

Major Perry Rhodan, commander of the spaceship STARDUST, found more than anyone had expected might exist on the moon — for he became the first man to make contact with another sentient race!

The Arkonides had come from a distant star, and they possessed a knowledge of science and philosophy that dwarfed mankind's knowledge.

But these enormously powerful alien beings refused to co-operate with the people of Earth... unless Perry Rhodan could pass the most difficult test any human being had ever faced...

CHAPTER ONE

The silence was deceptive.

The mirrorlike surface of the Koshun salt lake in northern China was unbroken by movement. Still as death, the lake lay sprawled across the wide desert. Not the slightest breeze could be felt, and the atmosphere was oppressively hot and dry. The glimmering air was buoyed above the heated stones and lost itself in the blue of a cloudless sky. Far away on the horizon rose a ridge of low mountains, from which had come the river that fed the salt lake.

The river was the only thing that stirred in this part of the Gobi Desert. Heavy and sluggish the river flowed, neither wide nor deep but never becoming completely dry.

Vegetation could not have grown on this stony ground, and animal life would not have found food amongst the flat rocks. Nothing was alive; yet the silence was deceptive.

A slender structure of glittering silver stood close beside the banks of the river. It did not fit into the picture of this lonely wilderness, for it was an interplanetary craft more than ninety feet long whose aerodynamically designed hull and delta wings were in stark contrast to an environment so inimical to human life.

The *Stardust*, the first terrestrial spaceship ever to land on the moon, had returned to Earth and landed in the Gobi Desert. The whole world already knew this, but only a few would begin to suspect that it had been not an emergency landing but an intentional manoeuvre.

In the hull of the vehicle, a rectangular opening appeared. A man came into view in the opening. His gaze swept along the river, across to the mountains and then to the lake, where it remained. Captain Reginald Bell, test pilot for the U.S. Space Explorations Command and engineer of the *Stardust*, drew in the air with eager breath, although it was anything but refreshing. The captain was short and heavysset. He wore the tightfitting blue uniform of the newly created Space Navy and held his cap under his right arm.

His eyes, which seemed almost devoid of colour, bore a faint glimmer of hope as he turned and called into the interior of the spaceship. "You think it's possible to take a bath in that puddle over there?"

Someone emerged from the dark corridor and stepped up beside Reg. He wore the same uniform but without epaulets. He seemed to be about thirty-five years old, tall and lean, and above a face with hard grey blue eyes there fell short blond hair. This was Major Perry Rhodan, commander of the *Stardust* and leader of the first lunar expedition.

"Of course it's possible," he said in answer to Reg's question, "but the water is warm and hardly inviting. Besides, it's far too salty for my taste."

"Oh, I always liked highly seasoned food," declared Reg in a very serious tone. "I could even drink the whole lake, if necessary."

"You'd really be in for a surprise. The waters of the Atlantic would taste like sickening sweet lemonade compared with that over there."

Reg squinted up at the sun, which was nearly at its zenith. "I hope I'll have a chance to find out, because they won't be leaving us in peace much longer. I hope Khrest has thought of something in the meantime."

Khrest was the scientific leader of an extraterrestrial expedition that had had to crashland on the moon. His race, which had been master of a large part of the Milky Way for many thousands of years, had degenerated through the centuries. Now he and his people were suffering from leukaemia. His blood had begun to deteriorate. He was hopelessly lost if the human race would not choose to help him. Therefore, he had agreed to come to Earth with the *Stardust*; but so far no one had any idea of the great secret that had accompanied the spaceship back to Earth.

"The protective umbrella will be sufficient for the time being. Khrest has assured me that nothing can penetrate it, not even a hydrogen bomb. One twist of a lever and we'll lie under a transparent dome of energy against which our whole world could rage in vain."

"That sets my mind at ease." Reg nodded. "The Chinese won't keep us waiting very long, before they arrive. They probably think that we fell into their big sandbox here just by accident and that we're only waiting to be picked up by them. Wouldn't they give their eye teeth to get hold of the *Stardust* !"

"And their right arms as well, if they only knew what kind of passenger we have with us," Perry assured him. "I only know from some hints what powerful means the Arkonides possess, but it's already quite clear to me that Khrest all by himself is capable of keeping the world at bay. In any event, you can rest assured that pretty soon a lot of people will be very annoyed with us."

A shadow darted across Reg's broad face. "I'm afraid our own people will be among them. Couldn't we explain to them, at least, why we didn't return to Nevada Fields?"

Perry shook his head. "Don't you know General Pounder by now? Don't you think he, to say nothing of the national security and international defence people would be most interested in our extraterrestrial guest? And don't forget Mercant..."

Allan D. Mercant, Secretary of the NATO Division of International Defence, had only the higher Commands of NATO above him. Additionally, Mercant was head of the special department known by the official designation of International Intelligence Agency. There was no country that did not

unknowingly play host to some of Mercant's agents.

Reg sighed deeply. "I can understand Fletch wanting to return home. At heart he probably understands that you've done what's right, but he can't help thinking of his young wife and the baby she's expecting. I really don't know if we can keep him here for any length of time."

"He can leave if he wants to," Perry said, to Reg's surprise.

Reg gulped. "Leave? Where to?" With his short, stubby fingers he pointed toward the desert. "To go *there*? Do you *want* him to get lost in that desert?"

"It won't be lonely here very much longer." Perry glanced at his watch. "I'm only surprised that no reconnaissance plane has shown up before now."

He nodded briefly toward Reg and returned to the interior of the craft. In the rather crowded mess hall, Dr. Eric Manoli, the ship's physician, was tending to Khrest, who lay stretched out on a narrow bunk. Clark G. Fletcher stood at the hatch and, his lips tightly pressed together, looked out into the desert.

"Well," said Perry, as Manoli looked up, "how is he getting along?"

Khrest answered before the physician could reply. "I am well, thank you, Mr. Rhodan. I feel a bit weak, but that is all. The air of your planet does me a great deal of good. Do you really believe you can help me?"

Dr. Manoli began to discuss Khrest's condition. "Leukaemia is a disproportionate increase in the number of white blood cells. The oxygen carrying red blood cells are consequently pushed out of the way. One suffocates, so to speak, even though he may breathe fully throughout his lungs—for what good are lungs filled with oxygen when there are no red blood corpuscles to transport the oxygen to the organs that require it? At first, fatigue manifests itself. The sick man becomes progressively weaker. The physical deterioration is followed by a gradual wasting away of the mind. Just recently has a means to conquer leukaemia been discovered. It was an Australian research scientist who developed the antileukaemia serum."

"Of course we'll be able to help you, Khrest," Perry concluded. "But we can do this only if there is mutual trust. I am interested in your invention, in your technical advancement and let's be honest, your weaponry. In exchange for this information, I can offer you recovery and complete regeneration. It's a business proposition, if you like."

"Your honesty is refreshing. Thus did our race behave some thousand years ago; but nowadays too many of us are weary of such forthrightness. I almost believe we could learn something from you."

Perry thought of the Arkonides who, far away on the surface of the moon, reclined on their couches and sought to while away the hours by watching three dimensional abstract images on screens with six planes. By this occupation they convinced themselves that they did not suffer from boredom. Their emotional inertia did not permit them even to attempt a repair of their gigantic spacecraft. Many millennia of computerized government and untiring robot servants had made the Arkonides aesthetes whose only *raison d'être* was to lie on their backs and dream with open eyes.

"A renewal of blood is known to us also as the best precaution against degeneration and genetic decay," the major said.

Khrest sat up on the bunk. He leaned his back against the wall and one could see that he was at least a head taller than Perry. Externally, he seemed to differ but little from a human being. His only extraordinary features were his almost white hair, albinoid eyes, and unusually high forehead. Invisible to the naked eye, an extra brain, unknown in any earthly creature, was situated atop the normal mantle of the cortex. This hypercranium possessed a photographic memory and an intricately developed memory bank. That Khrest had a protective breastplate instead of ribs surrounding his heart and lungs was also unknown to any of the four crewmen. Khrest, for all his unique anatomy, was the last descendant of the ruling dynasty of Arkon, home planet of his race. Being a scientist, he interpreted Perry's remark concerning a "renewal of blood" perhaps too literally.

"Of course, such an intermixture of blood would show positive results. But fraternization with the members of a primitive..." He paused, then tactfully rephrased his statement. "...not yet completely developed race would stand in defiance of our law."

"I have no intention of marrying Thora." Perry smiled a bit dryly. Reg, who had just entered the doorway, broke out unabashedly into a bleat of laughter that seemed incongruous coming from his bulky body. Manoli carefully took his patient's pulse. Fletcher showed no reaction.

For a fleeting moment Perry felt himself transported back to the immense spherical spacecraft of the Arkonides on the moon. In his mind he saw Thora, commanding officer of the expedition whose task was to search for the planet of eternal life. She was a tall and singularly beautiful woman with light, almost white blond hair and large eyes glowing golden red.

A woman? Perhaps, fudging by her outer appearance; but that was all. In reality, she was a creature cold and calculating, with crystal clear reasoning ability and the highest intellect. Her attitude toward "the lower forms of life," *Homo sapiens* among them, was ruled by an incredible prejudice. Only her logical mind had permitted her to conclude a compromise with Rhodan. She knew that no other alternative had remained, unless she wanted to spend the rest of her life on the moon.

Khrest slowly shook his head. "I admire your imagination; yet I believe we should abandon these useless words and think rather of what should be done. You promised me help."

"And you shall get help," Perry assured him. He turned to face Reg. "Forget about that bath. Take care of the news first, try to tune in to the most important broadcasts. We must know what's happening in the world now."

"Nobody's going to inform us officially if they plan an action against us. I'd rather speak directly to Pounder."

"Nothing but silence at the beginning, Reg. Let them rack their brains for the reason we don't answer. I must get them good and ready for what I intend to do."

Perry paid no further attention to him. He knew Reg, and he knew he could depend on him. "Eric, you take care of Khrest and do nothing else but that. Fletch, I'd appreciate it if you could get us some food. Later on we probably won't have time for that. Meanwhile, I'll worry about the strategic end of things. What kind of weapons has Thora sent along, Khrest?"

The Arkonide was still sitting on the bunk, his hands folded in his lap. "To begin with, the force field, which should be the most important. It serves only for defence, but it should not fail to leave a certain impression on potential aggressors. Further, we have three hand weapons called psychoradiators. Their strength can be regulated. At maximum intensity they can paralyse a human being at a distance of up to

one and a third miles, but they can never kill; at lesser intensity the victim's conscious awareness is so weakened that it will be quite easy, even for you, to dominate him. Moreover, one may give posthypnotic commands, which must be carried out at all costs, even when the person affected no longer remains within the radius of these psychorays. Connected with these is an artificially induced amnesia. He is simply unable to remember a thing."

"That seems like it might be useful." Perry nodded. "What else have we got?"

"Only the broadcasting set, with which we can reach Thora at any time. You are probably aware that these special waves will penetrate even there mass of the moon. That is necessary because our ship is on the other side of your satellite."

"Hmm," Perry muttered pensively. Khrest understood.

"Do not worry. The energy vault and the psychoradiator will do for the time being. In the event of further difficulty, Thora will intervene."

"What about the G force neutralizer, the thing you brought along to nullify the interior effects of our acceleration when we were blasting off in the *Stardust*?"

"I almost forgot about it. It cannot really be considered a weapon. Its range is enormous, more than six miles, straight ahead as well as in a circle. You may free an expanse of about six miles in length or a circle of twelve miles in diameter from the Earth's gravity. The neutralizer is at the centre of the circle, in our case, the *Stardust*."

"Excellent," said Perry. "That should be quite enough." He went to the door.

Clark G. Fletcher, the podgy faced giant with the gentle touch, turned away from viewing the desert and stared defiantly at Perry. But when his glance met the steel hard gaze of his commanding officer, he nodded hesitatingly.

"Okay, Perry, we'll talk of other things later on."

Reg caught Perry at the exit hatch. "There's some interference with our radio reception. Perry, I can't pick up the United States. There must be some extremely powerful broadcasting station very near us. This guy speaks English with an accent and says we shouldn't do anything, since the rescue action is already underway."

"Rescue action!" Perry exclaimed. "What a pleasant expression for what the Chinese no doubt have in mind for us. Tell them that we don't need any help."

Reg did not reply. He looked past Perry. Far away, beyond the river, close to the chain of mountains, a cloud of dust rose slowly toward the sky and settled over the desert like a slightly duty blanket. What seemed to be tiny dots were approaching the salt lake.

Perry followed the direction of his friend's gaze.

"Ha! Here we are. Here they come; there's a helicopter."

The slender body of the helicopter was shining brand new in the bright sunlight, its whirring rotors hardly distinguishable from the naval vibration of the heated air. The sand below the helicopter was whirled up

by its descent as it landed about 300 feet from the *Stardust* .

"Reg, you will remain here. Take one of the hand radiators and wait until I give you a signal. Maximum intensity. I'm going out to meet them."

"But...!"

"No buts. They want us alive. There's no danger."

Reg disappeared, returning some five seconds later. In his hand he clutched a silvery rod with a multifaceted lens at one end. A small red button on its side could be moved up and down a slide or pushed in wherever needed.

Perry nodded briefly and descended the ladder, walking toward the helicopter's landing site. Two men in the uniform of the army of the Asiatic Federation had disembarked from the vehicle. They studied him curiously as he approached.

The pilot of the helicopter remained in the cabin, his hands nervously clasping the stock of a heavy machine gun.

Perry smiled as though he were feeling sorry for them. Wouldn't they be surprised!

The two officers came forward. They spoke English with hardly any trace of accent. "We are so pleased that you made a safe landing!" said one of the officers, the one with the gold bars. "I am Marshal Roon, commander in chief of the land based forces of our People's Republic, and this is Major Buta'an."

"Perry Rhodan," said Perry, inclining his head slightly "What brings you here, if I may ask?"

Both officers were so nonplussed that they were incapable of uttering a single sound. They exchanged hasty glances and eyed the space pilot who they thought was in need of help. Perry smiled obligingly "It's very nice of you to try to help us, but it's really quite useless. I'd give the same answer to an officer of the American or the Soviet army, if that puts your mind at ease."

"I don't quite understand what you mean," Roon admitted, smoothing out the wrinkles that had accumulated in his trousers from sitting so long in the helicopter. "You made an emergency landing, did you not? You need our help. Or can you start under your own power?"

"And if that were the case?"

"Inasmuch as you have already trespassed on our territory, we would have to forbid that."

Perry smiled. "Well, now you're getting to the heart of the matter. You're really less concerned with helping us than with claiming us for salvage. Very well thought out. But We have not landed here to become your prisoners."

Roon felt ready to lose his temper, but a warning glance from the major was sufficient to calm him, and he regained his composure at once. The major seemed to have some strange influence over the leader of the army.

"Who said anything of the Sort, that we might wish to limit your freedom of movement? But of course, we will have to examine your rocket, to make certain no photographs were taken over Asiatic

Federation territory."

"We have even photographed the whole Earth from the moon. Do you want to forbid that, too? Didn't *your* moon rocket take any pictures?"

The two shared a quick glance.

"Our moon rocket was destroyed shortly after take-off, through sabotage. Or haven't you heard?"

Perry was honestly shaken. He had always considered the conquest of space to be the task of mankind as a whole. He knew that the barriers between nations would fall only when there far greater barriers of space forced them to. For him there existed no differences of race and nationality; for him there were only human beings, Earthmen. Even to his enemy, if he had one, he would not have begrudged a successful flight to the moon. Thus it was a heartfelt sentiment when, on impulse, he stepped toward the marshal and offered his hand.

"I'm very sorry, but I had no idea. Saboteurs?"

Roon overlooked the hand extended to him. "It can't be explained any other way. Our most capable scientists made an inspection of the rocket before takeoff and could find nothing *wrong* with it. Yet at an altitude of about sixty miles, the ship disintegrated completely."

"There are a thousand possible causes for such a failure," stated Perry, and slowly let his hand drop. "You have no evidence of sabotage."

"A hireling of the Western Bloc had concealed himself on board the ship and tampered with the reactor."

"Rubbish," Perry said sharply. "You can't excuse your own failure with such rationalization." He was quite annoyed with the insulting suspicions of the Asiatics. He noted that Roon was not Chinese but had possibly come from India or Indonesia. "No one from our side would have the least interest in preventing your flight to the moon; but there's no sense in talking about it any more. What do you want from us?"

For the first time the major addressed Perry. "Did you land here voluntarily?" he wanted to know.

The question was directly to the point. Perry decided to answer in the same straightforward fashion. "Yes. We could just as well have landed in the Sahara or in the United States."

"And what made you land here, of all places?"

"We have our reasons. In the future, I must ask you to regard this domain as the frontier of a neutral power, even though it is situated in your sovereign territory. You don't need the desert; therefore, this won't cause you any economic inconveniences. We assure you that we shall respect your borders and make no intervention in your internal affairs. We shall even undertake direct negotiations with your government, if necessary. As for you, Marshal Roon, I'd like to recommend the recall of those troops already on their way here to seize an American moon rocket as a booty. Is that clear?"

Major Buta'an had stepped back, his right hand on the stock of his pistol. His lips were firmly drawn together. Something was flickering in his eyes.

Marshal Roon, on the other hand, was much more in control of himself. He smiled with disarming courtesy. "You are joking, Mr. Rhodan! It is our lawful right to inspect any and all aircraft that land in our

territory. In case there should be no cause for suspicion, we will release it as soon as possible. That so-called neutral power I will overlook as a bad joke."

"That's up to you. I've given you fair warning. And now, goodbye. I'm sure we'll be running into each other again, on some other occasion."

"Just a moment." Major Buta'an had raised his weapon and aimed it at Perry. It was a large calibre pistol that used high explosive shells, a bit old-fashioned, but still effective, especially at such short range.

Perry folded his arms over his chest. He could sense how, at about eighty yards behind him, Reg was itching to try out the ray gun. He would surely have done so long before now, had Perry not remained in the direct line of fire.

"Yes?"

"You are a spy, Mr. Rhodan. Your moonship is nothing but an outpost for the Americans, who landed you here on purpose. A military base, if you wish. At first we hoped that we could be lenient with you, because we believed you were in difficulty. But we have seen through you. We know what your designs are, and we shall..."

"Don't make any promises you won't be able to keep," Perry warned. "The Americans are just as surprised as you are that we landed in this place. They're just as ignorant of our intentions. We would send them off, just the same, *if they* tried to approach us. Is that finally clear? All right, then. Permit me to return to the rocket. I'll tell you once again, Marshal, withdraw your troops. Otherwise, I cannot be held responsible for anything that might happen."

He nodded briefly to both officers, casting a glance of warning at the pilot with the machine gun. He turned and walked slowly back to the *Stardust*, where Reg was standing in the hatch, the silver rod playing undecidedly in his hands. One could almost feel Reg's relief when his commanding officer stepped out of the line of fire.

"Shouldn't we get them?" he called to Perry. "The one with the golden trousers is certainly a general. I'd implant the suggestion that he is a doorman in a circus and then send him back. Wouldn't that be fun?"

Perry had reached the bottom of the ladder. He turned around.

Marshal Roon and Major Buta'an (Perry could have bet that the major belonged to the counterespionage authority) both stood quiet, waiting and indecisive. Buta'an still held the weapon in his hand.

"I've nothing against some fun," Perry admitted, when he stood next to Reg in the hatch. "Go get the neutralizer."

Reg disappeared at once and seconds later reappeared with a small rectangular metal box that looked so unobtrusive but could nevertheless work wonders. This box must have a tremendous capacity for storing large amounts of energy in a very small space. Gravity neutralizer, Khrest had called it. What was hidden in this single phrase? The dream of many generations.

Perry set up the apparatus and slowly pulled forward the lever that activated the directional ray.

On the desert, Major Buta'an hesitantly thrust his weapon back into the holster on his belt. "Marshal, how can you permit a spy to give us orders? I consider this irresponsible! I shall have to inform my superiors of your conduct."

"Go right ahead," Roon agreed. He looked with half closed eyes toward the *Stardust*. "I believe I have acted correctly. There may be more to this affair than either of us imagines. You think that this landed spacecraft is a camouflaged act of aggression by the peoples of the Western Bloc? The installation of an official military base, is that what you want to believe? Not a bad idea. It might even be true. But we just don't know for sure. Perhaps this Rhodan is not so crazy as he seems. Sometimes I wonder if they haven't found something extraordinary on the moon, something that gives them a great deal of power."

He stopped short. Something was not quite right. Suddenly he felt light and giddy, as if he had been drinking too much, drinking far too much. The bad thing, however, was that he seemed to be losing his balance in the same instant. It was as though he grew taller and taller and was still growing far beyond proportion.

Dammit, if only the major would notice.

But Buta'an was too occupied by his own troubles to... watch out for the marshal. A careless movement had made him lose the ground beneath his feet. He was rising slowly upward like a balloon, upward toward the expanse of blue sky. At the same time, he was turning over like a trampoline jumper in slow motion.

Roon had not budged. He stood as before on the hot sands of the Gobi, mouth agape, looking up at Buta'an who cursed, stuttered, and implored his ancestors for help. But apparently neither oath nor ancestor could help; he kept ascending.

"Pilot!" screamed the marshal suddenly, and abruptly turned around.

If only he hadn't done that! His rotating motion could not be arrested, and in a spiral-like movement Roon was lifted skyward, following the chief agent of the Asiatic Federation Security Service.

By now the pilot could stand it no longer. He held fast to the back of his seat, as was customary, until he reached the narrow exit. For a long moment, mouth and eyes wide-open, he gazed up toward both his superiors as they floated by near him, rising ever upward. Then he hastily whipped out his machine gun.

His first shot swept him out of the cabin. The helicopter recoiled sideways a few inches above the ground. Involuntarily, the barrel of his weapon dropped down, but the startled pilot had depressed the lever for continuous firing. Like a rocket, his speed increasing with every shot, he sped into the cloudless desert sky. Even when the magazine of his gun had been emptied, he still continued his ascent.

It was an incredible, eerie picture, and in broad daylight. Three men were floating through the air, and a helicopter hovered obliquely and hardly balanced between the rocks like a ship stranded in the current on the ocean floor.

Perry looked up into Reg's radiant face. "Well, what do you think of that?"

"Just great! A unique circus act. This general or marshal fellow hangs so well up there in the air. They're scared stiff, I bet. But now what? You aren't going to let those guys starve up there, are you?"

Perry slapped his palm to his forehead. "No, not that! Tell me, can you fly a helicopter?"

Reg nodded, quite surprised. "Of course. Why?"

"Later. Now we'll let those 3 kites land, very gently. That's the way. Push the lever back a little. Half a G; that should do it... No, I'm afraid they are falling too fast. A quarter gravity, so they'll get at least a few bruises as souvenirs and won't believe it was nothing but a dream. Yes, that's fine!"

In the meantime, Marshal Roon had reached the ground again. Completely beside himself, he looked all around in hopes of discovering the invisible giant who had lifted him up. Buta'an landed a bit less gently on a rock, some thirty feet to one side. His painful expression told everything. The pilot was in danger of falling farthest. Fortunately, he had drifted over far enough so that now he fell head over heels into the river; and because he was under only a quarter of Earth's gravity, he was swimming about like a cork, which undoubtedly contributed to his confusion. He had dropped his machine gun quite some time ago.

Perry shouted as loud as he could. "Marshall Roon, can you hear me?"

The marshal raised his fist and shook it menacingly. "You'll pay bitterly for that! What on Earth was that, some form of antigravity?"

"For a general, that's pretty smart," Reg roared in high spirit, and slapped his thighs. He seemed highly amused by the whole affair.

"Unless you order your troops to turn around, you're in store for quite a lot of such surprises," Perry said. "In our arsenal are weapons beyond even your wildest dreams."

Perhaps he should have kept silent, but he wanted to ensure that the others would behave more cautiously.

His revelation, however, achieved just the opposite effect, "Weapons, that's it," mumbled Roon, glancing quickly toward the younger chief of security. His glance said, now we see how much your office and your information are worth! Nothing whatsoever! I don't know a thing about new American weapons capable of nullifying gravity.

"Well what is it?" Reg bellowed gesticulating wildly. "Has this little trip through the air left you speechless?"

Roon said something to the pilot, who had reached the shore and rejoined the two. Perry had pushed the lever of the neutralizer completely back, and normal gravity was restored.

"Just a moment," Perry called out in warning when he saw the pilot move toward the helicopter. "The aircraft remains here. It landed without permission on the territory of our newly proclaimed power. The helicopter is hereby confiscated."

The marshal turned red. This was visible even at such a distance.

"Looks good on him," commented Reg. "I particularly like the contrast with his gold uniform."

"How dare you!" roared Roon, quite beside himself. "I'll..."

He did not say what he would do. Major Buta'an whispered something to him.

"You'll be hearing from me," Roon added quickly. He then turned, signalled the major and the pilot over to him and marched off toward the distant mountains.

Meanwhile, the cloud of dust had come much closer.

Perry breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, that was our first encounter with the Asiatic Federation. I'm not so eagerly anticipating the second. I'm afraid we'll have to switch on our force field. Since its radius of activity is about a mile and a quarter, the river, part of the lakeshore, and the helicopter are included. Well, that will be our new territory. The smallest domain on Earth but also the most powerful."

"And what do you intend to do with the helicopter?"

"Silly question! We have to get away from here somehow, don't we, in order to get spare parts and the drugs for Khrest? Or had you intended walking through the Gobi Desert?"

Reg's face lost much of its healthy glow. "*Me?* How come me? *Must I?*"

Perry nodded deliberately. "One of us will have to, so why not you? I can't rely on anyone as much as I can on you."

Reg's hair, which had seemed at this point to be standing on end, returned to its unruffled state. He made a grand gesture that seemed to embrace everything. "Hmm. Yes, of course. Your right, as always. When is this to be?"

"As soon as the world has calmed down," Perry replied. He took the neutralizer and returned inside the *Stardust*.

Reg followed slowly. With an expert glance he studied the helicopter, which lay askew, put the psychoradiator in his pocket with a regretful shrug of his shoulders, and closed the hatch.

In the command centre they met Fletcher, who said, "Dinner is ready. What happened?"

Perry explained everything to him in a few words.

"And do you believe you can be successful? I've told you already that I'm not going along with it. I want to go home. I want to see my wife again. In three months she'll be having a baby."

"Everything will be finished by then, Fletch. You've got to be reasonable. Look here, we've known each other quite a long time. I'm certainly not doing anything without reason, and I'll explain to you once more just why we had to land *here* and not in Nevada Fields."

"You can't convince me."

"The peace on Earth we have for the time being is wholly illusory. With the least provocation, every deadly missile in our automated arsenals fire in all directions and completely destroy our world. Should this state of affairs endure forever, now that we have the chance to intervene and bring about changes? The Western Bloc and the Asiatic Federation oppose one another. The Eastern Bloc, with Moscow, plays only a subordinate role since the Chinese have risen to become the greater power. We are now in a position where we can tip the scales; we are now standing between both giants, and we are backed by the incredible technology of the Arkonides. The might of the Arkonides in the hands of one nation would

mean the end of all freedom, even if that one nation were the United States. You will come to understand."

"Do you realise that you are a traitor?"

A poignant expression played across Perry's face. "Many call me that, because they not understand. But I am not a traitor. I am simply no longer American, but a Terran. Do you understand that, at least?"

"Perhaps. But is that all of it?" Fletcher swallowed hard. "You could just as easily have landed in Nevada Fields."

"Not at all. We will be forced to defend ourselves here as well as there, and I'd much rather fight the Asiatics than our own people. No, I could become soft, someone could persuade me... That could never happen here, because I know what's in store for me if I should give in. Khrest means unlimited power, Fletch. It is hands, and therefore in ours, to prevent the outbreak of war. If the great powers recognise that they are threatened by a might greater than their own, they will quickly forget their own conflicts. This might even lead to a unification, to one accord."

"That's a Utopia, nothing more."

"Let's wait and see for ourselves. There's a grain of truth in the modern myth in which the flying saucers arrive and bring peace to the world. Khrest is helping us only because we have assured a cure and personal freedom. He would not have that freedom if we surrender, no matter to whom, because the others would then feel threatened, and quite justifiably so. This would eventually unleash the last of all wars. But *now* they will be careful."

Fletcher made a weary gesture. "You'll let me go if I wish?"

"Reg will take you along when he leaves to get the medicine and the spare parts. The helicopter is waiting outside."

That was all, for the moment.

With a twist of the lever Perry activated the force field. The *Stardust* was now surrounded by an invisible but impenetrable bell one and one-quarter miles high and extending just as far in all directions. From an aerial perspective, one would see, far below in the desert beside the lake, nothing but a small wreck incapable of flight.

In reality, however, the spacecraft was the germ cell of a new dominion whose boundaries, though presently no more than 9.4 miles in circumference, would one day be measured in thousands of light-years.

CHAPTER TWO

The mere sight of General Pounder reminded one of a bulldozer. His square build bespoke incredible energy and strength of will. As head of the United States Space Explorations Command, he was known

to fear nothing, and his courage was undaunted neither by Washington nor the Pentagon. He was in equal measure feared and loved by all his staff, for they knew they could go to him with their problems at any time. Nevertheless, his biting humour so rarely came to the surface that some fools were convinced the general would one day be devoured by his own acid.

Now he sat in the office of his headquarters, behind an immense desk almost completely covered with all manner of communications devices. In between were heaps of official documents and dossiers. Across from him sat a man of almost insignificant appearance.

The other man was the complete opposite of General Pounder. A spare, thin wreath of blond hair encircled his mirrorlike bald dome, and white hair at his temples lent him a peaceful appearance. Despite the few remaining hairs and the temples of grey, this man appeared incredibly young and as harmless as he seemed youthful. In his eyes shone a mild and tolerant light.

And yet, Allan D. Mercant was anything but mild, anything but tolerant, when there arose any question of his duties as International Defence Secretary for the whole of the Western Bloc. One could hardly imagine a more obstinate and unwavering sentinel.

"You have a great deal of confidence in Major Rhodan and his men," Mercant said gently, then pointed to the map of the world that covered one wall of the room. "The *Stardust* landed in the Gobi Desert, and you still believe it to be pure chance?"

"The ship gave the international signal of distress before transmission ended. Its power must have failed."

"And why didn't Rhodan land with the help of remote control, which surely would have brought his rocket into the Nevada Fields landing area? Why did he assume command himself? Will you explain that to me?"

General Pounder shook his head helplessly. "This is exactly what I can't do; but it is still no justification for making prisoners of myself and all my staff. You've surrounded all of Nevada Fields with your people."

"Just a precautionary measure, nothing more," said Mercant, smiling calmly. "There is an old saying, if you expect the worst, you won't be disappointed."

"Let us suppose that Rhodan made the decision himself to land in the Gobi Desert and therefore has very definite plans," Pounder said.

"I'll gladly believe that," Mercant remarked with sarcasm.

"A plan or an intention that is in no respect directed against us," the general continued. "If you're suggesting, perhaps, that he wants to hand over the *Stardust* to the Asiatics, you are entirely mistaken."

"And what other intention do you suppose he could have?"

"That I don't know," Pounder admitted, "but I do know Major Rhodan. He is reliable and above suspicion."

"A human being is an uncertain factor in any equation, General. No one can look into the heart of another. Wealth and power, or at least the chance for these two can confuse even the most loyal mind."

General Pounder seemed to sit a bit larger behind his desk. "Do you mean to say with all this that Rhodan might have become... mentally disturbed?"

"Not at all, General! No one who strives for wealth and power can be wholly insane. *He is nothing but a traitor!*"

In one swift movement, Pounder rose from his chair, bent his massive body over the desk and thrust his fist under the man's nose. "Stop that now! Even if you are Allan D. Mercant, I won't have my people insulted by you! Rhodan *is not* a traitor. It was an emergency landing for the *Stardust*. And please, before you continue like this, will you kindly offer proof to the contrary? By the way, Washington has already entered into negotiations with the government of the Asiatic Federation."

"Interesting," was Mercant's comment as he pushed aside the fist with a careless elegance that disarmed Pounder. "Is it also possible to know of the result?"

"Nothing so far," confessed Pounder. "I'm still awaiting word directly from my staff in Washington."

"Then I'll tell you what the report will say. Quote, 'The government of the Asiatic Federation of course regrets the incident and promises to do everything possible to rescue the stranded space pilots. The wreck of the *Stardust*, if not already burned, will be released for return.' Shortly thereafter there will be a second announcement saying that the *Stardust* was totally destroyed on impact and that only the unrecognisable remains of the crew could be found. And then silence will descend over the whole affair, and no one will ever talk about it again. In reality, however, have been quite different."

"If I had your imagination I'd be writing novels." Pounder seemed to envy the man across from his desk. "Nevertheless, let's hear how it could have been, according to your opinion. How could it have been in reality?"

"The Asiatics will dismantle the *Stardust* and evaluate for themselves the result of the moonflight. Rhodan and his men will receive their promised reward upon surrender of all their newly gained knowledge. Perhaps a villa in Tibet or perhaps even only a bullet in the brain."

Pounder sank back into his chair. "You are not only no longer normal, but a victim of your profession as well," was his diagnosis. "Rhodan certainly knows that he was guaranteed a good life with us, that we would have given him *two* estates if he had only expressed such a desire. Nor are there any ideological motives. The only remaining alternative is an emergency landing. That is my opinion. Rhodan will resume communications with us as soon as he is in a position to do so, just wait and see."

Mercant brushed his hand across his bald head. "I'd much rather rely on the information of my agents. Major Perkins will hardly leave us in the lurch."

"Perkins? Wasn't that the man who uncovered the plot against the NATO installation in Australia and then finished off the leaders?"

"That's the man. Just a few hours ago I sent him to Peking to take matters in hand for himself."

"And you believe..."

"Under an alias, with the proper papers. Lucky for us that we have good commercial relations with the Asiatic Federation."

Just at that moment the visiphone buzzed. Pounder delayed his intended reply and pressed a button. The small screen lit up, and a face appeared.

"A line from Washington for General Pounder and Mr. Mercant," came the announcement.

"Both present." General Pounder gasped for breath. "Are you sure that both parties are wanted?"

"Washington expressly desires that I make the connection when, and only when, both gentlemen can be reached."

"Then make the connection. Mr. Mercant is in my office. Hurry up."

"Just a moment, sir. Wait just a moment, please."

Pounder looked at Mercant. "What do you have to do with Washington?" He seemed surprised.

"Quite a lot." Mercant smiled innocently as he moved to where he would see the visiphone. "There is, for instance, my immediate superior, the President."

Pounder swallowed and stared into the screen.

The face of the operator had disappeared, and another face became visible. It was the White House Press Secretary. "General Pounder?"

"Speaking." The general nodded briefly. Mercant bent slightly forward to include himself within the range of the camera. "Mercant is also present."

"Thank you. The reply from the Peking government has arrived. This reply is of such a strange nature that we have decided to undertake nothing further without first consulting you. Is your recorder running?"

Pounder pressed a button concealed beneath the rim of his desk. "It is now."

"Well, then, please listen. Our request to Peking was as follows:

'Washington to Peking. Would like immediate permission to send a board of inquiry to inspect the wreckage of the lunar rocket *Stardust*, which has crash-landed in your territory. Inasmuch as this is an exploratory vessel, no diplomatic obstacles should stand in the way. We expect your consent.'

"The reply was just received. Here it is :

'Peking to Washington. *Consent refused*. The government of the Asiatic Federation considers the intended establishment of a Western base in our territory to be in blatant defiance of all previous agreements. There can be no doubt that this was not the crash landing of an alleged moon rocket. The crew has rejected a rescue unit and deployed a new device which renders human beings weightless. Unless your government issues a command for this military base to surrender itself, undamaged, at once,

it will be destroyed by the division of our army that has surrounded it. We will give you two hours.'

"Well, these are the two communiqués. What do you have to say to that, General Pounder?"

The whole face of the Director of the Space Explorations Centre lit up with radiant excitement. "Thank heaven the *Stardust* managed to land undamaged! Damn good luck! Rhodan and his men are alive. And we've reached the moon. We were the first to land on the moon. Magnificent!"

"Very gratifying," commented the Press Secretary, "but at the moment I'm far more interested in your opinion with regard to the Asiatic communiqué. What does it mean, a weapon that nullifies gravity? Was there equipment on board the *Stardust* of which we have not been informed?"

"Nonsense. Nullification of gravity! We have conducted experiments in that area, but they remain unsuccessful. The Asiatics are trying to bluff you. They only want to let the *Stardust* vanish, that's all."

Mercant interrupted. "Do you have any confirmation that the moonship landed without damage?"

"None," replied the Press Secretary. "If we did, it would probably have been through your office, Mercant. We've informed Peking that we are unfortunately not in communication with the *Stardust* and that we therefore cannot intervene. The ridiculous assertion that the lunar rocket is an American military base has been sharply denied. So far we have received no reply... . Wait a moment! Peking is calling right now. Hold on, please. I'll arrange for you to listen in."

The face of the Press Secretary disappeared from sight, and although the screen remained blank, Pounder and Mercant could understand every word spoken in the room some 2,500 miles away. Unintentionally, they became witnesses to the beginning of a development that could very well mean the end of the world, unless some miracle happened.

"Washington speaking. We are waiting, Peking. Over."

"Peking speaking. You have not complied with our request. Your base in the Gobi Desert has likewise refused to permit an inspection, whereupon a division under the direct command of Marshal Roon was given the order to destroy it. Although you are undoubtedly very well informed about what happened, we still wish to describe briefly the events that followed.

"Our tanks advanced and about one and a half miles from the landing site encountered an invisible obstacle. Following the perimeter of this transparent wall, we found that it extended in a circle around the *Stardust*, enclosing an area a bit in excess of seven square miles. A certain Rhodan refers to this circle as the 'territorial boundaries of a new and neutral power' Our tanks withdrew and opened fire on the base. Our shells detonated far from their goal, as if the invisible wall also extended upward, enclosing the grounded rocket like a protective bell. Our scientific advisors are of the opinion that the base is surrounded by a force field. Thus, the base may be unconquerable. We wish to point out, first of all, that we consider the presence of the *Stardust* a threat to world peace and that inevitable consequences must follow unless appropriate action is taken. Should this base not be eliminated, or should it not surrender to us, within the next twenty-four hours, we shall regard all diplomatic relations between the Asiatic Federation and the United States as dissolved. We await your reply. No further communications will follow."

Pounder looked at Mercant. His complexion seemed less healthy than it had been hardly ten minutes

ago. Even the defence Secretary had exchanged his bland smile for a few lines of worry.

"Force fields," he murmured. "We know nothing of this. I must say, Pounder, your scientists really know how to keep quiet about something."

"Don't talk such nonsense, Mercant. I know as much about a force field as you yourself. The Asiatics are calling a bluff, that's all. They've been looking for an excuse to get rid of their nuclear warheads, and now they've found one."

Mercant leaned forward. "Are you telling me that you don't know anything about this 'bell of energy' around the *Stardust* and that you also don't know anything about a new device to counteract Earth's gravity?"

"Nonsense, both of them! Nothing of the kind exists. I've already told you that the Asiatics are bluffing."

"Hello?" The Press Secretary had come on again and interrupted their conversation. "You've listened in, haven't you?"

"Of course," confirmed General Pounder. "That is absolutely the greatest nonsense that I have ever heard, and I would suggest..."

"General, even greater nonsense can result from this. Namely, war. We must prevent this under all circumstances. Please try, at all costs, to contact the *Stardust* Mercant can assist you—and then find out what they meant by the force field. Lehmann will certainly know what to do. We'll be expecting your reply before expiration of the ultimatum given us by the Asiatic Federation."

"Will do," snarled Pounder, who had absolutely no idea how he could accomplish this. "I'll get in touch with you in time."

The screen grew dark.

Mercant sighed. "If Major Perkins doesn't send us some word pretty soon, we'll really be in a bad spot. Now, I suggest we get in touch with Lehmann. Is that all right?"

Pounder barked a number of commands into one of his phones. Moments later a tall older man entered the office. This was Professor Lehmann, Director of the California Academy of Space Technology and supervisor of the scientific project Moonshot. There was admittedly no expert greater than he in his field. Indeed, in an occasional candid moment General Pounder could even be persuaded to confess that Lehmann was the spiritual father of the *Stardust*.

With a somewhat astonished expression, the professor addressed the two men. "You wanted to see me?"

Pounder nodded. "You've probably met the bloodhound Mercant. A formal introduction will be unnecessary. I'd like to save myself a long story, so just listen to what has happened." He manipulated controls under the desk until sound emerged, followed by a buzz, with further noise ensuing. "The tape," Pounder explained, as if demonstrating a new invention. "Occasionally it saves a lot of trouble."

While Professor Lehmann was, by means of the recorded exchange, informed of what had occurred, Mercant sat innocently in his chair, already lining up his mental chessmen and working out future plays. If Perkins succeeded in making contact with Rhodan, provided, of course, that the latter was still in the

Gobi Desert and had not yet become a pawn of the Asiatics, as he presumed, then the whole affair must soon be explained. There were several possibilities:

The *Stardust* had landed on purpose in the territory of the Asiatic Federation. That meant that Rhodan was a traitor. But it was equally possible that she had been forced to crashland and was now being dismantled by the Asiatics, who only pretended to have encountered opposition. This—and Mercant was convinced of it, was nothing but a preparation for a subsequent broadcast that would say the defences of the *Stardust* had suddenly collapsed and the ship had been destroyed in the process.

Then there was a third possibility... but this was too fantastic for serious consideration. Despite his love for animals (he had once been observed to pull a worm off the hook of a most surprised fisherman and carefully place the worm in the earth) Mercant was a terribly sober and pragmatic person. His life consisted solely of facts, reports, and regulations, never of suppositions.

And yet...

He did not have an opportunity to finish his thought. The episode on the recorder had concluded. General Pounder jutted out his chin and looked at Lehmann. "Well, Professor, what's your reaction to that? *Doyou* believe Major Rhodan is a traitor?"

"Traitor? Who came up with that crazy notion?"

Pounder glanced at Mercant with a significant expression. "That was merely a rhetorical question, Professor. I am much more curious to learn your opinion of this force field concept and... and the other thing."

"Nullification of gravity, is that what you mean? Both are nothing short of fantasy, impossible with the means presently at our disposal. The Asiatics have concocted a fine fairy tale there, in order to find a suitable pretext for keeping the *Stardust*. I'll wager that tomorrow we discover the ship has been destroyed and therefore cannot be returned to us.

Mercant nodded in agreement. "Very well done. A splendid analysis. If I'm going to retire, I'll recommend that you become my successor."

"Not interested. I'd rather fly along to Mars. Well, at least we know that the landing of the *Stardust* occurred without any serious damage. The ship is safe; otherwise, this smokescreen manoeuvre would be uncalled for. If we could only find out the cause of it all, our questions would no longer remain unanswered. If only we had a good intelligence agency, we'd have no problem."

This apparently innocent remark found its mark. Mercant turned red. In an instant his mild expression collapsed. A steel hard expression arose in his eyes. Without bothering any longer with the grimacing General Pounder, he rose to his feet.

"The last word hasn't been said. You'll be surprised," he threw at Lehmann. "You'll be surprised how well our intelligence agencies are operating. General, please call me the minute you hear from Washington. Goodbye, gentlemen." He slammed the door behind him.

Professor Lehmann, quite surprised, looked at Pounder. "What's the matter with him? Since when is Mercant so sensitive?"

"You've hurt his professional pride." Pounder grinned, obviously very pleased. "Serves him right. Why

does he have to treat everyone who isn't a fellow bloodhound like half human beings? Well, now we are undisturbed. Tell me, Professor, what's your honest opinion? We agree that Major Rhodan is above suspicion, do we not? What really did happen in the Gobi Desert?"

Lehmann bent forward. "Perhaps we should phrase our question differently and ask, What really happened on the moon?"

Pounder stared at him, incapable of reply.

In Peking Major Perkins had left the stratoliner and proceeded to a first class hotel. Within a few moments of his arrival he had already received from a contact the address of a reputable firm in the employ of the Asiatic Federation government. He sought out the manager, and a meeting was arranged.

Agent Perkin's papers were in the name of Alfons Hochheimer, mining engineer. According to the passport he had lived in the Asiatic Federation for more than ten years and had worked several times for the official government agencies in the exploitation of mineral resources.

In the reception room of the business firm,

equipped, Perkins noted, with the most modern conveniences, a Chinese in European clothing approached him, an inscrutable smile playing about his lips.

"Mr. Hochheimer, I presume? My name is Yen-Fu. What can I do for you?"

"I understand that you participate in the development of economically uninteresting areas," replied Perkins. "Working for other enterprises, I have already had occasion to explore many parts of the Gobi Desert with radar sounding. I know a place where uranium might be found, if one digs deeply enough."

Yen-Fu smiled more intensely. "Gobi? Uranium? I believe you are in error. There is no uranium in the Gobi Desert. We have sent several expeditions there already, but no success could be achieved in that respect."

Now it was Perkins who smiled in an inscrutable fashion. "Your people did not have access to my research instruments, Mr. Yen-Fu. Have you ever heard of the radar sensor of Professor Gottfried Spielmann?"

The Chinese shook his head. "To be honest, no."

Perkins was not at all surprised, he had just invented the name. "How unfortunate! Spielmann is one of the most impressive figures on the scientific scene in the Western world. Thanks to his invention, the United States and her allies have located the great uranium deposits along the Amazon River. I myself have one of his latest models."

Despite his continued smile, some mistrust became evident in the face of the Chinese. "Are you not American?"

"No, I am German, but I've been residing in the Asiatic Federation for ten years. Here, my papers. I hope they will establish my loyalty."

Yen-Fu examined the exquisitely skilful forgeries with great care but could detect no irregularities. Hesitating slightly, he returned them. "And do you know where in the desert uranium can be found?"

Perkins nodded. "Enough to supply twenty power stations for a hundred years. Of course," he added with a sly smile, "one can also do other things with it."

"Wait a moment. Please."

Perkins waited but not for long. Soon he was speaking with the president of the firm, then with official representatives of the government, and finally with the pilot of the plane that was to bring this *ad hoc* commission into the supposed uranium area.

"This radar sensor, do you have it with you?" inquired Yen-Fu with interest. "Is it possible to read the results directly on it?"

Perkins thought of the cleverly constructed metal box that contained no more than a battery and some cables inside and a few dials and several buttons outside. He nodded.

"But of course! Do you think I would come to you without the necessary equipment? When shall we start?"

"In one hour, if you like. We are still expecting confirmation from the proper authorities."

If only everything goes well, Perkins thought, although no one could do anything to him. His papers were probably more authentic than those of the Chinese. Nevertheless...

In the little cafe across the street, Perkins quickly drank a bottle of lemonade and gave a few coins to a beggar who, in a loud, high voice, lamented his misery and bewailed having to feed seven small children.

The man in rags thanked him for the coins with many bows and in between the many bows suddenly whispered, "O father of justice, heavenly paragon of human pity, thanks be to you for your kindness! (Hey, fellow, don't you recognize your old friends any more?) My children will offer up prayers to our ancestors for you. (Why did Mercant have to send you of all people?) May the goddess of fertility bless you, my lord, for having given such riches to an undeserving beggar! (By the way, the government official on the plane is one of our men. Go easy on him.) Permit me to kiss your feet."

Perkins briefly winked at the beggar, then turned away with a gesture of displeasure. He tossed a coin on the table and left the cafe.

It was a jaunty little jet. Aboard, besides the pilot, were a representative of the government, a chief engineer, and Perkins. The small cabin showed evidence of some luxury and thus indicated that it also served in a private capacity. Interchangeable skid runners and pontoons enabled it to land on uneven ground or on water.

The jet engine roared, but the noise almost entirely lost itself in flight.

Peking sank below them. The jet flew straight westward. Fertile valleys receded quickly into the east. The first mountain ranges appeared, then brown arid deserts.

The government official bent forward and tapped the shoulder of the engineer, who was sitting next to Perkins. "Where is this region located, Lan-Yu?"

"East of Suchou, near the Koshun salt lake, near where the American moon rocket is supposed to have crashlanded."

"Do you know something about it?" The words escaped the government representative quite against his will.

"I've heard about it." The engineer tried to evade the issue. "Just rumours." Then he looked around and grinned. "Or is there truth to that rumour?"

"Of course not! Nothing but idle rumours, what else?"

They had been in flight for some ninety minutes when the pilot opened the tiny door of the cabin and said, "The flight centre in Peking has just given us orders to turn around at once. We are forbidden to fly over the area between Ordos, Shan-si, the Nan-shan mountains, and Ninghsia. The Koshun salt lake lies exactly in this area. No reason was given."

Lan-Yu looked at the government official, who nervously chewed at his lower lip. "What does that mean? You received permission from the authorities to accompany us on this flight. You should have known in advance."

"Just keep on flying and turn off the radio," the representative of the government ordered the pilot. "Don't pay any attention to the order from the flight centre."

"But I have to receive the weather forecasts, and I must announce my position every five minutes."

Perkins caught a glance from the government's representative. He nodded imperceptibly and put his hand in his pocket.

"Turn the radio off completely," the government man repeated. "I urgently advise you to follow my instructions to the letter from now on; otherwise, you will have to suffer the consequences. I represent the government, just remember that. Land at the Koshun salt lake. How long before we land?"

The pilot hesitated, then looked for a moment at his instruments. "Ten minutes."

"I'll be up front in eight minutes, and I'll supervise the landing operations. Until then, no change of course. Do you follow me?"

"You will be responsible for this," said the pilot, and disappeared.

Engineer Lan-Yu had followed the conversation without comment. His smile had faltered, and his narrow eyes had become narrower still. He noticed that Perkins, alias Alfons Hochheimer, was still keeping his hand in his pocket.

"Why do you not follow the instructions of our government?" Lan-Yu asked slowly. "I would not like for us to run into any difficulty. I am certain that this has to do with the foreign spaceship."

"You can bet your bottom dollar on it," he was assured by the government official. "But rest assured I know exactly what I'm doing."

"I couldn't care less," admitted Lan-Yu, "as long as we find the uranium." His glance hovered over the impressive metal box that lay on the free seat next to Perkins. This metal box had been able to convince even the president of his firm when he had seen it. "I really hope we find the location."

Five minutes later the pilot announced, "An air force jet is ahead of us. They are urging us to turn around."

"How can you know that if you have no radio contacts?"

"Warning shots," the pilot replied. Apparently he knew no fear.

Thirty miles.

"Switch on the radio. I'm coming up front."

The government representative turned to Perkins with a meaningful gesture, then disappeared into the narrow pilot's cabin and closed the door behind him.

Perkins pulled an automatic out of his pocket and pointed it at Lan-Yun "Do you happen to have any weapons on you?"

The engineer was so startled that he gasped. His eyes became as round as buttons as he stared into the black muzzle of the gun and shook his head.

"What do you want from me?" he stammered.

"Just keep still and keep your mouth shut. If you pretend you don't exist, you might come out of this adventure safe and sound. But if not..."

An impressive silence made the alternative all too obvious.

"But... you *can't* all by yourself."

"I am not alone. And now, don't say anything more. We're going to land now."

The jet began its descent. In the meantime the military escort had turned around. Unhindered, the jet passed the air barriers of the Asiatic Federation, swept low above several tank units, and suddenly sighted, farther off by the river Morin-Gol, the *Stardust*.

The lunar rocket was standing forlorn and deserted. No life was evident in its vicinity. High above, in the clear sky, a tiny dot could be seen, circling round like a bird of prey. The circle became narrower, and it seemed as if the predator would at any moment pounce upon its victim.

Neither Perkins nor his co-agent had the least inkling that this tiny dot in the sky was an atom bomber of the Asiatic Federation air force in search of its target.

"Where do you want me to land?" asked the pilot.

The government representative, one of the most capable men in the International Intelligence Agency, pointed below them.

"Close by the moonship, in the desert. Make sure the plane comes to a halt not more than a hundred yards from the *Stardust*. Is that clear?"

The pilot nodded in agreement. He began to bank, preparing for landing. The jet was gliding at an angle toward the desert. Its altitude was only a few hundred yards. The distance to what they believed to be the wreck of the *Stardust* decreased rapidly. Only three more miles... two more miles...

Meanwhile, high above them, an H-bomb was falling. The tiny speck in the sky stopped circling and flew off in a straight line. With different velocities and from different directions, two objects approached the *Stardust*.

But it happened in the same instant.

Perkins had gone into the pilot's cabin after he had tied Lan-Yu into his seat. The jet had just touched down and was skidding across the ragged earth with breathtaking speed. They were still more than two miles away from the *Stardust*, when suddenly, about two miles above the spacecraft, a second sun rose.

Three pairs of eyes were blinded by the immediate presence of a white hot mushroom cloud whose glowing gases began to flow down along the outlines of an invisible bell.

They were alive only long enough to feel the impact when the jet came to a sudden halt as it slammed into the force field.

And then there was nothing.

CHAPTER THREE

"Perry, Pounder is on the line! And he's all upset."

Perry Rhodan nodded to Khrest, with whom he had just been talking. "If you'll excuse me, Khrest, I don't want to leave anything undone."

"On the line," was obviously an understatement. The connection via Echo satellite was flawless. Pounder's face was clearly visible on the view screen, as if he were looking in through a window. The Asiatics no longer interfered with the reception, a sign perhaps, that they were becoming quite confused.

Reg bowed deeply and made a grand gesture toward the screen. "And may I introduce to you... the general!"

Perry pushed him aside. "General Pounder, reporting with my crew, back from the moonflight. All are well. The *Stardust* is no longer flightworthy because of technical troubles. Your orders have been executed. The scientific results of our expedition will be forwarded to Professor Lehmann."

The general gasped. His gasp was fully audible halfway around the world. "Rhodan, have you lost your mind? Will you explain why you landed the *Stardust* in the Gobi Desert? Did remote control fail? You

should at least have tried to reach the ocean."

"I landed here on purpose, General."

"*What?*" Pounder's face resembled an overripe tomato. "What do you mean, on purpose? Rhodan, you're not trying to tell me that..."

"I'm not trying to tell you anything, at least not what you seem to believe. I'll try to explain."

"I'd like to know what there is to explain," Pounder roared. "Destroy the *Stardust* at once, with the automatic destruct system, and surrender to the forces of the Asiatic Federation. Is that understood?"

An icy glint became visible in Perry eyes. "I understand you perfectly sir; but I will not follow your instructions."

"You will not *what?*" Pounder presented a frightening sight. His face had turned a shade darker still. Reg ducked down involuntarily, as though afraid that the head on the screen would suddenly burst. "Major Rhodan, I am ordering you..."

"May I inform you, sir, that I am no longer a major and therefore no longer under your command," Perry said calmly. "As you see, I have removed my insignia of rank. If you will permit me, I shall explain everything once and for all."

Professor Lehmann's face abruptly appeared beside Pounder's. There was curiosity in his expression. "Rhodan, are remains of an atmosphere present in the moon craters and perhaps traces of...?"

"Silence!" shouted the general, and shoved the scientist aside. "Speak up, Rhodan." He stroked his chin. "And you'd better be convincing, because your words will decide whether or not we'll have a war on our hands within the next ten hours. The Asiatic Federation is absolutely convinced that the *Stardust* is a strategic outpost of the United States, established very much on purpose. Unless this 'strategic outpost' has been given up by tomorrow, diplomatic relations will be severed. I don't need to tell you what that will mean."

"Has it gone so far already?" Perry whispered, fear in his voice. "Then, indeed, every second is precious. Now, listen carefully, General. We landed as planned on the moon and discovered there the remnants of an extraterrestrial civilization. What it is in cannot tell you in detail now, but a few indications will be sufficient for Professor Lehmann's peace of mind. The moon has never been inhabited, but long ago the exploratory vessel of an interstellar race landed there. It is untouched and contains an arsenal of weapons with which one could destroy not only Earth, but our entire solar system. Death rays and force fields, gravity neutralizers and antineutron screens that can prevent any nuclear reaction and, what's more, hand weapons of an effectiveness that you can hardly imagine. You will realize, General, that we could scarcely hand such tremendously powerful weapons over to any nation on Earth."

Suddenly Pounder's voice turned cold sober.

"But you are in Asiatic Federation territory. You landed there, and since this conversation is being monitored, all the world knows now what you've found on the moon. Expeditions will begin, and a race will determine who gains possession of ultimate power. It would have been better if you had remained silent."

"I want the world to know" Perry replied. "And no one will land on the moon unless I so desire. Don't

worry, General. Neither the Asiatics nor the Russians *nor you* will obtain those weapons. These weapons are in my hands. I shall take care that no one starts the war that will destroy us all."

"You?"

In this one word were hidden such contempt and disbelief that Perry turned red with rage. He stepped forward and glared coldly at the general "Yes, *I*. Please understand the politics have failed. For decades you have tried to prevent the hot war. Threat followed threat. Conference followed conference. Not only are the Eastern Bloc and the Asiatic Federation to be blamed, but the Western Bloc as well. No one would give in. Everyone kept rearming. Today, everywhere on our globe guided nuclear missiles are poised in readiness. The push of a button will launch them into the sky. Automated guidance systems will steer them along their course. But even before they can reach their goal, on the other side retaliatory missiles will blast off. Almost simultaneously the nations on both sides of the world will cease to exist. We have faced this ghastly vision already for decades now. No one is capable of banning the danger. Only a precarious balance of power has thus far prevented the war. But woe if one or the other side became too strong! In order to live in peace, they would have to destroy their opponent. In order to live in peace, that is, they would have to die in war! You would do this yourself, the same as the Asiatics would. Can you understand at last why none of you must ever gain possession of the *Stardust*, as long as we have the extraterrestrial..."

"You would perform the greatest service to your own country if you..."

"If I would bring these weapons to Nevada Fields, is that what you mean? You're wrong, General. The Asiatic Federation and the Eastern Bloc would immediately feel so threatened that they would have to decide to launch the slaughter of the Western Bloc. The end of our civilization would come. No, I persist in my plan, whether you approve of it or not."

"And what plan is that?"

"I will form a neutral third power between the Eastern and Western blocs. We have the ability to render harmless any nuclear warhead launched. Any atomic weapons will be safely disarmed at great altitude, as if they were simply fireworks that had fizzled. I will repel any attack on the *Stardust*, from whichever side it may come. I will..."

Perry stopped talking. There was a noise behind him, and he turned around. Reg had grasped Clark G. Fletcher's sleeve as he burst into the broadcasting room.

"Don't listen to him, General!" Fletcher shrieked hysterically. "He's gone mad! The Arkonides, with their degenerate ideas, have made him lose his mind. I refused to land here. He threatened me with a gun, General. Rhodan is a renegade!"

Perry had given Reg a signal to let Fletcher finish his speech. Now he approached him, putting his right hand on his shoulder.

"Listen, Fletch. The General can hear what I've got to say to you. Perhaps I would act the same way if I were in your position, but I'm not. You can leave the *Stardust* at any time you wish. I'm holding no one back. But first confirm for General Pounder that we've found these weapons on the moon, these weapons with which we can control the whole world. Don't tell him anything else. Only that."

Fletcher hesitated. He looked into Reg's threatening face. In the technician's hand was the silver rod of the psychoradiator. Perry looked at him almost kindly. The intensely interested face of Pounder was

staring at this scene from the screen.

Fletcher nodded. "That's right. Rhodan can destroy the world if he wants to."

He hung his head, turned around, and went out into the corridor.

Perry breathed a sigh of relief and turned to the general. "Together with you, sir, the heads of state of the Eastern Bloc and the Asiatic Federation will also hear my words. I want first of all to state the situation as follows: The realm of the Third Power may be very narrowly limited from a geographical point of view, but don't let yourself be fooled by that. Respect my wishes and take care not to let your mutual mistrust drive each of you to a point of no return. The *Stardust* is not an American military base. That ought to be clear by now. Neither did she land here to become the willing prey of the Asiatic Federation. The Eastern Bloc should now bury its hopes of becoming the third party who will profit by the discord of its two adversaries. Now, apart from that, you can always reach me on this frequency, and should I have anything further to say, I'll do so by the same means. I'm very sorry, General. Perhaps you will understand me one day. For the time being I can only ask you to forgive me."

Pounder confronted the steel blue eyes. Then he nodded slowly. "I will try, Rhodan. One can only hope, by God, that Mercant does the same. You know him as well as I do." A bitter smile flashed across Perry's face. He knew the meaning of this warning, but nothing frightened him any longer. Mercant was, after all, nothing but a human being. And human beings were no longer a source of awe for Perry Rhodan.

Washington to Peking:

"Contact with the Stardust has been established. Commander Rhodan claims to have come into possession of incredible weapons, which had been abandoned on the moon by an alien civilization. We no longer have any influence on future events. We urge you to reply."

Peking to Washington:

"Video conversation between General Pounder and Rhodan was monitored by us. His claims incredible and too farfetched. The ultimatum is still in effect. You have seven hours."

Moscow to Washington:

"We concur with the opinion of the government of the Asiatic Federation and regard the American military base in the Gobi Desert as a threat to world peace. In the event of armed conflict, however the Soviet Union will remain neutral."

Moscow to Peking:

"We concur with the opinion of the government of the Asiatic Federation, and regard the American military base in the Gobi Desert as a threat to world peace."

Washington to Moscow [idem Washington to Peking]:

"We assure you once again that the United States government knows nothing of an American military base in the Gobi Desert and that the crew of the Stardust has been asked to surrender. We propose an immediate emergency session of the heads of state."

There was no reply to this note.

The seven precious hours began to pass swiftly. In Asia the towers of the continental launching platforms were turning toward east and toward west. Monsters of silver glittering steel shone menacingly in the glow of the searchlights. Men scuttled back and forth, and then it became quiet again.

One could see the same picture in the defence installations of the Western Bloc.

The Eastern Bloc aimed its deadly atomic weapons so that they faced the four corners of the Earth.

In each of the three parts of the world, a man was sitting in a room deep underground, in front of giant control panels and electronic computers. He was connected to the command posts by video screens. His hand rested quietly on the table, close to a red button.

This button seemed to wink ironically and say, "Well, go on! Why don't you push me? Are you afraid someone else will do it too? Or do you fear that the end of the world will come if you push me?"

Three red buttons, each an invitation to Inferno!

Khrest was sitting up in bed, leaning back against the messhall wall upholstered with cushions. Eric Manoli had given Clark Fletcher an injection that put the astronomer into a deep sleep. Reg was now in the centre with the doctor, monitoring radio traffic. Every half hour he informed Perry of what was going on in the world.

Gradually Khrest began to grasp the implications of his arrival on Earth, even though its populace did not realize that he had come.

He nodded slowly. "It is incredible, Mr. Rhodan, that your race can stand this mental stress. You tell me that your world has already existed for decades in such a tense atmosphere, where the touch of a single button could unleash wholesale destruction. Why has not someone arisen and put an end to such an intolerable state of affairs. Why have they not formed a universal government? Why have they not pooled their weapons stockpiles as a protection against possible extraterrestrial aggressors?"

Perry Rhodan sighed. "Your question isn't easy answered, Khrest. If we had an answer, we wouldn't be living constantly between life and death. Perhaps there can't be an answer, as long as mankind is convinced of being alone and unique in the solar system. One will respect only a more powerful force; but each of the two great nuclear powers on Earth is just as mighty as the other. (The third one plays only a subordinate role.) Everyone knows that if war breaks out, the annihilation of both adversaries, and probably the rest of the world, is the inescapable result. Only this knowledge has heretofore prevented a

catastrophe."

"I am beginning little by little, to understand the problem. When my race was still young, they were confronted by the same difficulties. For more than 200 years they lived in fear of total destruction. Then a warrior insect people from the outer reaches of the galaxy found us and attacked us. In less than half an hour both opposing governments had formed a coalition and successfully conquered the common enemy. However since the danger remained ever-present the coalition survived as well. Thus we became a single race and began our evolution toward maturity."

Perry Rhodan slowly nodded his head. Into his eyes came a hard glint. "Although I've never heard it before, your story is nothing new to me. It's the only logical solution to those problems which evolve whenever intelligent creatures discover the ultimate weapon. You will understand now why I'm acting the way I am, why *I have* to act this way. It's not pleasant to be considered a traitor by one's own friends and superiors. But if I give in to sentiment, the world will be lost. Your weapons would fall into the hands of one of the power blocs, and they would destroy the other. But before it could succeed in that, its opponent would release a suicidal vengeance. No, I see my way clearly ahead of me, Khrest. Your problem is the answer to my questions. You want to get well; all right, I'll help you with that. You want electronic replacement parts; I'll obtain them for you. You will again be able to take off in search of the planet of eternal life. Perhaps you will forget us. But I'll me your brief presence here to bring peace to our world. A peace with the help of power, with force. It's no longer possible otherwise. Only the fear of the great powers in the face of a still greater one will bring them to their senses. I believe you will be able to help me with it."

"Whatever is in my power will be done. For the time being, though, it does not look as though your actions are successful. The ultimatum will expire very shortly, and what then?"

"Thora must intervene. The force field and the gravity neutralizer apparently did not convince the Asiatics that they're dealing here with gigantic extraterrestrial inventions. My people in the West, On the other hand, believe that we intend to deceive them. Therefore, something must happen that will make it clear to all parties concerned, with a single stroke, how really strong the Third Power is. Your ship is on the moon, Khrest. What can you do from there, to make all mankind understand its grave danger? Could you, perhaps, loosen the Rock of Gibraltar from its foundation, and let it fall into the ocean 1,500 miles away? Or could you move the Statue of Liberty from New York to Peking or paralyse worldwide radio communications?"

"I could do all of those, and it would be good to give mankind such a dramatic exhibition. Think it over and inform me of your decision. *I* would suggest that we use an energy beam, choose a centrally located but uninhabited area, and warn all humanity. Say that in about two hours, that would be three hours before the ultimatum expires, you will burn into the desert a funnel with a diameter of 30 miles. But emphasize that the second time around, you would use this ray in populated areas, should your wishes not be respected. That should be enough to convince them."

Perry smiled coldly, but behind his apparent heartlessness there was hidden a genuine concern for the future of mankind. He knew that no argument would ever be sufficient to bring the guardians of diverse ideologies into agreement. Only a shock could accomplish this. And he was ready to administer the required shock therapy to the world.

"I can believe that. Do you think Thora will help us with this?"

"Whether she wants to or not, she has to. In her arrogance toward the lower races, she forgets that once upon a time we too were in the same stage of development, level A to D. That was perhaps our most

productive period. We were young and enterprising then. We loved everything new and advanced. How different all this has become today! We have degenerated and become self-satisfied. Total standstill. Hmm... To be quite frank, Rhodan, sometimes I have odd ideas when I think how much we resemble each other in a physical respect. Your mind blended with our own, your youth combined with our knowledge... we could conquer the universe!"

Perry's eyes lost their hard cast. His gaze went off into the unknown distances that could be spanned only by eternities. Quite unconsciously, his hands clenched in fists, then opened again. With lightning speed a vision of the future revealed itself before his eyes....

Human beings and Arkonides—*onerace*... The spirit of enterprise and the quest for adventure would be coupled with age old knowledge and amazing technology. Faster than the speed of light, spaceships piloted by men and women eager for Conquest would penetrate into the farthest reaches of the galaxy, finding new worlds, founding colonies and new empires. Interstellar trade would bring indescribable wealth, and perhaps a great galactic civilization would result. A new race would develop.

Khrest seemed to guess what was going on in Perry's mind. He smiled a wise smile. "We are only at the very beginning, Perry Rhodan. You are the representative of mankind; I am the representative of the Arkonides. You need our help; we need yours. An alliance of sorts, it might be called, born of mutual necessity. but later on I can imagine the product of a coalition of reason and the common advantage. Is Earth perhaps the planet of life that we are looking for? Every rejuvenation means a new life."

"At first we must prepare the beginnings, Khrest. Then we can continue to talk about it. This world, which can bring you the complete recovery of your health, contemplates its own destruction. Hatred and fear, pettiness and egotism, intolerance of diversity of opinion, rigid defence of traditional maxims, all this had led to the current situation. Formerly it was the fear of God that forced man to conduct himself properly and allowed him to become civilized. Today the same result can be achieved only by material force and fear. All right then, Khrest. Ask Thora to direct her energy beam onto North Africa, onto the northern part of the Ahaggar Mountains. I'll send out a warning to clear the area at once, but as far as I know it's as good as uninhabited."

"This demonstration should not fail to be effective," promised Khrest. "But emphasize in your warning that this is one of the more harmless demonstrations we can deliver."

The radio receiver of Lieutenant Durbas's desert patrol picked up an array of disquieting broadcasts from all over the world, but all frequencies were suddenly overlaid, with overpowering loudness, by an unknown broadcaster. In vain did the radio operator try to adjust his apparatus. Even when he turned it down as low as possible, Perry Rhodan's voice could still be heard as far away as 200 yards.

"This is Perry Rhodan speaking for the Third Power on Earth. Since the world is preparing for war and the end of civilization is therefore close at hand, I shall try to give you a last warning. This is to demonstrate that I can annihilate at a moment's notice that nation which dares to launch the first nuclear warhead. Exactly 115 minutes from now there will appear in the Sahara, north of the Ahaggar Mountains, a crater thirty miles in diameter. This phenomenon will be caused by the action of an energy ray that has its point of origin on the moon. All persons now in that area are advised to remove themselves as far as possible from the centre of the target. As soon as the demonstration has ended, all the world powers will have three hours to reconsider their points of view. That is all."

The radio operator stared, speechless, at his radio set. Lieutenant Durbas, who had risen and come

toward him, did the same, he too stared at the radio, speechless.

"What in the world was that?" Durbas asked finally.

"Perry Rhodan, isn't that the moon pilot who landed in Asia? He's supposed to be collaborating with the Asiatic Federation, or so they say. They also talk of new weapons that he's brought back from the moon." The men of the desert patrol gathered indecisively. Their full track vehicle stood in the shadow of an oasis. The driver looked toward the east.

"Over there are the mountains. Are we far enough away from it?"

Lieutenant Durbas made a gesture of annoyance. "You really believe that nonsense, Hassan? An energy ray from the moon, ha! What next?"

The radio operator shook his head thoughtfully. "There must be some truth to the matter, Lieutenant. I've heard the news. They say that this Rhodan has a ball of pure energy surrounding his spaceship. Even atom bombs have no effect on it."

"Old wives' tales! That's all! You can't believe everything people say, especially where the yellows are concerned. Melt a crater into the desert? What nonsense! What do you hear from Fort Hussein?"

"I'll get in touch with them right away."

Hussein advised them to heed the warning.

"All right," sighed Durbas, and looked longingly at the shaded oasis. "Then let's retreat farther to the west. This old tracker will make about twenty-five miles an hour. That should be enough."

Fifteen minutes before the announced demonstration they were lying behind a deep ridge, looking expectantly toward the east. They wondered about the many airplanes that suddenly appeared and began to circle high above. Nearby, the helicopter of the Eastern Information Centre landed with its communications equipment. Beside it the television relay station of the Asiatic Federation stood peacefully. But from the Americans, nothing was to be seen. Perhaps they were stationed farther to the north.

Another ten minutes.

A wide ring had formed around the endangered area. No one could really believe what was perhaps due to occur here in a short while, but no one, nevertheless, wanted to miss the opportunity of observing a spectacle of nature, a spectacle of nature, however, that was produced and announced by a still very secret power.

Another five minutes passed.

Durbas nudged Corporal Abbas. "It will be getting dark in a other hour. Rhodan should hurry up. And by the way, we have been given the command to return to Fort Hussein right away. Something must be going on."

"War?"

"How am I supposed to know? If you really think about it, we have been in a state of war since 1945."

The corporal glanced at his watch. "It's about time now," he whispered, and looked toward the east; but in the same instant he closed his eyes like everyone else, blinded by the intensity of the light.

From out of the clear sky there fell a broad curtain of light that bathed the sandy desert some eighteen miles from the observation front. The spectators could see the bright light even through their closed eyelids. The origin of this ray, becoming progressively narrower with increasing altitude, lost itself deep in the blue sky, to be exact, where the crescent of the moon was standing invisibly.

A heat wave swept over the frightened group, but the radio broadcasts continued and the TV cameras kept operating, never ceasing to report the phenomenon live to all the world. On the screens of the news centres of all nations, the ray could be seen blazing. One of the airplanes that approached the danger zone too closely was seized in a tremendous vortex and carried directly into the heart of the flame storm. It was instantly transformed into a giant drop of molten metal that evaporated by the time it had fallen only a few yards.

For one minute this ray played down upon the desert. Then it was extinguished. All of a sudden, night seemed to fall. The sun, which before had been so brightly shining, now stood like a dying star, pale and reddish in the sky, still high above the horizon. One could look into it with open eyes.

Where the beam of energy had struck the earth, there was no longer any desert. A deep abyss lay agape in sand and rock, bottomless and with glowing borders. Within its interior there was a reddish luminescence, a fiery incandescence. Vapours rose from the depths of this newly created hell.

Only from an aerial perspective could one observe the crater in its entirety. It was gigantic in its dimensions and exactly circular, as if drawn with a compass.

The world held its breath.

For three hours.

The time of the ultimatum came and went.

Three red buttons remained untouched.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lieutenant Klein arrived in Peking by a roundabout route. He made contact with Number Two, in accordance with his instructions, and received further briefing from him. The assignment he had begun seemed impossible, but he had to attempt it. Perry Rhodan meant danger for the whole world. Whoever could remove this danger would gain undying fame, regardless of the nation of his origin. It was a task that demanded the highest personal commitment and the greatest courage.

There was, however, one circumstance that seemed to make it easier. Allan D. Mercant himself had given this important hint to Klein before sending him on his journey.

"Listen carefully, Lieutenant Klein. This Rhodan could never be removed by ordinary means. There is only one possibility—treason. Don't worry unnecessarily about the morality of the matter, because Rhodan has betrayed us. You must succeed in penetrating the force field. How you do this will remain your own problem. And something else, you are not alone. Agents of the Eastern Bloc as well as of the Asiatic Federation are working toward the same objective. It is not entirely impossible that the common crisis will bring about a certain understanding among ourselves. Until the *Stardust* has been destroyed, the agents from Moscow and Peking are our colleagues. So, now, good luck."

Good luck. That was what Klein could really use, and so far he had actually had it.

In Kalgan, some seventy-five miles northwest of Peking, he had bought a truck. There he noticed a Chinese he had already seen three times in the same day. This fellow observed him and never let him out of his sight for a moment.

The truck was apparently a good cross country vehicle. Along with it he had bought supplies and provisions, in addition to a tent and all equipment necessary for starting a small expedition. The roads were good, even if they were closely watched.

On the side of his truck, in large letters, he painted words that would place him above suspicion: TRIAL RUN FOR THE ARMY. His papers declared him to be an engineer. He was to determine whether the vehicle was suitable for troop transport through desert and mountains.

As Klein drove the truck out of the city, he watched in vain for the suspicious Chinese he had observed previously. Perhaps the fellow had understood at last that he could find nothing of value here to steal.

"They're on the lookout for foreigners," mumbled the agent, evading a vehicle that came toward him. "But I don't look as rich as a foreigner. What could you steal from an engineer?"

In the evening hours he passed the city of Kwai-hwa while driving along a new road that led alongside the Great Wall. He had no way of knowing that at the same time, Mao-Tsen, Asiatic Federation Minister of defence, was sitting in faraway Peking, hunched over a radio device that announced the precise location of the presumed test vehicle. Beside him was the Major Buta'an, his chief agent.

"Lieutenant Li Shai-tung is one of my best men," said Buta'an proudly, as if this were of his own doing. "He found the American right away and has not left his side. I am eager to test the validity of your theory that the others will cooperate with us. If this be so, then, as we have reason to believe now, the *Stardust* is really not an American military base. Indeed, were the Western Bloc to possess a weapon such as the ray from the moon represents, we would not be alive any more. Does Li know that the *Stardust* must fall into our hands intact?"

"He has received his instructions," Mao-Tsen agreed thoughtfully. He was listening to the shrill voice that emanated from the loudspeaker. "Ah, the American has driven on. He will soon reach the Hwang-ho and perhaps even Pau-tou, if he does not prefer to stay overnight in the open."

Klein did not know that his route had now been recorded on a map of the Asiatic security high command, as accurately as if he were broadcasting his position at every turn. He would learn this only when he stopped.

The crescent of the moon was already approaching the horizon below which the sun had long ago disappeared. To his left glittered the surface of a slowly flowing stream. Bushes lined the road to the edge of the shore.

Klein found an opening and drove the truck through it. He rolled a few yards farther until he had come to a suitable place to park. Here the truck stood protected among rocks, trees and bushes. Nearby the stream was flowing.

The lieutenant stretched and got out of the truck. Although it was warm, he thought a fire might help. He would not make camp tonight, but some hot coffee would do him a lot of good. Then he could stretch out on some blankets in the back of the truck and sleep.

"Are we stopping for the nights?" Someone asked in English with a terrible accent. "Take it easy, my friend, don't move! I am not unarmed. Turn around. Yes, all right. But slowly."

Klein had just thrown a few pieces of dry wood into the campfire, whose flames hungrily devoured their meal. Their growing glow allowed him to recognize the face of the speaker. It was, of course, the Chinese he had already noticed in Kalgan. Apparently he had managed to stow away in the back of the truck. All this would not have been quite so bad, but he held a heavy machine gun cradled in his arm. Klein looked directly into the menacing maw of this most dangerous weapon, whose explosive bullets could cripple even a medium sized tank.

"What do you want with me?" asked Klein. "If you're a beggar, then you're certainly a well equipped beggar. But watch out! This is a vehicle of the government."

"Of which government?" Li Shai-tung smiled his enigmatic smile. "The American government? Let us lay our cards on the table. What are your instructions? Perhaps we could reach some sort of agreement."

Klein gestured toward the fire. "Let's sit down."

"Do you have a weapon?"

"Do you want to come to an agreement or not? Are we going to keep talking with gun in hand?"

Li was hesitating. "I have the advantage now, but I would gladly give it up without regret if I only knew that you are sincere. Answer one question before I can trust you, before I consent. What are your instructions? What is the name of your superior? I know the answers already through my chief. If your answers coincide with mine..."

He slowly climbed down from the truck but kept the gun pointed at Klein. Klein reflected a moment, and then, remembering the words of Mercant, he suddenly knew how right the chief had been. The developments had already begun to take shape. It was starting at the very bottom, on a small scale, but one of these days it would encompass all nations. If they did not succeed in destroying the *Stardust* ...

"My superior is Allan D. Mercant, Director of the Western International Intelligence Agency. My instructions are to destroy the moon rocket *Stardust*. Is that quite enough?"

Li nodded. Lowering his weapon, he kept it in his hand for an indecisive moment before he threw it into the back of the truck. Then he walked over to the fire and extended his hand to Klein. They shook.

The lieutenant swallowed hard. His every action expressed amazement as he sat down with Li. A pleasant warmth came from the fire. The water in the kettle began to boil.

"Our assignments differ in one respect," admitted the Chinese after a long pause. "You are supposed to

destroy the *Stardust* , but I must prevent this under all circumstances. However, I think we will see eye to eye in time. At any rate, for the moment we have the same goal. Perry Rhodan must be prevented from forcing his will upon the world. Do I understand you correctly?"

Klein nodded.

"We can therefore collaborate until the time when we will have rendered Rhodan harmless," the Chinese said. "What happens then remains to be seen. Let us arrange a compromise. You will state your terms, please."

Lieutenant Klein could never know how grotesque it really was. Two agents of hostile powers cooperating to eliminate an even greater power. Only a few days before, the speed of a bullet would have decided who would still be alive in the next instant. Today all this was changed. Fear and trembling before an unknown and incomprehensible third power had made reluctant allies out of former deadly enemies.

"You promise not to give me away to your people, even after we've reached our goal? For this guarantee, I'll tell you how I intend to pass through the force field when we've reached the *Stardust* later. Agreed?"

Li offered the American his hand. Again they shook.

Five days later they left the road near Hang-shou and proceeded in a northerly direction into the Gobi Desert. The mountains and the river fell behind them. Now there were only a few salt lakes, small brooks and, with every mile, less and less vegetation. The desert became increasingly prominent. Some thirty miles from their destination, they were stopped by a tank patrol of the Asiatic army. It was Li who saved the day. A radio message to Peking worked wonders. With many apologies, both agents were released. The commanding officer of the patrol bowed a thousand times before Lieutenant Klein and wished him and his Chinese companion the best of luck and much success.

The situation became more and more strange. There seemed never to have been a conflict between East and West. The fear they shared moulded even the most contrary ideologies into unity.

They had to cross the military cordon twice more. Klein began to wonder why he was still driving the camouflaged truck. He could just as easily have gone by an army helicopter, and apparently it mattered little whether it was the army of the Asiatic Federation or the Western Bloc.

But then he considered that after all, he had to bluff Perry Rhodan.

If he could be bluffed.

Captain Reginald Bell shut off the motor of the helicopter.

"Well," asked Perry, "everything okay?"

"Of course. It should be easy to make the twelve hundred or so miles to Hong Kong, if I can land and get fresh fuel along the way. Next stop is Borneo. Then I have to make do until Australia."

Clark Fletcher stirred restlessly. He wore a vacant expression. He had long since forgotten the *Stardust* ,

which stood scarcely a hundred yards behind them. He saw only the helicopter that would return him to civilization. From there, there would be the possibility of returning to the United States, where his wife was expecting him.

How he had got here, he did not know. He knew his name and the name of the city in which his wife was living. That was all. The hypno block that Khrest, with the help of the psychoradiator, had erected like an armoured barrier around his memory had erased all recollection of the past from his mind. No one would be able to get anything out of Fletcher that he could no longer remember.

Reg jumped to the ground and shook hands with Perry. "You can rely on me, old man. I can put Fletch down in Hong Kong or Darwin, and then I'll get the necessary spare parts and the antileukaemia serum. I'll be back in one week. Say goodbye again to Manoli and Khrest for me."

"Don't let them shoot you down, Reg."

"The helicopter belongs to the army, and besides, I've got the antigrav with me. Its effective range extends as far as six miles. Quite apart from the fact that the hand radiators and other gadgets will help me too. With those, I can trade in whole continents, if need be. Just think of the little power generators! No bigger than a cigar box, and still they can supply 200 kilowatts continuously for a hundred years. Fletch, get aboard."

While the astronomer climbed into the back seat and sat down among the many boxes, Reg once again grasped his friend's hand.

"Release the force field in the very instant I've climbed up high enough. A few seconds should be sufficient. Then close the barrier again. I'll be back in a week."

Perry returned to the control centre of the *Stardust*. As the helicopter gained altitude and approached the dome of the invisible energy bell, he thrust back a lever for five seconds. Then Reg was outside.

With relatively moderate speed, the helicopter moved toward the south, flew over a few armoured divisions at fairly low altitude and soon afterward crossed the Richthofen Mountains along their eastern limits. Then Reg turned toward the southeast and remained at an altitude of about 2,000 feet.

Late in the afternoon, without any warning, he was attacked by a fighter plane.

This incident was inexplicable, even if it were possible that someone had observed his departure. It seemed unlikely that they had left him undisturbed for so long, only to attack now.

The small plane approached from the front and fired at him. The tracers were too far to the left, but before the pilot could make correction he had already shot past. He banked in a wide circle and attacked again, this time from the side.

By now Reg had overcome his initial surprise. He held the helicopter to its course while setting his hand radiator on medium intensity. Then he directed it at the returning plane.

"Now let's see what you can do," murmured Reg, and added intensely, "Pull up! Pull the engine straight up. Cease fire."

At once the small tongues of flame darting from beneath the wings were withdrawn. The enemy aircraft began climbing on an almost vertical ascent into the clear and cloudless sky.

Reg slowly put the hand radiator down. It was already too late when he thought of issuing another command to the pilot. The distance of some two or three miles could not be bridged by the radiator.

The fighter plane continued climbing, vertically and senselessly. Even when Reg could no longer see it, it continued its ascent, already much slower. The fuel had been exhausted. Nevertheless, the pilot, now half suffocating, faithfully followed the command he had received from thin air. He kept climbing upward until the last drop of precious fuel had been consumed in the sputtering turbine.

For a second the plane seemed to stop in midair. Then it began to fall. Madly spinning in a descending spiral, it fell for miles, to shatter on the rocks of the Tsingling Shan.

Reg was shaken. He had only now begun to realize what fearful power this innocent looking ray caster meant, if one knew how to use it properly. Perhaps he should have given the pilot another order; but how could he have decided that in a fraction of a second?

He landed on the small military airport near Chun-king. From there, it was another 600 miles to Hong Kong. At first no one took any notice of him. But when he simply stopped and remained in the helicopter, a jeep arrived. A high officer climbed out and came toward him.

"Why haven't you announced yourself?" he demanded. But then he saw Reg's face, which could not under any circumstances be mistaken for that of a Chinese. "Who are you?"

Reg grinned, if only because he had heard that it was the thing to do in this part of the world. "I don't understand a single word," he said in English. Pointing the radiator at the others, he continued, "I am Marshal Roon, and I need fuel. Please do whatever is necessary, but hurry up, will you, please?"

The driver of the jeep had been included in the treatment.

The officer saluted smartly, climbed back into his jeep, and whizzed off.

Grinning, Reg waited. He turned around toward Fletcher who had been witness to the occasion. Fletcher sat with eyes half closed, uncomprehending.

"Poor guy," muttered Reg.

Five minutes later, a tanker came and stopped beside the helicopter. It was getting dark but no one bothered with the two men in the cabin anyway. The fuel tank was filled. A few reserve fuel cans were placed in the hold. The leader of the group then signalled the end of the transaction.

Nodding graciously, Reg started the engine. He could still see the wide eyed expression on the faces of the Chinese as he took off into the copper evening sky.

The real Marshal Roon would never be able to explain to his satisfaction how Captain Fin-lai, who knew him so intimately, could swear throughout the court-martial proceedings that he had encountered him that night at the Chun-king air force base. Surely one could not be in two places at once.

It was strange.

At a distance of exactly seven miles from the *Stardust*, on the Koshun salt lake, a Mongolian firm (with the permission of Peking) had begun to set up facilities for the production of salt.

Bulldozers pushed mighty gaps into the shore, and earth moving machines bore away the sands. Thus were formed, not more than a yard in depth, pans into which brine could flow. When the sluice gates were closed, the sun would evaporate the water and only the salt would remain. Whole columns of trucks stood by, ready to bring the salt back to Mongolia, which belonged to the Moscow sphere of influence.

Lieutenant Klein and Li Shai-tung were forced to rest awhile, lest they become too conspicuous. As strange as the busy group of workmen may have seemed to them, there was no reason not to expect them here. The official battle against the *Stardust* had been ended when the futility of military tactics had finally been established. The low yield hydrogen bombs had left behind no fallout and no harmful after-effects. The troops had been moved away from the immediate vicinity of the lunar vessel.

The chief engineer of the firm, Ilij Rawenkow, welcomed the unexpected guests with special cordiality. He spoke Chinese fluently.

"What brings you to this forlorn land?" he inquired, after inviting them to a cup of tea. "We didn't expect to see another living soul for many months. By the way, gentlemen, may I introduce Peter Kosnov, the manager of our firm."

Both Russians made a good impression; yet something in, or rather, behind their eyes warned one to be cautious.

"We are testing a transport truck for the army," Li said very convincingly. "I think this is just the right region for that. Engineer Klein is accompanying me. He's lived in the Asiatic Federation for the last fifteen years."

Rawenkow and Kosnov exchanged quick glances.

"Oh, very interesting indeed." Rawenkow smiled charmingly. "Isn't it odd how Europeans or even Americans will join us and work side by side with us? After all, I suppose, all fences go down when it is a question of economic advantage."

Li almost blinked. "Really? Only economic advantage?" he replied tentatively, expectantly.

The Russian (one could see even at a distance that he, like Kosnov, was no Mongolian) looked inadvertently in the direction in which the spaceship lay, beyond a slight knoll.

"What do you mean by that?" He stalled for time.

Li did not change his expression. He followed their gaze and added, "There are no potential salt production areas over there, if I am not mistaken. Why did you not have the idea of making use of the Koshun lake any earlier?"

"What are you insinuating?" Rawenkow became impatient. He could hardly contain his distress.

"Let us drink to the reconciliation of old enemies." Li smiled and slowly drank his tea. "You don't mean to tell me that you are here just by accident, or do you? Over there, a scant six miles from here, stands the *Stardust*. She is much more valuable than all the salt lakes in the world. Now, since when do

Russians work for a Mongolian firm? You are Russian, aren't you, Rawenkow?"

Kosnov made an injudicious movement and found himself looking, not very intelligently, down the barrel of the pistol that Klein waved directly into his face.

"But who would be in such a hurry?" Li said in mild remonstrance. "You are among friends! Kosnov, forget the revolver in your shoulder bolster, and you, Klein, make sure your gun stays out of sight. It would be ridiculous if we could not come to terms, in the face of such a terrible opponent. Am I not right, Rawenkow?"

The Russians nodded slowly in agreement.

"How could find us out so quickly? So far, no one has thought to assume in us anything but the fictitious firm."

"Perhaps because we are colleagues," Li said amiably. "Is the name of your superior, by any chance, Ivan Martinovitch Kosselov?"

Both startled Russians nodded.

"Well, then we are in agreement. May we finally introduce ourselves? This is Lieutenant Klein of Western Security; I am Lieutenant Li Shai-tung of Asiatic Security. Thus, finally, three representatives of the three great power's are sitting around one table, even if it is only a shaky wooden barrel in the Gobi Desert. Speak honestly, is there still any reason why we should remain enemies?"

Rawenkow shook his head. "You are right, Lieutenant Li. I think we should call a cessation of all hostilities. We have the same objective, do we not?"

Klein gnawed on his lower lip. Suddenly he asked, "What happens once we've achieved our goal?"

No one could answer that.

Port Darwin lies on the western edge of Arnhem Land. It is the most important port of Cambridge Bay on the northern coast of Australia.

Although Australia belonged ideologically and economically to the Western Bloc and had its embassy in Washington, a large portion of its population was in favour of continued neutrality toward the continent. They also favoured military independence.

Reg knew, nevertheless, that he was not landing in friendly territory when he set the helicopter down near the coast on a sandy plateau. Evening was approaching. The lights of the city had begun to shine brightly.

"Fletch, are you coming to town with me? You can stay there overnight in a hotel. Tomorrow I'll bring you some money, and then there's nothing to stand in the way of your flight home."

"That's all right, Reg. You know I've got to get back to my wife. She's going to have a baby in three months, maybe a little sooner."

"Yes, yes, I know," agreed Reg. This baby story was getting on his nerves by now. If all expectant fathers carried on like this, he could understand so many jokes were made on the topic.

"Forget your worries. We've got about half an hour's walk into town. Let's hope nobody has observed our landing here. Come along."

Without incident Reg safely established his friend in the Royal Hotel and then took a walk around the town in order to gather some information. He returned to the helicopter shortly. A policeman who had been heated to the effects of the psychoradiator had willingly supplied all requested information.

Dr. Frank M. Haggard lived in the eastern section of the city, in a building near the hospital he had constructed. Here was the laboratory in which he had made his startling discovery two years ago and where he had gone on to develop the serum against leukaemia. Reg followed the directions given by the policeman and flew his helicopter along the white shimmering avenue of the freeway until he had reached a fork in the road, where he followed a side road toward the east. Soon he saw the silhouette of the skyline outlined against the lighter hues of the ocean.

He landed in a clearing, put the ray caster in his pocket, tucked one of the inexhaustible generators under his arm, and went on his way.

Frank Haggard had not yet gone to bed. He seemed surprised by his late caller. He drew up his eyebrows in a scowl but asked Reg to enter all the same. He looked curiously at the small package that Reg set carefully on a table.

"What can I do for you?" asked the famous physician.

Reg looked at him. Haggard turned out to be a Hercules with dark blond hair and blue eyes. He might be about forty-five years old. His face wore a kindly expression that would inspire confidence, especially when someone needed help.

"There's a lot you can do," began Reg. "I don't quite know how to explain it. My name is Reginald Bell. I don't suppose you've heard of me before?"

The physician leaned forward. "Do you live in Darwin?"

Reg was disappointed, but he did not show it. "No. I'm from Mongolia. I've just come from there."

Haggard leaned back again, rather quickly. "Oh," he said. And that was all he said. After all, Mongolia was 3,000 miles away. This stranger had just happened to come all the way from Mongolia to see him, of all people, at ten o'clock in the evening. Perhaps a lunatic that had escaped from somewhere. It might be better to watch one's step with him.

"Yes, from the Gobi Desert, to be exact."

"Oh, that's too much!" Haggard exclaimed involuntarily; but he got hold of himself and asked, full of sympathy, "Did you walk?"

"Only the last 500 yards," admitted Reg. How on Earth could he explain to the scientist what he wanted. "Doctor, I need all your leukaemia serum for the treatment of a sick man. Only I am—ah—a bit worried about payment But I do have a few things I brought along with me."

"You may speak quite freely with me," assured Haggard, his eyes straying across the room to the telephone. "Still, couldn't you have waited until tomorrow morning for this?"

"I'm sorry, Doctor, but that's out of the question. Every minute counts. Would you be interested in a cheap supply of electric current?"

"What do you mean?"

Reg took the little package and put it on his lap. He unwrapped the paper and set a small metal box on the table. There it lay, harmless and unimpressive. Only a few electrical outlets suggested that one might get electricity from it.

"It provides up to 200 kilowatts. You'll never have to recharge it. At maximum use, the supply will last up to 100 years. What do you think of that? Don't keep looking over at the phone! I'm not crazy, and I won't harm you. You have my word."

Now Haggard didn't know what to think. His intuition told him that he was dealing with a normal person, but now he was offered a technical miracle that contradicted all known physical laws.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Reg sighed. "All right, I'll tell you the whole story, but it sounds crazier than a fairy tale. I'm sure you've heard of the *Stardust*, the American moon rocket that landed in the Gobi Desert. Well, I'm a member of its crew. My commander, Perry Rhodan, stayed behind, while I..."

"Perry Rhodan?" Haggard recalled some newspaper articles he had read. "Yes, now I know! Now it comes back to me. Weren't there some political complications?"

"That's putting it mildly. Yes. We have our reasons for keeping the results of the expedition to ourselves. But on the dark side of the moon we discovered an alien spacecraft and its crew. It had been forced to land and couldn't take off again unless spare parts could be supplied them. The Arkonides—these are the space travellers, are unable to repair their ship themselves because of an advanced state of deterioration. They're extremely intelligent, but physically and psychologically they're wholly debilitated. Their expedition's scientific leader, named Khrest, is suffering from leukaemia. He has only a few more years to live, at best. But it's of the greatest importance that he be cured, because the future of his race depends on his survival. And the future of mankind as well. Khrest is our key to outer space and the planets of other solar systems and to a state of technology incredibly beyond our own. Do you understand everything I've said so far?"

Haggard nodded. "I've heard about the big crater in the Sahara, of course. Was it Khrest who did that?"

"Yes." Reg dispensed with unnecessary explanations. "And he can do even a great deal more; but we'll continue along that line later. First of all, my question—will you help us? will you let me have the serum? I can give you, in exchange, this generator. It comes from the Arkonides."

Haggard lit a cigarette. His hands were trembling almost imperceptibly.

"The serum by itself won't be of lasting benefit. Khrest really should come to my sanatorium for a regular series of treatments."

"That's unthinkable! He wouldn't be safe here for a single moment, Haggard. Agents from all nations

would be searching for him."

Haggard nodded slowly. Then he looked Reg squarely in the face. "Then I will have to go with you, Mr. Bell."

"You will? But your clinic, your sanatorium, your search projects. . ."

"They can wait. This Khrest is much more intriguing. I have always had a passion for the extraordinary. You should know that. Do you think I would pass up the opportunity of thoroughly examining an extraterrestrial intelligence? When do we leave?"

It was too sudden for Reg.

"Well, as soon as possible. There are a few more I have to take care of first. I need some money to buy spare parts for the Arkonide spacecraft. Electronic elements. Perhaps you could offer a suggestion as to how to go about it."

"I'm familiar with several corporations. If you offer them one of these generators, I'm sure you will be able to talk them into giving you a whole assortment of spare parts."

"Very good! Then tomorrow we'll make the rounds of the wholesale dealers. But right now we've got another problem coming up. I have only one helicopter at my disposal, and it won't carry very much. Would you happen to know someone who has a larger vehicle more suitable for transport?"

Haggard frowned pensively. "One of my assistants has a very respectable yacht. I'm sure he would place it at my disposal. There are some 1800 miles across the ocean to Hong Kong, but we could easily manage that in a week."

"Excellent. Once in Hong Kong, we'll see what we can do further. My psychoradiator will be able to help us there."

"Your who?"

Reg brought the silver rod out of his pocket. "A marvellous thing, Doc. With this, you can impose your will on anyone within a radius of two miles. You see, I would have taken you along with me to the Gobi even if you hadn't gone willingly."

"Incredible." Haggard was honestly amazed. "Then if that thing is functioning properly, we should have no trouble."

"It's working just fine," said Reg.

The next day brought considerable surprises and worry to the managers of several wholesale dealerships. Only the presence of Dr. Haggard, who was well-known to them all, prevented them from altogether rejecting Reg's demonstration as a malicious deception. Once convinced, however, their attitude of scepticism very quickly became wild enthusiasm. Reg disposed of his little black boxes, and the wholesale dealers, in turn, disposed of several large boxes full of replacement elements of an electronic nature. In addition to that, quite an imposing sum of money changed hands.

Fletcher was given \$5,000, and he booked passage to New York.

Haggard had his assistant's yacht come around to the bay near his clinic.

Everything seemed, therefore, to be in the best of order, and three days after Reg had arrived in Darwin the small vessel was loaded and ready to begin its voyage, the helicopter secured to its deck.

The two men went ashore for the last time. Haggard wanted to give a few final instructions to the assistants who replaced him. Meanwhile, Reg waited.

Somewhere in the twilight, sirens were screaming. Searchlights were stabbing into the dark with their bright pinpoint fingertips and bathing the bay in a semblance of daylight. Up in the air, the engines of heavy helicopters were humming. Tanks, scuttling through the bushes on the shore, pointed their guns at the yacht.

Soldiers suddenly appeared between Reg and the pier. In their hands weapons were held in readiness for firing. An officer approached from one side and came to a halt in front of Reg.

"Your name is Reginald Bell?"

"Is that forbidden?"

"You will please answer my questions and say nothing else."

Reg was silent.

"You belong to the crew of Major Perry Rhodan?"

"If you already know, why ask?" Reg thrust his hands into his pockets with a defiant gesture.

"Don't do that," warned the officer. "To resist would be foolish. We have you completely surrounded. Dr. Haggard has already been arrested, and Captain Fletcher is already in our custody."

"Poor guy!" murmured Reg with pity. "He's going to have a baby."

"What was that?"

"Oh, forget it. You wouldn't understand anyway."

During this exchange Reg had succeeded in setting the psychoradiator at maximum intensity. He now pushed the ON button. Carefully he observed the officer's reaction.

Now, bend your knees ten times, he thought, concentrating deeply.

The soldiers who had come closer dropped their weapons and stared in wide eyed amazement when they suddenly beheld their commanding officer doing knee bends with outspread arms. Reg was counting along. The man executed exactly ten knee bends.

Tell your people to disappear as quickly as possible and to return to their barracks.

The officer turned around and shouted at the soldiers. "What are you idiots still doing here? Get back go

the barracks, on the double! Hurry up, before I..."

"What's going on here?"

The cool, calm voice belonged to a civilian who had emerged from the bushes quite unnoticed. His dress was so inconspicuous as to have made it quite obvious to everyone, even one so inexperienced as Reg.

"The soldiers must return to their barracks," said the officer mechanically. "They must disappear."

The civilian turned to Reg. "Are you Reginald Bell?"

"Everyone seems to be asking the same question today. How odd! Once upon a time, no one cared what my name was. But since I've returned from the moon all this sure had changed!"

"Ah! Well, then, you admit it."

"Why shouldn't I? But who are you anyway?"

"Secret police. Follow me."

Reg had moved slightly.

"It would be to your advantage to follow me," the plainclothesman advised him gently. He began to walk toward the clinic.

"Who is in command of the action against me?"

"Police Inspector Miller and his garrison, sir," the policeman replied with a strangely changed voice.

"And who arrested Haggard?"

"I did. He will be transferred to the prison, where he will remain until his part in this incident has been cleared up. Would you like to talk to him?"

"You will authorize the release of Dr. Haggard at once," commanded Reg, and stopped. He had changed his mind. "Bring him to me at the yacht and see to it that Inspector Miller immediately abandons this action. Is that understood?"

"I am to bring Haggard to the yacht and cease the action. Understood."

"All right then, get going."

Reg had to take into consideration the fact that the new arrangement must not be made known so quickly that perhaps one or the other detachments might still try to execute the old orders. He would do best, therefore, to remain on board the yacht. The civilian would manage to bring the prisoners to him, unless he was prevented from doing so by force.

In the cabin of the upper deck, where glass windows afforded a clear view in all directions, Reg set up the antigravity apparatus on a table. Since its radius of activity extended for six miles, the city would also be affected by it.

He waited until the civilian had handed over the utterly bewildered Haggard. Then he switched on the antigravity. The yacht, being the centre of the field, kept its naval gravity. The surface of the ocean, unruffled by the slightest wind, remained like a huge bowl of lead. Only where a fish jumped playfully up into the air could a strange sight be seen. Fish and ocean spray were borne slowly aloft and soon disappeared in the dusk of evening.

Reg said regretfully to Haggard, "Too bad we can't see what's happening in the meantime. Everything within a radius of six miles, in any event, is weightless. Can you imagine how the whole police force must be floating up in the air?"

"But my patients...!" worried Haggard.

"The area of your clinic has been excluded. And now it's about time for us to flee the scene. I'll leave the antigrav switched on. Of course, it's also effective vertically, toward the sky, so no one can approach us at a distance of less than six miles."

In a protective bubble wherein the gravitational pull of Earth had been completely nullified for miles around, the yacht left the natural harbour. The yacht, bearing the very appropriate name of *Zephyr*, moved out toward the open sea, floating droplets of water in its wake.

Reg might not have been quite so happy had he been able to see what he had done with his light hearted playfulness. There was utter chaos in Darwin. Men and vehicles found the ground escaping from beneath their feet and rose without gravity into the night sky. If they were lucky, they reached the upper limits of the gradually diminishing antigravity zone, reacted with the opposite impulse, and landed gently on Earth again. Others were less fortunate.

This night, the news of this incredible event circled the globe. Again the whole world was on alert. Naval flotillas changed their course, sailing now toward the Celebes. There they elected to find a member of the crew of the *Stardust* on a secret yacht.

The following day two aircraft carriers and seven destroyers of the Asiatic Federation Navy had left their usual element. When, devoid of gravity, they were lifted up to a height of one and a half miles and then were allowed to fall slowly back into the ocean, they discontinued their efforts. They fired long range missiles from a safe distance.

But here too they had no success.

None of the missiles hit its target. They all detonated quite uselessly at either great altitudes or below the surface of the ocean. Reg was very well versed in how to alter their course by changing the amount of gravity in whatever way it suited him. But he also knew that the real dilemma still lay ahead of him.

Now that the whole world was at his heels, he could hardly succeed in landing without notice in Hong Kong. If he ever wanted to see the *Stardust* again, he would need a great deal of luck.

Captain Clark G. Fletcher stared insensibly into the bright light. His eyes were open wide.

"All you have to do is answer," said a hard voice behind the lamp. The face beyond the voice could not be seen. It was concealed in the darkness of the room. "Why did you want to return to the United States?"

"My wife, she's expecting a baby."

"Yes, you've already said that but you must have still another reason. No one would risk his life for a baby."

"How would you know that? Are you married?"

The disembodied voice cleared its throat. "Why did you not remain with Perry Rhodan?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I don't know anyone by that name. I don't know anything about a moon rocket either. Why don't you stop torturing me once and for all with your stupid questions? I don't understand what you mean."

"What are Rhodan's intentions?"

"I don't know."

"What did you find on the moon?"

Fletcher tried to move his arms but he could not, for steel bands held him fast to the arms of his chair. Sweat stood in great beads on his forehead. He was thirsty. He closed his eyes, but the bright light bored into him even through closed eyelids.

"I don't know!"

"Listen, Captain Fletcher. We've only begun. Unless you tell us the truth, we will be forced to resort to far more unpleasant methods."

"I can't tell you anything if I don't *know* anything!"

Behind the bright light there was soft murmuring. The light was suddenly turned off. The naked bulb on the ceiling seemed dark and dim. The steel bands were released, and firm hands pulled Fletcher out of his chair. Without protest, he let himself be led away. He saw neither the doors to the room nor the walls of the corridor. Not once did he see the faces of his inquisitors throughout it all. He thought only of the airplane that should have brought him back home by now. Even the brightly illuminated operating theatre could not impress him in his delirium.

They placed him on an operating table. Men in white coats bent over him and bound his arms. He willingly submitted to everything. Copper plates enclosed his wrists and ankles. Cables with electrodes were cool against his temples. Somewhere a large motor began to whirl.

The first colour reflexes appeared on a video screen. Several men sat waiting intently in front of it. Their tension was clearly evident on their faces.

"Do you believe we can learn anything this way?"

"The mental projector is infallible, Inspector. Unfortunately, its application might, in certain circumstances, pose a danger for the malefactor. But so long as he is talking—or rather. I should say, *thinking*—nothing much can happen."

"And his thoughts are translated and made visible on the screen?"

"Correct. We are dealing here with a further development of the lie detector that has heretofore been in use, but there is hardly any basis for comparison of the two any more. If we ask questions of the subject in the machine and he does not wish to answer them, at least he cannot refrain from thinking about them. These thoughts form on the screen in a picture that exactly corresponds to whatever he is thinking."

"I believe I see what you mean."

"Then let us begin."

Fletcher kept his eyes shut tightly. He lay very quietly, as if he wanted to go to sleep. His chest rose and fell rhythmically.

One of the civilians bent over him. "Can you hear me, Fletcher? You don't need to answer if you don't want to. But I would like to ask you a few things. Speak only when you so desire. What was it that you wanted in the United States?"

With fixed attention the men stared up at the video screen. A clear picture began to form there for the first time. The face of a still young and pretty woman appeared. She smiled and beckoned. On the table Fletcher moaned. The picture changed. Beds, nurses, doctors, and then again the young woman. She was lying in a hospital bed, a baby beside her.

"Would you believe it?" muttered the inspector. "He really is thinking only of his baby. *Anidee fixe*. Continue the questioning, Chief."

The chief nodded and turned to Fletcher. "Fletcher, what happened on the moon? We must know what happened on the moon."

At once the image of the woman with the baby disappeared. Colours flashed in a kaleidoscopic pattern, formed abstract figures and blended in an unrecognisable blur. Then a vortex began to form, turning faster, ever faster, until it had become a whirling disk.

"What do you know of the *Stardust*?"

The disk spun around with increasing speed. Amid this, lightning raced across the screen. Fletcher was groaning. His breathing grew more rapid, until he was panting. Perspiration ran in streams across his forehead.

One of the men in white coats stepped forward and nudged the chief. "You must stop for a while," he urged. "The prisoner is under too great a strain. His heart may not be able to stand that much."

"But we've scarcely begun!" interjected the inspector. "Just a few more questions."

"But can't you see that he doesn't know anything at all? The symbols indicate total amnesia.... All right, I'll give you two further trials, but I will hold you personally responsible."

The spinning vortex on the video screen had disappeared. Once again the young woman was visible. She walked through a blossoming garden, leading a little girl by the hand.

"Fletcher, what is the course of action that Perry Rhodan is pursuing?"

Instantly the image of the woman with the little girl faded out. Once more the vortex began to whirl madly. Lightning was crackling. Colour patterns arose and were extinguished.

"It's senseless to continue," said the doctor. "He doesn't know anything."

"But he must know something!" roared the inspector uncontrollably. "He hasn't lost his sanity, has he?"

"Perhaps his memory."

"But we must know what has happened! Isn't there any possibility of forcing his power of recall to return?"

"If you had time, perhaps we could succeed in doing so, but you would have to leave him alone for months, possibly even let him go."

"Impossible! He's a danger to the whole world. Just think of this Reginald Bell. Remember what he did to our whole town yesterday? Swimming up in the air, as though there were no longer any gravity...! No, not for a single moment is Fletcher permitted to remain without supervision."

The doctor sighed. "Well, then, put your last question to him."

The chief nodded. Obviously he did not agree with the inspector's undisciplined behaviour. He brought his mouth quite near to Fletcher's ear and asked, "Who is Khrest?"

That was the name Haggard had unwittingly yielded up during the interrogation that had lasted only a few minutes. The Inspector had caught the name, but did not know quite what to do with it.

"Listen, Fletcher. Who is Khrest?"

Fletcher reared up within his bonds. His eyes, now opened wide, stared into those of the civilian. In them there was fear but also something like recognition. His hands clenched into tight fists, and his lips mumbled inaudible words.

On the video screen there was chaos. The multicoloured vortex turned faster and faster, until no longer were there any colours but a monotonous grey. Then everything burst asunder. Splinters of colour slid in all directions and seemed to leap through the glass of the screen.

Then the glass became dark and remained so.

One of the physicians leaned forward to look into the rigid gaze of Fletcher's open eyes. He felt his pulse; then he stood upright.

His voice was sombre. "Gentlemen, he is dead."

The inspector turned pale. "Dead? How could he be dead? His heart was strong enough."

The doctor shrugged. "His heart may have been in perfect condition, but he died of a cerebral stroke."

No one said anything further.

Fletcher lay motionless on the operating table. Never would he learn of the birth of his child. Never would he know his little girl.

Lieutenant Klein stood at the invisible barrier. His hands felt the obstacle his eyes could not see. A mile and a half within the confines of the barrier stood the *Stardust*, once the pride of the whole Western world, then an opportunity that had failed to materialize, now the horror of all mankind.

A lone figure came toward the lieutenant. It was Major Rhodan, whom he recognized from the many film clips taken of him. The major stopped some six feet from Klein. In his hand he held paper and pencil.

What do you want? Who are you? Klein read what had been written.

Klein had not thought of it, but of course, if the force field could hold even atomic energy at bay, why not sound waves too? He searched his pockets and found a pencil and some paper. This way, at least, some form of communication was possible.

Lieutenant Klein. I come in behalf of Mercant and Pounder, to negotiate with you.

Perry Rhodan smiled and wrote, *Get undressed and I'll lift the force field for five seconds.*

Undressed?

Yes

—because of weapons.

Reluctantly Klein looked around in all directions. No one was in sight. He knew that Li and Kosnov, who sat behind the shore line on the other side of the riverbank, would disapprove, but that was of little concern to him now. The main thing was that he would be able to get through the force field, something no one else had yet been able to do.

Klein took off his clothing, placing everything neatly folded on a little heap. Perry nodded to him. He raised his right arm and gestured toward the *Stardust*, and Klein could suddenly hear his voice.

"Hurry. Come over to my side."

Klein left the humid air mingling with the cooler air when the force field had been removed. Then he was standing next to Perry.

In the same breath everything became totally still again. Klein could feel no wind. The invisible barrier had again been drawn around the space ship, and thus he was entirely cut off from the rest of humanity.

"Well, you come from Pounder, do you?" asked Perry, shaking hands with him. "I thought the old boy would get around to sending an envoy. How did you manage to get through hostile territory?"

"It wasn't so difficult," admitted Klein. "Their efforts at surveillance are diminishing."

"Really?" Perry said doubtfully. "But come along with me. I'll lend you some trousers."

They walked slowly toward the *Stardust*. Klein felt a strange sympathy for the man walking beside him. Yet his instructions were to kill this man at all costs, if he did not assent to Mercant's command. Well, for the time being, anyway, there was no sense in thinking about it. He could hardly kill him with his bare hands, and how should he destroy the *Stardust*? Of course, he knew about the self-destruct system, but there were still three men in the crew. No, it would not be quite so simple. Not even if he wanted to kill him.

And did he really want to?

On a flat rock directly at the side of the ship, both sat down.

"Now, please be quite honest, Lieutenant Klein. What are your orders? What word do you bring me? Did Pounder really send you?"

The agent shook his head. "Not directly. I'm with Mercant's defence division. My orders are to persuade you to destroy the *Stardust* and return with me to Nevada Fields. In case you refuse, I'm supposed to kill you and destroy the spaceship myself."

Perry called something to Manoli, who had meanwhile appeared at the hatch. Soon afterward the doctor returned, bringing with him a pair of light trousers from some uniform. Klein put them on.

"This is Dr. Manoli. Lieutenant Klein, from the Division of International Defence. Stay with Khrest, Eric. Tell him that we have a visitor." He waited until the doctor had gone before replying to Klein's words. "Well, then those are your orders? Why have you told me all this?"

"Because I have confidence in you, Rhodan. Because in the last few days I have had an experience that has moved me deeply."

"And what was that?"

"Later, Rhodan. I'll tell you in time, but first I want to ask you one question. . ."

"That will occur during the course of our discussion. You will answer my questions, I will answer yours. The picture will then form by itself. Is General Pounder very disappointed in me?"

"Why, of course. He cannot understand your motives. But at least, *he tries* to understand them, whereas Mercant's opinion is absolutely fixed. In his book you're a traitor."

Pounder doesn't think so? And how about you? What's your opinion?"

"You're a traitor in Pounder's eyes, perhaps also in the eyes of most of the peoples of the Western Bloc. In their judgment, it was your duty to hand over the discoveries you made on the moon. You were obligated to do so, if only economically, for without the financial backing of the United States government you would never have been able to reach the moon in the first place. Still, there may be reasons that transcend our morality; but they must certainly be very good reasons."

"Indeed they are," replied Perry decidedly. "My conscience, all my reason and logic, forbid me to surrender to any one terrestrial power the tremendous technology that was our discovery on the moon. What would be the consequences of that, Lieutenant Klein? think well before you reply."

"There isn't very much to think about. Before the Western Bloc—and I presume it to be the first

choice—could test its new weapons, fear and panic on the other side would already have caused a nuclear attack. War, and with it total annihilation, would have been unavoidable. I can understand very well what it is that you seek to avoid, Major Rhodan, but will everyone else?"

"They will have to," said Perry in a hard voice. Uncompromising resolve was visible in his eyes. "In reality, it is a question of much more than just avoiding a war. You are aware that on the moon we found an alien technology; but you are not aware that the creators of this technology, the Arkonides, are still alive. One of them, a scientist, is here with us, aboard the *Stardust*."

Klein needed a full minute to recover from the shock. "They are not dead, they are not extinct? They are alive, and they can, if they wish, produce more of these weapons?"

"Not only weapons of destruction but also constructive things. For example, tremendous sources of energy in the form of handy portable generators with which you can power vehicles of every sort.... You can extend the list of achievements almost indefinitely. Now you will begin to understand more fully why I really had to land here and why I am forced to defend myself against everyone—*everyone*. You are the first exception to this rule."

"Why me?"

"Because you come from Mercant and Pounder. I value these two men, and I would like for them to understand my motives. But you, Lieutenant Klein, you will be able to convince others only when you can follow my reasoning with your own intelligence. This is why I will not explain it for you."

Klein smiled. "I understand very well, and I believe I know your intentions. Look beyond the force field, over there at the river. Two colleagues are waiting for me. No, not Americans or western Europeans. An agent of the Asiatic Federation and an agent of the Eastern Bloc. We are cooperating in order to meet a common crisis. Just a few days ago we were threatened by the outbreak of war among ourselves but today the deadly enemies of yesterday are already working side by side in the fight against the still greater threat of your Third Power."

Perry nodded and smiled back. "Yes, it seems that we understand one another. Continue."

"Nothing more, Major Rhodan. Only you could confirm my suspicion that this event is only the beginning of a great upheaval."

"Yes, that is so. I represent a serious threat to the world—but not a threat to its uneasy peace. Fear of me and the might of the Arkonides will unite the nations of Earth. When that has happened, nothing should prevent the acquisition of the galactic technology by a stable world government. That, Lieutenant Klein, you may report to Mercant and General Pounder. Now I'd like to introduce you to my guest, the Arkonide Khrest. Please follow me into the ship."

Two long hours later, when Lieutenant Klein returned to his colleagues waiting at the river, there was no longer anything that could have changed his decision. He had become a defender of Perry's dream, a dream that would become the moral foundation of a future empire encompassing the galaxy.

"Well?" asked Kosnov, and stood up.

"What has happened?" Li inquired.

Klein stood between them. On his right, the Russian walked with long, strong steps. Little clouds of dust

were kicked up by his heavy boots. On his left, the Chinese Li shuffled quickly along. In his slanted eyes could be seen a great deal of distrust.

"Well, please do say something, Lieutenant. What have you accomplished?"

"Really everything. My assignment has ended, and I think yours as well. I'll try to explain it to you, Li. We've become comrades, haven't we? We understand each other very well. And you, Kosnov, can you imagine why we should kill each other simply because we have different answers to the same questions? Both of you shake your heads as if to say no. Fine. Then tell me, what would happen if that spaceship over there, with all the fantastic weaponry it brought back from the moon, should suddenly cease to exist or if it should fall into the hands of any one of the great powers, no matter which?"

They did not reply.

"Then I will tell you. In that same instant we would turn our weapons upon one another again; once more we would be deadly enemies, and that only because a greater threat would no longer exist. And just as it would happen among ourselves, so would it be with our nations. The end of the *Stardust* would mean the end of peace on Earth. Do you understand? Only so long as there exists the Third Power, the power of the Arkonides, will our world continue to exist. We three now have the chance to preserve the peace of our world, by returning to our countries with the report that there is no way to the *Stardust*. Then we will remain three good friends, and our three nations will do exactly the same."

Li smiled his enigmatic smile. "Six days ago I already had similar thoughts, but I did not dare to express them. Now I fully agree with you."

Klein and the Chinese looked hopefully at the Russian.

Kosnov had stopped. He returned their gaze.

Then he suddenly smiled.

"I fear that exacting salt from brine would be much more profitable at the Black Sea. We will soon be moving out of here. Soon we shall break camp and leave."

All three men laughed heartily.

Then all three clasped their hands and shook them in friendship.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hong Kong bore some resemblance to an army camp when the private yacht *Zephyr* in the harbour.

Reg had turned off the antigrav but kept it ready for use, fully prepared in the event of an attack. Haggard had given orders to the crew of the yacht to steer for a vacant berth. Both men were standing on the forward deck.

"Still looks a bit risky, I'd say," murmured the doctor sceptically. "How can we go ashore without getting caught? All the world knows by now of our arrival."

"Well, so what?" Reg answered in amazement. He toyed with the psychoradiator. "With this contraption I can put the whole city to sleep, and I can make it sleep soundly. To every single inhabitant, to every soldier, I can issue a command that must be obeyed unconditionally. No, I don't see any reason to be concerned. Not at all. Particularly when they won't be able to employ tactical nuclear weapons, the only thing that might become dangerous for us."

"And how shall we bring my laboratory ashore? How shall we unload your spare parts and get them finally to the Gobi Desert?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Reg said in the most soothing manner. "For now, let's have the port commandant come by as soon as we dock. By the way, why did you have to bring such an extravagant lab with you? I haven't had time to inquire into the matter until now."

"Extravagant? This is hardly more than a small portable lab, equipped with the more modern diagnostic aids, surgical instruments, machines to analyse basal metabolism, and samples of a wide variety of medications. You must consider that we are dealing here with a biologically divergent being who will likely as not respond to treatment in a manner entirely different from what we are used to. An X-ray console is also here, for which..."

"And I thought," Reg interrupted with a sigh, "that we could do with an ordinary surgical syringe and a few ampoules of serum."

"That's where you are mistaken, my dear Mr. Bell. But look over there at the armoured tanks on the quay. They're just waiting to sink our yacht."

"Nonsense. They could already have tried that a long time ago. They know very well that I will leave them up in the air, in the exact sense of the words. Okay, now the yacht is at anchor in port, and I can try a few of my magic tricks."

Reg directed his radiator at medium intensity toward the low lying building on the main quay and began to concentrate deeply.

The port commandant is to report at once to Pier Seven. Port commandant to Pier Seven. Most urgent. YachtZephyr.

If he could have seen what he achieved with his telepathic command, he would probably have burst out laughing. In the administration building, almost 200 employees were busily at work. Each and every one of them suddenly felt it his most momentous duty to direct the port commandant's attention to the fact that he must go at once to pier number seven where the yacht *Zephyr* was awaiting him. But the commandant was already on his way there, following the impulse that had arise. in his innermost being, and all along the road he had to fend off the entire work force of the administration building, who seemed only to delay him with their incessant reminders to "Report at once to Pier Seven."

"I know, I know!" he shouted, so loud that everyone could hear him.

He rushed out onto the quay, pushing his way through the crowd of dock workers. He reached the yacht quite out of breath. Along the way he was joined in silence by the commander of the armoured division employed in the area. Together the two men climbed up the small gangway that had in the

meantime been rolled out for them.

By now, Reg had stationed the switched on psychoradiator in such a manner that its radius of activity included the pier and the upper deck. The apparatus couldn't be seen, but it was nevertheless very effective.

Haggard could not conceal his uneasiness but Reg confidently strode out toward both visitors.

"I am so glad to see you," he said with honest conviction, "and I thank you for the magnificent parade you've put on in my honour. That really wasn't necessary. Sir, in two hours I shall require twenty longshoremen to unload my ship. Will you please see to it that I have these workers? Thank you so much. You may leave now."

The port commandant saluted smartly and departed. The commanding officer of the armoured division remained where he was. He seemed to be waiting for something.

"Who is in command of the troops assembling in Hong Kong?" asked Reg.

"Marshal Roon is personally in charge."

"Roon? Wasn't that the officer who floated way up into the air in the most marvellous spiral when Perry switched On the antigrav? Of course! The same to whom the helicopter belonged. Tell him that he can pick it up again at his earliest opportunity."

"Very well. I shall inform Marshal Roon immediately."

Ten minutes later, a group of high ranking officers proceeded from the main quay to the narrow pier. A pair of golden stripes shone in their midst. That would be Marshal Roon himself.

The psychoradiator lay well hidden beneath a huge coil of rope. Its rays played over the whole group, but no one would notice their effect so long as he was not addressed directly.

After a brief discussion, Roon and two officers came aboard the yacht. Roon had long since forgotten why he really had come here, and only the compulsion to fulfil the command still motivated him.

Reg puffed out his chest, which made him appear a bit less potbellied. His short hair was standing upright like a hairbrush. He saluted smartly. "Marshal Roon, I am delighted that you could come so quickly. Gentlemen, welcome aboard the *Zephyr*. May I ask, Marshal, how you liked your little trip through the air not so long ago? I am sure you remember it."

"Why, of course. I remember it well. A very strange phenomenon. An invention of the white devils. Besides, my helicopter was stolen. You are Captain Reginald Bell, if I am not mistaken. I urge you to surrender."

"But Marshal, we are such good friends! Of course you're only joking. You will have your helicopter returned, and that will be the end of the whole affair. You'll just forget all about it. Agreed?"

"Agreed," consented Roon without the slightest hesitation.

"In addition, you will withdraw all your troops from Hong Kong and release instructions to the army. The *Stardust* must not be disturbed, not in any respect. You will also guarantee safe transportation to

Reginald Bell and afford him all possible support. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Well, then. You will send me three overland trucks within an hour. One of them you will man with ten high ranking officers. Let them take along blankets or sleeping bags. The other two vehicles must be empty, to carry our own freight. Agreed?"

Marshal Roon saluted. "Your orders will be executed. Is there anything else, sir?"

"Yes, Marshal In the future you will refuse to submit to any command that concerns action against the *Stardust* or its crew. Pass this on to your subordinates."

Turning around with a flourish, Marshal Roon marched off the deck. Back on the pier, the other officers began to question him, but he shouted them down so furiously that they pulled in their heads and kept silent. After all, he was the field marshal; he ought to know what he was doing.

And Roon suddenly did.

Haggard eventually stopped gaping. "It's most amazing..." he began, but Reg interrupted him.

"You'll be even more amazed, once you've talked to Khrest. Didn't I tell you that we'd make it?"

They waited calmly in silence. They saw how the armoured tanks assembled on the other side of the quay and then rolled off toward the eastern exit of the city. The infantry, which had by then begun marching, followed them. The police, however, hesitated. Reg showed them no mercy. He took the psychoradiator in his hand and commanded, "All members of the police, whether official or secret, lie down flat on the ground!"

It was astonishing to note just who abruptly stretched out on the ground, as directed. Even very dignified old gentlemen who seemed to be walking around with a bored expression on their faces suddenly threw themselves into the mud and lost their yak hair beards. Workers and fishermen who appeared quite harmless joined them on the ground. And of course, there were the policemen in uniform.

"Crawl along the ground," ordered Reg with secret joy. He swore that from this day forward he would never let go of the psychoradiator. "Crawl on the ground until you reach your quarters."

Squealing children accompanied the procession of once feared policemen as they made their way through the streets, crawling on their bellies like snakes. No one could explain these circumstances, but everyone felt that this was the way it should be, for all had been witness to the command without recognizing its source. But those who did not belong to the police were not unduly concerned about it.

The port was completely depopulated.

Shortly, the twenty workers and three trucks arrived as requested. Ten officers were sitting expectantly in the last vehicle.

"Just keep quiet and wait for further instructions. You are our military escort. You'll have to defend us with your guns against attack. That is all."

The unloading of the yacht and the loading of the trucks did not take very long. Just one hour, and all

was done. The yacht raised anchor, moving out to sea. Reg wished the crew a happy and safe voyage home.

He had taken a seat next to the driver in the first truck. Haggard was sitting in the second one, which carried his valuable laboratory equipment. The column started to move and was soon bouncing over the rough road. Only at the edge of the town did the condition of the road improve, so that one could finally drive a bit faster. No military forces nor policemen could be seen.

In Canton they reached the overland road, wide and well paved, leading to the 1,200 mile distant Lan-chou. Once they had arrived there, they would have to turn north through the valley of the Hwang-ho, past the Alashan Mountains, and then along the 38th Parallel westward across the desert. Altogether, it would take a three day journey at the most.

If only everything went all right...

Peking to Washington:

"Various incidents seem to indicate (contrary to the minority opinion that Major Rhodan's claims might possibly be true) that the Stardust with which we are dealing is nothing but a Western military base. Our scientists are of the opinion that the nullification of gravity could easily be a Western discovery. We therefore repeat our demand that you remove the base in the Gobi Desert forthwith."

Washington to Peking:

"How do your scientists explain the still active new volcano that has appeared in the Sahara Desert? We reaffirm that we have nothing whatsoever to do with the Stardust. We are just as interested in removing this menace as you are."

Peking to Washington:

"The crater could very well be a diversionary tactic entirely unrelated to any so-called energy ray. Our belief that the Stardust is an American military base has been confirmed by the fact that your people have prevented our agents from approaching the lunar spacecraft. Your agents, on the other hand, have been able even to enter the Stardust. We therefore repeat our warning."

Washington to Peking:

"We have no corroboration of your charges. We are unable to verify that even a single one of our agents has been able to contact Major Rhodan. There obviously must be some misunderstanding. There must be some explanation for this incident."

Moscow to Washington:

"We demand the immediate removal of your military base in the Gobi Desert."

Moscow to Peking:

"We demand the immediate removal of the American military base in your territory."

The assault took place three days later.

The truck column had passed the Alashan Mountains and had just turned westward. The former caravan road was very poor and forced the trucks to drive at an extremely slow speed. Huge holes in the road had to be carefully evaded, and deep ruts made it constantly necessary to detour.

It was to their advantage that at the moment of the attack, they were crossing a rather low depression. Otherwise, the first round of fire would surely have found its mark. But this way the heavy barrage passed over their heads and detonated on the northern foothills of the Richthofen Mountains.

Reg had everything stop on the spot and ordered the vehicles to line up in close formation on their right. There they were protected from direct hits by a steep slope facing the north. He then took the gravity neutralizer under his arm and looked for a good place to climb up and assess their position. Arriving atop a bluff looking out over the desert, he put down the box.

"Dammit, the yellows have learned a few things since the last time."

The Asiatics were now at a distance of at least six miles and had set up a regular emplacement there. One of the officers gave Reg a pair of binoculars.

At least eight heavy cannon were over there. Further to the right, there was a battery of lighter guns. In between them were machine gun nests.

The enemy was no longer vulnerable to the effects of the neutralizer .

Once again a salvo passed above them, this time already a bit lower. The hits were coming closer.

"Haggard, the radio instruments are in the front truck. Take one of the officers and try to get in touch with the *Stardust* . Wavelength, 44 meters. Let me know as soon as someone answers. But hurry up! Otherwise, those guys over there will finally hit their target. There's nothing I can do to prevent it."

Haggard found a radio officer. It was nevertheless ten endless minutes before the instruments received the *Stardust* 's reply. Reg slid down the slope and asked Haggard to take his place. They had to protect themselves against a surprise infantry attack.

"Perry, is that you?"

"Reg! Hi, fellow! You're still alive! Where on Earth have you been keeping yourself? Did everything come off all right?"

"So far, so good. I'm less than sixty miles from the *Stardust*. We have three trucks full of material for Khrest. With me is Dr. Haggard, the discoverer of the antileukaemia serum. And now the Chinese are giving us a nice fiery reception."

"Well then, so far you've been able to manage?"

"Don't forget that the others are learning too. They've already found out that they can't come any closer than six miles. They're not even using any long distance missiles any more, because they know I can change their course. But I'm not immune from the chance hit of a grenade, much as I'm trying to deflect them. You must help us, and very quickly at that."

"What is your exact geographical position?"

"Just a moment. Hey, driver! The map."

In a few minutes Perry knew the exact position of the column and where the enemy artillery was. He promised to ask Khrest for immediate assistance. Reg stayed tuned to the radio.

The shell bursts were falling closer and closer. Several smaller shells were already whistling very near above their heads. One of them even exploded on the southern crest of the ridge, but that was pure accident.

Perry came on again. "Khrest wanted to ask Thora to use the energy ray, but the moon is still too far below the horizon. It's impossible, Reg. There's nothing we can do from the *Stardust* either. But there's still one possibility. Have you traded away all the power generators?"

"No, I'm returning with two of them. Why?"

Then thank the Lord! Which do you want to use, the psychoradiator or the antigrav?"

"But the distance is too..."

"Don't get all upset—it's not good for your health. All right, which do you prefer? You can choose both if you have two generators left. The situation is this, the power reservoirs of the psychoradiators and the antigrav are too weak to bridge more than the specified distance. Attached to the generator, however, they can multiply their range tenfold, but only for a few minutes. Then you'll have to wait awhile, to avoid an overload. Do you follow me?"

"And how are they supposed to be connected?"

"Between generator and antigrav, a cable will do. The psychoradiator has a little cap in its reverse end. Unscrew the cap. Underneath it you'll find a plug. You'll know how to insert it into the generator and..."

"That will do, my lord and master. And thanks a lot. Too bad you can't watch what's going to happen here in a little while."

"As a matter of fact, I can. That's even worth the risk of switching off the force field. You'll be arriving back here tonight, I hope?"

But Reg was no longer listening. Now that he knew what to do, he did not want to lose a second in doing it. The drivers and officers were ordered to keep as quiet as possible. Haggard was given the antigrav with the attached generator, while Reg held on to the amplified psychoradiator.

Perry Rhodan, who along with Khrest and Manoli, was sitting in front of the screen of a small closed circuit television set, had surely the greatest fun watching the spectacle that followed. They observed the scene from above, via a miniprobe hovering above the enemy's position at about two miles altitude.

At first nothing seemed to be happening. But then, when the heavy guns fired another round, a rather bizarre tableau was offered the spectators. Unhindered by any earthly gravity, the shells whizzed off in a straight line and disappeared in the vicinity of the faraway mountains. The guns, however, recoiled with the corresponding reaction, sailing off at a lesser speed and slowly rising in the opposite direction. The gradual descent that later occurred suggested that Reg had left them perhaps one-tenth of normal gravity, so that all involved would reach the ground again safely, without losing their lives in a sudden fall.

Khrest made note of all this with a nod of approval.

The smaller guns did not fare any better.

But the main event was still to come. As if in obedience to a silent command, all the soldiers were suddenly executing an abrupt about-face, officers, drivers and artillerymen alike—and running off toward the north. Like giant fleas, they proceeded with great leaps, touched the ground after several hundred yards, then bounded off again. The distance spanned by the jumps became shorter. Reg had to decrease the power of the antigrav gradually. Eventually the poor devils were only running; but they ran and ran, as if the very devil were after them. They would probably have kept on running if Reg had not given them the command to take a refreshing bath in the nearest salt lake of the Ninghsia Desert.

Perry adjusted the dials on the control panel. The mini probe descended. In higher magnification, Reg appeared on the screen and, next to him, a giant of a man with dark blond hair. Both were laughing until tears streamed down their cheeks. They slid down the slope and climbed into their vehicles again.

When the trucks started off, Reg was still laughing.

Perry turned off the set and looked at Khrest.

A fine amusement was visible in the eyes of the Arkonide. He nodded slowly. "I stand in admiration of you and your race," he said. "But possibly I am mistaken and you are an exception. Your friend could easily have killed all his enemies. Why did he not?"

"Because he was in possession of far superior weapons."

Once again Khrest nodded. "Ah, I thought so. Now I am certain that our destiny could not rest in better hands than your own. You will achieve it, Perry. You will realize your dream."

"Thanks," replied Perry warmly.

Four hours later the two trucks were rolling through the force field, which had been lifted especially for them. The third truck, however, had already turned around, and it drove off in an easterly direction with its three drivers and ten officers.

They had been given instructions to report to the security high command in Peking with the information that the Third Power wished to take up diplomatic relations with the Asiatic Federation.

CHAPTER SIX

Peking to Washington:

"The latest incident has proved that your government does not intend to comply with our request. Therefore, if this affair has not been cleared up by noon tomorrow, our time, we have decided to officially sever diplomatic relations with the Western Bloc. The Asiatic Federation possesses means sufficient to defend itself against attack."

Peking to Moscow:

"We are expecting a definitive statement from Washington regarding the presence of the American military base in the Gobi Desert. The answer should have arrived by ten o'clock tomorrow morning..."

Peking to Stardust :

"Your demand that we take up diplomatic relations with a single spaceship is absurd. We ask you for the last time to announce your surrender by radio. You will please switch off the force field and leave your ship, unarmed. Should you send us a negative reply, diplomatic relations with the Western Bloc will be officially terminated tomorrow at noon."

Washington to Peking:

"We assure you once again we have no explanation for the current crisis and therefore urge an immediate emergency session of the heads of state concerned."

Stardust
to Peking:

"We repeat our offer. Furthermore, we wish to make known that we will, with all means at our disposal, prevent any warlike act between nations of Earth."

Moscow to Peking:

"We acknowledge receipt of your communiqué."

The waning moon now followed the sun in its descent below the horizon. Because of its favourable position, a direct line video connection with Thora was possible.

In spite of his iron self-control, Perry could not suppress the somehow strange feeling that seized him when he saw the singularly beautiful woman. Her light, almost white blond hair made a pleasant contrast with the red golden eyes that looked at him so coldly and matter of factly.

With an arrogance that made Perry's face flush with anger, she said, "Why are *you* calling me?"

"Khrest would like to speak to you," Perry replied just as icily.

"Then will you kindly get him?"

Perry did not reply. He looked at her once more and turned away. With an unemotional expression, Khrest took his seat in front of the video screen and began to speak in urging, sometimes commanding, then again imploring. Occasionally Thora offered a question or made a reply. Finally she said something further and nodded in agreement. The screen grew dark.

Khrest remained seated at the set for several moment, unmoving, before finally rising.

He sighed. "For the moment she will do what I have ordered her to do. But I already have a presentiment that later we shall run into difficulties with her. She blindly defends the old laws, without recognizing the necessity of change. She will resist when it comes to the question of bringing about a *rapprochement* of our races."

"Perhaps I should talk to her for a few minutes with a psychoradiator in my hand," Reg suggested sharply. "Then she'll behave as nicely as the officers of the Asiatic army."

"We are immune to the effects of the radiator," Khrest said. "No, one of these days she will *have* to understand where the future of her race now lies. At any rate, now she is informed of our situation. She suggested that I return in a small space capsule she would send for me. It was her intention to let the energy ray wander in a criss-cross pattern over the whole globe. I was finally able to convince her that nothing would be gained by this. I made clear to her, first of all, that my cure and recovery is the most important thing—and not only my own, because I assume that our entire race is suffering from leukaemia as the result of some genetic decay. I must therefore remain here alone. Tomorrow Thora will personally supervise all the events from an auxiliary vessel of our space sphere, revolving around Earth in a stable orbit at an altitude of about 600 miles. A constantly renewed neutron field will prevent any nuclear reaction. Magnetic fields will divert rockets from their course and let them fall harmlessly into the ocean. Special mechanisms for draining energy will interrupt your power supplies and paralyse your communications systems. Gentlemen, you may rest assured that there will be no war, even if all the world should want it. By tomorrow afternoon we will already be negotiating with the various governments, and they will be forced to recognize us."

"And what until then?" asked Perry.

"There is nothing to do but wait."

Eric Manoli laid a hand on Khrest's shoulder. "Please, Khrest, won't you lie down again? You must avoid any unnecessary strain. Tomorrow, when everything is over, Dr. Haggard will examine you. I'm convinced that he will be able to help you."

Khrest smiled in gratitude. "If he can't, then no one can."

They all regarded him fondly as he turned to leave. Reg followed him and helped arrange the blankets of his bunk.

Haggard glanced questioningly at Manoli. "What is your conclusion? Have you had an opportunity yet to examine him and make a proper diagnosis?"

"Come with me into my cabin. There, in complete peace and quiet, I'll tell you what my observations have been so far. Together we should succeed in helping Khrest recover completely. For the time being he is in no danger."

Perry remained alone in the centre. Through the observation dome he studied the nocturnal sky. The stars were shining with a rarely seen clarity. The waning moon sank toward the horizon. In one or two hours it would have set.

Tomorrow would be the day of ultimate decision. If nothing thus far had persuaded the world of the might of the Arkonides, only the terror and consternation of the following day would convince them. There was nothing more difficult than to prevent a war that a desperate humanity had freely chosen.

He remained until the moon had vanished completely below the horizon. Then he suddenly felt the cool night air. It was as if, with the moon, the face of a woman had also withdrawn into darkness. The beautiful face of a woman with light, almost white blond hair and red golden eyes.

The awesome machinery was set in motion.

For years it had lain awaiting this moment. Thousands of test runs and exercises had proved that in time of crisis, the mechanism would function without error. One touch of a button was sufficient to release the chain reaction that nothing could ever stop.

Peking, twelve o'clock noon.

The Premier of the Asiatic Federation nodded to Marshal Lao Lin-to, who had assumed command of the armed forces in place of the deposed Marshal Roon.

Lao lifted the receiver of the telephone that was connected by a direct line to the security high command.

"*Pleiades*. The squadrons are to take off at once. Step number one. Missile launching pads, target: West. Fire with radius seven. Fleet, navigate waters: East. In ten minutes it must all be over. All ground troops into the fallout shelters. Await counterattack. Endit."

Somewhere a hand was balanced over the red button. The hand hesitated for a moment that seemed to last eternities. Then a yellow thumb fell upon it and pressed it hard, ruthlessly, all the way down.

A continent was trembling.

From barrels hidden beneath the sea, in submarines patrolling international waters, slender atom torpedoes broke through the surface of the waves and raced high into the radiantly blue sky, as if in pursuit of the sun. They turned toward east and toward west. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands...

In every base there was maximum activity. Squadron after squadron, heavily laden with their deadly cargo, rose into the air, entered formation, and followed the prearranged air course high into the stratosphere.

The fleet followed close behind, to deliver the *coupe de grace* to a destroyed world and perhaps also to avoid the annihilation that must inevitably fall upon their own shores.

All this happened according to plan.

Only one unanticipated move was made, somewhere in the barracks of some installation in the Asiatic Federation. A Western agent fingered a telegraph key with furious haste. Morse code raced around half the world, requiring but 1 / 20th of a second.

Exactly one minute and eighteen seconds after the yellow thumb had touched the red button, the same thing happened in Washington. The same machinery was set in motion. This mechanism could not in any respect be distinguished from that in the Far East. In a hair trigger instant, ICBMs were hurled into the black night sky, leaving behind them a train of fiery gases. They were lost as glowing specks among the stars.

Perhaps they were a bit faster than those of the Asiatic Federation. In that case, death would not make a difference of seventy-eight seconds but might strike both sides simultaneously.

Only the missiles of the nuclear submarines, which were stationed in every ocean all over the world, would be faster, for they would have to bridge smaller distances.

How much longer still?

Ten minutes, perhaps; possibly even fifteen.

Then the end of the world would begin.

Moscow waited all of two minutes.

Then there as well someone punched the red button. The missiles stormed into the morning sky and remained on course. There were thousands of them. Now the differences between this and the attacks that had begun elsewhere became obvious.

The ICBMs of the Eastern Bloc all had only one target. Their trajectories all converged at one point. This point designated the spot where the *Stardust* stood beneath its protective bell of energy, isolated from the world and the imminent disaster.

The sun shone brightly in Moscow.

The radar installations along the borders of the gigantic country revealed that the missiles of the Asiatic Federation had passed them by, high in the upper atmosphere, and still had a long flight ahead of them. None of them would come down in the territory of the Eastern Bloc.

The first rockets of the Western Bloc showed a similar disinclination.

Marshal Petronsky nodded toward the Prime Minister with open triumph. "We've done it! In half an hour there will no longer be any Asiatic Federation, nor will a Western Bloc or a United States exist. This damned base in the Gobi Desert will have been obliterated. There will be but one power remaining. We will remain."

"The art of survival my dear marshal. Merely the art of survival. It is only possible for a neutral power."

Then a mood of silent expectation descended upon the two men. But not onto them alone. It fell like a shroud upon the whole world.

The last minutes before the end seemed never to pass. They crept along to become eternities.

Mankind held its breath. The first Polaris rockets, gliding into lower layers of the atmosphere, approached their targets. Their angle of trajectory grew more and more acute, and finally they simply began to fall vertically toward Earth.

They buried themselves deeply in the ground, leaving nothing but small, inconsequential craters.

No detonation, no nuclear reaction, no mushroom cloud.

The wave of ICBMs had meanwhile traversed the Pacific. The explosive power of each was so great that they could each have destroyed all life within a radius of sixty miles. Therefore, they diverged from one another during their flight, until they reached the western coast of North and South America like a single long and narrow line of fire. When they failed to detonate on the intended targets, their own momentum drove them further inward before making their descent on mountains, jungles or plains. Only one missile in the second wave fell prematurely. It went right through a seven story apartment house in the western district of Los Angeles, plummeting through each floor in turn and finally lodging in its foundation.

The fate of the American missiles was just as inglorious. Not a single one detonated or went down in densely settled areas. As could be confirmed later, they caused only insignificant material damage.

On the oceans of Earth a preposterous set of circumstances was taking shape.

At a distance of more than 120 miles from the Asiatic coast an American bomb squadron sighted the fleet of the Asiatic Federation. The aircraft carriers and heavy cruisers, smaller destroyers and PT boats—yes, even submarines—drifted as if at anchor on the calm ocean waves.

Air force Colonel Bryan Neldiss gave the signal to attack. Although he could find no explanation for the attitude of his suddenly materializing opponents, he nevertheless had no intention of letting this fat booty get away from him.

The radio went dead. He could not get confirmation of his command. Without his having to lift a finger, his plane started to dive. The whole bomber squadron followed rank. Not far from the enemy fleet, the

squadron of American bombers plunged *den masse* into the water. Everyone hastened to abandon the rapidly sinking aircraft. Rubber life rafts helped the swimming crews to safety.

Admiral Sen-toa did not give the command to fire, as he had at first intended. Instead, he initiated rescue procedures. Lifeboats were put down into the water. Helping hands pulled the airmen out of the softly undulating ocean. Within half an hour, all was finished. The American squadron had sunk. The fleet of Asiatic vessels lay motionless, as if held fast in the light breeze by an invisible hand.

Bryan Neldiss and Sen-toa sat silently and icily opposite one another in the officers' quarters. Their mutual animosity had given way to the fear of something still more threatening, something unknown.

Some ninety miles off the West Coast of the United States, the same events had occurred. but with the roles reversed. And here one of the pilots drowned when he could not leave his sinking plane in time.

The Russian ICBMs, pulled out of their trajectories by some unseen force, made 180 degree turns and returned to their own bases. With only minor deviation, they bore straight down into the ground almost where they had begun their flight. None of them detonated.

The nuclear war was over before it had even begun.

There were actually some peasants in China and farmers in the American Midwest who never even knew what had happened. After they heard of the rockets that had gone down, when radio communication was restored they loudly declared their displeasure with what they at first thought were futile attempts to send another man to the moon. But upon learning the truth of the matter, they suddenly grew silent.

Someone had prevented the war. A single individual had been greater than all the great powers. He had opposed them and had forcibly wrung peace from them.

Perry Rhodan!

But not for long did Perry remain the hero of the common folk. Too great had been the insult that he had inflicted upon the overlords of Earth. Too great their anguish when they found themselves displaced from the thrones of their power.

And if none of them, alone, was able to end the sinister reign of Perry Rhodan, then perhaps all together, in a common effort...

With this conviction, a fever of diplomatic activity ensued.

Peking to Washington:

"Herewith we express our regret over the misunderstanding that almost resulted in global conflict. We propose an immediate conference of all concerned parties. We leave it to you to select an appropriate site where the conference may be held."

Peking to Moscow:

"The Prime Minister of the Eastern Bloc is requested to participate with the Premier of the Asiatic Federation and the President of the Western Bloc in a conference of world powers to be held in two days."

Peking to Washington:

"Cairo will be satisfactory as the site of the conference."

Washington to Peking [idem Washington to Moscow]:

"The government of the Western Bloc has declared the crew of the Stardust principal enemies of the state. We therefore invite the Asiatic Federation to prepare a joint lunar expedition when the present world political crisis has been resolved."

Peking to Washington:

"Agreed."

Peking to Asiatic Federation Space Explorations Command:

(Highly Classified Information.)

"Step up all efforts to launch a new moon rocket immediately. Preparations are to be kept secret."

Cairo to Washington/Peking/Moscow:

"Arrangements completed. We await the arrival of the respected representatives of the three great powers and consider it a great honour to have been chosen as the site of your committee conference."

Two days later:

"They've officially excluded us from the community of nations," whined Reg. If one had not known him better, one would have thought him ready at any moment to break into tears. "Enemies of the state, that's what we are. Criminals! And why? Because we prevented World War III."

"Are you surprised by that?" Perry drew up his eyebrows. "By preventing the war, we demonstrated that we are stronger than they are. In Cairo they finally speak with unanimity. The great nations have united to destroy us. I couldn't ask for anything more."

"For anything more! What do you mean by that?"

"No nation—only man as a citizen of the world must conquer space. The alliance against us is really only the first tentative movement toward a unity of purpose for all mankind. Fear has welded all mankind together in an identity. With the help of the Arkonides, we have realized the great dream. Reg, we have united the world."

"And therefore they exclude us?"

"That is the price we have to pay."

Reg scratched his reddish hair. "I wonder if Fletch has returned home safely by now."

"I don't know. Anyway, his name has not been mentioned. Only Manoli, you and I—we are enemies of the state. They don't know anything yet about Khrest. That is a surprise that still awaits mankind."

Reg pointed toward the blue sky. "It was really marvellous how Thora went along with us, I must admit. Without her we'd be in a fine mess."

Perry slowly shook his head. "No more so than we are now. The difference is that we might very well now be the last human beings on Earth."

Suddenly Khrest was standing in the doorway of the control centre. "In the fate of your race I recognize the rebirth of my own," he said thoughtfully. "Now I see the future before us. Of course, and this you must not forget, there may still be incidents. The danger has not been entirely removed, but the first steps have been taken. Sometimes fear is the best therapy."

"But it must not remain this way forever," warned Perry earnestly. "Someday the unity of mankind must be the result not of fear but of an edict of conscience—a result of reason, reflection, perhaps even an affair of the heart. This cannot be achieved from one day to the next, but I do know that someday it will come about, whatever I may contribute to it."

Khrest put his hand on Perry's shoulder and said gently, "You have already done this, my friend. Perhaps you are already become the first human being that I—who do not belong to your world and who have origin in the wilderness of space—could call a Terran. Yes, of course! You are the first Terran, Perry Rhodan."

"And what am I?" asked Reg sulkily. The perennially silent Manoli this time did not fail to make a very fitting remark: "One must become a human being before one can become a Terran."

Reg sniffed with disgust and started his massive body in motion toward the exit. "I'm going swimming in the lake," he announced.

Manoli let him pass, whispering softly to him, "Very well. Take a bath in the salt lake. Let them pickle you."

Khrest smiled silently.

Perry Rhodan seemed not to have heard anything. He stood near the astrodome, gazing up into the cloudless sky. Somewhere up there the moon was pursuing her lonely orbit around Earth.

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THE THIRD POWER

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