

CHAPTER ONE

Toward noon the roaring of the endless barrage grew weaker. Now there were only occasional detonations of heavy grenades exploding on the surface of the invisible energy screen; their strength was spent in producing brilliant flashes of lightning without achieving their intended effect.

Then complete silence followed.

The four men who were sitting in the former command center of the Stardust I looked at each other. Captain Reginald Bell sluggishly pushed aside the chessboard. "What is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

His chess partner looked regretfully at the chess figures that had been knocked over by Bell's negligent gesture, before he replied, shrugging his shoulders, "Your guess is as good as mine. Probably just a brief firing pause."

"After days and days of nonstop bombardment? I bet they must have a good reason to stop the shooting."

"That bet you are bound to win for sure," nodded the man sitting across from Bell. "There are always some reasons for everything." He pointed to the tumbled over chess figures. "By the way, that was an unfair trick. You knew you had lost the game, didn't you?"

"My dear Dr. Manoli," said Bell pompously, "quite the contrary would have happened. The game was as good as won."

"Sure. But by me," grinned the physician.

"Let's leave it undecided who won or lost that game. Let's concentrate on first things first!" interjected a tall, lean man with steely gray blue eyes-Perry Rhodan. He had just got to his feet and walked over to the round hatch where he could survey the scene outside. "As far as I can make out it looks as if the Asiatics have pulled back their forces." Stepping back from the window, he nodded pensively while he smoothed back his dark blond hair. His other hand remained in his trouser pockets all the while. Then he turned to the fourth man of the group."How is Khrest coming along Dr. Haggard?"

Dr. Frank Haggard answered with the slightest hint of a smile, "From a medical Point of view Khrest's health has been completely restored. There is not a trace of his leukaemia left."

"We don't have to fear for his health any more?" asked Rhodan eagerly. "He will go on living then!"

"Of course. Although I don't know for how long. The life span of the Arkonide race must be limited somehow; otherwise, they would not have set out on their search for the planet of eternal life. The alien's body seems of an extraordinary youthfulness, and his metabolism shows a surprising vitality. But judging from his looks he seems to be about fifty years of age."

"But he is much older than that," said Rhodan. "And so is Thora."

Thora, the commanding officer of the extraterrestrial race of space explorers, presented a mystery and challenge to the few humans that so far had come in contact with her. She had fascinated them by her appearance. Her light hair, more white than blond, her huge eyes of an odd golden-reddish hue and her almost yellow complexion had indicated her to be of an albinoid type. And yet she had to be called beautiful. Perry Rhodan, though, considered her beauty to be only skin deep. He was convinced that she had inside her nothing but icy cold reasoning and a steely logical mind. She seemed to lack a heart and soul. Never would she have been willing to help the human race or even to recognize them as her equals, if she had not been forced to do so by her spaceship's destruction. The space cruiser's auxiliary vessel, which in reality was an enormous space sphere almost 200 feet in diameter, was equipped with an ultralight drive, but its range extended only 500 light-years-not enough even to establish contact with the nearest base of the Arkonides."Thora is getting on my nerves," announced Bell as he stood up. "I know that she despises us, and she is coming to our assistance only because this way she is able to help herself. I just can't stand that."

"The Arkonides do need us, that's quite true," admitted Rhodan. He continued with emphasis, "But don't let us forget that we depend on them, too. It's a kind of symbiosis. We can't do without it if we ever want to reach our goal. And one of these goals, Reg, is the unification of mankind. The imaginary threat has had the result for the first time in human history that all the nations of the world have united, even if only to destroy us."Haggard moved next to Rhodan and looked out of the hatch. The Arkonide space sphere reposed quite close to the Stardust. Inside the alien ship the generator was working to

produce the mighty power field that created a protective screen around their base. The outer circular perimeter of that energy dome touched the ground at a distance of about three miles from the center. This was a fortress that could not be stormed. Even atomic bombs glanced off ineffectively from the invisible outer hull of energy.

Shiny, metallic robots hurried back and forth, anchoring the space sphere securely to the ground and busily performing many tasks. They were the only occupants of the alien space cruiser, besides Khrest and Thora, that had been saved when their moon base was annihilated. They were the lone survivors of a space expedition that had set out from a star empire whose scope could hardly be imagined by a human mind.

The Arkonides' remaining auxiliary vessel could indeed traverse a distance of 500 light-years within a few days. This was an incredible feat, measured by human standards, but unfortunately for the Arkonides, it was insufficient. Their situation could be compared to that of a shipwrecked crew stranded on an uninhabited island in the Pacific, busily building a canoe from a single tree trunk. However, the storerooms of the auxiliary vessel were bulging with spare parts and all kinds of machinery, capable of constructing whole space flotillas, if the industrial potential of Earth's economy could be harnessed to this productive effort. This was the reason Khrest and Thora had entered into an alliance with Perry Rhodan. This offered the only way they could ever return to their home planet. With human help they could construct a ship that would reach their planets revolving around a hot, blue white sun within the star cluster M 13, more than 34,000 light-years away. This planet, Arkon, was the center of a galactic empire.

Haggard motioned toward the space sphere. "They seem to be settling down here on Earth, at least temporarily. How can they build a starship here in the desert, far removed from civilization?"

"I don't know for sure," admitted Rhodan, "but I have a pretty good idea. Don't forget that we are sitting here underneath an energy dome about six miles across. That's quite some area. I can well imagine that huge industrial facilities could be erected here. Don't you agree, Doc?"

"You mean an industrial plant for spacecraft construction?" wondered Haggard aloud. "You mean to say that..."

"I only suggested such a possibility," replied Rhodan softly. "I am not too well informed about Khrest's plans but I am convinced that he will need our technical assistance with them. We'll see shortly what he intends to do." Reginald Bell, too, had got to his feet in the meantime. He yawned.

"I must confess that I'm worried about this cease fire. As long as the Chinese were busy shooting at us, they were not up to any other mischief." Suddenly Rhodan's brow was deeply furrowed. "Any other mischief? My dear friend, this brings up an unpleasant thought. Could they use this lull to attack us in some other manner we aren't aware of yet?" Bell turned pale. "I didn't mean it that way..."

"But wouldn't it be quite plausible for them to look for some other method to remove this cancer from their body? After all, that is what we are in their eyes, nothing but a cancerous growth threatening their survival. Unfortunately, we cannot observe from here whatever is going on outside. We have no friends-

"How about Captain Klein from the intelligence agency!" Bell interrupted. "Don't you remember what he did, together with his colleagues from the Eastern Bloc, Lt. Kosnow and Lt. Li Tschai-tung from the Asiatic Secret Service? How they acted quite unmistakably in our interest when they were supposed to annihilate us! I am absolutely convinced that they would warn us if they knew of some danger."

"Yes indeed-Captain Klein." Rhodan nodded in agreement. "He is on good terms with the main command center in Greenland. He is working directly under Allan D. Mercant, and if he knew anything that would threaten us here, he would not hesitate to inform us about it."

Rhodan peered once more through the window hatch. He trembled slightly. A shadow flitted across his face, but he did not seem to be displeased by what he saw. He was, on the contrary, somehow embarrassed by it. But he quickly regained his composure.

He turned to the three men. "Thora wants to talk to me." He walked over to the door of the command center.

Now Bell in turn looked out of the hatch. Over there, next to the gigantic space sphere, stood a beautiful figure, tall and slender. Her bright hair could hardly be distinguished from the metallic background of the spacecraft. She stood quietly, waiting, every inch the unapproachable commanding officer of the stranded space expedition. Her pride forbade her to make even the slightest welcoming gesture to the approaching Earthling.

Commander Perry Rhodan could not have explained logically what attracted him to this woman. Never before in his life had he encountered someone who was more intelligent, more aloof and more arrogant. This creature from another world, who had the appearance of a woman, was heartless; she simply could not have a heart. Nevertheless, she was most beautiful.

Yet it was not her beauty that attracted Rhodan to her; it was rather her aura of inaccessibility. At first he had thought it important to persuade her that human beings, too, were intelligent and therefore had a right to exist. But soon he had recognized that only an approach of cold logic would convince someone of Thora's type. He had to make her see that man was not only intelligent but also indispensable to her plans. She did not make the slightest effort to come to meet him. She did not stir. She waited motionless until he stood in front of her. Only then did she address him.

"They have stopped the shooting," she remarked dryly. She avoided specifying who they were, noted Rhodan. She would not even call them humans or terrestrials. Crass disdain was in her voice. "Why?"

Perry looked straight into her icy eyes. She met his glance steadfastly, but then a brief flicker arose in their bottomless reddish gold depths. Just a brief moment; then once again she was in complete control of herself.

"It might be that the enlargement of our energy dome has caused them to change their plans," Rhodan replied, quietly. "After all, we have increased your domain to about five times its former size. They had to withdraw their troops hastily after your initial punitive measures. Although they did continue the bombardment of our positions here for some time, they seem to have worked out some other tactics in the meantime."

"This will not do them any good either."

"You might underestimate the human race," suggested Rhodan slowly. "This is not the first time for you, though. Remember what happened the last time? You lost your ship, didn't you? Why do you want to repeat your mistake?" "I never make a mistake, I want you to know. Not I, but the robots, were responsible for the catastrophe on the moon."

"Those robots had to, obey your commands and carry out your orders," corrected Rhodan calmly. It gave him an almost painful pleasure to humiliate her. "Don't you think that the protective screen might be too large now? Its scale might decrease its stability, I'm afraid."

"Let me worry about that. In my opinion even the largest atomic bomb would detonate ineffectually on the screen's surface. You don't realize the full capacity of the Arkonide reactor. It is capable of producing enough energy to throw your planet out of its usual orbit." Rhodan knew that she was not exaggerating.

"In any case, I am very appreciative that you have limited yourself merely to defensive measures," he said. "I realize that you could easily have reduced to dust the enemy army that is surrounding us. Why don't you, by the way?" Displeasure briefly flared in her icy features.

"Khrest is against it. He probably believes he must be grateful to you for curing him of his illness."

"Shouldn't he?" She shook her head lightly. "You look at this problem the wrong way. We are only trying to pay off a debt when we come to your assistance here. I'll admit that in some areas you are ahead of us—in the field of medicine, perhaps. But in the field of technology..." She did not bother to complete her sentence. Rhodan seized the opportunity. "You are indeed far ahead of us in the field of technology; I fully realize that. But despite this superiority, even you are powerless without our help. Even if 500 light-years represent an insurmountable distance for us now, under the present circumstances, you still cannot make an use of your know-how to bridge this distance and return home. In order to do so, both you and Khrest are fully aware that you are forced to collaborate with us. This is the only reason, the one and only reason, that you have entered into this alliance with us. We don't need to fool each other. Let's be honest" She did not even smile. "Little by little you are beginning to think logically, Rhodan. Our collaboration is nothing but a matter of expediency; that is all there is to it. Once both you and we have attained our goals, we will again go our separate ways. No expression of gratitude need be exchanged, because each of us will have profited by our mutual association. That is the way I see things."

"Khrest's approach is more human, if you will pardon the expression. He has a soul."

"A soul? What is that, a soul?"

Rhodan flipped his hand in a contemptuous gesture. "Maybe sometime later I'll try to explain that to you. Right now it would be a complete waste of time. Will you tell me, now, why you asked to see me?" His matter of fact attitude and coldness had a very sobering effect, even on Thora. Little did she know what effort he had to exert to achieve this effect of aloofness.

There was a dangerous gleam in her eyes as she answered, "Our robot detachment has stabilized the energy screen. We can await any further attacks with complete calm. How soon can you provide us with the necessary help, so that we may begin with the construction of our new spaceship?"

"As soon as mankind stops fighting me. Only then can we start to assist you with your project. Unfortunately, I can't change the fact that your cooperation must precede ours. First you help us so that

we can help you in turn."

"And how long will it take for the human race to understand the foolishness of trying to fight against us?"

"Never, unfortunately, as far as I know them. Unless they are forced to do so by radical means." He smiled coldly. "We are a race of warriors still, I regret to say."

She regarded him. For an instant Rhodan seemed to perceive a sign of sympathy in her glance; but it was probably just an illusion on his part.

"So were we," she remarked, "once upon a time when we were young and immature. This attitude will pass only when the race has become mature and wise."

"And has grown old!" added Rhodan.

He was rather surprised that she nodded in agreement without growing angry at him. "You are right, unfortunately."

With these words she turned around and walked toward the space sphere.

CHAPTER TWO

An unobtrusive looking man sat behind the desk.

He was rather short, youngish in appearance, and he exuded an impression of almost unbelievable harmlessness. A thin wreath of golden locks circled his bald dome. Here and there near his temples a few white hairs could be seen. His eyes regarded the world around him with a beatific expression.

For the time being, this world consisted solely of a technically perfectly arranged office, almost two miles underground, deep below the permanent ice of Greenland. This was the headquarters of the best organized secret service of the world, the Intelligence Agency. This special organization had been formed during the Cold War and was under the command of NATO. The harmless man behind the desk was the head of this organization, Allan D. Mercant, one of the most feared men of the twentieth century.

A screen lit up.

"The heads of the secret services have arrived, sir."

"Eastern Bloc and Asiatic Federation?"

"Iwan Martinowitsch Kosselow from the Eastern Bloc and Mao-tsen from the Asiatic Federation," confirmed the announcer from the communications center. "Lieutenant General Tai-tiang has just landed. He has been escorted to the electrolift already."

"Well, the whole clan is assembled then," Mercant nodded and leaned back in his seat. He waited until the screen grew dark before he smiled mildly.

Only a few short weeks ago it would have been absurd even to imagine in one's wildest dreams the events that were now taking place. The men who once had been the bitterest enemies, the highest in command of the secret service and espionage organizations, were now meeting in the Headquarters of the Western Intelligence Agency. They had a common purpose now-to destroy a common foe. Mercant's smile grew suddenly bitter. And what would happen in case they succeeded in their task? He knew the answer the moment he thought of the question. There was a strange fire in his eyes as he bent forward slightly to push a button.

Another screen lit up. On it the head of a pretty girl became visible. "Mr. Mercant?"

"Please see to it that the three men who have been accommodated in the transfer hotel are called to the conference too. Their names are Captain Klein, Lieutenant Li Tschai-tung and Lieutenant Kosnow. Let them wait in the outer office until I call for them. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, sir," The pretty girl nodded, and her picture disappeared from the screen. Mercant stared at the empty screen for another second before he rose from his seat.

This conference room had been chosen other than the one where the plans for the moon expedition had been discussed and decided. This time Mercant had placed the utmost importance on complete secrecy. There was no trace of any hidden microphone or other electronic snooping device; there were no secretly running tape recorders or noiselessly working cameras. The room was small, with only one door and not even an air conditioning system. There was only one vacuum pump that sucked out the used-up air, which was constantly replenished by bottles of compressed air standing in a corner of the room. Admittedly, this was a rather primitive arrangement, but it was proof against any unwelcome listeners.

And Mercant knew only too well why he did not want to risk any unwelcome listeners.

Three men were sitting at the table when Mercant entered the room. They interrupted their conversation, which they had carried on in Russian, and rose.

Mercant smiled innocuously. "It's a pleasure to be able to welcome you here, gentlemen. We owe this happy occasion to our common foe. Thanks to him, we are sitting here united around the conference table. Too bad that one day soon we will finish off this enemy, don't you agree?" Lieutenant General Tai-tiang, commander in chief of the encircling troops, seemed to be nonplussed. It was evident that he did not know how to interpret this startling remark.

Iwan Martinowitsch Kosselow, Chief of Defence of the Eastern Bloc, reacted quite differently, however. He broke out a wide grin, slapped his ruddy, fleshy cheek and roared loudly, "I am not so sure that your President would be pleased to bear that kind of talk. But our conversation won't go beyond these walls, I hope." Mao-tsen, chief of the Asiatic Federation defence department, smiled enigmatically. This was all the comment he cared to make.

Mercant shook hands with his three guests and asked them to be seated again. Suddenly his face turned serious, as if someone had wiped away his friendly smile.

"Rest assured, my dear colleague," he said to Kosselow, "there isn't another human being on this Earth who can hear whatever we discuss in this room. We are hermetically sealed off from the outside world. The door has been electronically locked, and in case I should suddenly suffer a heart attack your own organizations would have to go on without you; leadership, for nobody would come to let you out of here. Maybe in a year or two, people would start wondering how long this session was taking. But by then it would be too late for you anyhow."

"You have a rather odd sense of humour," observed Mao with a smile, although his yellow complexion had become a trifle darker momentarily. "But let's come to the point! Let's listen to our friend's report now!" Lieutenant General Tai-tiang was apparently still pondering the meaning of Mercant's words, for he was startled when he was addressed by Mao-tsen. But he quickly regained his composure. His voice sounded more and more confident as he proceeded with his account. "We followed the advice of our experts and kept aiming our missiles so that they hit Rhodan's energy screen head on, all the time at the same spot. A certain weakening could be observed, but this success was only of a very short duration. Then, just a few days ago, Rhodan enlarged his domain. Until then the diameter of the energy dome had been roughly three miles. Now it has grown to six miles. The enemy's territory covers an area of almost thirty square miles right in the middle of the realm of the Asiatic Federation. This is an intolerable situation."

"It is just as intolerable for the other parties concerned," confirmed Mercant. "What countermeasures did you take?"

"We withdrew our troops in time, after we had been warned by Rhodan. Then we renewed our fire from our shortened lines. Although our fire power had been strengthened considerably in the meantime, now the screen no longer showed any weak spots. Apparently this is due to the incredible capacity of the Arkonides' generators, which were transported inside the space sphere coming from the moon. I must admit that in the face of such strength we are simply helpless. We had to cease our bombardment a few days later. We ran out of ammunition. Since then calm reigns around the enemy's base. But inside the energy bell we have observed a great deal of activity. They seem to be erecting several smaller buildings. Their purpose is unknown to us at this point. There are plenty of robots but only four human beings and the two Arkonides. The base is completely sealed off from the outside world. As far as we know, no one has entered or left it." Mercant nodded quietly. "Nobody except our agents Klein, Kosnow and Li."

"Unfortunately, their mission was unsuccessful," boomed Kosselow's mighty voice. "Isn't it time to repeat this experiment?"

"This is exactly why I have invited you to come here," said Mercant. "But first I would like to discuss our position with you. We must be sure where we are. General Tai, do you think it is absolutely

impossible to seize the enemy's stronghold, attacking it from the outside? Are you convinced that there aren't any bombs capable of penetrating this energy screen?" Tai-tiang nodded in silent agreement. Mercant looked at the chief of the Asiatic defence organization.

"Well, Mao, what is your opinion? Can you come up with any suggestions?"

The Chinese had regained his natural colour in the meantime. His smile was still as enigmatic as before, however.

"Our agents were unable to accomplish their task. Even if they came as close to their target as was necessary. Our agent Lieutenant Li, nevertheless, does not know anything we did not already know before. I am sorry, but I am at my wits' end." Mercant's glance kept wandering on until it rested on the Russian Kosselow. "Kosselow?"

"I could simply repeat what our Chinese colleague just said. But that would be too easy a way out. Frankly, I have been thinking a great deal these past few days how we could save this precarious situation, how we could turn it to our own advantage. As usual, there is always something good to be found even in the most hopeless appearing situations. You, Mr. Mercant, hinted at such a possibility at the beginning of this meeting. Isn't it true that Rhodan has accomplished something that is to our mutual advantage -we are peacefully assembled here to discuss matters of common concern to us? Necessity brought us together, isn't it so? The former opponents are the friends of today."

"Well, well!" muttered Lieutenant General Tai-tiang, and cleared his throat. As he was about to continue a glance from Mao-tsen made him change his mind. He fell silent.

"Yes, indeed, friends!" repeated Kosselow seriously. "And why is that so? How has this come about? Only because we are all afraid of Rhodan! We know that we are powerless to fight against his superior technical machines. We realize only too clearly that he could destroy us, if he so desired. Sometimes it worries me that he does not do so."

"What a macabre comment," smiled Mercant, with his usual mild expression. "But right to the point. You have assessed our situation correctly. Go on, Kosselow! I am anxious to hear what conclusions you have drawn from your observations."

"I'd rather not tell you, at this point. But as regards other matters, I want to be completely frank with

you. According to General Tai we will never succeed in destroying Rhodan's base from the outside. If that is the case, why don't we then attack from the inside?"

"Very interesting, indeed. And how would you do that?"

"As usual, people think last of the most obvious solution. Just take your case, Mr. Mercant. Where do you feel safest? Right here, deep down below the ground! Whoever wanted to annihilate you and your headquarters would have to attack you from below. What is the difference between Rhodan's energy bell, which shields him from any attack coming from the air, and this rocky cover, stretching above us for thousands of feet? If you want to get at him, you too must attack him from below, from underneath the ground on which his base stands." For a while there was silence in the room. Only the rhythmic breathing of the men could be heard. Kosselow was leaning back in his chair, waiting to see the effect his words had on the others.

Mercant spoke up first. "Well, this makes the second point on which we seem to agree, Kosselow. We had arrived at the same conclusion as far as politics were concerned, even if we did not express this in words. And now we find ourselves in agreement as regards strategy. You have guessed at my plans accurately. Will you permit me to include now in our discussion the three men who know the base better than any one of us?"

Without waiting for their reply, Mercant pushed a button directly in front of him. The door opened a few seconds later. Somebody peered into the room, Mercant motioned to him briefly, and the person disappeared.

Then Captain Albrecht Klein, Lieutenant Kosnow and Lieutenant Li Tschai-tung entered the conference room. The door quickly closed behind them.

Mercant pointed to three empty seats. "No need to introduce you to each other, since you all are well acquainted. But in a few minutes you will meet someone whom none of you have known of so far. Especially you, Kosselow, will be amazed to learn how much our views coincide. Captain Klein, you have already explained to us the reasons why you failed in your attempt to wipe out the Stardust base and its crew with an attack using deadly bacteria. May I assume that you all approve of another plan of annihilation of the enemy? No, this time no bacteria!"

The door opened again. A man entered, dressed in the uniform of a colonel. He saluted stiffly; then he remained standing and waited until Mercant rose to introduce him.

"Gentlemen, may I present to you Colonel Donald Cretcher of the IIA. Colonel Cretcher is an expert in underground construction and was mainly responsible for building the subterranean installations of these headquarters."

The chiefs of defence greeted the newcomer uneasily. General Tai-tiang, in particular, could hardly conceal his feelings of distrust. Kosselow was the only one present who had listened attentively when Cretcher's special field of interest had been mentioned. Mercant began to speak. "Kosselow has already hinted at the solution, that we must attack Rhodan from underneath his base. The energy screen is effective in the surrounding atmosphere, but it does not reach below the surface of the Earth. So far, of course, we have no conclusive evidence how far the underground range of the energy dome may extend. But I sincerely do not believe that it could work in any other medium except the air. If, therefore, we should succeed in drilling a shaft through the underground rocks deep enough and far enough so that it will end exactly below the base, we could finish off this whole unholy mess by detonating an atomic bomb at that spot. That, very briefly, is my plan. I have asked you to gather here to discuss the execution of this new strategy, for all the big powers must be willing to cooperate. First and foremost, the Asiatic Federation, since we will be operating inside their territory."

While Klein was listening to Mercant's words, thoughts were racing feverishly through his brain. Kosnow and Li, too, seemed to be absorbed in their thoughts. These three had been given the task, by each of their respective government agencies, of wiping out the Stardust. The three had met and joined forces when they realized they could not accomplish their job going their separate ways. But Klein had managed to penetrate the energy dome once before, and his second encounter with Rhodan had convinced him more than ever that the former commander of the first moon landing expedition was motivated by only the highest and noblest intentions for the good of all mankind. Klein in turn then had been able to persuade his two colleagues of Rhodan's integrity. Not a single soul on earth could know of this "high treason"! Or could they have been mistaken? Did someone know?

Allan D. Mercant looked at Klein, There was a strange glimmer in his eyes, which was quickly replaced by his usual expression of gentle understanding.

"In case this plan should succeed, it would also mean the end of a fear that has made friends of former enemies. I know that there are people who fear this, for they prefer this to the constant horror of impending atomic war, with its threat of total destruction of life as we know it on Earth. I even know some of these people, and perhaps I share their opinion. But it is our duty, I must emphasize, eliminate Perry Rhodan. He must be rendered harmless, for he represents a danger that we cannot handle, and thus he endangers our very existence. Have I made myself sufficiently clear, Captain Klein?"

Seven pairs of eyes were directed toward the secret agent, who seemed to feel the ground tremble under his feet. Was it possible that Mercant had found out something?

"I don't understand you, Mr. Mercant." Mercant maintained his kindly smile. "You do understand me very well, Klein. Very well indeed. And please, don't you believe for a single moment that I can overlook punishable deeds, just because they were committed with the most honourable intentions. You will be requested to carry out a task whereby you can demonstrate to our satisfaction that complying with duty is more important to you than following the dictates of your own personal feelings. The same thing, by the way, also applies to Kosnow and Li." Kosselow stormed angrily, "I'd stake my reputation on our man!"

"I wouldn't be that careless with my reputation!" warned Mercant calmly. "You have no proof for your allegations!"

"That might be true. But I have an excellent nose for such things-I have an unerring instinct."

This was no exaggeration. Klein knew how much Mercant was feared in this respect by the people around him. Mercant never had to use a lie detector during cross examinations. He was always positive whether someone told the truth or not. Some of his agents were even sure that Mercant could read their minds.

Mao-tsen joined the conversation. "We have met here to work out the best way to fight against Perry Rhodan but not to accuse our best agents. Whatever you plan to do with your own man is your own affair. But will you kindly leave our agent, Lieutenant Li alone. I have full confidence in him, regardless of what you might say. May I suggest now that we start discussing the details of our plan."

"You are right-this is why we are assembled here," said Mercant, and pulled a map out of a briefcase. He placed the map on the table in front of him, the men were all soon bent over it while they listened intently.

"This is the exact position of Rhodan's base in the Gobi Desert. This circle represents the area covered by the energy dome. As you can see, this comprises even part of the lake. We might have a chance to get inside the bell here by using some diving equipment. We could simply dive and swim underneath the outside perimeter of the energy screen into that part of the lake which lies inside the base. But what good would it do to get a few men over to their side? We all know the kinds of weapons Rhodan has which would render our men ineffective at once. No, we are forced to proceed in a radical manner if we want to succeed. I have discussed this with Colonel Cretcher, and perhaps he can explain directly to you how he envisions carrying out the best strategy." The colonel nodded briefly. He pulled the map over to his side a little more and placed his hand on a spot of the circle.

"Right about here, more than a mile from the outer perimeter of the energy dome, there are a few low hills. While they ascend quite gradually from south to north, their walls are rather steep on the northern side. This slope will be the ideal point where we can begin to drive a shaft into the rocky ground, since neither of the space rockets can overlook what is going on here on the other side. We would have to build this shaft toward the center of Rhodan's base for a distance of about four miles to reach a spot directly underneath his installations. These excavations must take place at a depth of at least 1,500 feet, to minimize the danger of detection by their listening devices. I admit that this is a rather bold plan, but it is also absolutely safe and sound!" Kosselow and Mao-tsen looked at each other. Their eyes bespoke amazement and approval at the same time. Lieutenant General Tai-tiang pointed with his index finger to the hills on the map and nodded to confirm Cretcher's statement. "I know these hills very well. This is the exact place of our gun emplacements. By the way, Colonel Cretcher, how did you find out so much about this spot?"

The chief of the IIA smiled mysteriously.

"But my dear general! We naturally have a few confidential agents serving in your army. Besides, don't forget that Western officers were officially permitted to inspect the area and your military installations there. As you see, things have a quite natural explanation."

"Yes, of course. Excuse me. Well, you mean to say then that the northern hill will be the most favourable starting point for this action?"

"Absolutely. And as soon as we are sitting right smack below the spaceships we will detonate an H bomb. Guess what will remain of Rhodan and his friends from out of space?"

"Not too much," admitted Kosselow, and scratched his head pensively. "But still, I can't imagine that the Arkonides would not figure out such a possibility themselves. I am sure that they will safeguard themselves against any such eventuality."

"We have thought of this too," assured Mercant. "It would be wrong, of course, if we should remain quiet and inactive now. On the contrary, General Tai-tiang will have to resume his nonstop barrage as soon as the digging commences. Maybe not as intense as before but still strong enough to keep Rhodan and his associates busy. And don't forget that the detonation of the missiles will drown out the noises that will be inevitable when we explode our underground charges while digging the tunnel. In addition to that, it is quite impossible that Rhodan should learn of our enterprise, since his base is hermetically sealed off from the outside world. This extends even to any radio communication. We have placed strong jamming stations around the base that prevent reception of outside signals. Even if someone should try it, there is

no way of warning Perry Rhodan of our plans."The same mild glimmer as before became visible in Mercant's eyes as they made a brief round from Klein and Kosnow and finally to Li.Colonel Cretcher pointed to the map. "We will organize an international squad. Each nation will contribute its best men. Together we will finally succeed in removing this common foe of mankind for good."

"He is an American, after all," muttered the Chinese Mao-tsen under his breath.

"He was an American!" corrected Mercant sharply. "You must be aware that he was drummed out of the air force and stripped of his rank. But this doesn't matter any longer. We are facing an invasion from outer space. We must repulse this attack, come what may, for if we don't succeed we will soon cease to be masters of this planet."There was a short pause.

Lieutenant Kosnow, agent of the Eastern Bloc, interrupted the silence. "What particular task will we have to carry out?"

Mercant smiled. "I was waiting for this question. It is obvious that any international contingent has its weak spots. Rhodan has some friends among us, there is no doubt about it. Perhaps some of his friends will even be working with the detonation crew, although there won't be much they can do to help him there. But I want to make sure that the men of this squad will be under constant surveillance. Since we cannot do this alone, I thought it would be advisable to employ here a team of agents whose sole duty would be to guard the security of this enterprise. I believe I made myself sufficiently clear, didn't I?"Klein was observing Mercant while he spoke to the assembly. There was no hint in Mercant's eyes of what was going on behind his forehead. And yet it seemed to Klein that he could sense a challenging irony hidden in the IIA Chiefs words.Lieutenant General Tai-tiang rapped his knuckles lightly on the map. "As soon as new supplies of ammunition reach my positions in these hills, I'll be ready to start shooting again. How long, do you estimate, will it take to finish building the shaft?"Colonel Cretcher shrugged his shoulders.

"It will take a few days to get that detonation crew together. The job itself might last about two weeks, provided we have the most modern machines at our disposal. It will also depend, naturally, on the ground formations. In case we find mainly rock..."

"Quite likely at this depth!"

"Well let's say about three weeks. Perhaps in another month there will be a gaping crater in the Gobi Desert, and Perry Rhodan and the Arkonides will become a soon forgotten legend."

"Which nevertheless brought us a short period of peace among the nations of the world!" concluded Kosselow with emphasis.

Later, when Allan D. Mercant was again sitting all alone in his office and letting the events of the past hours pass review in his mind's eye, Kosselow's last remark stood out in particular. Mercant knew that Iwan Martinowitsch Kosselow must have his doubts about this affair-the same way he did. Only Mao-tsen, Chief of the Secret Service of the Asiatic Federation was absolutely sure of himself and totally uncompromising in his views. As far as the Chinese was concerned, Rhodan was the arch enemy who must be destroyed. Mao did not waste any thoughts about what would come afterward. But Kosselow did, and so did Mercant. Klein, too, must be one of those persons who think very intensely. Perhaps this was the reason Mercant was capable of receiving some of his strong brain waves, which he could interpret in some vague manner.

Mercant smiled. He knew that his people called him a magician when he told them what they were thinking about. He was not a mind reader or a telepath, but he was still capable of sensing other people's emotions. There were so many areas of the brain that lay fallow, unused, that perhaps a small stimulus was sufficient to awaken some of them. This is what must have happened to him. If he worked at it he must surely improve this so far limited faculty of mind reading. Perhaps he was a mutant. Mercant contemplated his slender fingers, then shook his head. No, he was not a mutant in the true sense of the word. Yet he possessed some extraordinary talents that enabled him to distinguish whether someone was speaking the truth.

And thus he knew with absolute certainty that at today's conference of eight participants, exactly half sympathized at least partially with Perry Rhodan. He almost forgot the fifth person, who was forced to follow unconditionally his government's orders but who was already hesitating deep inside, in his heart, and seriously began to ponder Rhodan's true aims. Namely, himself.

CHAPTER THREE

Not a single shot had been fired during the past five days.

The four men of the Stardust I sensed that something important and decisive was in the offing, but they could not divine what it was. Reginald Bell was highly irritated and was always pacing the corridors of the ship like a captured beast of prey, except when he preferred to roam around the outside of the aliens' space sphere and watch the robots busy working at their tasks. Every day he swam in the part of the lake that was protected by the dome of the energy screen. The air inside the dome had become oppressive and very humid. Frequently he extended his excursions into the desert. He would walk there for hours and occasionally dared to advance as far as the invisible wall that separated them all from the outside world. Not a human being was in sight. They seemed to be all alone on this planet. The troops that had formerly surrounded the spaceship's base had withdrawn so far to the rear that they could be recognized only now and then as tiny dots. Not a trace was to be seen of any of the guns and tanks. There was something in the air.

Even Rhodan could feel it. Spurred on by an inner restlessness, he decided on the fifth day to leave Stardust I and walk over to the space sphere. He had seen very little of Khrest these last days, for the Arkonide scientist was closely obeying the instructions of his physician, Dr. Haggard, who had brought about his recovery from leukaemia. Most of the time, the alien was resting a state of artificial sleep that afforded his blood a better chance of regeneration.

One of the robots was blocking the entrance to the spacesphere.

Perry waited for a few minutes but when he was convinced that the metallic guard would not move from his spot he approached him and tried to push him aside-unsuccessfully of course.

From high above the entrance rang out Thora's voice: "You should be more cautious, Rhodan. Luckily for you that we could save only our work robots. All our soldier robots but one perished during the attack on our moon base. And this soldier robot is still being repaired. You would not have liked how he would have dealt with an intruder. What do you want here?"

"I must talk to Khrest."

"Why?"

"For various reasons. Most important that they are preparing to attack us again."

"So what! Do you still have any doubt that we are able to defend ourselves?"

"That is not the point. You know that we need the people of this world to carry out our plans. If you should annihilate the human race while warding off their assault, you will never see again your home planet Arkon."

With this reply Rhodan touched a sore spot in Thora's character. She was burning inside to "teach a lesson to these rebellious primitives." But she was frustrated by Khrest, as well as Rhodan. This hurt the pride that she felt as female commander of the Arkonide scientific expedition. But on the other hand, she realized that both these men were right. After all, it was impossible to create the necessary installations for construction exclusively with the help of their worker robots. She uttered a command in a strange language. Awkwardly, the robot stomped aside to let Rhodan pass. Rhodan climbed up the few steps to the open hatch where Thora welcomed him with an icy stare.

"Khrest is in need of rest."

"I am fully aware of that," answered Perry unperturbed by her hostility. "But I have Dr. Haggard's Permission to talk to him now."

"Well, Haggard authorized you to do so?" she replied with disdain. "You seem to have forgotten to obtain the consent from the proper authorities. How about asking my permission?"

"That is unnecessary in this case," answered Perry Rhodan and pushed gently past her. Without looking back at her he walked on to the antigrav lift and floated upward.

Khrest was awake. He was resting on a wide couch in the roomy cabin and was watching an abstract colour program on the picture screen. When Rhodan entered, he switched off the set and sat up.

"Hello, Perry. Glad to see you. Nice that you find a little time to visit me again."

"The pleasure is all mine. How are you feeling? According to Haggard you seem to undergo a period of rejuvenation."

"Yes, indeed. I feel born again. This man has worked miracles with me."

"He is our most outstanding physician," agreed Rhodan.

Khrest, too, had very light, almost white hair and reddish eyes. His unusually high forehead caused his forehead to extend to more than half the size of his whole head. All other characteristics that distinguished the alien from human race were of an organic nature. Instead of a rib cage enclosing and protecting the vital organs of heart and lungs, Khrest had a solid, bony thorax. This certainly afforded better protection against injury but would make it more difficult to gain access in case of a needed operation.

Compared with human beings, Khrest was a genius. His photographic memory was similar to the workings of an electronic brain. He was a living computer of the highest capacity.

"Unfortunately, we do not have anyone to compare to Dr. Haggard," continued Khrest. "Maybe this is the reason our race fell ill. We are in possession of the means for prolonging life, and this made us careless. We began to degenerate, for our boundless conceit did not permit us to mix with other races. We are a highly inbred race - all of us are somehow related."

"I have mentioned already that your people are in need of new blood."

"How do you imagine that to come about practically?" asked Khrest, smiling feebly. "I admit that your physical and mental capacities are young and strong. Combined with our superior knowledge, this might result in a race of giant intellects-of course, only from a theoretical point of view, to begin with, for it would take many generations for the results of such a fantastic experiment to become evident. No, I believe that we are past any help; we have waited too long. And besides, can you really seriously imagine that Thora would ever consider mingling her blood with that of a human being who is only a primitive in her eyes?"

"Definitely not," Rhodan shook his head.

Khrest pushed a button. The concave wall next to his bed slid aside, and an oval shaped window appeared. Rhodan noticed that they were about 120 feet above the ground. A magnificent view of the

surrounding desert spread out in front of them. The sun was high in the sky behind the ship. Far to the north there was a chain of low lying hills.

"This landscape reminds me in some ways of my own home planet, at least the way it must have looked a long time ago," said Khrest softly. "But then we became the focal point of a galactic empire, and we could no longer permit ourselves the luxury of a genuinely natural environment."

"I would like to be able to visit Arkon someday, Khrest."

The white haired scientist smiled indulgently. "You might be disappointed, Perry. Our world, as big as your own, is nothing but one huge city. One immense, hollowed out honeycomb. Nevertheless, someday you will see Arkon."

Perry leaned forward, surprised. "I? Able to see Arkon? How?"

Khrest lay down again He looked up at the low ceiling of the cabin; then he fixed his glance on Rhodan. "Yes, you will visit Arkon, Perry Rhodan. Perhaps I did not make myself clear when I spoke of regenerating our own blood. There can never be a mingling of our races, for yours would be the loser in this process. But there is a possibility that once mankind is united-but definitely not before that point-the human race, guided by the Arkonides, might take over the heritage of the galactic empire. What do you think of such a dream for the future?"

Rhodan breathed deeply. "Too fantastic a dream to be considered seriously, Khrest. You are masters of a galaxy wide realm, and you would never abdicate your power voluntarily. On the other hand, man is too immature yet even to dare dream of such an empire."

"I am afraid that you, too, underestimate man's potential," Khrest said. "I had many an occasion to discuss these matters with Dr. Haggard. He shares my view in this respect."

"Even if I should believe in man's dormant capabilities, I could not deceive myself that the Arkonides would be capable of such a display of unselfishness."

"Don't judge us by Thora!" admonished Khrest gently. "She is the commanding officer of an

expedition and has been specially trained for this task. Her sharp and logical mind is the result of intensive indoctrination."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Indoctrination is a hypnotic method of teaching that activates the parts of the brain that lie fallow, while the parts that are already functioning become intensified."

"Training by hypnosis then, isn't it?"

"Yes, if you prefer to call it that. With this method you can transform a primitive creature into an intelligent being, provided, of course, that it has a brain to begin with. I intend to use this approach to transmit some of our own knowledge to you."

Rhodan stepped back instinctively. "What? you want to...?" he was gasping for air. "Why?" Khrest was still smiling. "You are so full of distrust, my friend. You assume I could not do anything unselfish. You are right to some extent. I am thinking far ahead, of times to come. With bold strokes I am painting a picture of the future, but this is not solely the future of the Arkonides. They will no longer be alone. Two related races will rule the galaxy, the Arkonides together with the Terrans. Please Perry, note the expression 'Terrans.' You are probably aware of the tremendous difference between a human being and a Terran. You, Perry, went out into space, and this automatically made you a Terran. Everybody changes into Terran, once he experiences the feeling of being able to close his hands around the globe. The others, though, especially those who are attacking us, are nothing but human beings who are completely unaware that their home planet, Earth, represents only a starting base for the future. All intelligent life has originated from the ocean, for this is where the archetypal cell was born. But the ocean belongs to the same category of environment as the universe. Thus, man returns to his original home when he moves out into space. And someday in the future, once the Terrans and the Arkonides have solidified their star realm, Earth will have become nothing but a legend. This world will be lost amidst the millions of tiny specks of light in the infinity of a borderlines ocean." Khrest fell silent for a few minutes. This gave Rhodan the opportunity to absorb this colossal vision of the future.

Then Khrest continued, "In a few centuries the Arkonides will no longer be able to hold together their empire. Already now and then some planets are trying to regain their independence. Needless to say, this independence would not do them much good, since they would only use it to tear each other to pieces. Therefore, to maintain general peace within the galaxy, we must make sure that a strong hand holds the reins. Unfortunately, though, the Arkonides become increasingly incapable of fulfilling this task. But rather than permitting the collapse of this cosmic empire and witnessing its conquest by some stronger and perhaps more cruel ruler, we prefer to share our power with an ally who owes his position of strength to us. We want friends that feel obligated and grateful to us for the help we gave them. We have never

before encountered a race who would be more suitable for this purpose than your own, the inhabitants of the planet Earth near the edge of the galaxy. Do you understand, now, that I am acting selfishly by making you strong?"

Perry Rhodan nodded slowly in agreement. He understood.

"These are the reasons that decided me to entrust you to our indoctrinator, even if this goes against Thora's wishes. But I feel the need to have two human beings on my side. Will you please tell me the name of your best friend. I want him to obtain the same schooling via the indoctrinator that you will get. Am I wrong in assuming that you will suggest Reginald Bell's name to me?" Rhodan nodded assent. "What does this hypnotic schooling process entail?"

"Don't worry that we will waste any time," smiled the Arkonide scientist. "If we can start right away, today, then already by tomorrow you and your friend Bell will possess more knowledge than is shared by all the world collectively. In addition to that, certain areas of your brain will become activated that would remain dormant for many thousands of years if you let events follow their natural course of normal development or mutationally induced progress. As I have already mentioned, to a certain extent you will receive some telepathic powers; that much I know for sure. But I cannot predict what other dormant characteristics will be awakened. Quite possibly they will become activated, although not, fully developed."

"That sounds really incredible."

"You will comprehend this process better once you share our knowledge. We have brought such an indoctrinator with us in order to educate less intelligent races. This enables those whom we have treated to become mental giants who can then transmit to their own race advanced ideas that will lead them along the path of progress. It is nothing but an artificial acceleration of a process that would take too long under normal circumstances. As far as you are concerned, I am proceeding much more radically. There will be no intermediate steps. I will have you jump across the gap of many millennia. You will turn into a type of man that will perhaps become the norm in another 10,000 years, when the galactic empire will be firmly entrenched on the basis the Arkonides have built before."

Again Khrest was silent, leaving Rhodan time to ponder these new facts.

Now Perry began to comprehend the apparently magnanimous attitude of the alien scientist. By helping man, he served foremost his own interest and that of his own race.

Perry pondered this thought. A logical solution for particular situation.

"I am willing to go along with your plans," he said calmly, despite his inner excitement. "But what will Thora have to say to this?"

Khrest shrugged. "She will have to come to terms with the idea. After all, I am the scientific leader of this expedition and must make the decisions."

"But she is the commander!" objected Rhodan.

"True enough. That means that she is responsible for the spaceship and the flight but not for scientific measures. These are solely my responsibility. You can rest assured that I know exactly what I am doing."

Rhodan did not doubt this for an instant.

Two hours later Khrest took Rhodan and Bell to a part of the space sphere that had been inaccessible to them up to this point. In the midst of complicated machinery connected by an apparent confusion of cables, were two isolated chairs with electronic helmets. These helmets were provided with several metal clamps that led into the machines. Somewhere an ominous hum could be heard, and an array of lights blinked constantly on and off.

The white haired scientist pointed to the two chairs. "The indoctrinator. Have a seat, please. You will lose consciousness and will not be aware of what is going on around you. The installation functions automatically. You see here a scale where I will set the exact amount of knowledge to be transferred to you. As you have probably noticed already, I have selected the highest possible degree for both of you. This will bring you up to the mental level of the Arkonides. As far as your inborn character is concerned, it will remain unchanged."

Reginald Bell regarded the helmets with obvious distrust. "This reminds me too much of the hot seats in Sing-Sing."

"What do you mean by Sing-Sing?" inquired Khrest.

"That is an institution for locking up criminals," Rhodan enlightened him sarcastically. "Reg is afraid to share their fate of getting electrocuted on these seats, which resemble electric chairs where criminals are executed for their crimes against society."

"Just sit down. You won't feel a thing," Khrest reassured the hesitant Bell. Rhodan felt a light prickling sensation on his skin after Khrest had attached the clamps to the machinery. The hum grew stronger. Khrest placed his hand on a yellow lever and looked at them.

"You will fall asleep in a few seconds and wake up again at once. At least, this is the way it will seem to you. In reality, twenty-four hours will have passed by then. Let's hope though that nothing will happen in the meantime, for an interruption might endanger the result of this lightning quick training. If necessary, Haggard or Manoli will have to decide what needs to be done. All right we are ready..."

"Stop!" shouted an angry voice from the opened door. Thora was standing there, her gold red eyes ablaze with fury and hatred, her fists clenched in anger.

"I forbid you to proceed with this indoctrination, Khrest! Nothing can take place on this vessel without my previous consent! The human race is not fit to be advanced to a higher level of knowledge. They are a martial race, too fond of war. They would constitute a threat to us if they were suddenly endowed with superior intelligence."

Khrest kept his hand on the lever, unmoving. "You are mistaken, Thora. They will help us to save our empire I have tried to explain to you the reasons for this action but you simply refuse to understand. I am sorry about that. We need Perry Rhodan and the human race if we don't wish to perish. Our elite is dying out-

"We won't die out if we find the planet of eternal life." Khrest smiled gently. "Thora, have you ever considered that the old story of the planet of eternal life might have been meant symbolically? Might it not be in a figurative sense that this world is the planet of eternal life that we are seeking? But enough of this now," he added in a firmer tone. "Don't disturb me here. I must finish this work. We will talk more about it later." Thora's voice grew more threatening. "If you insist on proceeding with this indoctrination I will use the gravitractor and cause this planet to fall into the sun!" Khrest turned pale. "You wouldn't dare, Thora! It would be a crime against our basic laws. Wait for me in my cabin! We will discuss the whole matter again, while the indoctrinator is doing its work here." Before Thora had a chance to reply, Khrest pushed the lever forward.

The humming became unbearable. Perry Rhodan felt his blood pounding in his throbbing temples. He could hear Bell's groaning next to him. Gradually everything turned dark in front of his eyes, and he felt himself sinking down into a bottomless pit. A few seconds later he was completely unconscious...

CHAPTER FOUR

Strange events took place during the week long suspension of open hostilities.

Lively activity unfolded in the hills to the north of the Gobi Desert base. Some troops were withdrawn, and others arrived. Matching and tractors were brought in from the north and parked in specially prepared depressions in the ground. They were soon hidden by camouflage nets. An army of experts began their work. Surveyors determined the location of the entrance to the shaft. Lieutenant General Tai-tiang supplied his guns with ammunition. Everyone awaited the green signal to go ahead.

In the meantime, across the hills to the south, inside the Arkonide space sphere, time was racing by for Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell and leaving its trace on their brains in the form of concentrated knowledge. Dormant cells were awakened to sudden life and began to grow.

Khrest had used force to prevent Thora from carrying out her threat to annihilate mankind. She finally agreed to await the result of the experiment. Somehow, Khrest thought, her threat had not been meant seriously, when she had declared her intention to let the Earth fall into the sun.

Four additional events took place in various parts of the world, events that accelerated the development that began to take shape. These events seemed to occur independently of each other, but actually they were linked quite closely. They had a common origin, which dated back more than a quarter of a century.

At that time there had been visible for the first time in human history a mushroom cloud whose shape was destined to become the symbol of a new era.

It had been a crazy idea right from the beginning. Fred Hangler had known this from the very first moment. But the decision was not up to him. This was the boss's job. Trying to rob the Central Bank of Brisbane, in the middle of the day! It simply could not work! Everything had been planned to the smallest detail. Outside in front of the entrance, the black limousine was waiting. The boss was sitting in the back seat, cradling machine gun on his knees. The car door was slightly ajar. Next to the driver stood Jules Arnold, one hand hidden in his trouser pocket. He kept continuous watch on the road ahead, especially the traffic cop on the next corner. The policeman had no idea what was brewing just a block away. He stood under a big umbrella, waving his arms as if he were conducting an orchestra, rather than regulating the traffic in Brisbane, on the east coast of Australia.

Fred had been given the most difficult job to do. He was to enter the bank and force the two tellers to hand over the money reposing inside the vault safes. It would not occur to anybody that anything of the sort could take place just before lunch time; they would be taken complete by surprise. Furthermore, it was general knowledge that around this time of the day all the police forces were feverishly waiting for their well deserved siesta, and thus their vigilance was at low ebb.

Fred Hangler knew that everything had to go very fast. It was impossible to avoid an alarm's being given. Hangler was not in the least interested in killing an employee of the bank. He was perhaps willing to sacrifice a few years of his life behind bars but not to make the supreme sacrifice and finish his life at the end of a rope. As soon as he had the money, he would run to the car waiting outside. Just a short, fast trip and they would disappear in Jeremy's garage. A couple of minutes later the car would have another colour and new license plates. The traffic cop at the corner would make his sworn statements quite in vain. The vehicle he had seen drive off at a crazy speed would have disappeared without a trace. The boss had thought of everything. He always did. The only thing he failed to remember was the atom bomb that had been exploded over Hiroshima more that twenty five years ago. But in all fairness, no one could be expected to associate that long ago event with this robbery in Brisbane one generation later. Nevertheless, that bomb led to the failure of this well hatched plot.

Fred Hangler entered the bank, carrying a big brief case in one hand, while the other firmly gripped a revolver inside his coat pocket, of course. He was angry to note that several customers were present. The boss had counted on nobody wanting to transact any business at noontime, either depositing money or, worse still, taking out any sums. Well, there was nothing Fred Hangler could do about it now!

He walked to the end of the line of waiting customers. Only one window was still open for business. The teller behind the other, closed window was yawning. He glanced in a most disapproving manner at the new customer and then proceeded to unwrap his sandwich. A bottle of milk completed his frugal lunch.

In the meantime, his colleague was busy helping the four customers waiting for his services. He paid out one small sum to the first customer, gave some information to the second and then turned to the third man. Fred Hangler noticed with pleasure that his hypothetical fortune was just about to be increased by this obliging gentleman, who intended to deposit the tidy sum of several hundred pounds.

Fred's palm grew moist. He held on tightly to the gun in his pocket. The man in front of him began to count out the pound notes in a most laborious way. just as slowly and mutinously were the same bills rechecked by the teller behind the window. Suddenly the teller with the sandwich and the milk bottle stopped eating his lunch and sat very still, as if listening to some voice that no one else could hear. A strange glimmer lit up his eyes. His glance wandered slowly around the room and, as if by accident, began to rest on Fred Hangler. A deep furrow formed between his eyebrows. Then he put his foot on the hidden alarm button.

Nothing happened in the bank. But just a short mile away, inside the nearest police station, sirens began to howl, startling the inspector from his midday snooze, which he had started prematurely. The hands of the wall clock were not yet pointing to 12. The inspector jumped up and stared at the alarm panel. Number 4 was lit up on it. That meant the Central Bank. Alarm. Robbery!

Bank robbery? Now, at siesta time? Unheard of gall of these criminals.

The inspector was seized by righteous indignation. He tore the receiver off the hook and began to bark some furious commands into the phone. Then he fastened his holster, made sure of the gun and ran out of the room. Out side in the corridor he met his alerted officers.

"Robbery in the Central Bank! Get a move on!"

Any thought of siesta time had vanished. A few seconds later a police car manned by five policemen were racing out of the police garage, siren whining, toward the Central Bank.

In the meantime, John Marshall had removed his foot from the silent burglar alarm button. He knew

that it would be at most five minutes before the police would appear, unless they were fast asleep. One always had to reckon with such a possibility during the midday heat in this peaceful town. He did not take his eyes off the customer, who was now waiting quite patiently, until the man ahead of him had made his deposit and departed. Then the customer stepped close to the window,

The police inspector was smart enough to throttle the siren as he approached his destination. Without drawing any undue attention, the police car drove up close to the bank building and stopped on the other side of the road.

The same moment that the uniformed men jumped out of the police car, the big black limousine, which until now had been parked right in front of the bank entrance, drove off. There was nothing conspicuous about this, and nobody paid any particular attention to the departing limousine.

Fred Hangler placed the big briefcase on the counter ledge in front of him and said in a quiet voice, "Young man, I would like to make a withdrawal of all the money you have there in your safe. Here is my authorization to do so." With this he pulled the gun out of his pocket and aimed it at the teller. He risked one quick glance over at the teller at the next window. John Marshall sat calmly munching his sandwich and waiting for the next development, the arrival of the police.

"Don't touch the burglar alarm," the gangster warned Marshall. "You'd be a dead man before the cops had a chance to, get here."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," answered Marshall, chewing and taking another sip of milk. "Just turn around and see for yourself. The police are here already." Hangler stared at him, completely beside himself. The first teller disarmed him deftly, before Hangler could offer any resistance. Hangler turned around. He saw five policemen quickly cross the road and enter the bank building.

The inspector was the first to storm into the bank. "What happened to the robbery?" he asked, nonplussed, and stopped in his tracks. He was confronted by a truly perplexing scene. Behind one of the tellers' windows somebody was sitting calmly eating a sandwich and drinking milk. The inspector hated milk passionately. In front of the other window he saw a harmless looking man who was being threatened by a gun held in the teller's hand. Just then, from a door in the background marked Manager, stepped a portly gentleman, hat in hand, ready to leave for lunch. He, too, stopped in his tracks, regarding the odd scene with disbelieving eyes. "What's going on here, Myers?" he asked. The bank teller, who kept pointing his pistol at Hangler, whispered excitedly, "What a coincidence! Good heavens, what a coincidence!"

"What coincidence?" inquired the inspector.

The bank manager came closer.

"He wanted to rob the bank," declared Myers. "Mr. Marshall tried to bluff him and pretended that the police were coming. The guy grew so nervous that I managed to disarm him. And then, what do you think? the police did come. I don't understand how it all happened."

"The burglar alarm was triggered," snorted the inspector. "Have you already forgotten about that button next to your feet?"

"I didn't give any alarm," insisted Myers. "And even if I had stepped on the burglar alarm, wouldn't it have been too late? This guy had hardly finished saying that he was holding me up, when you walked in here."

"Our police force just can't be beat," remarked the manager radiantly. He had come to believe that he had it all figured out. In the meantime Hangler had regained his composure.

"You can't prove a dam thing!" he snapped insolently. "I always carry a weapon. All I came in here for was to withdraw some money."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Myers. "With a gun pointed at me."

"We'll soon enough find out the truth," interjected the inspector, and motioned to his men. Handcuffs closed tight around Hangler's wrists. "Be it as it may. just three minutes ago we received an alarm signal at the station." He checked his watch. "To be exact, let's make it almost four minutes." Myers looked at the clock. "Four minutes ago I was still serving another customer and didn't have the faintest notion of a holdup. Marshall over here had just started on his lunch break."

"Uhum!" The manager cleared his throat with noisy reproach. He shot a most disapproving glance at the second teller. "You arrive late in the morning but make up for it by going on an early break. And probably make overtime there! I sure like that," he concluded in a sarcastic tone.

"So do I!" John Marshall smiled back, unperturbed. "That's why I came here to work for you in the first place." The bank manager's left eyebrow shot up at an angry angle. Myers grinned. The inspector gave Hangler a shove toward the door. "Let's go. We'll have plenty of time to discuss this." He looked over to the manager. "You should be pleased to have such reliable and prompt people working for you. But for them, you would have been out a lot of money. And for you, Mr." He hesitated. "Mr. Myers, I believe it is. I'd like you to come down to the station a bit later to make a sworn statement." The inspector relieved Myers of the holdup man's gun, then led his small army out of the bank. "What were you saying just now?" inquired the manager, and glanced with obvious disgust at the emptied milk bottle. He seemed to share the inspector's dislike for milk. "I simply emphasized how much I like to work for you."

"Well I'm glad to hear that!" He turned to Myers "My dear Myers, I would like to express my appreciation for your fast action. If you hadn't taken away that burglar's gun so quickly, and if you hadn't pushed the silent alarm button..."

"I didn't give any alarm," said Myers. "I only saw the police drive up and stop across the street and then run inside. That's when I could start acting. If anyone pushed that alarm button it must have been Marshall. But no, that's impossible too." He paused, then said, "The police could not have got here that fast. When that guy pulled out his gun, it was not more than five seconds later that the police showed up. I simply can't understand the whole thing," he concluded, shaking his head. The manager apparently felt pity for his lonely raised left eyebrow, for he provided some company for it high up on his furrowed forehead.

"Mr. Marshall," he said curtly, "was it you who gave the alarm?"

"Why, of course, Sir."

"The moment you saw the gangster point his gun at Myers?"

"No. Before that."

"Before that?" repeated the manager, confounded. His whole face looked like a question mark. "But how could you have known then what that man wanted to do? Or can you read minds?" he concluded with mockery.

Marshall nodded in silent affirmation. "It looks like it, doesn't it, sir? I knew exactly what this man intended to do. He was standing there in line, waiting for his turn. Then suddenly I was aware that he was holding a gun in his right hand, to threaten Myers. What else should I have done, for heaven's sake? I simply had to step on that alarm button. That's what it is here for, after all."

"Strange, most strange indeed." The bank manager scratched his skull, right at the spot where he had a few straggly hairs left. "You must have caught the brain radiations of this man. You must have received his thought waves. Incredible! If it were not for the difference in time I would not believe a single word you say. Have you ever experienced anything like this before?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Well, reading someone else's mind." He cleared his throat. "Do you know what I am thinking of now, Marshall?" John frowned. Again he seemed to listen attentively to an inner voice. Then his face lit up. "Oh, how marvellous, sir."

"What would be marvellous?"

"The reward for Myers and myself." Marshall's face was shining with pleasure. "You were just thinking of giving us a bonus of 100 pounds, weren't you?" The bank manager stared at him as if he had lost his mind. Then fear came into his eyes. As if trying to ward him off, he stretched both hands out against Marshall.

"That's uncanny, weird! A telepath! You are a telepath Mr. Marshall! That's exactly what I was thinking of. To give you a reward Good Lord, how could you have known?" John Marshall smiled again and placed the empty milk bottle under the counter. He looked younger than his real age, especially when he was smiling. "I don't know, sir. At school I always knew everything better than any of the other students. I just knew the answers. Maybe because the teacher was thinking of them, But today, looking back at it, it seems that that must have been more than just guesswork."

"I am inclined to agree with you there!" mumbled the manager. "You should have yourself examined and tested by some experts, Mr. Marshall. You are a phenomenon. Incredible If I had not witnessed the whole affair, I would never believe it."

Neither did anyone else believe it, naturally. Particularly the press. Though many articles were written about the foiled bank robbery with big headlines in the daily papers-Telepath unmasks Bank robber-in reality no one took the whole story seriously. Only Jules Arnold and the boss worried about it. But what could they do, now it was too late?

That night John Marshall did not turn in as early as usual. He locked the door of his small bachelor apartment, went into the tiny kitchen, and prepared himself a snack. Then he settled down with half a bottle of brandy. He sat in his living room, which could be changed into a bedroom by pulling down a wall bed. Once again he let the events of the day pass in review in his mind.

Fred Hangler was a notorious gangster; that much he had learned from the evening newspapers John had not especially noticed him when he first entered the bank; he had been too busy with his lunch. Then, something had suddenly crept into his mind. Yes, it had crept.

... must wait until the three ahead of me are through ... Could be that they will deposit some money ... that teller is no problem ... Point my gun at him ... boss outside ... holdup. Although John had not understood entirely, he had reacted with lightning speed. There were four customers present. Therefore, the last one must be the gunman. That was only logical.

... damn it, he is withdrawing some money now ... John felt his flesh creep in horror. He could perceive so clearly the emotions of the fourth man waiting in line. Squinting slightly from behind his milk bottle, he observed the man out of the corner of one eye. Right hand in his pocket-that meant a gun, of course. Right. No doubt. John had released the alarm.

... but this one is making a big deposit, at least! Just a few seconds now. Keep calm... Once upon a time John had been in love with a girl. It had often happened that he told her something that she was just about to tell him. They had said, "Our souls are swinging on the same wavelength." ... I hope no one else is going to come in now ... Safety catch released ... Soon ... Perhaps it was something like thought transference reflected John. If one was thinking very intensely, possibly the delicate energy waves in his brain were a little stronger than usual and could be received by another person. Just the way a radio could receive the waves from a transmitter. John must be especially sensitive to thought waves; he must have a particular talent. But never had he experienced it as clearly as today. He was convinced that he could have caught all the gangster's thoughts if he had not been so excited. But the bank manager, on the other hand- how easy it had been when he had asked him to demonstrate his ability.... and now ... the gun ... yes ... now ... And then suddenly the police had appeared. John sighed. He had spent only a short time at the police station, being interrogated. He had signed his statement, and that was the end of his part in the whole affair. Mind reading! The inspector had scoffed at the idea and said something nasty about drinking too much milk. Too much stimulation of the brain, perhaps. But then he had thanked him and spoken about extraordinary ability for swift reaction. But Fred Hangler was sitting safely behind bars! Perhaps this extraordinary ability could be perfected with the proper kind of training, John mused.

So far he had paid little attention to it, had always thought it to be coincidence. But it could be that many other people felt the same who had similar talents. Telepathy had been described in many novels and in reports of scientific experiments, but nobody really believed in it. Well, John thought, he had ample proof today of its existence. He would have to investigate this a bit further, make some experiments of his own to see whether he could really read minds.

Wouldn't it be something if I could. John began to spin daydreams. He could see himself as the eighth wonder of the world, whose favours would be eagerly sought after by politicians, giants of industry and the like. They all would want to have a telepath as an advisor, to outguess their competitors' intentions. Of course, they would pay him handsomely. How about Miss Nelson in the apartment next door? wondered John. She is home now; I saw her come in a little while ago. There is only a thin wall separating us. Thoughts can't be stopped by mere walls. I should give it a try . . . Suddenly he was seized by feverish excitement. Today's events had swept away any doubt he had had before. He could read thoughts, if he put his mind to it! Why had it never occurred to him before to test his ability? Now he could prove to himself that it was no mad dream or mere coincidence. He got up and walked over to the wall.

He placed his ear against it and heard someone breathing quietly on the other side. Well, Miss Nelson must be in bed already. Maybe she was still reading, perhaps even the newspaper reports of the foiled robbery attempt at his bank. She should by now be aware what kind of hero was living next door to her.

John had never shown any special interest in Miss Nelson. She was young and pretty, and she worked as a salesgirl in some department store. They were good neighbours, nothing else, although John would not have minded if they had been a bit better acquainted.

All was quiet. John tried to concentrate. He imagined himself able to see the girl as she lay in bed. He tried to recognize her face as she looked at him . . . with admiration. And then . . . It was as if John had received an electric shock. At first he believed it to be nothing but imagination, but then his doubts vanished. Again it seemed as if strange thoughts were creeping into his brain and pushing aside his own thoughts. And then, not only could he understand these thoughts, but he began to see with the girl's eyes. He could see the book she was reading, the small bedside lamp beside her, even the lines in the book. He was able to read them clearly. For an instant he closed his eyes. He was horrified-it was too much!-but the thoughts persisted. Now she laid down the book and went on thinking. How strange-she was thinking of him, of her neighbour John Marshall.

Good grief! What thoughts!

John blushed in embarrassment like a schoolboy and stepped back from the wall. He opened wide his eyes, fell into a chair and hid his face in his hands. And then he started to laugh.

It worked! It was not a figment of his imagination! He was able to read other people's minds, if he concentrated on it. There was no longer any doubt about his gift. But it would probably be wiser not to let anyone know about it, at least, for the time being. First he had to perfect his talent; then he could try to make money with it.

He completely forgot about the newspaper reports, which were ignored by most people but were taken seriously by a few.

But one thing he did not forget-to pay a friendly visit to Miss Nelson the next day.

Everything had happened quite differently in Miss Sloane's case. Since her eighteenth year she had been aware that she was not what one considered a nominal young girl. She had been told so by her father, a well-known atomic physicist, who had collaborated on the development of the first nuclear weapon. He lived now in retirement in Richmond, Virginia. Three months before Anne was born, her mother had accidentally been exposed to a strong field of radiation while visiting her husband in his lab. There had been no noticeable effects at first but, then after Anne was born, her father's attention was always focused on her. When she reached the age of eight the first signs of deviation appeared. Driven by a strong desire, Anne had managed to set in motion an electric toy train, although it was not connected to any source of current. Her ardent wish to see the toy train move had started it and kept it driving around the toy tracks in her playroom. Professor Sloane had been horrified at first, but then he had realized that the atomic radiation to which Anne had been exposed before birth must have altered the structure of her brain. Faculties that normally lay dormant in that human brain had been awakened and developed.

Anne Sloane had the power of telekinesis.

What had been suspected for a long time became certainty in the ensuing years. When she turned eighteen her father enlightened her. From then on Anne began to observe herself systematically. She constantly discovered new variations of telekinesis and then fled to Europe under an assumed name to escape the investigations of well-known scientists. Systematically and quietly she began to train herself until she mastered matter by her sheer willpower.

Now she was twenty-six years old, the same age as John Marshall.

Now she had returned to Richmond, to live with her parents. She was respected and feared by her

contemporaries. The President of the United States had personally guaranteed her safety. He had every reason to do so.

Anne was sitting on the veranda, taking a sunbath, when the two gentlemen in gray suits rang the doorbell. It was not the first time that such visitors had come. It was obvious to anyone, even at a distance, that they belonged to the secret service.

But this time things were somehow different.

Their car was parked in the quiet side street in front of the Sloane residence. Another car was waiting just behind the first auto. Four men were sitting inside. They had nondescript faces, but their eyes were extremely alert. They did not take their eyes off the house into which the two gentlemen had disappeared.

Anne's mother, too, noticed at once that her two visitors were not the usual type of special agent. They radiated authority and power. They must be quite high in the hierarchy of the secret service. "We would like to talk to Miss Anne Sloane," said one of the gentlemen, a short and young looking man with already gray hair that surrounded the bald dome of his head like a golden wreath. His gray temples heightened the impression he gave of a very peaceful person. "We have come on very important official business."

"I guess so," replied Mrs. Sloane, who by now was used to such callers. "Another order from our government, I presume. We have tried to avoid these things, not with too much success, unfortunately."

"The freedom of the whole Western world is more important than the convenience of a single individual," the man insisted solemnly. "This is indeed a most urgent matter."

"My daughter is outside on the veranda. Will you follow me, please?"

The second visitor looked older but radiated such kindness and joviality that one felt like addressing him right away as "uncle." He bowed courteously to Mrs. Sloane, and both gentlemen walked behind her, through the back of the house.

Anne was rather displeased when her mother announced the visitors. But as soon as she peered into

the friendly yet firm eyes of her callers, her resistance melted away. Instinctively she knew that she was not dealing with run of the mill agents.

"You have left me alone for a little while," she remarked, as if in gratitude. She pointed to two chairs next to the small table near her. "Won't you have a seat, gentlemen and then tell me what your trouble is? In the meantime my mother will get you something cold to drink." She did not expect any introductions, for all her secretive visitors were called either Smith or Miller, or perhaps Jones. Quite frequently she had been able to assist the FBI or similar institutions with her unusual faculties. In return she enjoyed the protection of the government.

The younger of the two pulled up a chair and sat down.

"My name is Allan D. Mercant, in case that should mean anything to you. I am chief of the Intentional Intelligence Agency and also Chief of Intentional Defence. May I introduce to you Colonel Kaats, Chief of the Inner Defence, a special department of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Anne half-closed her eyes. She was full of apprehension.

"I am very pleased to meet you, gentlemen, but isn't it rather unusual that you of all people should go to the trouble-

"No trouble at all Miss Sloane, but a genuine pleasure to finally meet our trusted collaborator in person. We have heard a great deal about you." Mercant moved his chair so that he could look directly into Anne's eyes. Kaats sat close to him. Mercant looked benevolently at the young girl "But you can rest assured that this is not just a courtesy call."

"I thought not." She nodded lightly.

"We are in a predicament, and we need your help," urged Kaats.

"I am sorry to hear that." Anne looked up at the blue sky and wondered if she would ever again be as happy, gay and unburdened as she had been in her childhood. "Yes, I am listening."

Mercant cleared his throat. "The best thing will be to start right from the beginning. This will give you an idea what has happened and why we require your help. We are not confronted here by the usual problem. We are not searching for some spy or some other enemy agent. We are searching for something, much more vital-peace for the world."

"You remember that once before I made the attempt-"

"Yes. I know about that. You wanted to force the big powers to destroy their atomic arsenals. That attempt was bound to fail, for force can be met only by some other force. But somebody else accomplished it. You know who that is, I assume. Perry Rhodan."

Yes. She had heard of him.

"Is your visit in any way connected with Perry Rhodan?"

"Yes. You are familiar with the story. Perry Rhodan, former major of our young space force, was leader of the first expedition to the moon. He was accompanied by Captain Reginald Bell, Lieutenant Eric Manoli and Captain Clark G. Fletcher. On her return flight to earth, the Stardust did not land as planned in Nevada but in the Gobi Desert. It seems that Rhodan found something on the moon that provided him with tremendous power. In the meantime we have learned that he encountered an extraterrestrial spaceship that had made a forced landing on the moon. These aliens have at their disposal the products of a technology that is advanced beyond the wildest imagination. At the time when war threatened to break out between East and West, Rhodan intervened in the conflict, calling himself the Third Power. He succeeded in keeping both enemies from annihilating each other. Certainly a most commendable enterprise; this much must be admitted."

"But at the same time this demonstration of power represents a tremendous potential danger. just imagine, Miss Sloane-somewhere on Earth there exists a power capable of wiping out all the nations of this world. Perry Rhodan, unfortunately, is today in a position whereby he can impose his will on us. With the assistance of these aliens, he managed to foil to a certain degree the expeditions to the moon that were later undertaken together by us and the Asiatic Federation. His might already extends, therefore, out into space. There is now such a concentration of power in the Gobi Desert as is hard to visualize. They are building spaceships and producing weapons, and no one on Earth can prevent it. Invisible energy screens extend around their installations, which are safe even from atomic bombs. In addition to that, they can manipulate gravity and control men's minds at a certain distance." Mercant grew silent. He looked at Anne Sloane, full of hope. The girl seemed to ponder his last words.

"I must admit, this seems like a rather extraordinary and perhaps painful situation, but not menacing. Why should Rhodan be considered a danger to the human race? Didn't his intervention prove rather the contrary, that he had our best interests at heart, when he prevented an atomic holocaust?"

"Are you so sure of his motives?" countered Mercant. "No one really knows what is going on in the Gobi Desert. So far Rhodan refuses any explanation for his intervention. Still, his presence is of a definite advantage to us, inasmuch as it has pushed a war between East and West into the realm of fantasy. Even the most ardent enemies become allies when they are faced by a still mightier common foe. We are now cooperating with the secret services of the Asiatic Federation and the Eastern Bloc. But so far we have not met with any success. This is where you come in, Miss Sloane!"

"What am I supposed to do?" inquired Anne. "You know yourself the limitations of my capabilities. And besides, I haven't the faintest idea how this energy screen will react when someone tries to pierce it with thought waves. And that I will have to do if I want to accomplish my task in a telekinetic way. Really, Mr. Mercant, I don't have the slightest notion how to proceed."

"You will naturally receive your instructions from us," declared Mercant, considering her words a partial consent. "We have even worked out a detailed plan of procedure for you. Our final aim is to render harmless Perry Rhodan and his superior weapons."

"Why must you do that? He has not done any harm to you. And isn't Rhodan a citizen of the United States?"

"He was!" emphasized Kaats. "He renounced his citizenship, and he has been deprived of all his rights. Perry Rhodan is the enemy of mankind."

Anne looked up again toward the sky. The sun had advanced and now approached the top of a big elm tree in her backyard. Soon shadows would fall onto the veranda.

"The enemy of mankind?" pondered Anne. "I have always imagined him to be somebody quite different-the man who prevented an atomic war."

Mercant grew restless. "My dear Miss Sloane, you must leave that to our judgment. We are better

informed than you. Rhodan intends to seize not only this planet's military might but also its total economic potential. The machines and goods he can offer in trade already surpass anything we have ever dreamed of accomplishing. This alone is sufficient for Rhodan to shake the very foundations of our economic existence."

"That sounds great," she mocked. "I would like to meet this Rhodan very much. This makes your proposition sound acceptable to me."

"You will have an opportunity to make his acquaintance if you are willing to work with us," promised Mercant. "Perry Rhodan and his allies are looking for friends and helpers."

She was amazed. "How can this be possible? To seek friends while being known as the world's foremost foe? How does he go about it?"

"Quite openly. Who could prevent him from doing so? And how is anyone to guess his neighbour's destination when he packs his suitcases and leaves home? Dr. Haggard from Australia was abducted by force. Today he is working for Rhodan. We tried to smuggle in some of our agents, but they were caught. Maybe you will have better luck."

"I would seriously doubt that." Anne shook her head. "I can hardly believe I'd be more successful than your people, who are so much more experienced than I."

"That's just the point! Exactly because you have less experience. Our agents were too cautious and wary and reacted accordingly. Besides, you are a woman."

"I won't deny that," she smiled. "But what has that to do with the whole thing?"

"A good deal. One of the members of the Stardust's crew wanted to return to the States. Rhodan gave him a hypnoblock that induced an artificial amnesia. When Captain Fletcher was cross-examined by the Australian authorities, he unfortunately suffered a stroke. His widow died too a few weeks later, when her first child was born. Her death was kept a secret. But we are in possession of her papers. And we also have a photo of her. Have a look at it, Miss Sloane!" Mercant opened his wallet and took out a photo. Anne hesitated slightly before she accepted the preferred picture; then she looked at it. It showed a young woman, about twenty-five years old, dark and slender. Anne did not notice anything particular about it except that it reminded her of somebody she knew quite well... "It looks like you, doesn't it?"

asked Kaats eagerly. Now Anne could see the resemblance, but it was nothing more than a slight likeness. "No one would dream of mistaking me for her, if that is what you want to say. No, I don't think I could pass for her."

"That is not so important here in this case," Mercant said. "Neither Rhodan, Bell nor Manoli had ever met Mrs. Fletcher in person. They might have seen a photo of her. Therefore, a slight resemblance is all that is necessary. As Mrs. Fletcher you will try to enter Rhodan's base in the Gobi Desert."

"This is a crazy idea," said Anne sceptically. "Who would fall for such a trick?"

"Rhodan! He will understand that Fletcher's widow wants to get in touch with him to find out what led to her husband's death. Once you are inside the energy wall, you can try out your special talents of telekinesis. I don't think even the fabulous Arkonides know a protection against that. At least, we hope they don't."

"Arkonides?"

"That is what the aliens call themselves. The strangers who had to make an emergency landing on the moon. They originate from a solar system more than 34,000 light-years away from ours. Star cluster M 13, NGC number 6205, to be exact."

"If these aliens really have come from this far distant star, I'm afraid that my limited faculties won't impress them too much."

"Let's wait and see. In any case I am not wrong in assuming that this job sounds tempting to you? You do accept, I hope."

"I don't seem to have much of a choice. And besides, to be frank, this mission intrigues me." Mercant rummaged in his coat pocket and pulled out some papers. "Here are your instructions. And your airplane ticket. But before you start you will undergo a short but intensive training course in psychology."

Suddenly Anne felt cold. She gazed up and noticed that the sun was now hidden by the branches of the elm tree. She stood up. "Let's go inside, it's too cool here on the veranda now. Over some whiskey

you can explain all the details to me." While she led the way into the house, she was suddenly overwhelmed by the feeling that she had let herself in for more than she could handle. Perry Rhodan, the celebrated astronaut, had gained her complete admiration when he had undertaken his daring flight to the moon. She had not been able to make much of the events that had followed, but she was sure that he was neither a traitor nor a criminal even if the whole world was against him. And now all of a sudden she was supposed to fight against him.

She was not entirely sure that she really would.

Unlike Anne Sloane, Ras Tschubai had never had the slightest indication of his hidden talents. He was born a few years after the end of World War II in El Obeid, a tiny village in the Sudan. He had studied in India and had lived for the past two years in Moscow, the metropolis of the Eastern Bloc. He worked in the laboratory of a scientific institute involved in research into the production of a serum to prolong life.

As a chemist, Ras took part in an expedition into the interior of Africa where a particular species of bee could be found. Their liquid food was indispensable for the synthesis of the serum.

For weeks now the expedition had roamed the jungles near the headwaters of the Congo River, far from civilization and cut off from their supply sources. Radio communication with the outside world had been cut off when their radio stopped functioning. The native porters had taken French leave one after the other and had disappeared into the darkness of the jungle nights.

Their situation was desperate, for the slightest relapse into primitive circumstances meant certain ruin in this age of advanced technology. Both Russians, the German and the African born Ras Tschubai were sitting in the middle of the immense jungle, surrounded by virgin territory and hostile wilderness, far removed from any help. What irony when high above the dense roof of foliage they could hear the hum of the heavy transcontinental airplanes! just a few miles above them, yet unreachable.

They ran out of food as well as medical supplies.

The leader of the misfortune ridden expedition sighed, "Damn these wonder bees! Prolonging life! For that we don't need any bees now, just a few cans of food. And a lot of luck. Ras, you are the only one here who knows the country at all, If anyone can help us now, it's you." They were crouched around a

small campfire in front of their tent. The fire was smoking terribly, for they had been able to find only damp wood. The sun never penetrated as far down as the jungle floor.

"I was only born in Africa but educated in India and the Soviet Union," Ras replied.

"But your parents lived here and your ancestors. You inherited their knowledge and their instincts. You are the only one who could find a way out of this maze. We have tried in vain for days to reach even some village. We have not enough strength left to carry on. One of us must go on alone. You, Ras!"

Ras was frightened. It was correct that his grandparents and even his parents had fought in Africa against the white man for their freedom and independence. They had lived in these endless steppes and impenetrable jungles. They had found food by hunting the animals of their domain. But he was now one generation removed from them. What did he know of the dangers of this wilderness? Nothing.

He shook his head in desperation. "It is senseless; that much I know. I'll never find the way on my own. Who knows if there is anybody still living in this jungle? They are all concentrated now near the coast or on the steppes. Even the wild tribes were lured by civilization. The jungle has been deserted. The wild animals have taken over. How should I, a man alone, find my way back to civilization?" As he spoke, a picture appeared before him from days long gone by. He saw El Obeid, a tiny oasis in the wide Sudanese steppes that had developed first into a little village and then into a regular small town. El Obeid! That, was where his parents had lived, where he had been born. Here he had spent his childhood, those long ago days without any worries. The village school and the teachers and the funny memories of many a childish prank . . . The old chieftain who used to sit under a banana tree at the edge of the village pond and who told such interesting stories . . . How well Ras could remember all this, just as if it had been only yesterday. And his parents . . . "Instinct, Ras!" said the leader of the expedition, bringing Ras back to reality. "It isn't the compass that matters; but the instinct. Your parents were still savages when they were children, don't you ever forget it. Your own civilization is nothing but a thin veneer that can be stripped away at any time. Forgive me if that sounds rather brutal but it's the truth. It takes many generations to turn this thin layer into a thick and durable skin. You, Ras, belong to the first generation. If anyone of us has a chance for survival, it is you. Therefore you are the one to go for help." Slowly Ras looked around the campfire. The German was squatting close by. He seemed to be cold, although it was warm and humid. He was drying his feet and boots, which had become soaked in the swamp. One of the Russians was sitting on a rotting tree trunk, staring straight ahead with a sombre expression. His rifle was leaning next to him, but only two bullets were left in it. The leader of the expedition regarded Ras expectantly.

The student of chemistry sighed deeply. "You're the boss. If you want me to, I'll try my best. But I can't guarantee anything."

"That remains to be seen. Take this rifle here five rounds of ammunition. That will leave us ten bullets

for hunting. In addition here is your share of medications. It's not much, but it will do for one fever attack. You will have to hunt for your food."

"That means no food to take along?"

"That's right. We can't give you any! We have almost nothing left. I am sorry, but I can't see any other way out. You must start out today." Ras knew that he could not argue; it would be senseless. He obeyed orders and soon afterward took his leave from his comrades. He walked off with firm steps and soon disappeared into the dense underbrush of the jungle. The thick foliage closed behind him and hid his friends from view. They remained behind, sitting motionless in the little clearing, just staring after him.

At first things were not too bad. Ras found a path apparently made by wild animals on their way to a water hole nearby. He followed the trail. If I should continue like this for about 600 miles, he thought bitterly, I would reach the coast. The only problem is that it would take weeks or months at this speed. It is hopeless. But what can I do? Perhaps I'll be lucky and I'll find some nomadic tribe or some Pygmies. Or ... El Obeid! If only he had stayed there, everything would have been fine. Although he could not have studied, he would still have had a chance to live a long life. Perhaps he would even have become a teacher. His parents would still be alive, perhaps. As it was, only one sister lived in their old home. How long since he had last seen her!

Caution! It was nothing but a monkey who, high up in the leafy roof of the jungle, had discovered the strange wanderer. His loud chatter aroused a lively echo. Ras was contemplating whether he should shoot him, but he did not feel hungry even though he had eaten hardly anything today. With a brisk step he continued on his way.

Soon it grew dark. Under no circumstances, he decided, would he spend the night down on the ground. He had to find some tree whose lowest branch was within easy reach. But this was not so easily done. It was almost night before he discovered a huge fallen tree trunk lying at a slant in a small clearing in the thick underbrush. He ran upward along the trunk until he reached a big forked branch, whence many paths led into a new realm that had been unknown to him till now. An entanglement of many branches, boughs and twigs wove a cover more than sixty feet above the jungle floor.

It was not at all difficult to find a suitable place. A cave like leafy shelter provided protection against the night wind and cover against any enemies approaching from behind. He took the blanket roll he had carried on his shoulders and spread it out. Carefully he put the gun in a corner. He still felt no hunger,

only great fatigue. He stretched out in a shallow depression of his "nest," listened for a while to the nocturnal noises of the primeval forest and was soon asleep.

He dreamed. Strangely enough, he dreamed of the scene of his childhood of which he had thought earlier. He could see everything so clearly that it seemed to be reality. The old chieftain once again told his stories of those bygone days when he roamed through the steppes, armed with spear and bow, hunting for enemy warriors and for game, Ras's sister brought water from a nearby well, carefully balancing the jug on her head. His parents-Ras sat up with a start. A new sound, which so far had not been part of the nocturnal concert of the jungle, had awakened him from his dream.

At first the trunk had trembled lightly, as if something had jumped on it from the ground below. Then came a soft shuffling, as if the creature was cautiously approaching. Some thing was softly treading on the wood.

Ras reached for his gun. He could not find it at once, and while searching for it he knocked it over. Before he managed to get hold of it, it flipped over the edge of his tiny platform. He could hear the rifle hitting against branches and leaves on its downward path. A dull thud announced that his weapon had arrived on the ground.

Silence.

Ras trembled with fright. He was seized by a superstitious fear. Again the creeping, groping in the dark became audible. It seemed to be louder now.

And then Suddenly ... his heart stopped beating for a moment. He saw two glowing lights close by. It must be big jungle cat that had followed his scent. Ras knew that he did not have a chance. His only weapon was lying far below him on the ground, perhaps even in the morass. His knife was very small, not of much use. How could he fight off a dangerous wild animal with it? But it was his only weapon, and he pulled it from his belt with shaking hands.

The two luminous eyes had approached him to a distance of less than ten feet. He could almost smell the stinking breath of his adversary, still hidden by the darkness. Ras remained sitting up straight, his back braced against the hollowed out tree trunk. He waited.

From the left something hissed viciously. The shining eyes in front of him suddenly disappeared, as the

big cat attacked its rival on the left. Ras could see nothing but he could visualize the struggle that went on nearby in total darkness. Both animals were fighting for their prey. they were fighting over him.

The victor would not wait long before attacking him. There were still a few minutes left to him to prepare himself for the coming onslaught. There was not really very much he could do, he knew. His hand closed tight around the small knife.

The wild hissing of the battling animals seemed to move away a short distance, but it increased in ferocity and loudness. Claws tore at wood and caused a nerve-racking sound that chilled Ras to the marrow of his bones. And then, suddenly and unexpectedly, all became silent. But only for a fraction of a second. Then Ras could hear branches breaking, the sound of something bumping against foliage and trunk. This could only mean that one of the animals had lost its grip and fallen to the ground. The struggle was over.

Soon another would begin.

Once again he perceived the flickering eyes, a little farther away. Now they stared moving toward him.

Damn it, why had he had to take such a tremendous risk! How should walk through the jungle, all alone and almost unarmed? What on Earth had possessed him to emigrate to Moscow? He should have stayed in El Obeid, with his parents and his sister.

Oh Lord, his sister! She was the only member of his family still alive. He had always been so fond of her. The house ...He forgot all about the wild animal that was slowly creeping nearer. If he had to die, then at least he would meet death thinking of his beloved home and his sister.He could see her now in front of him in the small room in the back of the house. She sat at the table, grinding some grain to a fine flour. He was standing near the door, the way he had done at his last visit, just two, years ago. She had not known that he was supposed to arrive and had not recognized him immediately. But then ...He would give anything now to be at her side this very second, to be in the safe shelter of the house. With all his might he longed for it, willed it. He could think of nothing else. He had even forgotten the wild cat...His sister was sitting at the table but she was not grinding any grain. Instead she was leafing through some letters she had taken from a box in front of her. Then she looked up and noticed Ras standing at the door. But this Ras was like a stranger she did not know. A dishevelled man in torn clothes, with a knife in his right hand, raised high, ready for attack ..."Ras! What is the matter? Your knife..."The chemistry student stood as if frozen. With wide-open eyes he stared at his sister. Slowly his hand came down, still holding the knife. He released his grip, and the knife fell to the floor with a clanking sound.

"Brother, what is wrong with you?"

Ras was breathing hard. He looked around the room, without comprehending how he had got here. Just a short second ago he had been sitting on a tree in the middle of the jungle more than a thousand miles away, facing a certain death.

And now ... El Obeid! His parents' house! His sister! "Sara, is it really you? Am I really here?"

"Of course you are here. But what you look like! Did you escape? Did you break out from a prison?"

"Maybe I have done that," he murmured, trembling. "Maybe I escaped from a mental prison, from the barriers erected by my mind. But that can't be possible! Why me, of all of people?"

"What are you talking about, Ras? I don't understand."

"Sara, I don't understand it myself. I don't know how I got here. I was far away in the jungle with an expedition. The expedition!" Suddenly he remembered what he had set out to do. They had sent him to get help. But now they were more than a thousand miles away. But ... no, this no longer presented any problem. As long as he knew their exact location ... Perhaps by airplane? "Listen, Sara, my friends are in danger. I left them half a day ago ... in the Congo." His sister looked at him greatly worried. Ras was suffering from some fever attack. She must get him to a doctor as quickly as possible.

"Do you have some food in the house?" Ras asked firmly. "Make a bundle ready. Hurry up, please."

Ten minutes later he held a big bundle of food under his arm.

"Turn around now, Sara. I'll be back in about an hour. You must believe me, trust me. I shall..." She ran past him toward the door and locked it. Then she hid the key in the pocket of her apron.

"You'll just stay here, Ras!" she cried, turning to close the window. "Whatever you are planning to do will have to wait until Dr. Swartz can come by to examine you. He will know-" She did not finish her

sentence. She had been turned away from him for only a moment, but when she looked back again toward Ras, all she saw was an empty spot where he had been standing with his bundle.

And a fourth case must be reported, for it was the most incredible and most baffling incident. It lay in the realm of parapsychology and concerned a special faculty, unknown so far. Nobody on Earth would have seriously considered such a possibility....

Every Friday a few young artists from Schwabing, the artists quarter in Munich, Germany, gathered in the apartment of author Ernst Ellert. Each visitor brought along his own contribution to the evening's refreshment in the form of a bottle of wine or some salami. This gave each the reassuring feeling that they would not cause too much hardship on the small budget of the freelance writer. This particular Friday they were celebrating the birthday of Jonny, a painter who was so possessed by his love of painting that he could not refrain, even tonight, from making a few sketches on the gaily coloured wallpaper. Ellert had long since given up reprimanding him for such unwanted displays of his art. All he would hear for the rest of the evening would be Jonny's comments of "narrow minded frustrator of artistic creativity, the eternal curse of the true artist." Late, as usual Heinrich Lothar arrived; nobody knew for sure how he earned his living. There were rumours that he photographed models for magazines, did occasional translations and the like. All these occupations, however, never prevented him from taking each of his friends aside sometime during the evening and discreetly whispering, "Say, you couldn't lend me a five till tomorrow?" This most touching approach had only once been crowned by success, when Ellert had let himself be victimized. Of course, he had never seen his money again. The fourth member of the group was Aarn Munro, editor and publisher of a small magazine that was read by hardly anybody. Aarn Munro was not his real name, naturally. But he liked to be called by the same name as the hero of a well-known science fiction novel of his youth. Since he could not make a living from his auctorial work alone, he had some other job, which he preferred not to mention. He'd rather be regarded as an artist, even if he never sold anything. And he did make excellent drawings. Finally there was Frettel, who also was smart enough to regard his artistic activities as a sideline. Frettel was a singer, entertainer, manager, organizer, impresario and general patron of the arts, not to overlook his being a physician.

"Tonight's topic," began the host, swiftly extracting a cigarette from Aarn's pack when Aarn's attention was momentarily diverted, "came up for discussion last week. You remember that Frettel mentioned some strange happenings that are supposed to have occurred in London. We could not come up with a plausible explanation. Lothar thought these phenomena were due to one of the parasciences. To be honest, I don't know too much about them and therefore don't believe in them. At least, that was my opinion up till yesterday." Lothar took the olives that Aarn had brought and unthinkingly emptied the contents of the small jar into the wide cavern of his mouth. He chewed on them with a great deal of enjoyment.

"Up till yesterday?" He ate and talked at the same time. What do you mean by that?"

"That I have changed my opinion," replied Ellert, and tried without much success to rescue one of the olives for himself. He made up for this with a shot of the whiskey that Jonny had donated. "After all, artists are permitted to change their points of view if it pleases them. They don't have to be consistent."

"You are right; opinions are the only thing we can change," observed Frettel thoughtfully. "Besides the figures on our patients' monthly statements."

"You are a doctor!" pointed out Ellert to him. "Writers can't play that game so easily. Our publishers-" Aarn was not at all interested in these problems. He simply did not pay anything for his writers' contributions to his magazine, for most writers were overjoyed just to see their names and their stories published. Therefore, he interrupted his friends' conversation rather abruptly. "Ernst, how come you waited until yesterday to think differently about parapsychology?" Ernst was glad to get away from the unpleasant discussion about financial matters. Money was always a sore point with him. "Because something strange happened to me yesterday."

"Let's hear about it!" urged Jonny, while trying to save at least some of his drink for himself. "Maybe I'll get some new ideas from you."

"I can hardly believe that," countered Ellert with a good humoured wink at Jonny. But at once he became again. "All right, I'll tell you a story, a most interesting story. But I know beforehand that no one will believe me. He waited until his guests had settled down comfortably in their seats and lit their cigarettes. Then he asked, "What do you think of time travel?"

General bewilderment. Then Aarn snapped, "That's your hobby, isn't it? You even wrote about it once, and it wasn't too well received by sensible people. If you want me to be frank with you, I consider time travel a most entertaining fairy tale." The rest of the group nodded unanimous agreement.

Ellert sighed. "That's what I expected you to say. But despite that, will you listen to my story, please! As you all know, I have pondered a great deal about this particular notion. I think it quite possible to go time travelling in a mental fashion. A dream could be looked upon as a kind of mental trip through time, if it transports us into either the past or the future. Even when you mentally recall events of the past you could speak of this as time travel to a certain limited degree. I think you will agree, therefore, that the notion of time travel is not so absurd as it might appear at first glance."

"Just a moment!" interjected Frettel. "That doesn't make sense! What has that to do with time travel? As I understand it, it consists of physically transferring the body of a person into the future or the past. Therefore, I would have to exist in some epoch different from my own, at least temporarily, in order to be able to speak of time travel."

"You are quite right," admitted Ellert, much to Frettel's surprise. "I share this view, although I tried to describe the other variation. In any case," he continued, "I've lain awake many a night trying to figure out how one could possibly have a glimpse of the future, even if I could do this only mentally without being physically transferred to some other era. I've racked my brain to understand the connection between dream, fantasy and wishful thinking; the relationship of the hypothetical eventuality of teleportation and temporal portation. Tempotation, to coin a word. If we assume the possibility that the body can follow the mind to another location, then it should also be feasible for the body to follow the mind to another period in time."

"Oh boy!" admired Jonny, without letting go of his almost empty bottle on the table. "It's simply snorky the way you can make plausible some things that are really impossible."

"No wonder," grumbled Frettel. "That's what he gets paid for." Ellert waited until the general excitement subsided. He looked very confident of himself now, and his good friends knew this to be the sign that he was going to spring some more surprises.

"It's getting interesting bit by bit," remarked Lothar with sarcasm. "Go on with your story!" demanded Aarn, his eyes shining with speculation and full expectation.

Ellert did not need any urging. "I have Always been interested in the future, and it seems that I have been constantly preoccupied with it. Especially so yesterday. Nobody knows what is going to happen tomorrow, and who is sure that he will exist the next day? In the last year we have had a few narrow escapes from an atomic Armageddon. Everybody understands the consequences of an atomic war. And if a certain Rhodan had not intervened, none of us would be sitting here so comfortably talking and drinking.

"But despite Rhodan's service to all mankind, he is looked upon as our enemy. This doesn't make sense to me. It's plainly illogical. Well, to make a long story short, last night before going to sleep, I directed my thoughts toward the future with such intensity that I almost believed I had arrived in it. I so fervently wanted to learn what would happen in one year. And then suddenly: I knew it!"

"I beg your pardon?" squeaked Jonny in utter amazement. He released his grip on the bottle for an

instant, which was not lost on Aarn, who took the opportunity to help himself to the meagre remainder of liquid refreshment. "You knew it? Be more specific, please!"

"I am just about to. While my thoughts were focused on the problem most intently, I suddenly noticed some change taking place, I could not define what kind of change this was, for everything seemed to happen so swiftly. It became dark in my room, for a few seconds or an eternity, who knows? Then all of a sudden it was daylight. The sun was shining bright. I was sitting here on my bed, wondering what had taken place that would account for the sudden turning of night into day."

"You must have had too much to drink," suggested Jonny.

Ellert shook his head. "Just wait a minute, my friend. I have not yet finished telling my story. Well, it was broad daylight, and the sun was shining. I got up from my bed and looked around, wondering all the while. At first I assumed that my mental effort had made me fall asleep abruptly and that morning had come and it was time for me to get up. Then I noticed that two of my pictures were missing from the wall. Yours, by the way, Jonny. Instead there were two new paintings, signed by Aarn..."

"But I have never drawn any pictures this size," objected Aarn.

"That's just the point!" exclaimed Ellert. "This is my first proof already. You are going to paint them-not draw them! And you will make me a present of them in the near future."

"He's gone off his rocker," whispered Lothar worriedly to Frettel, who was sitting next to him. "Why don't you examine him sometime?"

"I deal in appendix operations, not in brain abnormalities," said the physician without emotion.

Ellert did not seem to mind their discussing his state of sanity. "At first, of course, I did not understand. I examined the paintings more closely-and I may say I liked what I saw, Aarn-and walked toward the corner, where I stopped in front of my big wall calendar. You know this big calendar over there where I write down all my appointments, And what do you think I saw there on my calendar?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," mumbled Lothar. "But don't keep us in suspense. Go on speak!"

"The date! Why, what else should I see on my calendar? But it was the 17th of November two years hence!"

Jonny burst out laughing and kept laughing till tears came into his eyes. He tried to utter a few words, but they were unintelligible.

Frettel did not join in the general amusement; he remained serious. "Is that the truth?" he asked. "Explain What happened?"

"A simple explanation might be that my almost superhumanly felt desire had brought me into the future, more than two years ahead in time. But the most amazing thing was that my body remained in the present time. At first I believed that my body, too, had arrived in the future, but then I noticed suddenly that another will was fighting against my own. I realized quickly that my own will of today was struggling with my will of two years hence. Only my mind had travelled into the future and slipped into the body Ernst Ellert of two years from now. With his eyes I saw and experienced that period which is still lying ahead of us. I could even participate in the memories he had accumulated during these two years. But I did not succeed in imposing my will on his. Yet I knew that that same night our usual gathering was scheduled to take place, although according to the calendar it was a different day than we usually meet now. It was an exception. I was on leave, and this way we were able to get together for the evening."

"On leave," mused Jonny, as if he had never before heard such a word.

But Ellert did not care to elaborate on what kind of a leave he was on. Instead he reassured them. "I will set your minds at ease. All of us will still be alive in two years. No war will have broken out but tremendous changes have taken place."

"Now I know what is ailing you, my friend," Lothar triumphantly. "He is taking up fortune telling."

"You might have a point there. Maybe that's what happens with prophets when they start foretelling the perhaps they can send their minds some years ahead report what they saw." Ellert sighed with resignation. "But I see you don't believe a word of my story."

"Of course we don't," smiled Frettel. "But it still is a most entertaining tale. I keep waiting for the punch line."

"Punch line?"

"Why, what else? It's a gag, isn't it?" Ellert lit a cigarette. His face was very serious. "There is no gag, there is no punch line. The story is simply the truth. Would you like me to prove it to you?"

"That would be nice of you," admitted Lothar. Frettel and the rest nodded in agreement. They looked at Ellert with great expectation.

"All right, my friends, I'll try now to attend our next Friday night party here. In other words, I'll be able to tell you right away what will happen in one week. Or even better still, what will occur during the coming week. I'll listen in to your usual weekly report of your activities at our next meeting by sending my mind ahead into the body of Ernst Ellert, one week older. Then I'll return and tell you all about it. Within the following seven days you will have ample opportunity to verify the correctness of my prediction. Are you with me?"

"You bet," grinned Frettel. "And in the meantime, while your mind has wandered off into the future, I'll examine your body right here in the present. Perhaps I might observe some difference in your body, and this will be an additional proof."

"I sincerely doubt that you will notice anything different in him," remarked Aarn in a highly critical tone.

Ellert paid no attention to this dispute among his friends. He leaned back in his armchair, head thrown back, eyes closed. He had stopped moving. His breathing was calm and regular. Frettel was waiting for any sign of change but could observe none whatsoever. Finally, growing impatient, he poked his index finger at Ellert's chest. "Have you started with it, Ellert?" he inquired.

Ellert did not reply. He was sleeping. He could not be aroused. All attempts at awakening him failed. Frettel checked his pulse, heartbeat and blood pressure. All vital signs seemed to function perfectly, exactly the way they would in a sleeping person, except that this slumber was far deeper than anything the physician had witnessed before.

"He has been asleep now for five minutes like this," Frettel said, looking at his watch.

Johnny had turned serious too. He looked at Lothar and Aarn. "Do you believe there could be something to what Ellert has told us?"

They shrugged.

Suddenly Ellert opened his eyes. He looked around the room in confusion. Then he seemed to remember. He smiled weakly.

"Well?" urged Aarn. "What happened?"

"I was one week ahead in the future," whispered Ellert with resignation. "Exactly one week from now, from this very moment. For five minutes. But I can't tell you what will happen to you during this coming week. I did not see any of you. Apparently we won't meet here in my apartment Friday night. I did find my body, though, which had become one week older in the meantime. But not here in Munich."

"Where did you locate it?"

"In Asia! To be exact, in the Gobi Desert. How I got there, who knows? I don't at this point. It was difficult enough for me to get hold of a newspaper so I could at least tell you the events of the coming week. I wanted to bring some proof along to you of my trip into the future. Unfortunately, I could not transport the newspaper back with me, since I cannot cause matter to travel through time. But I did read some news items."

"Well, how about some tips on the stock market?" scoffed Jonny, who remained as sceptical as before. "I'd like to know why you were in the Gobi Desert, of all places. That's the spot where the American spaceship landed, isn't it?"

"You are right. It landed there. And in one week I'll be standing in front of the astronaut Perry Rhodan."

"Charming story," mocked Lothar. "Now I presume you will write one of your science fiction stories around this visit."

All the friends laughed, as if they had heard a good joke.

Only Ellert remained serious. "You won't be laughing in a few more days. I'm afraid there exists more things between heaven and Earth than we have imagined. The day after tomorrow will be our elections. I already know the result. Would that be enough proof for you doubting Thomases?" Frettel narrowed his eyes.

"Certainly-if sheer coincidence could be ruled out."

Ellert shook his head. "True. The result of the election could be correct just by chance. But not the fact that the newly elected official will become the victim of a heart attack the very same evening. The elections will have to be repeated in another four weeks."

All fell silent. Then Aarn's soft voice could be heard: "Telepathy, teleportation, telekinesis, and now to top it off we have teletempotation-travel through time. But only for the mind."

Frettel shouted with enthusiasm, "Ellert, you have invented a new branch of the parasciences!"

Ellert gave him a penetrating look.

"I discovered something that must have existed all along. I did not invent this phenomenon, my dear Frettel!"

CHAPTER FIVE

PERRY RHODAN thought that his eyes had been closed for just a brief moment. When he opened them again, nothing seemed to have changed. His friend Reginald Bell was lying strapped into the indoctrinator next to him, and he, too, was trying to wake up. There was an expression of utter amazement on his face. The indoctrinator! Now suddenly Rhodan knew how it functioned. Stored data were conducted through electronic amplifiers, then transmitted directly into the nerves of the head. They in turn conveyed the information into the brain, where it was stored in the memory bank. These memory banks, though, had been considerably enlarged in their storing capacity via electric shocks. From there the accumulated wealth of knowledge could be tapped whenever needed.

Khrest stood at the instrument panel of the indoctrinator. "You may get up now!" he said quietly. "The hypnotraining has been successfully concluded. Both of you have received the identical schooling, but it seemed advisable to me to equip you, Perry, with a certain type of superiority, compared with what Reg has been given. I have increased your already present potential for lightning fast decision making in the face of newly arising situations. In addition to that your suggestive powers have been augmented. Any normal person will from now on have to carry out any of your commands, as if he had been given a hypnotic order. I am fully certain that you will never abuse this power entrusted to you. But you will have to make use of it in order to accomplish what we have planned together. As to the extent of your newly acquired knowledge, well you will soon enough find out for yourself."

Rhodan pushed his hair away from his forehead. "Right now I am not aware of any change."

Khrest smiled gently. "What is the square root of 527,-076?"

"Seven hundred and twenty-six. Why?"

Perry gave the result as nonchalantly as if it were the most elementary problem in arithmetic. But he had hardly finished with his reply, when he turned pale. He had already got up, and now he was so shaken by surprise that he seemed to lose his balance for a moment.

Reg grasped his arm to steady him. "I also know the answer!"

"Your brain calculates automatically at the speed of light, if I may make such a comparison," Khrest enlightened them. "Your calculations are taking place in your subconscious. Your conscious mind is needed for more important tasks. Are you convinced by now that something has been changed in you?"

Reg still seemed beside himself. "And my math teacher used to tell me that I would never amount to anything, at least not in math! If only he could see me now..."

"For the next few days you will constantly make new discoveries of what changes have occurred in you. Don't be frightened by it. The only thing that matters is that you know how you have acquired your talents, that they were transmitted by our indoctrinator, based on the far advanced state of development of our race. You share our level of progress."

"I hope we will be able to handle it successfully."

"You will have to. And now, will you come along with me? I must discuss some things with you. Our connection with the outside world has been interrupted. Powerful transmitters are jamming our broadcasts and rendering impossible our contact with anyone else we need to communicate with. One of you will have to leave the protective energy dome to find out what is going on. Besides, we cannot afford to sit around inactive. The first work sheds have been erected. The robots cannot continue with their work. We must get materials and co-workers. We will build here in the middle of the desert an industrial complex the like of which your planet has not seen before. You realize that we will never get back to Arkon without powerful spaceships, and we want to accomplish more than just returning home, as you know."

Rhodan listened to Khrest's words. At the same time he mentally let pass in review the bold visions of the future of which Khrest had spoken to him. The galactic empire. A gigantic fleet would be required to build it up and to maintain it. But was mankind quite ready for this?"I'll go outside myself," he heard himself volunteer to Khrest. "I only wonder how long it will be before they detect who I am."

"Well?" countered Khrest with eager anticipation. "Just think of the technical means at your disposal now, Perry."

And Rhodan realized this very instant what they were. The information simply came up from the memory bank of his augmented brain potential.

The Arkonide equipment. A microreactor supplied the energy of his special suit. He could erect a miniature energy screen around himself that would provide protection against any dangers. Small missiles would simply bounce off it. The lightwave deflector would render him invisible to human eyes. The built-in gravity neutralizer would permit flight for short distances, since the speed would remain fairly moderate.

"How will I be able to leave here?"

"Tonight we will lift the energy screen barrier for a few seconds, although you could pass directly through it if, you wished to do so. But before that I would like to discuss the further details with you. Thora has agreed to this plan. She has come to understand the necessity for such a collaboration between us, even if most reluctantly."

"I am not surprised," said Rhodan curtly.

Los Angeles. Two days later.

In a small restaurant on Sepulveda Boulevard, the street leading to the international airport, Perry Rhodan sat enjoying a good sized steak. In the past two days he had managed to have talks with the presidents of three of the largest industrial concerns in the United States. Because of his new talents he had at once received confirmation for deliveries in the near future of large orders of the materials and manpower he needed. He had given a fictitious firm name in Hong Kong, under which he would accept delivery.

Outside the restaurant he had a taxi waiting for him to finish his meal.

Perry Rhodan sat quite calmly in the midst of a population that regarded him as their worst enemy. He was unafraid and did not even try to hide. Although his photograph had been telecast all around the world after his landing in the Gobi Desert, nobody seemed to have recognized him so far. And even if they did, it would not matter too much ... Rhodan felt well protected by his Arkonide equipment. Underneath his business suit he wore a special suit, one that was undetectable from the outside. A man sat down at the table next to Rhodan. His dark hair was combed back straight from his forehead. He

looked rather distinguished, perhaps too much so. Large sunglasses hid his eyes. He opened a newspaper and, soon seemed absorbed in it. He was reading the financial section. Absentmindedly he ordered some coffee.

Perry Rhodan tried to concentrate on his delicious steak trying to overcome a sudden feeling of unrest. Two days had passed since he had left the base in the Gobi Desert. This apparent calm was suspicious.

What if they now launched the long expected general attack? Rhodan was convinced that the Arkonides would manage to ward off any attack from the enemy outside, but he feared a rash action on Thora's part. Unless she was watched she was liable in her wrath to cause the greatest catastrophe and thus to endanger all Khrest's and Rhodan's plans for the future. During yesterday's negotiations Rhodan had noticed that people were not absolutely against him. On the contrary, the farsighted industrial magnates had recognized the advantages that their association with Rhodan offered them. In addition, each was fully aware that Rhodan's actions and the existence of his base in the Gobi Desert had prevented an atomic war. Rhodan wondered how his friend Reginald Bell would react in the face of an attack from the outside world. Now he possessed incredible intelligence and new, undreamed of capabilities, but his character remained unchanged. Not that Reg liked to act unthinkingly, but he needed Rhodan's presence to counterbalance his impulsiveness. The gentleman at the next table had put down his newspaper. There were deep creases in his forehead now. His attention was obviously focused on his neighbor, who had just finished eating and pushed away his empty plate. Several times he seemed want to get up from his seat, but he apparently could not quite make his mind. Then finally he stood up abruptly and walked over to Rhodan's table. He stopped short for an instant, looked at Rhodan and then said, "Pardon me, sir, I would like to ask you something, if you don't mind. May I sit down?" Before Rhodan could give his assent the stranger had pulled up a chair and sat down next to him. Rhodan was startled by his behavior and was mentally prepared for anything that might follow, even a physical attack. A slight push on his belt would have been sufficient to surround him with a protective energy bell.

The stranger smiled uneasily. "I might be mistaken, but two things speak against this, True, the resemblance is rather vague, but I could swear I have seen you somewhere before. But this is not the only reason I suspect that you are Perry Rhodan. Please, don't be afraid-you have nothing to fear from me. I would not give you away. You have done too much good for all of us on Earth. But I don't know how to tell you, Mr. Rhodan. Don't you read any newspapers?" Rhodan shook his head. "Not in general. just for the last two days, though..."

"No, sir. It was about a week ago that a lot was written in the papers about me, at least in Brisbane, Australia, where I am from. No one would believe what had happened, but it was absolutely true. I am John Marshall, if that name means anything to you."

Rhodan remembered having heard something about this man, but he had dismissed it from his mind at once as being inconsequential. Just some sensational bit of news, that was all. But swiftly the report assumed some importance. His logically working mind went into action and within a fraction of a second

gave an answer to why this man had been able to identify him as Perry Rhodan. He raised his eyebrows.

"You are the mind reader, Mr. Marshall. You were sitting here next to me and received my thought waves as I was thinking intently about my problems. Isn't this the way you recognized me?" John Marshall nodded.

"It seems to have become dangerous to think at all; thoughts are no longer free," said Rhodan regretfully. "Since when can you read minds?"

"Ever since I was a child, though only at an unconscious level. Just a week ago I realized that I have telepathic powers. But I don't know why."

"When were you born?"

"Not too long after the Second World War. Why?" Various possibilities crossed Rhodan's mind, combinations whizzed by, relays clicked, and then he knew the solution. "Atomic radiation, of course. Hiroshima, H bomb testing, fallout! There must be many more of you mutants running around in the world by now."

"Mutants?"

"Change of the genetic heritage. The radiation influenced the structure of your brain when you were conceived." In the tiny pause that Perry Rhodan let intervene, another mighty vision of the future rose in front of his eye. Mutants! An entirely new perspective opened up before him. If he could find all these mutants, at least the most capable among them, and engage them for his cause, then he could create an unbeatable troop. Perhaps he would need such a troop at some future date... He stopped his thought, for he noticed the expression of amazement on Marshall's face. Perry Rhodan had almost forgotten that the other man was capable of reading his thoughts. Automatically he screened off his thoughts behind a barrier that would not let his thought waves pass. This was one of the new abilities he had acquired during his hypnotraining with the indoctrinator. "Why did you begin to talk to me?"

John Marshall smiled uncertainly. "I had intended to make money with my talents," he admitted frankly. "Since yesterday I have been negotiating with various institutions. They offered me huge sums of money. But I believe there are more important tasks for me. You just indicated this possibility in your thoughts."

Perry Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief. "You mean to say you would be willing to work for me?"

"Yes, indeed."

"But I am not in a position so far to pay you for your services."

"There are things that are more valuable than any amount of money-for instance, ideals."

"Ideals? What do you mean by that?"

"Isn't that the reason you are fighting against the whole world? It is not power alone that motivates you!"

"Power plays some role, too, I confess. But even power can help to make ideals come true."

"That's right! I am therefore ready and willing if you want me." Perry took a closer look at the man. He liked him, quite apart from his special gifts. He held out his hand toward him. John Marshall took the proffered hand and shook it sincerely and firmly. Suddenly he looked beyond Rhodan. His eyes narrowed behind his sunglasses. A strained expression replaced the look of joy on his face.

He whispered, "They are after you, Rhodan. That car across the street is an unmarked police car. It's just parking now behind your taxicab. Two men are getting out of it now-don't turn around! They are talking to the cabby. They are coming here, toward our table. What do suggest?" Once again Rhodan's brain was working feverishly. One of the industrial managers must have given him away. Not intentionally, in all likelihood. Those guys from the International Intelligence Agency were not stupid at all. Once they picked up a scent, they did not let go of it until they tracked down their prey. Rhodan was all ready when the two inconspicuously dressed gentlemen came to his table. He nodded imperceptibly to John, placed a five dollar bill under his plate, then got up. "We'll meet at the airport, then. In one hour. Wait for me there. They won't bother you." John gave a slight nod. He got up and walked over to the next table as if the whole thing did not concern him in the least.

The two secret service agents hesitated for a fraction of a precious second before they approached Rhodan resolutely. One of them put his hand in his pocket; the other stepped up from behind and put his hand on Rhodan's shoulder. "Perry Rhodan, in the name of all mankind-"

Rhodan turned around. His gray eyes pierced those the agent. "What do you want?"

"You are Perry Rhodan."

"I am Foster Douglas, if you don't mind. Don't both me!" The agent hesitated. He had become unsure of himself. His colleague was unmoved. He withdrew his hand from his pocket. In it was a heavy gun.

"Don't make a wrong move now, Rhodan. Leave your hands just where they are. Come along with us!" Perry Rhodan looked him straight in the eye. "I am Foster Douglas. Stop annoying me!" Several of the guest in the restaurant had turned to watch the scene. In the meantime John Marshall was walking leisurely toward the taxi stand near the next corner.

The second agent let his weapon hand drop. He was undecided what to do. Something deep inside him told him that he had made a mistake, that this man was not Perry Rhodan at all. And yet the old previous command was still working in him.

"You will not interfere now when I leave this place," said Rhodan, looking sharply at the two men. "You did not find Perry Rhodan. Inform your superiors accordingly. Is that clear?"

One of the men nodded, but the other was hesitant.

Rhodan turned around and walked off. He was ill at ease, for he could not protect himself from a bullet fired into his back. He wanted to switch on the energy screen only in case of the greatest emergency. And to fly off with his gravity neutralizer was impossible in broad daylight. They would send light airplanes after him at once.

The two agents were still standing there undecided when Rhodan stepped into his waiting taxi. Close behind it the police car was waiting. The driver held a microphone in his hand. He kept speaking into the mike. Obviously he could not figure out his colleagues' strange behavior. "To the airport" ordered

Rhodan.

The taxi started moving and soon picked up speed.

The two agents seemed to rally from their shock. It was as if they were awakening from a bad dream. The table in front of them was unoccupied. Perry Rhodan had disappeared. Their bird had flown the coop. The diners in the restaurant were staring at them. The police car was waiting for them outside, but Rhodan's taxicab was no longer where it had been. It had disappeared too. "What a dirty trick!" snorted the man with the gun, and ran out to their car, where he barked at the driver. "What's the matter with you? Why did you let him get away, you idiot?" The driver put his microphone down. "Don't snap your thermostat, buddy. What are you blaming me for? It was you who let him get away. Wasn't that Rhodan?" The other agent had joined them in the meantime. The pressure in his brain had eased. His mind was functioning normally again.

"Hypnosis! We've fallen for that Rhodan's tricks. Which way did he go?" The driver pointed down to the next corner to the right. "Over that way. Toward the airport."

"Let's get after him! Notify headquarters." The police car tore around the corner at breakneck speed.

In the meantime John Marshall had found a taxi. Almost simultaneously with the police car he got onto the freeway. He leaned back in his seat, trying to catch the brain waves of the excited agents. But he could not separate the confusion of the various "senders" in the police car. He could do nothing but urge his taxi driver not to lose sight of the big black car with the two agents and their driver.

The traffic observer in the helicopter hovering above the freeway observed three cars streaking along, weaving in and out of traffic. But the first car kept a constant distance, well ahead of the two others which closely followed each other. Although the freeway traffic was fairly heavy, the first car took but a few minutes to reach the parking lot near Global Airlines. Quickly Perry Rhodan paid the cab driver and ran toward the entrance. Soon he had disappeared among the crowd of arriving and departing travelers.

From somewhere came the sound of whining sirens. Policemen appeared suddenly at all the entrance and exit doors of the building. They were joined by men in civilian clothing. Their hands were in their baggy, bulging trouser pockets. The passengers in the air terminal became restless. A loudspeaker blared above the busy din, "Keep calm, everybody! Police had to surround the building. This is an emergency measure. Just stay wherever you are. Don't move around!" Rhodan knew that this was a civilian airport, but he had found out earlier in the day that at the end of one of the farther runways a fighter bomber of the IIA was waiting, ready to depart at a moment's notice. The crew consisted of the pilot and three

other men. Rhodan was standing in the midst of a group of noisily arguing businessmen. They were furious at the prospect of missing their planes. About fifty yards from there John Marshall tried to push toward Rhodan in an inconspicuous manner. Both the agents from the restaurant were going from group to group, searching for their man.

Rhodan made a decision. He pushed down on a Button at the belt of his Arkonide suit. At once the lightwave deflector began work, and Rhodan became invisible.

Cautiously, trying not to bumping into anybody Rhodan moved toward John Marshall. The former bank employee was startled when he felt a disembodied touch from nowhere. Then Rhodan's thought waves penetrated his brain. Stop here Marshall, don't move on! I am invisible for the time being. they can't find me now. As soon as they don't see me any more they'll give up their search. They can't interrupt the traffic here in the airport any length of time. Marshall nodded his assent. They waited.

"At the end of the farthest runway over there a fighter bomber of the IIA is waiting. We'll try to reach it. You will come with me, won't you, John?" Marshall nodded.

"Good. We can't wait here forever. Start walking slowly toward that barrier over there. As soon as I become visible again, keep very close to me. I'll place an invisible energy screen around us both. That will afford complete protection. Then we'll walk toward the fighter bomber. Do you understand me?" Once again Marshall nodded. Slowly he began to walk. The other passengers started moving too. They were fed up with the whole delay. They simply began to walk in all directions. nobody could prevent them.

Marshall pulled out his passport for the employee at the barrier, who let him pass. Rhodan followed him closely, still invisible to the human eye. Then both men walked out onto the airfield. Several planes stood with motors running, ready to depart. Airport personnel and the police checked the papers of the passengers who were enplaning.

You keep on moving, Rhodan thought beamed.

Marshall walked past the first craft. All the way over to the left he had perceived the waiting fighter bomber.

Two men of the crew were lying stretched out under one of the wings, taking it easy in the shade. The pilot seemed to be checking out something at the landing gear. A fourth man was sitting inside the cabin, busy receiving instructions via radio.

Marshall walked calmly toward the bomber. The pilot interrupted what he was doing and looked with interest at John.

"Watch out! I am now going to materialize again. I'll become visible." The pilot and the men resting in the shade under the wing opened their eyes wide in utter surprise when Rhodan's figure suddenly became visible next to Marshall. They did realize, though, what had happened for the simple reason that they had been waiting on standby because of Perry Rhodan. Who else but Rhodan was capable of becoming invisible at will? The radio officer appeared in the door of the airplane.

"You will start right away!" commanded Perry Rhodan, looking forcefully at the pilot. "You will take us along with you. How much fuel do you have? Enough to fly nonstop across the Pacific?"

The pilot had somehow recovered from his initial shock; he smiled feebly. The radio officer had disappeared into the cabin in the meantime and now he returned with a pistol in his hand.

He aimed at Perry Rhodan. "Who are you?"

"It's Rhodan," replied the pilot. "Put that gun away. It wouldn't do you much good anyhow. After all, what harm would a bullet do to a man who can render himself invisible if he wants to? He is capable of anything! Isn't that so, Mr. Rhodan?" Perry Rhodan confirmed the man's suspicion with a nod. "You haven't answered my question yet."

"You mean the fuel? We have enough to fly you halfway around the globe. Just get on. But hurry up-my colleagues over there are wondering what's wrong. They will be here any moment now."

"He is sincere," Marshall whispered to Rhodan. "He is on your side. Odd, isn't it?"

"How about the others?"

"They don't know what to do." Rhodan turned to the pilot. "Why do you want to help me?"

"You are forcing me to help you. I just feel I must do whatever you ask me to. Hey, Jim! Hey, Hal! Get a move on. All aboard! Let's hurry. You too, Mr. Rhodan. Otherwise those guys will get here before we can take off." Rhodan remained on the alert. Even after the machine was in the air, he remained suspicious. After all, these men were working for the IIA. But so did Captain Klein. And the bomber crew was coming to his assistance now, acting on a voluntary basis rather than under his hypnotic influence. They had gone over to his side, ignoring their original instructions from their superiors.

As the bomber raced westward, out toward the vast stretches of the Pacific Ocean, Rhodan felt something akin to gratitude. He was no longer alone; on the contrary, he had friends among the nations of the world, many friends. And suddenly he was impressed with the certainty that mankind was worthy of reigning over the galactic empire at some future date as partners of the Arkonides.

Captain Klein was in a bad mood.

He stood on a hill and looked toward the south. The huge sphere of the Arkonide spaceship stood out clearly against the bright horizon. The Stardust I, however, looked like a dark dot, tiny and unimpressive. At regular intervals mighty detonations could be heard, exploding against the invisible wall of energy that surrounded the Stardust I base.

Deep below the spot where Klein was standing the ground was vibrating, but he could not feel it. Gigantic drills were biting into the earth and excavating a shaft with frightening speed. Special commando troops were working day and night. Down below in the valley a small hill was building up from the dug out rock and dirt. The underground dynamite explosions were muffled by an intensified barrage aboveground against the energy dome.

There was no possibility at all of warning Rhodan. Numerous secret service agents were entrenched in outposts, waiting and keeping a close watch. The enemy's base had been completely isolated. Nobody could come anywhere near it without being noticed instantly. Way down deep, the shaft had already

crossed the line that would have been the continuation of the energy wall if it had extended its effectiveness below ground. This meant, therefore, that they had penetrated into the fortress. All that was still needed was to change the direction of the underground tunnel. Just straight up. Then they would be inside the energy bell. But the digging did not yet turn upward. The special machines continued boring their path southward and were approaching the point that, according to exact calculations, lay directly underneath the two spaceships. Another two days. Then the excavation of the tunnel would be completed. The hydrogen bomb was already on its way to the Gobi Desert.

Klein heard steps approaching from behind. It was Kosnow.

The Russian's face showed concern. "Rhodan is not inside the base," he said very softly, as if he were afraid someone might overhear their conversation. "Somebody recognized him in Los Angeles while he was negotiating for some machinery. According to the reports I have heard, he is supposed to have escaped in time in a fighter bomber of the IIA."

"Of all things," grinned Klein with amusement. "Then he will most likely turn up here very soon. There will be some fireworks!"

"I don't care, as long as we can warn him in time. He must know what is going on here in the meantime, what they are planning against him. In another two days they will change the direction of the underground shaft, and it will be bored straight up. There will be a tremendous increase in the bombardment against the energy wall to drown out the noise from the underground vibrations. At a depth of approximately 150 feet underneath the spacecraft they'll detonate the H bomb. There won't be much left of Rhodan and his friends."

"There must be a way," Klein reassured him. "Even if it means that I have to get inside the dome myself to warn Perry Rhodan."

"It is absolutely impossible to get through the cordon around the base. You know that they are suspicious of us. They don't trust us at all, And Mercant for sure knows that we deliberately did not carry out our mission to destroy Rhodan and the rest of his group."

"But Mercant doesn't do anything about it. I could almost believe that deep inside he is on Rhodan's side and therefore also on ours. But I can't understand, then, why he permits this attack! I am totally confused."

"He is forced to let them continue with their preparations to wipe out the so-called enemy of all mankind. He cannot yet openly show his true colors. He is just as convinced as we are that Rhodan did the right thing when he refused to surrender the power potential of the Arkonides into the hands of one government alone. But Mercant can't admit this yet. Perhaps someday soon he will be able to tell the truth about his own convictions."

"But what if Rhodan should be annihilated in the meantime?"

"It will never happen, even if I have to sacrifice my own life to prevent it. But the explosion of the bomb is still a long way off."

"And the tunnel has not yet been completed," Confirmed Klein.

With a last glance at the distant spaceships, they turned north and walked down to the valley. Below they could see the Caterpillar tractors transporting the rocks and dirt that had been brought out from the underground shaft on a conveyor belt system. Everywhere there were groups of technicians standing around. Colonel Cretcher was talking with Lieutenant General Tai-tiang.

A man came running across the plain that had been crisscrossed by the innumerable tracks of vehicles and earth digging machinery. The man ran up to the general, saluted and handed him a message. Tai read it, then passed it on to Colonel Cretcher. Without waiting for a reply the general turned and walked briskly over to the next dugout. He disappeared quickly from view. Cretcher remained undecided for a moment, but then he, too, ran toward the trench and soon disappeared under the ground, running toward the entrance of the tunnel.

Kosnow frowned. He was puzzled by their odd behavior. "What was that all about?"

"Let's hurry and run after the messenger. If we can overtake him maybe we'll find out what's happened," suggested Klein. But before they had a chance to catch the man, the alarm sirens began to sound. "There goes the alarm! Something must be wrong."

Just as the messenger was about to disappear into his tent, Klein got hold of his sleeve. "What's going on here?"

"Rhodan!" shouted the man, a Chinese soldier. His English was broken. "He steal airplane..."

"That isn't the reason for the alarm. We have an known this since yesterday."

"He come here, this Rhodan. In five minutes, he be here."

Klein exchanged a glance with Kosnow. That was what all the commotion was about!

They ran off toward the entrance of the, shaft, leaving a most bewildered soldier behind. If the news was correct, then all hell would break loose here within the next five minutes. They would try to prevent Rhodan from reaching the safety of his base at all costs. Or else... Another possible solution flashed through Klein's mind. Maybe they did not intend at all to prevent Rhodan from passing through the protective energy screen that surrounds his base. There were plenty of reasons why they shouldn't But would General Tai be aware of these reasons?"Let's go, Kosnow! To the general! I have just had brainstorm!"Tai looked up surprised as the two entered his command post. He had just established communication with his gun emplacements and was about to issue his orders to them.

"What's the matter? How dare you ... ?"

"Withdraw your orders at once!" requested Klein firmly.

"What do you know about it?"

"Rhodan has stolen an airplane and will be trying to land it just outside the energy dome. You want to prevent him from doing so. Do you realize what might be the consequences if he notices your plan against him? That same moment he will turn around and simply go into hiding somewhere. What good would it do us to detonate a bomb under the base if Rhodan is not inside it and wouldn't be destroyed with it?"Lieutenant General Tai could react very fast, if necessary. He contemplated Klein for a brief second with appreciation; then he nodded. "Not bad, this suggestion. You're right. I will let Rhodan land without any interference and enter his base. He won't get away. He will be caught right in the trap. The big bomb is already on its way. We completed our tunnel construction sooner than planed, I have just learned from Colonel Cretcher. I Will inform the pursuing fighter planes to that effect immediately."With these words he took off toward the communications tent.

Klein and Kosnow, however, climbed up on the hill again so they could witness the imminent landing of Rhodan's plane. They did not have long to wait. A tiny dot appeared on the horizon. It rapidly grew larger and could be recognized as a fighter bomber of the latest design. A few smaller aircraft flew beside it, trying to push it toward the ground. But they did not shoot at the fugitive bomber, to avoid endangering the lives of its crew members.

Rhodan was standing beside the pilot. "You have done a splendid job, very brave indeed. I am very grateful for your help. Perhaps I can return the favor someday. Please land now exactly at the spot that I will point out to you. Nothing will happen to you or your crew—you can swear that I forced you to bring me here. Soon Mr. Marshall and I will be leaving you. It will be just a few steps from the landing site to the energy wall."

"How will we manage to get through that wall?" asked John Marshall from inside the cabin.

"I have some special equipment to neutralize the screen at any spot I choose. In a few seconds we will make it to safety. What matters now is to land before the fighter planes know where we touch down."

The bomber prepared for landing.

"I wonder why we hadn't been met by a welcoming committee of flak fire," said the pilot. The radio operator, with earphones clamped on his head, gave the explanation. "They withdrew their order to open fire on us. No reason was given for it might be that our lives are too precious. They probably want to interrogate us, and dead people don't talk." The wheels touched the ground. The plane seemed to sway, then advanced by a few irregular giant hops and ran into a huge boulder. Rhodan estimated it was about a hundred yards to the energy wall.

The impact threw the pilot against the instrument panel. His features contorted painfully as he instinctively shut off the fuel. The radio operator climbed out from underneath his shattered sets. The two other members of crew were already opening the exit hatch.

"Many thanks again! And lots of luck to you!" called Perry Rhodan as he pulled John Marshall out onto the ground with him. "We must run as fast as we can; otherwise, they might get us before we reach the wall. Stay very close to me now. I'm switching on my special portable screen." They began racing toward the spaceships that stood about three miles from them in the center of the base. Rhodan held tight

to Marshall's hand and pushed a button on his belt. Nothing seemed to have changed around them, except for a sudden cessation of wind. Their small energy bell protected and isolated them completely from the outside world. One of the fighter planes banked in a wide loop and approached the two men, flying very low. Guns blazed from underneath the wings. Four parallel lines of bullets tore into the earth, coming steadily closer to Rhodan and Marshall. John screamed out loud.

Then the firing ceased.

"Don't be afraid, Marshall. They'd need much heavier guns to pierce this protective shell around us." The fighter plane banked to the right, seemed to gain altitude and all of a sudden smashed against an invisible obstacle in midair. The force of the impact was so tremendous that the craft was squashed flat as a pancake. Then it rolled downhill on an invisible slope and finally hit the ground. Flames out of the wrecked airplane, and in a moment the ammunition it had carried exploded and entirely destroyed the fighter.

"Watch out, here comes the energy wall just a few feet ahead of us. Look out now-I'm applying the neutralizer equipment Don't worry, the other fighter planes are too late already. When we're finally safe inside, you can move about freely." Perry Rhodan released his grip on Marshall's hand. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the other fighter planes climb quickly out of danger. They soon disappeared in the south. Next to the fighter bomber they had left a little while ago, the four members of the crew stood and waved farewell. Then the crew of the stolen plane turned and marched off toward the far distant lines of the encircling troops. They knew that they would have to face some rather unpleasant hours being interrogated. "Come on, Marshall. Over there is the Stardust waiting for us. And may I welcome you most cordially to my domain!"

"Thank you very much," replied John Marshall. As Rhodan kept a straight course toward the two spaceships waiting in the middle of the desert, Marshall walked by his side.

They almost tripped over a man who suddenly appeared out of nothingness in front of them. He regarded them with frightened eyes.

Rhodan stopped abruptly.

The flat expanse of sand was devoid of any protective cover...

CHAPTER SIX

The TORPEDO SHAPED machine was eating into the rock with enormous speed. The finely ground stone slid automatically onto the conveyor belt and was carried to the surface. Many cables supplied the needed current for machines and illumination. The air conditioning system worked most efficiently. Colonel Cretcher was standing next to Klein and Li. His face bore an expression of supreme satisfaction.

"What a splendid idea you had, Klein, to convince Tai not to open fire on Rhodan. I won't forget to mention this to Mr. Mercant, rest assured." "He will be pleased about it, I am sure," ventured Klein, smiling inwardly at the hidden double meaning of his remark. Lieutenant Li pointed to the earth excavator. "How much longer?"

"Tomorrow night. The vertical shaft toward the surface is going to be just wide enough to let the H bomb pass through. The day after tomorrow there will be no more Perry Rhodan-and no Arkonides, either."

"The whole world will be able to breathe easier," muttered Klein.

Cretcher glanced at him briefly. "Possibly," he said, then turned his attention once again to the gigantic earth digging machines.

Klein and Li walked back along the tunnel toward the exit. The corridor was about six feet high and well lit. The walls were smooth. The conveyor belt was glided noiselessly on their left on its uninterrupted way to the exit. There was no one in sight.

"We must warn Rhodan, whispered Klein desperately. "Tomorrow will be too late. I can't imagine how he could foil this H bomb detonation, even if he found out about it right now."

"Don't talk so loud," breathed Li. "Sound carries too well here under these conditions. But you are right. I can't figure out any way out either. I feel as if I were about to betray Perry Rhodan. What will happen if their dastardly plan succeeds and Rhodan and his friends are all killed? I can tell you-the day after their death we will witness the renewal of the Cold War and, with it, our constant fear of the inevitable atomic destruction of the world. I don't know how much longer this can go on." Klein stopped suddenly. "Tonight I will try to pass through the lines of the secret front trenches."

The Chinese shook his head. "Even if you should manage to get through the front lines, what would you have accomplished? Do you really believe that Rhodan can keep constant watch along the whole extent of his borders? He won't even notice you standing and waiting to talk to him at the edge of his domain. No, it won't work. We must draw his attention to us in some other way - but if I only knew how!"

"Shush, somebody is coming," whispered Klein. They had heard the steps in time. A man walked toward them, coming from the entrance of the shaft. As they walked past each other, they recognized him as Tako Kakuta, one of the Japanese technicians. His gentle eyes searched theirs; his narrow chest was heaving.

"Hi, Tako. We've almost made it, haven't we?"

"Yes, sir, I believe so," replied the Japanese cautiously, "Is Colonel Cretcher up there ahead?"

"Yes, he is near the excavating machine," confirmed Klein, and continued on his way. Li tried to keep up with him. They had a long way to go before they would arrive at the exit, but they sat down on the conveyor belt as soon as they got too tired. This way they made much better time, too.

They could already see the brightly shining opening of the shaft far ahead of them, when suddenly they became aware of a shadow silhouetted against the daylight. They made it out to be the figure of a man walking toward the exit. Riding on the speedy conveyor belt, they managed to overtake the stranger as he walked past a very bright arc light. Klein's jaw dropped in amazement when he recognized the man. In utter disbelief he turned around, jumped off the belt onto the ground. Li did not react as swiftly as Klein and was carried on by the belt. Klein waited until the walking man came close. It was Tako Kakuta.

The passage was not wide. The Japanese had gone all the way back to talk with Colonel Cretcher about twenty minutes ago. In the meantime Klein and Li had hurried toward the tunnel entrance. And now they had overtaken the Japanese, arriving close to the exit almost simultaneously with them.

That was absolutely impossible!

Klein's thoughts raced, his brain trying feverishly to find a logical explanation for this seemingly impossible feat. Tako kept smiling, his feelings hidden under an impenetrable mask. He spoke almost humbly. "We must somehow have missed each other, Mr. Klein, on our way back."

Klein could not accept this and slowly shook his head. "How did you get here so quickly, Tako? You will have to tell me. I am one of the patrolling security officers here in the tunnel. You can't possibly have passed by us. On the contrary, you should just now have arrived at Colonel Critter's position. Tell me-how did you manage to get here?" The Japanese kept smiling. "I have overtaken you, sir."

"That's a lie, and you know it! We would have noticed you coming by. Let's hear the truth now!" For the first time something like fear appeared in the eyes of the thin Japanese. "You would not believe the truth, even if I told it to you," he said earnestly. "Please forget the Incident. I have nothing more to add."

But I have a lot to tell you," countered Klein, and seized the arm of the Japanese. "Come along-"

His hand suddenly clasped emptiness. The Japanese had vanished. He had dissolved into nothingness or perhaps become invisible. Klein was standing dumbfounded when Li reached him.

"What's the matter, Klein? Where is Tako?" Klein seemed to wake up from a bad dream. "If only I knew! The same way he made his appearance here, the same way he also disappeared again. Either I am suffering from hallucinations or..."

"Or?"

"Or he knows how to render himself invisible to our eyes, Li! But such things don't exist! Nobody can make himself invisible!" Li stared at the smooth wall of rock. "There is some other solution to this phenomenon. I have heard of similar cases where people suddenly vanished and then reappeared at some other place."

"Come on now, Li, we are living in the twentieth century!"

"That's exactly it. It could only have happened in our century. Haven't you ever heard of mutations? Activation of parts of the brain that had been dormant so far? People that have been affected this way have discovered in themselves some talents that had never been encountered before. Tako might be one of those people. I would guess that his specialty is teleportation."

"And what is that suppose to be?"

"It means that Tako is capable of transporting himself to some other place simply by the power of his own will. This sounds like a fairy tale, I know, but it can be accomplished under the right circumstances."

"Under which circumstances?"

Li became very serious.

"Nuclear radiation. Fallout from atom bombs. The children that were born after the detonation of the atom bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the children that were conceived and that grew up in the age of constant H bomb testing, these children have now reached adulthood. Their incipient faculties have developed with increasing maturity. There are mutants now living all over the world. I don't dare imagine what mankind will be like in another fifty years." Klein had grown pale. "You're crazy! There might be some occasional exceptions, nothing more than that. Provided what you say is really the case."

"Not exceptions, Mr. Klein. They will be the norm. And man the way he is today will become the exception at some time in the future. But let's hurry now. We must find Tako and talk to him. We must know if he really is a mutant." And while they were searching for him, Klein found the answer he had been looking for.

If they could bring Tako over to their side, they would have the way out they had been seeking. Tako could warn Rhodan of the impending catastrophe.

"Of course I could have escaped," said Tako humbly. "But this would not have helped me very much. You would have kept on hunting for me, and finally you would have caught up with me. This is why I followed you here. And now you can ask me all you want."

The door was locked. They were alone in the room. Li stood watch outside. Nobody could surprise them here.

"Are you a natural mutant?"

"My parents survived the catastrophe in Hiroshima. Sometime later I was born. My mother died still young as a result of the radiation she had received. My father was crippled. I was the only one to grow up healthy among my brothers and sisters. About a year ago I discovered the special ability that you witnessed today in the tunnel. I tried to develop this ability on my own, but I am convinced that I have not yet reached my full potential. Well, what are you going to do with me now, Mr. Klein?"

"You don't have to be afraid, Tako. How far can you travel this way?"

"Approximately one-third of a mile, not more than that. If I want to travel longer distances I must do it in several steps."

"Only a third of a mile," Klein could not hide his disappointment. "That is not too much. What happens if you materialize in the middle of some solid object and not the air?"

Tako smiled. "That is impossible. Then the next jump follows automatically. I cannot exert too much influence on this process, but I can regulate the first step quite accurately, so that I run hardly any risk in my travels."

Klein breathed deeply before he ventured his next question. "I would like to ask you something, Tako. Do you hate Perry Rhodan, the man we are supposed to annihilate with the H bomb?"

Tako retained his inscrutable smile. "You are an officer and part of the defense system. It is your duty to watch over the security of this special enterprise. If I did not hate Rhodan I could still not tell you so. Don't you agree?"

"You are right. But I did not intend this to be a catch question. I wanted to find out what you really think about Rhodan. Now I am risking my neck when I tell you what my opinion is in this respect. But you see, I have confidence in you. Tako, this enterprise I have to supervise must not succeed! Rhodan must not be killed! Do you understand me, Tako? If Rhodan should be wiped out tomorrow by this H bomb, then similar mushroom clouds will rise over all the continents in the near future. Life on Earth will come to an end. Only the Third Power is capable of preventing this last of all wars. It is difficult to comprehend but it is the logical conclusion from the events that have led up this day.

"Well, now you are informed of my innermost thoughts may I know now what you think?"

Tako's facial expression remained unchanged. "Perry Rhodan has far more friends today than he has hoped for. These friends must remain underground, though, for even the mighty are fearful in the face of the still more powerful. You see, Mr. Klein, your fear is unfounded. But what can an individual do but execute the orders of his society? Is it possible for the isolated person to revolt against those in power?"

"Not the individual, but it is possible for the many isolated people banded together. United, they produce a factor of power that no one can comprehend. And in regard to your question-we can avoid the catastrophe, for now we have you, Tako, on our side."

"How can I be of help?"

"You will approach Rhodan and warn him of the danger. Nobody else can penetrate into their fortress, but I assume that the energy barrier can't hold you back. Am I right?"

"Yes, indeed. I can get through the energy wall unimpeded."

Klein was startled. "How can you be so sure of that?"

"I can get through it. But why should I still hold back with anything? We no longer have anything to

conceal from each other. You wanted to send me to Rhodan to warn him, isn't that so?" Klein nodded.

"Well, I had the same idea you did. I already have warned him, Mr. Klein. I would strongly suggest that you not enter the tunnel after this midnight. That is the deadline Rhodan set when he learned of the planned nuclear attack."

Klein stared at Tako, completely baffled. Then he added with a tone of hope, "You were right, Tako, when you said that Rhodan already has more friends than he dares to hope for."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The man was a Japanese, Rhodan noticed at once. The man bowed deeply and humbly, his face smiling like that of a child.

"Please don't be frightened, Mr. Rhodan. But I have come here to warn you of a great danger."

"How did you get through the energy barrier?" Rhodan asked, recovering from his initial shock. Probably he had only overlooked this young man here in the bright desert sun. "I noticed you so suddenly. You seemed to appear out of nowhere."

"I am capable of teleportation."

John Marshall whispered in Rhodan's ear, "He is a mutant. Just like I am. He can transport himself from one place to the other without any interval of time. He has come from down below there."

"From down below?"

"Yes," replied Tako. "I came from down there. From an underground shaft running below your domain. But . . ." He hesitated and turned to Marshall. "How do you know this?" Marshall stepped closer. "I am a mutant, the same as you are, Tako Kakuta. That's your name, isn't it? You are capable of teleportation, and I can read minds." He stretched out his hand in a friendly gesture. "We are colleagues in a certain way. You have come to help Perry Rhodan." Tako shook the hand held out to him. "Yes, that is why I have come here. He has prevented the atomic war. All mankind should be grateful to him for having saved their lives. But human beings are unfortunately rather stupid."

Rhodan had completely regained his composure. He had found the second mutant. What he had only presumed so far had now been confirmed. This would provide a real basis for his secret plan to gather around him a small group of mutants who would be able to aid and protect him with the help of their superior abilities.

"What is the great danger you came here to warn of, Tako?"

"A special detachment is busy constructing a tunnel that will end 150 feet directly below your spacecraft. Tomorrow they will explode there a hydrogen bomb. I doubt that anything will remain of your

installations unless you take some fast counteraction."

"They'll detonate a bomb directly underneath our base?" Rhodan grew pale for a fraction of a second. Then his brain began to work with lightning speed and comprehended immediately the proper defensive measures. "Thank you, Tako. I think that it is not advisable you to return to the outside. You may stay here with if you wish."

"Gladly. But only later," the Japanese said modestly. "I assume that you are going to defend yourself against the nuclear attack. It is my duty to prevent loss of life among my comrades. May I ask you what you plan to do?"

"I haven't decided yet in detail," admitted Rhodan. "In any case, I won't start with any counteroffensive before tonight. Will that information be enough for you?"

"I will take care that nobody will remain inside the shaft tonight."

Rhodan put his hand on Tako's shoulder and spoke with appreciation. "You display a very humane attitude, my friend."

"Anyone would do that in my position, that is, anyone whose parents lived through an atomic attack. We will meet again very soon. Till then, Perry Rhodan."

The Japanese vanished right in front of their eyes. No trace remained of his presence. In the distance the two men could make out the glittering shapes of the spaceships. Someone was walking toward them, still far away.

"What was he really thinking?" inquired Rhodan.

John Marshall replied with emphasis, "His thoughts his words were exactly the same."

"Good. Then. he spoke the truth. Let's go-here comes Reg."

"Reg?"

"My friend Reginald Bell, second pilot and technician of the moonship Stardust."

They met up with Reginald Bell about half a mile from the centre of the base.

"Glad you're back with us again, Perry. And you brought along a visitor. Introduce us, will you?" But before Rhodan had a chance, John Marshall remarked dryly, "To begin with, I never use any hair oil, my dear Mr. Bell. That's the way my hair is naturally, smooth and slick. Secondly, you are no great beauty either. And finally, it's none of your infernal business how I managed to get into Perry Rhodan's good graces." Bell's red hair stood up like a brush, and his lower jaw dropped. With a helpless expression he stared first at Marshall and then at Perry Rhodan. "For crying out loud!" he said. "That guy knows exactly what I was thinking to myself!"

"Yes, Reg. He can read minds," said Rhodan, who could hardly refrain from laughing. "If I were you I would be more careful in the future; or if you want to have the luxury of your own private thoughts, why don't you surround your brainwave field with a protective barrier, the way we learned during our hypno training? By the way, allow me to introduce you to the first known telepath to develop in a slowly awakening mankind."

"Glad to know you," mumbled Reg, who was still struck with awe at this frightening display of invasion of privacy.

"My pleasure," replied John. "At least you will keep your thoughts nicely fenced in from now on and not embarrass any strangers with your critical silent remarks."

Rhodan interjected abruptly, "Is everything okay here?"

"Everything is fine, boss."

"Good. Let's go. I must have a talk with Khrest at once. It's urgent. They are getting ready to attack us. They plan to blow us all up. Nice, friendly people around here, don't you agree?"

"Real nice of them. But how do they propose to do that?"

"They built a shaft from their lines to a point immediately below our position here,"

"How did you find this out?"

"I can tell you that only later. There's not enough time now." Khrest was waiting for them in front of the space sphere. Eric Manoli was at his side, and Dr. Haggard stood a few paces behind them. In the background Thora was busy supervising a few robots who were building some machinery.

"I am happy to see that you have returned safely," Khrest greeted his first and foremost ally on the planet Earth. "Was your mission successful?"

"Please, Khrest, will you call Thora immediately? We must act at once, otherwise, we shall be lost. The power blocs of the world are collaborating, and that makes them dangerous for us. They failed to penetrate the energy screen, but they have found another way to get at us. They drove a shaft to right underneath this spaceship. Tomorrow they will explode a hydrogen bomb down there."

"You brought a guest with you?" inquired Khrest, without even mentioning the threatening danger. "He is a telepath-I can feel it. That means that mankind has overcome another hurdle toward maturity. Welcome, Mr. Marshall. My brain has the same capacity for telepathy, but I don't make much use of it. What did you say, Perry? A shaft? A bomb? Thora will be pleased to hear that." The irony was not lost on them. Thora's reaction to the news was full of hatred and disdain. "They'll never learn. The time has come to teach them a good lesson that they won't soon forget." The five men sat together with Khrest and Thora in a comfortably furnished cabin of the space sphere. Dusk was falling outside in the desert.

"I strongly warn you against any rash decision." Khrest chided her. "All that is necessary here is to foil their aggressive and destructive plans."

"If I had my way I would exterminate the whole race," replied Thora fiercely.

"This would be not only most unwise but also most dangerous. You, know we can't return to our home planet, Arkon, without help. And who knows whether another intelligent race can be found within a radius of 500 light-years." These sobering words had their intended effect on Thora. She nodded her consent, though reluctantly. "I'll abide by the decision of the majority. What are we going to do?" Rhodan bent forward. "Is there any chance of destroying this tunnel from where we are?"

"Yes. The direction finder has already indicated the position of the tunnel. I will apply the focal ray projector."

"What is that?"

"A special kind of energy. It emanates from the generator and the transformer in the form of harmless waves, and only when it arrives at its intended destination is it changed into a destructive type of energy. That means that from here I can send an energy ray through any matter, without damaging it. But one mile from here, or even 150 feet below the ground, the desired destructive effect will take place. The direction finder indicates the exact location of the tunnel. I focus on this point with the focal ray projector. This will cause the whole shaft to liquefy into molten rock. Will that do, I hope?"

Rhodan smiled gently. "It will certainly do. A great deal can happen before they decide to attack us anew. I hardly believe that they will consider us their deadly enemies for very long. It seems that gradually they learn to look upon us in a different way, to realize that we can offer them a great many advantages. We already have many more sympathizers among mankind than we imagine."

"That would please me greatly," said Khrest with warmth.

Thora interrupted, "When is the action going to take place?"

Rhodan looked at his watch. "Ten hours from now, Thora. There won't be a living soul in the tunnel at that time." She did not look at him. "All right. But rest assured Rhodan, this will be the last time that I will be considerate of the feelings of anyone. The next attack will be answered by a total destruction of your race. It might be wise to inform your people accordingly."

She got up and walked haughtily out of the room without so much as turning around once.

John Marshall interrupted the silence and addressed Rhodan. "Strange . . . she is lying. She is thinking differently from the way she speaks."

A gray dawn was rising far to the east.

The others were fast asleep. Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell sat and waited together in the command centre of the Stardust. Again and again they glanced over at the clock on the wall. How slowly the hands were creeping ahead! Still four more minutes to go until 4 A.M.

Across the road they could see the lights burning in the space sphere. A slender shadow showed itself from time to time behind one of the windows. It was Thora, standing in front of the electronic complex that she had called the focal ray projector. Her hand might at any moment grasp one of the many levers.

"Will she keep her word?" whispered Bell.

"I am sure she will," Rhodan reassured him. Then he continued. "Our Japanese friend must have been able to evacuate the tunnel, otherwise, he would have let us know. He would have requested a further delay. And with the four extra hours we gave them . . . Reg, she is starting!" A green light came from the space sphere. Its glow mingled eerily with the dawn's light. Deep below the surface of the earth, the unleashed atomic forces melted the products of human technology to unrecognizable lumps of metal. The walls of solid rock turned to liquid streams that congealed in bizarre shapes. Layers of loose gravel slid down and evaporated with a hissing noise. Slowly the holocaust advanced toward the entrance of the shaft.

The soldier standing guard near the entrance first noticed a pleasant rise in the temperature of the chilly nocturnal air. Then vapours welled up from the tunnel and filled his nostrils and lungs with their acrid odour. Horrified, he sounded the alarm. A few seconds later the whole camp had come alive. Molten rock oozed out of the tunnel entrance and solidified in big chunks that effectively blocked the entrance. A huge, impenetrable plug had been placed in the steaming opening of the cave.

Klein turned away from the window. "That is the end of that tunnel, Tako. You rendered a tremendous service to us and to all mankind when you warned Rhodan. Also when I you made sure that nobody had remained in the shaft tonight."

"It was not easy to convince Colonel Cretcher that there was radioactivity inside the tunnel. Fortunately, I managed to hunt up a few ounces of uranium and place it inside the shaft."

Li and Kosnow got up and shook hands with the Japanese to thank him for his deed.

"You will say hello to Perry Rhodan from us?" Klein asked. "Tell him that he can always count on us. And don't forget to mention that we are impatiently waiting for the day when we can join him officially."

"I will give him your regards, don't worry," promised Tako. "There will be many opportunities for us to show him our loyalty. Good-bye for now..." A second later the three men were left alone.

And Tako materialized inside the command centre of the Stardust.

Reg was standing with his back against the window, yawning loudly. "It's probably all over by now," he groaned. "I'm dead tired. I'm going to bed." Suddenly a human figure appeared out of thin air about three feet in front of him. The man bowed slightly and said to Rhodan, "I have completed my mission, Mr. Rhodan. Now I am coming to offer my services to you."

Despite his swiftly reacting brain, Reg's surprise was stronger than his logical mind. Although Rhodan had told him that Tako was a teleporter, this sudden apparition from nowhere startled him. First someone read his thoughts, and now this! He stood motionless and stared at the Japanese. "Snap your trap, Reg, or you might swallow Tako!" Rhodan said. He turned to the Japanese. "I accept your offer, Tako. Your forces and Marshall's combined represent a tremendous force. I know that we will be successful."

"If I had not shared this belief I would not have joined you," declared the Japanese, pride shining in his eyes.

Reg finally closed his mouth. He half shut his eyes and cautiously stretched out his hands. Then he placed them on Tako's shoulders. "He is for real!"

"Of course he is," smiled Rhodan. "Or did you think was a ghost?"

"Can he do that trick any time and any place he wants to go?"

"Yes, indeed."

A sparkle appeared in Bell's eyes. "Even to the space sphere of the Arkonides?"

"And why not?"

Reg grinned hugely. "Tako, could you please check if Thora has already completed her counterattack against the enemy? It's okay, Perry, isn't it? There is nothing wrong with that?" Perry Rhodan frowned slightly. "We would save ourselves a trip over there. What do you think, Tako-can you do that for us?"

The Japanese peered through the hatch toward the space sphere. There were still some lights burning here and there.

"All right." Before Reg could say a word, Tako had vanished.

A few seconds passed, and then Bell remarked, "I hope she gets a good scare, when suddenly somebody-"

But he himself was on the receiving end, for he was thoroughly frightened when Tako reappeared the same instant. An apologetic smile played around his lips.

"I am sorry but I could not talk to Thora. She was just getting ready to retire."

Now it was Rhodan's turn to smile in amusement "And ... ?"

"Yes, and . . . ?" Bell asked with a triumphant grin. "Did she get good and scared?"

"She did not even notice me. I materialized directly in back of her. She was just removing her garment."

"Her garment?" Reg opened his eyes wide in delight. A radiant expression covered his face, and he put both hands on Tako's shoulders. "We have become good friends, Tako, haven't we? And we will be closer friends still. Is that all right with you?"

"Of course," stammered the Japanese in consternation. "Why do you ask me that?"

Reg whispered in Tako's ear, "You must teach me teleportation-you simply must." And he led a nonplused Tako out of the command centre to show him to his quarters.

Perry Rhodan watched them leave the room. He smiled in amusement. Then, before he retired, he looked once again out into the desert.

The desert stretched before him, empty and peaceful.

The starry sky of night began to change colour. It became a deep red. A new day was beginning. What would it have in store for them?

THE END

