vehicles directly to the target star and avoid all danger.”

“And what is the purpose of that, Rhodan?”

“Nothing more than an intimidation attempt with which I hope to avert the outbreak of a revolution in a bloodless fashion...”

The Druuf interrupted. “Rhodan, we have determined that there is not a great difference between our intelligence and yours but do you really expect me to *believe* this?”

This compelled Rhodan to play a dangerous trump. “Druuf, to us you are monsters, a nightmare! The common man is terrified of you. Your spaceships engender horror. And that world, a powder keg with their revolution, will barely dare to breathe for fear that, after my warning an enormous fleet of Druuf spacecraft will appear above it.”

“Druuf, fly us a demonstration of might and intimidation and as surely as my name is Rhodan and by all that is holy to me... I swear that I will allow your fleet to return to your Universe by way of the portal.”

“Show me the portal, Rhodan. Let one of my ships fly through it and it will receive my command to return as soon as it is convinced it has indeed arrived in its own continuum. We will discuss the rest upon the return of my ship!”

“Agreed!” Rhodan replied. “Have your ship approach within 100 kilometres. The exact position will be forthcoming.” He covered the microphone with his hand and looked over at Bell. “Has Atlan’s courier arrived yet?”

“He reported in. He’s waiting for the prescribed position, Perry. But do you really trust this Druuf?”

“We’ll discuss that later! Marshall, who let the bomb between the ships go off prematurely?”

“Pucky! And he barely came out alive, sir!” Marshall said, trying to protect the mousebeaver with his last remark. But there was no deceiving Rhodan’s amazing sense of time.

He regarded Marshall sharply. “Which means that Pucky must have ignited the bomb before the arranged time.”

Marshall only nodded. Rhodan likewise nodded, which indicated that the mousebeaver had something unpleasant ahead of him.

The Administrator then had to turn his attention back to the Druuf commander.

“Rhodan, I’m sending my fastest ship over. Can you see it yet?”

It could be made out clearly, for all the ship floodlights were shining. The spacecraft was speeding closer, a blue-white gleaming stellar dot.

* * * *

The economic collapse of the Great Empire was threatening to split the gigantic celestial empire in the cluster of M-13. From hour to hour the inflation took on a more terrifying form. At Arkon’s command, the stock exchanges on all planets were closed; the rates were no longer quoted. It was useless to fetch money from the bank and take it home. It wasn’t worth anything there either.

The Galactic Physicians now had an additional reason for not delivering medications. They couldn’t have, even if they had so wanted, because the Springers with their billion-ton freight capacity were not landing on any worlds anymore. In great bunches they had gathered between the stars, awaiting further developments.

On Arkon 3 the first emergency in the assembly arose after 20 hours because more than 40 special spaceships that were to deliver important parts had returned empty.

The supply policy of the gigantic computer had not failed in the question of spare parts. But due to the fact that the ships returned without cargo, the reserves for the next three months had to be tapped. As always, the Robot Brain was directing production. It did not occur to Atlan to take over control; he had enough to do replacing the old directives with new ones in keeping with latest developments. Yet even the work which could no longer be postponed could not be completed.

Minute by minute the positronicon informed him of new, ominous events within the Empire. It became increasingly evident that Thomas Cardif, with the help of Cokaze, had unleashed an avalanche of galactic proportions.

He now contemplated the *Ring of the Nibelungs* lying in front of him. He

remembered having regarded Rhodan's courier in astonishment when he had greeted Atlan in the hatchway of his ship while the skies were blocked out by the gigantic dome on the other side.

"*Ring of the Nibelungs*," he repeated once again, recalling the days when Gunther, Hagen and Siegfried were alive and battling. He had known all three and of them all it was the sinister Hagen who had been his friend. But back then there had not yet been any *Ring of the Nibelungs*: the saga had not yet been created.

"Aha!" Atlan suddenly exclaimed. His auxiliary brain, which operated with strict logic, had supplied the explanation.

He walked past the astonished Terranian over to the small ship's computer and regarded the little round ring on its casing. Normally it had no other function than to serve as a pull ring if the casing jammed.

Rhodan had once called his attention to a similar ring, jokingly having remarked: "Isn't that the *Ring of the Nibelungs*? If the casing jammed and the ring weren't there, how could one get at the treasures stored in the computer?"

Rhodan's courier ship had meanwhile started off, taking course for that inconsequential sun system which was harbouring the Druuf fleet.

Atlan took the ring in his hand. It was specially designed. In the courier ship he had easily lifted it out of its loop, while still requiring a few minutes to find the opening mechanism.

"Why all these complications?" he asked, slightly dissatisfied. He did not like Rhodan's security complex. He turned the ring back and forth, a light metal with a high stress tolerance. A hundred years earlier no one would have even dared to think of anything like it; today this material could be found in every Terran household.

"But of course!" Astonished at himself, Atlan shook his head. Suddenly he knew why the ring was made of this light metal alloy and why it was supposed to be the *Ring of the Nibelungs*. "Perry, I owe you an apology! You are no romantic but a splendid old realist with romantic ambitions..."

A conveyer strip carried him to the laboratory of the mammoth positronicon. He entered the room equipped for metallurgic-photographic examinations. The ring was mounted in front of the 3rd developer that worked with guided magnetic fields, probing the piece of metal layer by layer. At first trace of any metallurgic-photographic exposure it would act as a 3-dimensional developer.

Atlan sat down in an armchair. His gaze rested expectantly on the screen. The 3rd device was humming away. Suddenly the screen flickered on; the scanner in the developer had found the layer with Rhodan's message.

Atlan, kept young for 10,000 years by the cell activator in his chest, could still be surprised, despite all his experience.

Rhodan was conveying to him what the *Fly Swatter* mission signified. Atlan was sitting bolt upright in his chair. He reviewed the message many times. "If he manages this..." the Arkonide sighed, seized by admiration for Rhodan. "Barbarian, I think you are still somewhat ahead of your son after all!"

He switched off the 3rd developer and returned by conveyer strip. The news which had meanwhile arrived could no longer surprise him. Everything was inescapably heading towards collapse.

* * * *

Again Atual and Ortece were seated in the cylindrical spacecraft, *Cokaz 2*, opposite Cokaze and Thomas Cardif.

Again the two finance experts were begging for the opportunity to take action. "...tomorrow is too late, Patriarch! An inflation knows no laws! A total collapse cannot be stopped by one command! By our gods, Cokaze, don't listen to the Terranian! Listen to us!"

"In which case the Galactic Traders would have never come as far as we are now!" Cokaze mockingly replied. "The Arkonides are at the end of their economic resources. That Atlan may dare to challenge little colonial peoples with the robot fleet but it takes more than robot spacecraft to get at us Galactic Traders. Arkon knows that our cylindrical spaceships are no pilgrimage vessels that only trust in the protection of the gods."

Atual excitedly interrupted him. "Patriarch, do not mock the gods or we will be cursed. Arkon is still a reality! The Druufs, those monsters from another universe, are still a real threat! The Regent still exists, even though Atlan has switched him off. And there is still Rhodan! Rhodan..."

Cokaze broke out in peals of laughter. "Rhodan! Of course, Rhodan! One need only mention the name of Rhodan in the Great Empire and everyone thinks that the celestial devils are standing behind the door."

"I have made his acquaintance! I know how great his power is! For decades he has made a fool of us, the Great Empire! He alone was mighty!"

"Didn't I say that?" Atual exploded, displaying an amazing amount of emotion for a banker.

"And who is sitting next to me, Atual?" Cokaze derisively asked. "So you have come to tell us that you are frightened after all?"

Ortece, who had barely uttered a word, now intervened. "The Empire, that is us, you, Patriarch and the poorest Springer who has thus far lost over a third of his fortune!"

Slowly Thomas Cardif stood up. His Arkonide eyes were gleaming reddish fire but the gleam radiated a chill. A mocking smile distorted his mouth. "You have spoken so much but not once have you touched upon the question of why the State Bank of Arkon has made no attempt to support the falling rates by purchasing. Answer that question, Ortece, and we will give you permission within the hour to halt the economic collapse! We have the full power of attorney and documents to enable it!"

Ortece stared at him as if seeing a ghost. He then looked imploringly at the

Patriarch, in whose eyes, however, there was neither pity nor help to be found. “I can’t do that. Atual and I are totally perplexed by the passive behaviour of the Arkon State Bank.”

Cokaze’s face showed his contempt. Triumphantly he pointed at Thomas Cardif. “Ortece, why do you think Cardif could predict to us, the Springer patriarchs, and to the *Council of 10* before the inflation set in that the State Bank of Arkon would not intervene? How do you explain that?”

Ortece’s eyes blazed in fury. “We are no clairvoyants, Cokaze! We are bankers who take their profession seriously, not charlatans!”

Cardif casually threw in his question. “How much would your bank earn if you attempted to halt the inflation today, if the plants were to resume work, the Springer fleets were to transport goods from one planet to the other? How many billions?”

“Couldn’t we split the profit?” Cokaze sarcastically inquired, staring at the two men.

Ten minutes later they were alone. Almost head over heels the richest and most influential bankers of the Great Empire had left Cokaze’s ship.

“Those scoundrels...” the Patriarch grumbled, shaking his head. Inquisitively he regarded Cardif. I know how to handle money and I also know what I have to do to increase it. But how can one earn enormous sums in an inflation if all the others are losing their last funds?”

“Here’s how you do it...” Cardif began to explain as the intercom of the *Cokaz 2* switched on.

“Sir,” the Springer com officer called to his patriarch, “the great transmitter on Arkon 3 has announced an important communiqué within minutes. All hyperwaves...”

“Put the transmission through when it comes in and don’t talk so much when you haven’t been asked. Remember that!”

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The second conversation took place between the Druuf commander and Perry Rhodan. Again Harno saw to it that Rhodan could observe the angular monster in his ship Central during the exchange, although the Druuf had no inkling of it.

The spacecraft sent into the Druuf Universe through the portal which had been created by the lens field projector in the largest *Drusus* hangar had meanwhile returned and reported to the commander.

“Harno,” Rhodan had asked the round creature, “can you hear what the scoutship commander is telling his chief?”

Harno managed it and Rhodan had no quarrel with the report presented by the returned Druuf.

Negotiations now proceeded.

“Rhodan,” the Druuf was just replying, “we are secure in places where you are not present. You are baiting us with your promise that we can return to our Universe. But if we take up your suggestion, you will really attempt to destroy us!”

Rhodan sensed that he could not make any progress with the Druuf with words. He had to provide tangible proof of his honesty. But how was he to do that?

The tele-transmitter, the only weapon of its kind and the most dreadful, had to be eliminated. If the Druuf were to find out about the existence of a device such as that, his appetite for the *Drusus* might increase.

Louder than before, he responded more out of intuition than intellect. “Druuf, you mustn’t forget that I did not have to search for you and your fleet. On my native star I already knew where you were hidden. I could just as well have come with all my ships and the battle against you Druufs would have been over long ago!

“I have no more to say than that. Now I am switching off. If you want to talk to me, do it soon!”

That was the old Rhodan, again investing his total personality and, by virtue of his foresight, knowing with almost 100% certainty that the Druuf commander would now be ready to accept his suggestion.

In the mighty Command Central of the gigantic vessel discussion was resumed but no one left his place. Rhodan’s flagship was still surrounded by Druufs. If the ultimate showdown were to come about, their fate would be more quickly sealed

than the time it had taken to destroy the superbattleship *Kublai Khan* over the world of the lizards.

“Has the information for Atlan been compiled?” Rhodan asked Gen. Deringhouse.

He stiffened imperceptibly. “Yes sir, all but the time...”

We’ll have that right away! Rhodan dared to contend.

No one allowed himself to smile sceptically at that. Perry Rhodan rarely made a prediction like that. But when he did, it always came about.

“Marshall?”

The chief of the Mutant Corps was standing next to Bell at the special tracker. He looked up.

“Inform Tako Kakuta that he is being detailed to the flagship of the Druuf as astronaut. Dr. Small will remain behind in his place!”

“But Kakuta is no astronaut!”

“All the better teleporter he is, Marshall,” Rhodan countered.

Bell nodded almost imperceptibly. He had realized what Perry Rhodan was planning with this switch but Marshall seemed to be having a bad day. “Sir, I don’t understand you.”

“Then I recommend that you have your distrust expelled. Perhaps there is some good therapy for that. Have you understood me now?”

“OK, boss!” Marshall laughed self-consciously, shaking his head over his own denseness.

Tako Kakuta, the short slender Japanese with the child’s face did not bat an eyelash when Marshall conveyed the boss’s order. Only Pucky, who had some reprimand to look forward to for his excessive zeal, said what he thought.

“I still don’t know which I like better: the Topide lizards, the Galactic Physicians or the Druufs. None of them appeal to me. They are all repulsive but the Druufs probably bother me most. I don’t trust them one inch. Tako, just take good care of our star course regulator and bring it back safe and sound.”

“You are having your talkative day again today, huh, Pucky?” Marshall commented sternly.

“No,” the mousebeaver replied, grinning with his incisor, “but is it prohibited to give Reggie’s thumb some thought and...”

Marshall, still cross about his own denseness, grumbled at him: “Do you have to go and repeat Reggie’s rubbish?”

“How delighted he will be about your good opinion when I disclose to Fatso, accidentally of course, how you talk about him! I could probably forget it forever, if you would stroke my fur for two hours.” That was plain blackmail and Pucky knew it but as a mousebeaver he could get away with it. However, Marshall did not play along.

“Tell him whatever you wish, my friend, but we will just wait and see when you are ever sent on a mission again! I think your fang will fall out before that!”

No one had ever referred to Pucky's incisor, of which he was so proud, as a fang before. However, Marshall's threat not to send him on any more missions was even worse. Hearing that was more terrible to him than being without fresh carrots for 10 weeks. "John," he meekly requested, "could we come to an agreement?"

"With you, blackmailer?"

But Pucky could not be deterred that easily. "OK, John! Then I am a blackmailer and you are a slanderer! You think that is much better?"

The mousebeaver had the laughter on his side; even the quiet Kakuta smiled his mysterious Asiatic smile. Ready for action, he checked out with Marshall for astronaut duty. Pucky disappeared on the spot.

Marshall informed Command Central over intercom of his participation.

Meanwhile Perry Rhodan was waiting for the Druuf to take the initiative in making contact. Tension was mounting steadily. During this period Communications was relaying news broadcasts from main stations of Arkonide hypertransmitters.

The Great Empire was cracking at all corners, although it was obvious that the newscasts were designed to heighten the unrest. Even discounting a great deal, however, it was clear that Atlan's position was worsening from hour to hour. The time was approaching in which the Empire would break apart after having endured more than 15,000 years.

During a lull Bell commented: "When the Druuf discovers that he is to play Fly Swatter and the fly at the same time, well..."

Reginald Bell's apprehensions were justified. Several things would have to become immediately apparent to the Druuf scoutships, assuming that the commander sent out the ships with the two Terranian astronauts:

For one, the unusual density of the stars in the cluster M13, which would have to arouse the Druufs' suspicion that they were dealing with the national territory of their bitter enemy.

For another, the alarming news of turmoil in the Arkonide Empire would not escape their attention.

Thirdly, and this point caused Rhodan the most anxiety—the Mounders were circling Archetz on security rounds. Should the two Druuf scoutships meet up with massed fleet—and the battle-trained vessels would not hesitate one second to attack foreign ships—then not only would Rhodan's plan be foiled, the Druuf fleet surrounding the *Drusus* would attack as well.

The outcome of that unequal match was obvious.

Rhodan turned to Gen. Deringhouse. "Compose a message for Arkon 3. Demand that Atlan see to it that—No! We won't use hypercom. Just include in the message the courier is taking to Atlan that the Mounders must disappear from the vicinity of Archetz, Emphasize that Atlan will have three hours time for it after receiving the message."

Perry Rhodan was not even conscious of the fact that he was giving orders to the ruler of the greatest celestial empire. During these days he saw Atlan and himself as sitting in the same boat which had to reach a safe harbour through a stormy sea. Should it sink underway, there would shortly be no more Great Empire and that tiny entity that proudly called itself the Solar Empire would no longer exist either. Hence it was of no consequence who was giving orders to whom. It was imperative to master the crisis in absolute mutual trust.

Rhodan was just as certain that his plan, *Fly Swatter*, had little in common with strategy. The plan was laden with unknown factors, the greatest of which was called Thomas Cardif!

Neither Atlan nor he had expected that this young man, supported by the Galactic Traders, could succeed within a few days in shaking the foundations of an empire that had existed for 15,000 years.

There was one single advantage on Atlan and Rhodan's side: even revolutions accompanied by economic collapse needed time to ripen. As long as that moment had not arrived, the greatest power still lay on the side of the state and that fact was the mainstay of Rhodan's plan.

Atlan was neither forced into the roll of crown prince nor was he a victim of confinement psychosis although he was the only living being hidden away under the gigantic dome of the mammoth Computer. He had accepted Rhodan's warning that it was better to incur a great risk than to squelch the least seed of revolution with brute force and thus himself set fires in all corners of the nation. For if Arkon's powerful robot fleet were to attack, hundreds of thousands of cylindrical vessels would form a front. And the positronicon had long since informed Atlan of how well they were armed and what a mismatch the robot fleet would be against the Springers.

"Rhodan..." The voice of the Druuf sounded to many of the men in the *Drusus* command room like the watchword that liberated them from intolerable stress.

"Druuf..." Rhodan replied just as curtly.

"I am ready to accept your suggestion but I am not prepared to engage two spaceships. Only one with two of your astronauts on board will fly to the target star. But if the ship does not return or cuts off communication, then you can prepare your own ship for combat, Rhodan!"

Rhodan ignored the threat. I will send my five men on an auxiliary craft to your ship, Druuf. Order your fleet not to attack it!"

"Already done. Send your men over here, Rhodan. The rest will follow later."

The special transmitter was silent again. The Druuf fleet commander had switched off.

Only a few commands were making the rounds of the great spacecraft.

Four astronauts and the teleporter, Tako Kakuta, were boarding a guppy that was to bring them to the flagship of the Druufs. Gen. Deringhouse was meanwhile sitting in Communications Central, completing the report for Atlan which the courier would deliver. He shook his head uncomprehendingly as a technician took

the message out of his hand and went over to a device that was not connected to any transmitter.

“Grossi, now just explain to me once again what a *negative* of a transmission impulse means. I simply can’t grasp it, so this is the third time you have to tell me...”

The technician Grossi shook his head, laughing good-naturedly. “General, it can only be explained with formulas and the whole thing was a chance discovery. More precisely: a cuckoo idea! When it flashed through the mind of my colleague Francozetti and he told us about it, we all laughed. He had the last laugh, though. Two months later he held his new formulas under our noses. Actually it is nonsense to talk about the *negative* of a radio impulse but we don’t have any other expression for it. And because we borrowed the term from photo-chemistry, it has to lead to false conceptions, which makes the process even more incomprehensible... to a layman!”

“Thanks!” Gen. Deringhouse said with a grin. “Now I at least know that I should quit bothering you with questions and what a splendid specimen of a layman I am. But now what’s happened with my, message in this contraption?”

Grossi, born in Sicily, got his degree in Naples. For 11 years he had been among the top talent brought to Terrania by Rhodan. Grossi now felt sorry for himself for again he had to turn down the general.

“I can’t explain that to you either. If I tell you that this device converts your words into impulses and that in the same operation it prepares a negative of them, you will automatically think of film negatives and that’s a dead-end...” He took the thin tape that had clicked its way out of the machine over to the automat of the hyper-transmitter. Gen. Deringhouse did not budge wanted to understand this as yet unexplained process from his side. He was not ready to give up. He still By means of this *negative* procedure there was certainty for the first time that hyper-transmissions could not be deciphered—as long as the process was unknown to the adversary.

The hyper-transmitter of the *Drusus* sent the *negative* message to the courier ship posted 30 light-years away. A direct connection to Arkon was not possible as Atlan did not yet have a like device. “But the courier has one, otherwise Atlan along with his positronicon could brood till the end of time about the undecipherable message our boss sent. So, General, the courier is taking off! You see?”

Grossi demonstratively pointed at the tracking screen. The courier ship could be seen as a minute, gleaming point.

Grinning, Deringhouse asked the dark, curly-haired Grossi: “And you are glad that I am leaving Communications Central, aren’t you? But you are not rid of me in the long run!”

* * * *

The yellow Rusuma sun shone on 18 planets; the 5th was the Springer central world of Archetz. Following the example of Arkon, the Galactic Traders had developed all of them into defensive forts in the course of millennia, with the exception of the planet Ult nearest the sun. Ultimately they included the many moons in their planetary fortification ring.

The clans, constantly cruising back and forth between the stars, mocked the need for security of their racial brothers who had become sedentary upon Archetz until they themselves were compelled to land frequently on Archetz, either for essential repairs of their cylindrical ships or even to purchase new spacecraft.

From the moment they felt solid ground beneath their feet they grasped the value of the mere knowledge that they were protected by heavily armed planets and moons.

Archetz, the hub of the subversive movement and of the economic crisis, had made a last ditch effort in the past days. The Mounders had been induced to fly security checks around this most important of Springer worlds.

The night lay above Titon, city of 12 million. In Cokaze's vessel, *Cokaz 2*, the two eldest sons of the Patriarch were on guard duty. They were instructed to awaken him and Thomas Cardif on receipt of any important messages. The major portion of the night had passed uneventfully, however, when suddenly the central control station of the strong battleship taskforce reported in on the Mounder frequency.

"Where is Cokaze, Springer?" the voice of the giant who weighed more than a half ton boomed from the loudspeaker. The giant's face was distorted by anger and his forehead was flushed. "Is he asleep? Then wake him up, quick, friend!"

Cokaze's eldest son stormed out of the communications room of *Cokaz 2*, confused by the gruff call of the Mounder. His younger brother switched on intercom, simultaneously connecting with his father's cabin and the Terranian's.

"Who is calling?" the Patriarch asked, still drowsy.

"I'm on my way!" Cardif interjected, wide awake.

They met on main deck and looked at each other questioningly. They shrugged their shoulders, having no idea of what the central control station of the Mounder might have to report of importance at this time of the night.

The Patriarch sank heavily into the chair facing the readout screen. "Onkto, what's up?" he asked, now aware that he was the richest patriarch of all the Springer clans and that there was no more important man at that moment in the entire Arkon Empire.

"Not much," the Mounder said in his incredibly deep bass voice. "We are pulling back, Patriarch!"

"What are you going to do?" Cokaze screamed into the microphone in a fever of excitement. "That is counter to our agreement, Onkto! That is treason!"

"Nonsense!" the Mounder retorted coarsely. "Arkon threatened us in no uncertain terms, demanding..."

“Arkon...” The Patriarch, otherwise so controlled, roared with laughter. “Arkon, none other! What is Arkon today?”

“Who is that standing behind you, Cokaze? The face reminds me a lot of Rhodan! Who is it?” the Mounder demanded, drowning out Cokaze’s furious laughter.

Thomas Cardif stepped forward. He placed his hand on Cokaze’s shoulder, indicating that the Patriarch was to leave negotiation to him.

“I am Thomas Cardif and my mother was Thora, an Arkonide princess, Onkto! That should do it. What did Arkon demand?”

Onkto, head of the central control station of the Mounders, 800,000 kilometres above Archetz in his battleship, felt hypnotized by the reddish gleam of these cold Arkonide eyes. “Are you the one counselling Cokaze?” he inquired, obviously confused.

“What did Arkon demand? Who made the demands? The Regent or Admiral Atlan?” It was the Arkonide speaking out of Thomas Cardif; in his gestures, tone and stance he was a prototype Arkonide but in his succinct manner of expression he was Perry Rhodan’s son.

Onkto’s querying glance at Cokaze went unanswered. “The Great Cöordinator called up, requiring immediate withdrawal. Otherwise we would be forced into it by the robot fleet.”

“And what evidence do you have that the Regent has pulled back the robot fleet from the Druuf front?” Cardif demanded to know.

The giant’s eyes widened in anger as he spat out a curse. Then he grumbled: “Cardif, if you already know, why ask? It’s enough for us Mounders to know that the robot fleet is no longer at the front... and the Great Cöordinator also threatened to send the Druufs!” he hastily added.

“And that is enough to chase the valiant Mounders into the farthest corner of the Universe?” Cardif bitterly scoffed. His reproach did not sit well with Onkto.

“We are no dumber or smarter than Patriarch Cokaze, who only has 10 ships left on Titon. He withdrew all the rest from the firing line...”

“Then assure me, Onkto, that you will not make your withdrawal known with one single transmission! If I don’t get your guarantee, *I* will see to it that the entire Galaxy learns why you abandoned security duty around Archetz... just because Arkon threatened to send the robot Fleet!”

“Cardif!” Onkto responded menacingly and his eyes narrowed to a slit, “you know as well as we do that the robot fleet is no longer on the front, which means...”

Cardif coldly interrupted: “I do contradict that, Onkto! Cokaze contradicts it as well! Once the Mounders are known to be extreme cowards, your war business will be in a bad way. Don’t you think so, Onkto?”

He was apparently not alone in the control room, as Cardif and Cokaze could hear him whispering, although they could not make out what he was saying.

The face of the Mounder once more faced the screen. “We accept the condition and are going to withdraw covertly. One day the star devils will fetch you, you damned Terran!”

Those were Onkto’s parting words. Thereafter the screen in the command room on *Cokaz 2* darkened.

Thomas Cardif turned his head toward Cokaze when he heard him ask: “The Mounders weren’t lying, were they?”

“Not one word!” Cardif confirmed. “They must have determined by tracking that the fleet of robotships was no longer at the front. But what does that mean, Springer? And why did Arkon demand that the Mounders stop flying security for Archetz? There’s some purpose behind it, but what?” He drummed his fingers on the screen. The movement was all that revealed his extreme exasperation. His face remained composed.

Neither Cokaze nor his two eldest sons disturbed Cardif, who was deep in thought. Finally the Terran said: I suggest that the *Cokaz 2* still remain on Archetz but I would like the planetary stations to keep a special watch on the area surrounding the Rusuma System from now on. I know that something dangerous is in the making... but what?”

From two localities far removed from one another the flight of the Druuf scoutship was observed: from the Drusus and from Arkon 3!

The newly developed special tracking device stayed dead on the track of the ship from the other universe. Its linear hyper-propulsion developed emissions like an endlessly long string, by which the course of the spacecraft could be followed. The Indian, Rabintorge, whose ingenuity had been responsible for its speedy completion, had once contended that the linear hyper-propulsion would press one of the four constants out of its natural bedding in the time-space structure and thus trigger off the tracking effect.

This contention was never seriously contradicted. It remained to be seen whether it stood the test of later examinations. The basic requirement was fulfilled, however, namely the availability of an apparatus which enabled them to discover the Druufs when exceeding the speed of light.

Atlan relied on the tiny hyper-transmitter which Tako Kakuta had unobtrusively dropped on entering the airlock of the Druuf ship. Every five minutes it beamed an impulse that was picked up by the antennas of the robot computer on Arkon and immediately evaluated by the positronicon. An enormous celestial chart with a light beam thin as a hair drawing nearer to the Rusuma System every five minutes indicated to the Arkonide the unbelievable speed with which the Druuf ship was racing through the universe, accelerating from second to second at that, although the ship had far exceeded the speed of light already.

Rhodan and Atlan were wishing the best for this Druuf ship, aware as they were of all that depended on this reconnaissance flight.

Tako Kakuta, the teleporter, and Dr. Brigonne, the astronaut, wished the same. They were both assigned as astronauts to the spacecraft of these monsters. Their

task was twofold: to allow the ship to arrive over the planet of Archetz and to remove themselves immediately if the crew should suddenly turn hostile towards them. The latter was Kakuta's job and the small Japanese with the childlike face was very exacting about his duty. He did not budge from Dr. Brigonne's side.

Brigonne, on the other hand, had long since stopped worrying whether the Druufs might become a menace. He was in his element and for the first time experiencing a flight faster than speol which produced a transition shock that could be measured but was not felt bodily. Only he did not understand why the Druufs were flying so slowly through hyperspace. For thanks to Ellert's information he knew that with linear hyper-propulsion they could reach light-speeds of astronomical proportions.

Once humans were in possession of linear hyperpropulsion there would be no more boundaries to flight into the far reaches of space and bodily stress would be relegated to history just like those primitive rockets in the museum used by Perry Rhodan and Bell on their first flight to the moon that provoked joking admiration. Or so, at least, Terran scientists thought.

Cheating your way into hyperspace in this fashion, without losing sight of the target star, had to seem unreal to any human on his first flight with linear hyper-propulsion. But the experience of seeing the target star coursing toward one and already heading for the next, compelled the belief in faster-than-light flight.

Brigonne was not able to interpret what they were doing. The Druuf spaceships, constructions of a different universe, were totally incomprehensible in their technical design. It remained a puzzle to him whether they were cartographically recording the entire route.

Kakuta and Brigonne had quickly become accustomed to the fact that they were twice as fast in their movements as the monsters, who were at a disadvantage in relation to all creatures in this universe because they were bound to their own Druuf time.

The two Terranians communicated over helmet radio. They had not yet thought about whether they were in breathable atmosphere. At that moment the eight Druufs in the ship Central were having some problem. They were grouped around a strange apparatus, flailing their arms wildly. The two pilots were the only ones to remain in their seats but they continually turned their round heads to the side and seemed to be very tense.

"Brigonne, do you know what's going on?" Kakuta asked the astronaut, moving even closer to him so he could teleport himself and the doctor out into space at the first sign of trouble.

"No idea." Brigonne's voice sounded hoarse but Tako Kakuta knew that it was not fear that caused this change. It might be the uncertainty of neither knowing nor understanding anything.

On impulse the teleporter switched on the special Druuf transmitter installed in his spacesuit which enabled him to communicate with the monsters. At the same moment he had a Druuf standing before him and over the loudspeaker he heard

his words: “Switch off!”

Tako Kakuta did not wait for him to repeat the demand but he stopped to think about it. There was only one explanation for the fact that the Druuf had immediately noticed his switching on the device: they were tracking!

And he thought he knew what they were seeking: the tiny hyper-transmitter in the airlock!

He quickly turned to inform Brigonne but first he turned on the scrambler. Gradually he began to believe in the vast capabilities of these intelligent beings and that they knew exactly what was said between him and Brigonne.

The astronaut quickly recognized the incomprehensible gibberish coming over his helmet microphone and found the appropriate counter-scrambler on the third try.

Brigonne just listened to the beginning. “Kakuta, what can we do to prevent their finding the directional transmitter? We must keep Atlan informed. The boss explicitly repeated that to me!”

Kakuta’s childlike face looked at him guilelessly through the faceplate of his helmet. “Would you like to tell me how they are going to find that tiny transmitter in a few seconds, Doctor?”

“Well, what are the Druufs up to now?” Brigonne made no bones about the fact that he was feeling very uneasy.

Three Druufs stalked out of the Central on their clumsy columnar legs but they did not leave empty-handed. All three were carrying heavy apparatuses and it was obvious that they were using them to track a transmitted

“Brigonne, how much flight time left?”

“That’s asking more than I know because I don’t know how high they’re going to accelerate.”

“But no longer than three hours?” Kakuta hastily asked.

“At our present acceleration, no. By then they would already be on the return flight. I hope we two will be with them,” the astronaut pessimistically added.

“Then you distract their attention for 10 seconds. They mustn’t notice that I’ve left Com Central. Can you manage that?”

“What are you up to, Kakuta?”

“Can you manage it, Doctor?” Kakuta’s eyes were suddenly flashing.

“Naturally. When I cough you...” This was followed by hefty nodding.

The teleporter saw no other alternative. He had to avert the danger by staking everything on one card. But first Dr. Brigonne had to act swiftly and surely to divert the attention of the suspicious Druufs.

During this period the thread of light on the celestial chart in the dome of the positronic computer continued to move a little bit every five minutes. Atlan, the sole observer—Atlan, fated to remain unaging for 10,000 years, his life full of inconceivably rich experiences—was staring with eyes torn wide open at this gleaming emission line that visibly grew every five minutes.

Converted into astronomical terms it signified that the acceleration of the Druuf scoutship was continuing. Atlan did not sense, however, that in those very minutes the Druuf ship was racing towards disaster.

Dr. Brigonne had to divert the attention of five Druufs. Two of them were seated in the cumbersome pilot seats, the other three were standing in front of some machine, constantly turning around to look at the Terranians.

Tako Kakuta felt the time running out. His opportunity of intervening to change the course of events was limited. The moment had to arrive soon! Why was Dr. Brigonne doing nothing? Why was he just standing around, not moving? Kakuta was very agitated but he mustered the reserves to control himself.

Finally Brigonne went over to the group of three Druufs. He approached them from the side. They seemed to be paying no attention to him—or were they observing him with their eyes on the temples of their bullet heads?

Brigonne switched on the communications device. “Druuf, I must call your attention to an important fact. Here...”

He simply went over to a star map hanging on the wall and pointed at a certain spot. “Here, right by this star cluster, there is... Druufs! It is important! Are you listening?”

And Kakuta heard Dr. Brigonne cough. The signal!

He hyjumped and rematerialised in the airlock containing the hyper-transmitter. When he came out of rematerialisation he was holding a beamer in each hand. His hands were steady as he welded shut the inner bulkhead with thermorays.

The two double welding seams he drew were so exact that they would be the delight of any autogenous welder. From bottom to top and from top to bottom again. He quietly counted to himself in the process: 5... 6... 7... 8!”

At 8 he was finished. He wheeled around. He still had two seconds left. The two thermo-beamers hissed into action and he drew a double seam across one third of the line represented by the seam of the sliding outer airlock door.

The metal, molten centimetres deep, slowly hardened as Tako Kakuta, protected by a softly humming transformer, reappeared in Com Central.

Dr. Brigonne was still standing in front of the star map, attempting to convince the Druufs of the danger presented by a super strong rotating magnetic field lying exactly in the ship’s course.

“Then don’t listen...” the teleporter heard him say over helmet radio after Brigonne knew that the mutant had returned. “Then don’t...” and he wordlessly walked away, switching off the communications device.

“Another 10 minutes,” Perry Rhodan said in a whisper to Bell, without moving his eyes from the special tracking device, “then they will be over Archetz. I wish those 10 minutes were already over!”

He, too, had no idea of what was transpiring within the Druuf scoutship. The monsters had thrown Dr. Brigonne and Tako Kakuta in irons; they had also said why they took that action, abandoning their callous silence the moment they ascertained that airlock 3 had been mysteriously blocked from both sides.

“Only you could have deposited the transmitter there! Why?”

Tako Kakuta replied ice-coldly: “Which transmitter? Show it to us!” Anyone can make assertions!”

The 3-meters-tall Commander remained silent but the two Druufs assigned to guarding the Terranians with their unfamiliar but menacing weapons said plenty.

Brigonne and Tako Kakuta ceased protesting. They were apparently resigned to their fate. And the Druuf ship continued to streak towards the Springer planet Archetz!

* * * *

The alien ship had long since disappeared mysteriously from the Rusuma System and the check stations installed on the 16 other planets had withdrawn the alert as Patriarch Cokaze and Thomas Cardif were still staring at each other mutely.

Cokaze finally broke the silence. He slowly stood up, pronouncing Thomas Cardif’s name like a curse as he said: “Suddenly you believe everything! Even the ridiculous threats by that ridiculous Admiral!”

Cardif demonstrated the courage of his convictions as he answered: “That Admiral is not so ridiculous, Cokaze. He is one of the old Arkonides.”

“Are you trying to tell me that he is over 10,000 years old, Cardif?”

Cardif refused to discuss this, waving it aside. I have discovered something, Patriarch.”

Cokaze listened intently, unable to read Cardif’s face. “What, Cardif?”

“Revolutions can only be carried out successfully *with* the power of the state, not *against* it!”

Cokaze stared at the young man as if he were seeing a ghost. He was not willing to accept what he had just heard. Fear and anger were awakened in him. They, the Galactic Traders, had staked everything. The Aras, the Ekhonides and the other great nations had joined their plan and now this young upstart Terran, who had been the true driving force behind the revolutionary movement, claimed: revolutions can only be successful allied with the power of the state, not against it!” “Cardif, is this what your ridiculous Admiral accomplished with his call? Do I remember correctly having heard from your mouth about all the miraculous things one learned at the Solar Space Academy? What is left of all that now? The remnants of a Terran, inwardly trembling with fear.”

“Oh, yes... Solar Space Academy!” Cardif smiled wanly while calmly regarding the furious Patriarch. “That’s where I acquired my present ability to realize that we have lost. Yes, we have lost! Right now Rhodan and Atlan are playing their main trump card! Springer, do you still refuse to realize what the appearance of that Druuf ship signifies? Have you forgotten Atlan’s threat to withdraw his robot fleet from the front? Have you forgotten why the Mounders are no longer flying around Archetz and what they reported? Don’t you want to remember what I demanded and said after the talk with the Mounder, Onkto? I

demanded that the planetary check stations be instructed to observe the universe very sharply and I commented that there were some dangerous developments somewhere, asking myself as well as you: but what are they?"

"And what would you now like to know, you super smart Terran?" Cokaze scoffed at him but the sarcasm did not sound genuine.

"Nothing. But I am afraid of something. I am afraid that Atlan has opened a hole in the front to give maybe 10 or 20,000 Druuf ships the opportunity to fly through... to star cluster M-13 and ravage us like vandals."

"And we all fell for a fool like you, a poor imitation of Perry Rhodan? At least Perry Rhodan has class. But you...?"

This did not affect Thomas Cardif, who coldly replied: I know when I have lost the match and I have the courage to see the consequences. Cokaze, if you want to survive I can give you one piece of advice: leave Archetz at once with the *Cokaz 2*. Report your arrival on Aralon. That'll make a good impression. Wait there for the next few days. I don't have any more to tell you."

"And what are you intending to do, Terran? Do you want to leave for Earth?"

Almost simultaneously he countered: I will cruise around on one of the cylindrical ships you will leave here on Titon. Otherwise your departure for Aralon might look like an escape. You will have to expose 4 or 5 of your ships to the danger of destruction."

"Do you realize that your skill at drawing a beamer with lightning speed will not help you one iota right now? One move and I will shoot you with my impulse beamer!"

"Cokaze, you should really take a course at the Solar Space Academy. Pity that you are too old for that! And too dumb!"

One hour later Cokaze took off for Aralon in the *Cokaz 2*, first taking leave of Thomas Cardif. "You are a weird partner!" were his last words. He left a thoughtful Terran behind.

Cardif boarded the *Cokaz 214*, which along with three other ships belonging to the mighty Springer clan was docked at the northern edge of the spaceport of Titon.

He sensed that he was about to lose the match against Perry Rhodan. He had already accepted the defeat but his hatred towards his father burned with unchanging intensity in his heart.

He was sitting in his cabin on the *Cokaz 214*, his head supported by his hands, thinking: *it is worth dying in order to destroy you!*

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7/ HISTORIC ANNOUNCEMENT FROM ARKON

For one second Perry Rhodan thought he was gazing into an abyss.

Harno was floating near him, his tele-vision enabling Rhodan to see into the command room of the Druuf scoutship, which had just returned from hyperspace and with incredible delay was homing in on the flagship of its fleet.

The flight to Archetz, had taken the scoutship several hours, while the entire return flight after curving around the Springer planet had only been a matter of seconds. Bell, at the special tracking device, had hardly found the time to report its arrival as Harno produced a picture of the Druuf Com Central, showing Rhodan that Brigonne and Kakuta were being guarded by two armed monsters. At the same time the spherical creature informed Rhodan of the thoughts troubling the astronaut and the teleporter.

The tiny hyper-transmitter planted by Kakuta in the airlock of the Druuf scoutship was threatening to transform the entire tactical manoeuvre into a catastrophe for the *Drusus*.

Deep in his mind he could hear Harno saying: *“The commander of the scoutship is just reporting to the Chief of Fleet. He is almost only talking about the station they tracked to airlock 3, which they could not get open.”*

An idea flashed through Rhodan’s head. Pucky was needed! He called for Pucky over intercom: “Don’t lose a second, Pucky!”

Rhodan was stared at from all sides. No one could remember ever having seen the boss this excited.

Pucky was standing in front of the boss. The mousebeaver broke a taboo, employing his telepathy to read Rhodan’s thoughts.

“Sure, Perry! But in which depot do I find this rhythmal-5?”

With one flick Rhodan opened intercom channels to all rooms of the *Drusus*. “Rhodan here! Calling all depots! Immediate report! Which depot contains rhythmal-5? Top urgency!”

Rhythmal-5 was a crystal complex which had been developed by the Arkonides and which, once loaded, emitted a weak impulse in a 5-minute rhythm for years at a time. They did not fully understand how it worked. At first glance it could be taken for a hypertransmission tracking tone.

“Sir,” a depot supervisor reported, “rhythmal-5 is stored in depot 123.”

Pucky had already teleported out of Com Central and was standing in depot

123. They were still searching for it with the aid of a small positronicon.

“Let’s have that stuff!” the mousebeaver squeaked. “Don’t forget to load it... and do you have any adhesive substance that can’t be destroyed by space chill? Let’s have it, too... pronto! It’s do or die!”

The small computer located the rhythmal-5. The directional finder homed in on it.

“That little crystal over there!” Pucky commanded. The intercom loudspeaker was blaring as the mousebeaver issued instructions on loading the crystal.

“Where’s that adhesive?” Pucky attempted to shout but his squeaky voice did not make it. Something resembling putty was pressed into his paw.

“Ready, lieutenant!” someone called.

The lieutenant was Pucky and he was flattered to be addressed with his officer’s rank by men he did not know.

The mousebeaver skipped the ‘thanks’. Disappearing from depot 123, he rematerialised in airlock 3 of the Druuf scoutship.

Switching on the spotlight on his spacesuit, he crawled around on the floor, looking for the tiny transmitter. Minutes passed. Suddenly something reflected the light from Pucky’s spot. “Finally!” the mousebeaver groaned in relief, taking his beamer and aiming at it. A short-lived thermoray melted the dangerous corpus delicti.

Pucky’s only incisor shoved to the fore. The mousebeaver was satisfied and laughing. The next moment he began to curse barbarically. The putty was stuck to his paw, straining his patience. Finally, however, it stuck to the floor and Pucky neatly planted the rhythmal-5 in it.

When the Druufs break open airlock 3, let them find a plausible explanation of how this crystal emitting one impulse every 5 minutes got in here.

Naturally it had been brought in by Kakuta or Brignonne. But could even the Druufs reproach them after noticing the impertinence with which it stuck in the putty?

Only Tako Kakuta’s welding seams did not please Pucky. “That’s something!” he growled. “Those seams could drive the Druufs mad. But if I burn a hole through they’ll really go crazy and lose all confidence!”

Sometimes Pucky loved to hear himself talk. But he did know how to follow through with quick action and seldom made a mistake while at it.

He burned three holes in the outer hatchway. They were arranged above one another at equal distances in the direction of the welding seam. Then Pucky took a small teleport jump, landing right up against the destroyed airlock door. He briefly held his thermobeamer against each hole so that the metal flow tracks would originate from the outside.

“The Druufs will go donk!” Pucky said with devilish glee. Then he concentrated and reappeared in Command Central of the *Drusus*.

“That takes care of that, Perry. Want a report?”

But he did not get around to it. The Druuf commander called. “Rhodan, get your ship ready for action!” he said coldly. “Your treacherous scheme was too crude!”

Rhodan demanded an explanation. The Druuf talked about a tracking transmitter. Rhodan denied it, demanding proof. It was surprising that the Druuf was willing to furnish it.

A waiting period began again but with no tension. Pucky had a chance to turn in his report. “The Druufs won’t be calling back too soon,” he dared to predict. “Kakuta put up a few welding seams in the airlock that will present them with an insoluble puzzle. And my three holes in the outer door will provide the rest. I sure wouldn’t like to be the scoutship commander who is about to get a heavy shooing out from his chief of fleet...”

That was the cue.

“Pucky,” Rhodan interrupted, “don’t the two of us still have something to say to each other? Who was it that ignited the time fuse of a bomb in the Druuf flagship too early and against orders?”

“Perry,” the mousebeaver dared to reply, “Fatso once told me I should be wary of people who hold every mistake against you. Do you think Fatso’s tip was a good one?”

Wild laughter broke out in Central Command. Even Rhodan could not remain serious.

Meanwhile the mousebeaver had silently removed himself by teleportation. From time to time he was very cautious.

* * * *

Arkon’s main transmitter conveyed Admiral Atlan’s second message.

For the second time he spoke to the many races and peoples of the Arkonide Empire.

He gave them an ultimatum: submission or death!

“...I will allow the Druufs to pounce upon this rotting entity that will not accept unity!”

“The robot fleet of Arkon will watch as one world after another crumbles!

“Take my ultimatum seriously! Do not forget that I know how to deal with you as the Great Cöordinator has dealt with you in the past, if I so desire!”

“Rebels are always lined up against the wall!”

“Decide whether you want to be rebels or true citizens of the Great Empire!”

300 Druuf battleships were speeding through hyperspace towards the Rusuma System. They were already underway as Atlan was decreeing his ultimatum. A pre-arranged code signal informed him that operation *Fly Swatter* had entered its second phase.

Druuf ships over Archetz! Demonstration of terror!

Had Rhodan ventured too much? Was the plan doomed?

He said no and the positronic computer provided a positive probability quotient of 81.54%. Still he could not rid himself of an uncomfortable feeling.

The *Drusus* was approaching half-speol and hence the transition point. The jump brought them within 10 light-minutes of the Rusuma System. The most high-powered tracking screens and the frequency absorber prevented Arkonide stations from tracking the Terran superbattleship.

The people in the *Drusus* were groaning from the pains of transition. For 10 seconds the positronicomp had taken over all functions. The crew slowly regained their full powers but some of them continued to feel the pain of rematerialisation for another half-hour.

Rhodan did not get a chance to take a couple of deep breaths. Harno had tuned into his thoughts.

Rhodan's face, marked by shock, instantly turned ashen grey. Harno had conveyed almost inconceivable news.

The commander of the Druuf fleet had suddenly abandoned his pledge to keep his agreement with Rhodan. The monster from another universe again regarded Rhodan's promise as a trap, the promise to allow his fleet to exit through the lens field projector portal after the flight over Archetz.

Why? What had changed? Rhodan's thoughts inquired of Harno, who was projecting the fearsome face of the Druuf commander sitting immobile in a ponderous chair.

"The mentality of the Druuf, Rhodan! With your powers of comprehension you cannot understand the Druuf change of opinion. One thing is comprehensible: only now has he recognized the significance of the planet of Archetz. He wants to capture the System, gain a foothold there and then capture star after star."

Now Rhodan knew which inner voice had tried to warn him against any pact with the Druufs. Now only Atlan and his enormous robot fleet could prevent the downfall of the Springer planet Archetz!

* * * *

Atlan saw Rhodan's face on the readout screen. The expression on it had alerted him; yet he had not expected an alert of this nature.

"So it will be blood and tears after all, Perry! Just what you wanted to prevent under all circumstances. Let me speak. We still have a few minutes. The robot fleet has already received my order to attack but they will arrive later than the Druufs. I shall..."

Rhodan interrupted him. "Any action is too late, Admiral. The Druufs are already in the Rusuma System!"

* * * *

3,000 gigantic alien battleships were suddenly hovering like a cloud about the Springer world Archetz. Not one single planetary station had announced their approach.

With half the speed of light they plummeted down toward Archetz, leaving behind in linear space most of the planet's fortification. Before the first heavy defence position could fire one shot, they began to spread death and destruction over the Springer world.

Titon went up in smoke and flame. Three other cities were razed simultaneously. Archetz' moons with their ray cannon emplacements turned into blazing torches in the day-lit sky.

The Druuf ships were everywhere. Their tracking devices of utter precision led the way into the forts; rays of battle followed, unloading their energy into the planetary atmosphere.

Despite the handicap of only being capable of half the speed of light in normal flight—of being half as fast as any other being—they were unleashing death and destruction before the Springers even grasped that death was closing in on them with a fleet of more than 3,000 ships.

Yet a few vessels on Archetz succeeded in escaping the inferno, breaking through the Druuf fleet out into free space.

The crew on the *Drusus* were passive observers. Rhodan's hands were tied. The large panorama screen, set for greatest magnification, showed everything with incredible clarity.

Thomas is down there! an inner voice told him.

Spherical ships of all Arkonide battleship classes were appearing, from the small destroyers to the superbattleships.

They descended out of the Cosmos like a gigantic swarm of locusts, streaking in like tiny suns with protuberances extended in a straight line for the chase.

They came in thousands and within seconds there were more than 10,000 of them. And even more enormous swarms arrived to hurl themselves at the Druufs.

"Where is the guppy, Reggie? Still no word from it?"

Reginald Bell shook his head.

When Rhodan learned from Harno that the Druufs intended to conquer the Rusuma System and break their agreement with the Terrans, a guppy with the best teleporters on board had been sent on its way.

The teleporters' assignment: get our astronauts out of the Druuf flagship!

And now the men in the *Drusus* were waiting for the return of the auxiliary craft but not even a distress call had arrived. Nothing!

Still the battle between Arkon's robot spacecraft and the Druufs became the Druufs' downfall. By now 10 to 15 robot-manned vessels were pursuing one single Druuf ship. Their programming was all that Arkon's robots knew; their creator, the Robot Regent, had not endowed them with human compassion. They

did not even realize that they were combating strangers from another universe. They had received the command to destroy this fleet and they would follow the order until there was not one enemy ship remaining or until the order was replaced by another from Arkon.

They even pursued Druuf ships that crashed on Archetz or on the other planets and moons, hammering them with fire from their disintegrator cannons, from their impulse and thermo weapons or from their thermo firing towers until everything disappeared in a cloud of exploding energies.

Then this terrible struggle came to an end almost instantaneously.

The robot fleet began to regroup in squadrons and slowly pulled back to the edges of the System.

“Over... the end,” Bell said in a quivering voice as the *Drusus* sped towards the burning planet Archetz, constantly beaming its identity signal.

As they penetrated the cloudy ceiling and gained ground visibility directly over Titon’s spaceport, a gigantic cloud of smoke surged towards them. Beneath it a city of 12 million inhabitants was crumbling in ashes.

Bell started. Some weight, a body had fallen into his lap. “Pucky—!” he cried and the smile on his face broadened.

His teleportation jump had deposited the mousebeaver right in Bell’s lap.

Pucky was exhausted. He was so weak that he almost fell asleep in Bell’s arms. Pulling himself together one last time, he squeaked in a feeble voice: “All clear, Perry! All healthy! The guppy is somewhere down there. Shot down. We had to deboard. We...”

Pucky had fallen asleep and Reggie carefully carried him over to the couch at the side of the room. “I’d like to know what this runt had to do to get our astronauts out of the Druuf ship unharmed!”

A half-hour later the *Drusus* landed on Titon’s almost totally destroyed spaceport. Rhodan dispatched his mutants to look for his son, Thomas Cardif, and to take him into custody. But John Marshall, the best telepath of the Mutant Corps, had already told Rhodan shortly before landing: “Sir,” he is either dead or he has fled. I can’t find him and I would have to discover some trace of him if he were on this world of debris.”

Shortly after the mutants were dispatched the teleporters arrived. They had come within a hairsbreadth of destruction along with the flagship of the Druuf commander.

“Sir,” Brigonne said enthusiastically with gleaming eyes, “without Pucky we would have never gotten away! Pucky is a miracle and so human!”

Rhodan smiled. “But please never say that to “Pucky! He doesn’t want to be prized as a human; he is proud to be a mousebeaver!”

* * * *

For the third time within a short period Arkon's main transmitter in the star cluster M-13 made itself heard. It was no longer necessary for the stations to report what had occurred in the Rusuma System; the people of the Great Empire, frightened almost out of their wits, had heard about it when the battle had hardly begun and the downfall of the Druufs was not yet a certainty.

Still in their dismay they realized that this Admiral Atlan, who called himself the successor of the Robot Regent, had the power to take drastic and relentless action. Hence the billions of intelligent beings in the Empire listened well as the main transmitter from Arkon 3 beamed a new message. Among the multitude of intelligent beings, a few million started as they spotted a familiar face on the screen.

Perry Rhodan was addressing the people of the Arkonide Empire on Arkon's major transmitted

"...I bow before Atlan, the Emperor Gonozal VIII, who will lead Arkon's empire to renewed greatness!"

"I proclaim to the Great Empire as Administrator of my interplanetary realm: allegiance for allegiance!"

"Peoples of the Great Empire, realize that your task and ours lie in the far reaches of the Universe and not in mutual hate and discord..."

Atlan laughed bitterly as Perry Rhodan stepped back from the camera and approached him. "Friend," he said gravely, "you have now made me emperor but what use is the title if the people of the Great Empire do not wish to stay with Arkon? No, I'm not resigning, Perry, but I don't want to be a dreamer, either. Time, barbarian! Time, time and once again, time! I can't change anything from today to tomorrow that has been destroyed for generations by irresponsible Arkonides. Neither can I do everything by myself—but will the time even be granted to do anything at all?"

Rhodan was astonished. "This is the first time I have seen you pessimistic, Admiral."

"I'm not, Perry. I just have not forgotten a certain Thomas Cardif... and you are the best example of what *one single* Terran can accomplish!"

Rhodan ignored that. "I think that Thomas was killed on Archetz."

"I *don't* think so. A Rhodan does not die that simply. Especially not a Rhodan who calls himself Thomas Cardif."

100 ADVENTURES FROM NOW
Clark Darlton will introduce
Admiral Geko

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

OVER 70 years ago Ernst Ellert had been a member of the Mutant Corps. His faculty of being able to project his mind into the future had also shaped his destiny. An accident had separated mind from body. Restlessly his mind had wandered astray in time and space, ever seeking its own plane of the present but never finding it. What it did find, however, was a new present, which was a future plane by comparison to its own time.

Now it possessed a body again but it was not his own. The latter lay in a mausoleum on Earth near Terrania. Perry Rhodan, Administrator of the Solar Empire, had kept it preserved there. So the essence of that which was Ellert lingered on Druufon, the chief world of the Druufs. He had promised to send a signal when the time had come for him to leave his host body and when he would be able to return to the Earth.

Next issue the long-awaited event takes place and—

ERNST ELLERT RETURNS!

by

Clark Darlton

150 ADVENTURES FROM NOW

H.G.Ewers will take you to

Hell's Threshold