

CHAPTER ONE

"You won't be able to understand that! You will be unable to comprehend any of the impulses. Your brain will become utterly confused, and you-"Thora stopped short without completing her sentence. The words would not come as fast as her frantic mind demanded.

How simple it is to see through her game, thought Perry Rhodan. It is not my brain she is worried about. Her real concern is to convince me that I am not yet sufficiently developed to grasp her secrets."What difference does it make to you?" he countered. "What would you lose in me? And the sight of Rhodan as a babbling idiot should give you a lot of satisfaction. Or am I mistaken?"

She was aware that he was trying to throw her on the wrong track, and it particularly annoyed her that he seemed to succeed so easily.

"That isn't the point at all," she replied tersely. "The psychotapes can be played only a certain number of times, and we must be careful not to exhaust them unnecessarily-especially in this case, where failure is so clearly indicated."Rhodan extended his right hand in a pleading manner. "But you do me wrong, Thora," he said. "Haven't we managed so far to understand everything that's been presented to us?"Thora snapped her fingers with disdain. "Whatever you have learned before is nothing compared with what you will be faced with now!"

Rhodan turned around to look at Khrest, whose face bore the usual serious expression. One had to know him well to recognize from the way the skin on his forehead was moving how much Khrest was actually enjoying this.

I would gladly exchange 1,000 fictitious programs for a single situation like this, thought Khrest. Lord of all the universes! The most intelligent of all Arkonide women and a demigod of the human species ... and behaving like little children!But in reality there were quite serious things at stake here. After some initial resistance, Thora had no longer objected when the two members of the "underdeveloped human race" received instruction, via the hypnoschooling method, in some of the achievements of the superior Arkonide sciences. But now she offered strong resistance to their demand to open up the last secrets of the aliens treasury of highest knowledge. She deeply distrusted Rhodan's argument that this would increase his efficiency.Khrest supported Rhodan in his plea. He explained to Thora that the Arkonides' last hope lay in the inherent energy of the underdeveloped human race and the assistance they were giving to the two survivors of the Arkonide space expedition. This help could be increased many, times if Rhodan and his friend were given the necessary scientific information.In the end Khrest had to make use

of the authority he had over Thora in his capacity as a member of the ruling Arkonide dynasty, before he could break her violent resistance to Rhodan's request. Rhodan had been affected by Thora's obstinacy more than he cared to admit even to himself. He expressed his gratitude to both aliens at the conclusion of the discussion. "Thanks for your confidence in my friend Bell and myself. It won't be wasted on us," he told Khrest. Turning to Thora he added, "As time goes on you will come to believe that I harbour no thoughts that would be detrimental to you or that would hurt your pride." Rhodan felt he needed to add this last remark for Thora's benefit, although he was well aware that Thora was none too receptive to such declarations of good faith. Not yet, at least.

"Go to hell!" exclaimed Reginald Bell with deep conviction. At the same time he tried to hide the fear he had felt when Tako Kakuta suddenly materialized out of the void close to him.

Tako was all smiles. His round, boyish face glowed pleasure.

"Why to hell?" he asked in his high voice. "I deserve better fate. I am bringing you good news."

"Good news?" echoed Bell. "Where on Earth would it come from?"

"From Tai-tiang," smiled Tako. "He has finally understood that he can't do any harm to the Third Power, even with his pioneer divisions. His troops are withdrawing." This was exactly what Bell had expected would happen after Tai-tiang's unsuccessful attempt to penetrate the Third Power's domain. Tai had dug an underground tunnel to avoid the protecting energy dome around Rhodan's base. As soon as he reached a position immediately underneath the center of the base, he intended to place a hydrogen bomb there and detonate it, blowing up the Third Power's command center with all its crew. But before Tai-tiang's forces could even bring the bomb inside the underground shaft, Rhodan had sealed off the tunnel with the help of powerful Arkonide instruments. Thus, Tai-tiang's plans of destruction had been foiled. But still Bell found it reassuring to hear Tako's report of Tai-tiang's withdrawal. "Thanks, Tako," he sighed softly with relief. "So long, sir," said Tako, and disappeared.

Bell kept staring at the spot where Tako had stood just a moment before. In the past few months he had come to believe that anything amazing and shocking was to be expected only from the Arkonides. Therefore, it would take quite a while for him to get used to the idea that Tako Kakuta was not an alien Arkonide but a member of the human race, even though, being a teleporter, Tako could suddenly appear out of thin air next to him and vanish just as swiftly as he had come.

Reginald Bell was thinking about the extraordinary gift of teleportation, which seemed altogether, unbelievable to him despite Tako's daily demonstrations. To Bell it seemed on the same order of

incredibility as a horse being capable of human speech. A slight hum interrupted Bell's thoughts, and he glanced over to the wall, where the soft glow of a telecom screen lit up the cool twilight of his room. Rhodan's face became visible on the screen. "I would like to discuss something with you, Reg," said Rhodan. "Are you busy now?"

"I have always time for you, my friend! Where? In your cabin?"

"Yes. Khrest is here with me."

Bell nodded briefly and left the room. Behind him the video screen grew dark. As soon as Bell entered his friend's cabin, Rhodan declared, "We plan to leave Earth for a few days." Bell listened attentively as Khrest continued the explanations. "We must leave Earth in order to be totally undisturbed when we administer the rest of the hypnotraining to you two. But besides guaranteeing absolute quiet for you, this trip serves still another purpose."

The Arkonide scientist's eyes seemed to light up with a faint degree of excitement as he continued, "We assume that our spaceship on the moon was not completely destroyed. I can't believe that terrestrial rockets could be that powerful. I am confident that we will manage to rescue a number of important items, if we take enough time out for such a mission with this trip." They decided to start their trip within the next forty-eight hours. In the meantime a feverish activity ensued, making the corridors of the vessel resound with the hurried steps of the crew, especially Rhodan and Bell.

The Arkonide auxiliary vessel that had brought Thora down to Earth from the moon on her initial rescue mission was well supplied with a group of robots whose special function was to repair anything that was out of order. But in Rhodan's eyes their inactivity between repair jobs seemed a waste of their usefulness. Any second the robots spent in the storerooms was a luxury that Rhodan felt they could ill afford. Therefore, he suggested to Khrest that they work out a programmed activity schedule for the robots. "How soon will you be able to finish such a program?" inquired Rhodan.

"In ten minutes."

"Ten minutes!" Rhodan could not conceal his admiration.

Khrest confirmed his words with a brief nod and turned to his desk. As Rhodan left the room he quickly noted the time.

Lost in thought as he hurried down the hallway, he failed to notice that someone was approaching from opposite direction. As he impetuously made a sudden around the corner he collided head on with Thora.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" he said with an embarrassed smile. She seemed to be in a good mood. She looked at him with mild irony. "If you grow still more energetic, maybe someday you will be able to look around corners and see what's coming."

"And if you could someday walk with your nose not quite so high in the air, you might be considered an attractive female!" he replied.

Thora bit her lip and left him abruptly, soon disappearing behind another bend in the corridor. With a sigh Rhodan continued on his way.

Soon Rhodan rejoined Tako Kakuta, who had been waiting for him. Rhodan handed him a sheaf of papers on which he had made some notes.

"Will you look through these, please, Tako? Later we can discuss them together,"

"Yes, sir."

Tako began to read the papers at once, while Perry remained a little longer before returning to Khrest's workroom. "You are just in time," the Arkonide scientist greeted him. "I have just finished."

Together they left and took an elevator down to the storeroom where the robots had their quarters.

"I have worked out a program for each of them," said Khrest, not without pride. "You will be amazed to see what the machines will have accomplished by the time we return from our trip."

In the storeroom there were about twenty robots with different functions. The Arkonides had not permitted them selves the luxury of constructing them in their own likeness. These were no toys to them, after all; these were machines with work to do. So most of the robots looked like machines mounted on Caterpillar tracks. Rhodan noticed that they also possessed claws that enabled them to lift themselves up and over obstacles that could not be overcome by the tracks alone.

The schedule Khrest had worked out for each of the machines was on a paper thin strip of plastic. "These strips contain all necessary impulses," declared Khrest.

Then he began to feed the programs into the robot machines by inserting the plastic strip into a slot at a different place on each of the twenty robots. Khrest waited until the machine began to hum, which was the signal that it was now ready to work, as it devoured the plastic strip.

"After such a long period of inactivity," explained Khrest, "it will take a few seconds for the activation to take effect."

A few seconds seemed to Rhodan a ridiculously short span of time, considering the feverish activity the robots displayed within a few moments.

Humming like bees, they began to leave their places and move about, carefully avoiding any collisions with each other. Then they all marched toward the elevator in which Khrest and Rhodan had arrived just a little while earlier. Rhodan burst out laughing after the last machine had left the storeroom on its way in the elevator.

"I'll be twonked!" he groaned. "I'd never have believed such a thing possible"

"You will- be really amazed to see what these robots are capable Of," answered Khrest. "They are true robots. Up to a certain degree they can think and act and make decisions on their own. I can't imagine what would have become of our Arkonide civilization without them.

The Robots did not leave the ship immediately. First they collected all the items they had been instructed by their programmed schedule to take along with them to the outside.

When Rhodan had first made plans to effect the task he had set himself, he had been obsessed with the idea that no time must be wasted. Rhodan saw a chance that was worthwhile taking if he could procure from terrestrial industry the various parts needed to construct a faster than light spaceship with an unlimited radius of action. All that was necessary was to place the parts in exactly detailed order. Their assembly would have to take place inside the protective energy bell. In view of the political situation of the great powers, as well as the character of mankind in general, it would have been an irresponsible risk to permit the factories of the world's population to proceed with construction of the spaceship itself. Rhodan knew that the space inside the energy dome sufficiently large to complete the assembly of the stars. But he had never assumed that it could be accomplished within an area of less than thirty square miles.

He watched with enthusiasm the nonstop activity and purposeful behaviour with which the robots went about the task. After they had unloaded everything they would need from the space sphere, they stacked all items at a distant spot and set out to level the ground.

There was no doubt in Rhodan's mind that they would have completed a greater part of the necessary work by time he, Bell and Khrest returned from their trip to the moon.

Tako had finished reading the notes Rhodan had left him. When Rhodan returned to Tako's cabin, the Japanese was sitting thoughtfully in his chair. "Did you understand everything?" Rhodan asked.

"Yes, sir. It won't be easy." Rhodan pulled up a chair and sat down beside Tako. "Listen, Tako," he began urgently, "we are up against a serious and difficult job. If we want to retain the two Arkonides as our allies, we are forced to build a ship for them that has the action radius they need. Unless we can bring them back to their own home planet and then have them return here with us, we shall be very, very old men before accomplish anything the world can respect. We need Khrest's help, and to get his fullest assistance we must have the right spaceship."

"Yes, sir. I do understand," said Tako.

"They will always be after you," continued Rhodan. "The secret services of the different countries will pursue you and you will constantly have to be on the alert. You will find many people who want to do business with us because of the money, and they will be ready to supply us with anything we need. But there will be also those who will make fabulous offers to you and then inform the police as soon as you turn your back. Never rely on your special talent alone. It will take about five to six days for the secret service to find out that you are a teleporter. From then on they will shoot first and then ask questions. They will lay traps for you and then try to finish you off."

Rhodan bent his head closer to the intently listening Japanese as he concluded, "We will supply you with an Arkonide protective suit. That should be of great help to you. But you will carry the final responsibility for your own safety."

Tako nodded resolutely. "Yes, sir. I understand."

"It will be up to you where you want to start with your job. Perhaps you might do best to approach private industry. I Will give you a list of all the things we need before you leave. Khrest says that such a spaceship must have a diameter of at least 1,000 feet. There will be many people who will think you crazy to order scaffolding for a 1,000 foot high plastic structure, or fusion generators with a capacity of 100 million megawatts. In addition you must be careful not to place too many orders for certain parts with one firm; otherwise, they might guess what they are intended for.

"You must not have any illusions-this is the most taxing task that anyone has ever asked you to carry out. You have until we are ready to start on our trip to prepare yourself for it."

Rhodan got up. Tako rose and bowed low. Rhodan smiled and cordially slapped his back.

"Lots of luck, Tako. A great deal depends on your success."

Rhodan was busy making a list of the things that Tako was supposed to get for them. There were many items, and Tako would have to End them within a short time.

Of course, man's industry would not be able to supply the faster than light drive. Khrest hoped to find the necessary components inside the remains of the destroyed vessel on the moon. The rest of the parts they required to construct the spaceship would have to be acquired separately and then assembled here inside the base of the Third Power. Rhodan was seized by a feeling of utmost excitement when he pondered what would happen within the next seventy hours. He would learn the secrets of the fast than light drive!

He was startled out of his thoughts by the sudden arrival of Bell, who raced into Rhodan's cabin without even knocking. Bell was upset, and he was out of breath, as he had been running at top speed to get here. "Klein has sent the signal!" he said quickly. "We must send Tako to him."

"Klein?"

"I think we should hurry up. Klein won't care to crawl too long out there in the hot desert sand under the eyes of Tai-tiang," urged Bell. Rhodan flipped the switch for the telecom. Tako's smiling face appeared on the video screen. "Reg will explain to you what we want, Tako."

Bell took over. "Klein has given the arranged signal. QPQ on the 6.3 megahertz band. He is waiting for you at the previously arranged rendezvous. Please hurry!"

"Yes, sir," Tako said quickly. He did not even bother to switch off his telecom, and Rhodan and Bell saw how he vanished from the spot where he had just been standing.

Lieutenant Klein was a triple agent. First, he was an agent for the International Intelligence Agency-this was his profession. Second, he was an agent for peace and intentional understanding-this was his inner personal conviction. And third, he was an agent of the Third Power, whose ally on the outside he had become. Klein, together with his colleagues Kosnow the Russian and Li the Chinese, had joined Tai-tiang's troops in their withdrawal after their unsuccessful-attempt on Rhodan's base. But now Klein had risked leaving the safety of the military camp and was advancing again close to the wall of the energy screen around the Third Power's base. He must have a very valid reason for it. Klein had prearranged several codes for his meetings with Rhodan's people. Each code designated a specific rendezvous spot, and "QPQ" on the 6.3 megahertz band meant a small hill about three and a half miles southwest of the southern shore of the Goshun salt lake. Hardly fifteen minutes had passed before Tako rematerialized. Rhodan and Bell had been staring at their intercom screen to observe Tako's reappearance in his room. But instead he chose to appear right in Rhodan's cabin. Bell turned around, startled by Tako's unexpected coming. Tako paid no attention to him but addressed Rhodan in an unusually excited manner. "Bad news, sir. Peking has ordered all branches of the nationalized industrial enterprises to inform their secret service at once about any of our agents. Moscow has given the same instructions to their manufacturers. And inside the NATO countries severe penalties have been announced threatening any industrial concern entering into dealings with us."

Rhodan seemed to be staring at something in the air.

"Some sly fox must have found out about our plans," Tako said.

Rhodan advanced two steps, then turned suddenly on his heel and looked straight at the Japanese. "Tako! Nothing will be changed as far as your job is concerned. I am afraid, though, that you will have to proceed even more cautiously."

CHAPTER TWO

The craft started to the moon according to plan. The robots had been busy for two days; slowly their mapped out work began to take shape.

Enough field generators had been left behind in the Gobi Desert base to maintain the energy dome while the ship was away. Still the moon flight vessel had taken along several of the instruments needed to foil the plans of the Third Power's military adversaries, who had started to prepare strategic manoeuvres against them as soon as they learned that the Arkonide vessel had set out on its lunar trip. There was no work to be done during the flight. The automatic guidance system of the ship functioned according to the instructions preset by Khrest.

When they were about 300 miles from Earth, the ship's radar system showed the first approaching enemy rocket. A few seconds later the rocket became visible as a flitting metallic arrow on the video screen of the direct optical observation instrument. Rhodan felt fear surge through him and could hardly catch his breath for some moments as he became aware of the ball of fire released by the exploding rocket. Only after realizing that their own ship had not been affected by the holocaust could he relax again. The Arkonide space sphere sped away from Earth with increasing velocity. Rhodan turned around. Bell, who had been standing behind him, looked at his former commander with a sheepish smile. "That's something like Christmas or being promoted suddenly," he said with a still uncertain voice that could hardly conceal the fright he had experienced a moment ago. Khrest merely smiled in his enigmatic but friendly way. Thora did not react at all. She simply stared as before at the video screen.

Another series of rocket attacks followed, at an altitude between 500 and 2,000 miles above Earth. The protective energy screen around the Arkonide craft warded off fifteen enemy rockets altogether, and the ship's crew did notice even the slightest jolt. Then the bombardment ceased.

The ship went into orbit around Earth at a distance 8,000 miles above the planet's surface. "Now we can start with the hypno training," said Khrest "You saw with your own eyes that the rockets cannot harm us at all. Even if they should resume their bombardment, it would not disturb you during your schooling."

Rhodan gave his consent to begin the hypno training. As soon as the overwhelming fear of a direct rocket hit had abated, he was seized once again with excitement, anxious to find out the last secrets of Arkonide scientific knowledge

The procedure was the same they had experienced already several times previously. Rhodan and Bell lay on a comfortable couch while they were connected to the information transmitters.

"It will take about three hours," explained Khrest. "This time we are dealing with extremely difficult material-difficult even for me."

He checked all connections again and asked, "Ready?"

"Ready!" replied Rhodan and Bell simultaneously,

Rhodan lost consciousness while he was wondering why Thora had not come to watch. Never would he be able to describe what he felt during the hypno training session. All he could remember later was a swarm of disconnected bits of information that made no sense. He no longer had any bodily sensations. All that was taking place now seemed to occur exclusively in his brain. But without the posthypnotic influence that would eventually render this schooling process effective, he could not have made any use of the various isolated items of new found knowledge that he could still recall.

He knew that his brain would be given a period of adjustment after the conclusion of the hypno schooling. His mind needed the rest to recuperate from the superhuman strain. He remembered that after every previous training session he had awakened refreshed and feeling wonderfully alert.

When he regained consciousness with a splitting headache this time, he realized at once that something unforeseen must have interfered with the schooling process.

Khrest was standing at Rhodan's cot gazing at him with an expression full of helplessness and uncertainty. Rhodan was fully alert in an instant. "What's happened?" he asked the Arkonide scientist abruptly. Rhodan could hear the moaning of his friend Bell lying next to him, but he paid no attention to it. Bell would need the usual few moments to regain full awareness.

Khrest jerked convulsively. "Are you feeling ... ?"

"Yes, I am feeling splendid! What's the matter?" Rhodan felt anything but splendid. His headache was unbearable.

"Thora..." stammered Khrest. "She has..." Rhodan remembered that he had feared something of the kind. Thora had too quickly consented to their plan to conclude the last stages of their hypno training. He should have realized sooner that she had something up her sleeve.

He rose and tore away the leads connecting him with the transmitter. Khrest recoiled as if in terror. Rhodan was amazed at the scientist's reaction. Why should Khrest be suddenly afraid of him? He wondered. "Where is Thora?" snapped Rhodan.

"In the command centre," replied Khrest meekly.

Rhodan no longer paid any attention to Khrest. The last thing he heard as he stormed out of the room was Bell's gruff voice, saying, "Go ahead, chief! I'll follow right away." Rhodan hurried along the corridor that led to the centre of the ship. He pulled his small Grinnell gun out of his belt. He regretted for a moment that he was not carrying one of the Arkonide weapons in addition to his usual protection. The small caliber bullets would hardly make a dent in the locked Arkonide door leading into the command centre, where Thora was hiding.

She had locked the door indeed, as he had suspected. She was not going to run any risks with these two Earthlings, whose uncanny urge for activity, measured by Arkonide standards, had frightened her repeatedly.

Rhodan activated the audio communication system inside the cabin. No answer! He followed by hammering with his bare fists against the door. There was still no sign of life from the inside. He walked back a few steps to the nearest telecom outlet. He pushed the command centre button and waited impatiently until the video screen lit up.

Thora had been waiting for his call. Her face filled the screen. Rhodan was startled to see such fierce hatred in her eyes. Never had he encountered such violent and raw hate in the eyes of any being.

"What is going on? What do you want?" she inquired calmly.

Rhodan knew that it would be useless to shout at her. The method of communication that seemed to work best with her was a display of superiority on his part. He could disarm her if he made her understand that he considers her no match for him.

"What kind of nonsense have you been up to this time." he asked her with a quiet grin.

She appeared to have steeled herself against this kind of approach. He could perceive nothing of the narrowing of her eyes that usually indicated how much she was hurt by his sarcasm.

She addressed him in her own Arkonide language, to make him understand how much she considered this her very own affair, of no concern to this poor, backward human being. "I am sick and tired of being chased about, you monkeys. That's all." Before Rhodan had time to reply, he heard, his friend Bell approaching from a bend around the corridor. He gave him a sign with his right hand, which was outside the viewing field for Thora, asking him to stay in the background so that Thora would not see him. Bell understood and obeyed.

"Tell me," Rhodan said, resuming his conversation with Thora, "what plan have you hatched up to get rid of us?"

For the first time he could detect some signs of worry in her. "I will land on Earth," she answered, "and take matters into my own hands."

"What matters? Do you really believe for a moment that you can go out and purchase your new spaceship anywhere on Earth, ready made?"

"No, not at all" she replied haughtily. "I will force these humans to build one for me."

"Force them?" laughed Rhodan. "How?"

Thora had stepped back from her video screen so that Rhodan could now look beyond her. Suddenly, he knew how he could deter her from her crazy plan.

"You know just as well as I that this ship has enough weapons on board to deal effectively with more than ten of your type of planet."

In the meantime Rhodan had begun a feverish activity that could not be observed by Thora. He had stepped closer to his telecom set, all the while giving signs with his right hand for Bell. He pointed to the floor of the hallway, where it joined the opposite wall.

"I will land inside the energy dome in the desert base on Earth," continued Thora in the meantime, "and make the terrestrial governments understand what I want from them."

Rhodan nodded, and at the same time he continued the hand signals to his friend Bell. His index finger still kept pointing at the same spot as before, while his thumb pointed toward the video screen of the telecom set. Rhodan could not tell whether Bell had grasped what he was trying to tell him.

"I make no secret of my intention to make a heap of ashes out of your planet, if my demands are not obeyed."

"That method guarantees, no doubt, your safe return home to Arkon?" mocked Rhodan. Now his right hand had changed the signal. His thumb pointed upward while his index finger imitated the movement of pulling a gun trigger.

Rhodan broke out in a cold sweat. "Why won't you reason out this problem calmly?" he said, trying not to show his inner tension. "You want to destroy mankind if they won't fulfil your demands. What will that leave you with? What will you do for the rest of your life? Live out your days in a miserable existence on Mars or Venus Is that the kind of future you want for yourself and Khrest?" Thora motioned impatiently, as if to shrug off his warning "You know that mankind won't let it get to the point where they

face extinction. I will make it entirely clear to them what they can expect if they don't comply with my wishes. They can't hope for mercy from me." Rhodan felt hatred surge up in him as he heard these words. "The nations of the world will simply laugh at your requests," he countered ironically. He paused for a moment, full of silent triumph, as he heard Bell creep away quietly -behind him. "They will laugh at you, then dig themselves into deep safety shelters, and you still won't know what to do to get help after you have destroyed the world with its industrial potential." Thora seemed to grow taller as she snorted contemptuously "Mankind will do nothing of the kind! No one will agree to his own destruction if he can possibly avoid it."

Rhodan was leaning against the wall in a relaxed manner in order to show her that he was willing to have a lengthy discussion with her about this problem. "Well, that is exactly where you have the wrong picture about the human race. Don't build up your hopes too high. Those few cowards among us humans who would rather give in to you than risk their lives would not be of much help to you anyhow." He still wanted to tell her more, but this very instant he noticed some movement beside her on the video screen. Close to the spot where Thora was standing was an opening of the fresh air duct about the size of a man's head. The air duct was a five foot wide shaft that led vertically throughout the ship, distributing fresh air into every room. From this opening Rhodan now saw the barrel of a gun emerging, held in a big fist.

"Okay, chief" said Bell, so loudly that Rhodan could hear him over the intercom. "Turn around, young lady, and raise your hands!"

But Thora could not comply with his command. The first instant she heard Bell's voice she had started to turn around in his direction. But before she completed her turn she was overcome by fright and fainted. She fell to the ground with outstretched arms. "Great!" bellowed Bell from the air duct opening. "That's exactly the way I wanted it. Now, shoot out the door lock before she comes to again!"

"I'll get something for this from Khrest!" shouted Rhodan, and started down the corridor, calling Khrest's name. Out of breath, he reached the information room, where barely fifteen minutes earlier he and Bell had been lying" under the influence of the hypno transmitter. Khrest was already at the door.

"Let me have one of your weapons," panted Rhodan. "One that can shoot out the lock of the command centre door, Thora locked herself in. She has fainted. If we don't hurry she will wake up and everything will have been in vain!" Khrest spun around and Disappeared down the hall. Half a minute later he was back. He was breathing with great effort as he handed Rhodan a heavy needle ray gun. "Here take this," he urged, "but be careful with it!" Rhodan raced back down the corridor, all the while getting the weapon ready to shoot. He stopped fifteen feet from the door of the command centre, and directed the needle thin, invisible energy ray through the visor onto the electronic door lock.

The plastic metal of the door began to hiss, form bubbles and melt. A hole appeared in the heavy door, and as soon as it was sufficiently large Rhodan stopped shooting.

The door no longer offered any resistance as he pushed it open. Rhodan could hear Bell breathing a sigh of relief from the direction of the opening in the air duct. "Thank heavens! I couldn't have shot her." Rhodan lifted the still unconscious Thora off the ground and placed her gently on one of the couches that lined one side of the wall. He activated the telecom and called Khrest.

"Come here, please. I want you to be present when she regains consciousness."

But the first to appear in the command center was Bell. He had not even stopped long enough to wipe the sweat off his brow. A wide grin spread over his broad face as he stepped through the demolished door.

"You don't know how proud I am that I could figure out your hand signals."

"You are just plain smart," Rhodan complimented him jokingly, putting on a serious air, as if he really meant it.

Khrest arrived Just then. "How did you manage that?" he asked, shaking his head in amazement.

Rhodan chuckled. "We discovered the air shaft just in time. Reg took the elevator down to the air conditioning plant and crawled up the shaft. When Thora saw him threatening her with his gun from the opening in the wall she fainted."

Khrest sat down carefully at the edge of the couch on which Thora was resting. "I can well imagine that," he said thoughtfully. "I almost died myself when I saw you get up off the hypno couch a little while ago."

"Why should you feel that way?" asked Rhodan.

Khrest waited a few moments before he said, "Way back at the beginning of our hypno training technique, when we built the first instruments but lacked the necessary experience to operate them, there occurred several regrettable incidents when the training session had to be interrupted for some reason or other. In every case the person undergoing hypno schooling lost his mind. We found a simple explanation for this. During the training process the brain is in a condition of extraordinary activation. Unless given the opportunity to return slowly to its state of normal functioning, it becomes short circuited. The result then is a kind of insanity that even our best psychiatrists have been unable to cure."

Khrest paused for a moment and looked first at Rhodan and then at Bell. "Do you realize what I mean by that? Since the first days of hypno training there has been no greater crime in Arkon and all worlds that are subject to the Arkonide code of law than interrupting such a training session."

Khrest motioned with his head to the still unconscious Thora. "When you were connected to the transmitter, Thora felt absolutely safe from any interference on your part with what she planned to do. She knew that I would not dare wake you before the end of your schooling period. Those three hours would have been enough for her to return to Earth with the craft and to make all necessary preparations so that you would no longer have posed a threat to her."

He fell silent for a few seconds.

"But you awakened us in spite of that!" interjected Rhodan in a grave voice.

Khrest silently nodded in affirmation, while looking down at the deck. "I assure you that this was not an easy decision to make. But I had to make a choice. Unless I aroused you from your state of unconsciousness, Thora would have landed on Earth and ruined all our efforts. There is no doubt that she would have brought about the destruction of Earth as well as that of this space sphere."

Khrest glanced up again and smiled. "The rest was easy. We were facing death in any case, so why not seize the only chance that presented itself? I was hoping all the while that your human brains would react differently from our own that they might withstand the shock of having the hypno training session interrupted."

Suddenly Khrest's face was all smiles. "And though I was hoping against all odds, my fondest wish came true. Mankind-" Suddenly he was rudely interrupted. Something began to move behind his back on the couch, and with a voice still feeble, Thora exclaimed furiously, "You are a miserable traitor, Khrest!"

Rhodan jumped up, and Bell leaped across to the foot of the cot. But Khrest remained seated. A sad smile came over his face as he answered quietly, "No, my daughter, I am not a traitor. Someday you will see the light. But I am afraid it will take a long time yet with you."

Thora, exhausted, closed her eyes.

Rhodan gazed at her intently, and when she opened her eyes again she seemed to falter under his severe expression.

"Listen to me!" he said harshly. "We are all fed up with your nonsense, your stubbornness and your disgusting arrogance. Now we shall make sure that you will never again cross our plans before you have learned to use your rational mind."

He seemed to pierce her with his eyes as he went on sternly, "You need not be afraid of us—we won't harm you. But you can rest assured that from now on I take command of this vessel. Any further attempts on your part to try to carry out your foolish notions will be regarded as mutiny." Thora had nothing to say. Her face remained rigid, and nothing revealed what was going on behind her forehead.

Rhodan made clear to her that she was free to move about, but he gave strict orders to Bell to watch her carefully, as long as he could do so.

Their primary concern was to complete their interrupted hypno schooling as quickly as possible. Rhodan regretted that they had not taken either Dr. Manoli or the Australian Dr. Haggard along on this trip. They could have kept watch so that nothing could happen to them while they were lying helplessly under the transmitter.

As things stood now, all he could do was to give the needle ray gun back to Khrest and urge him to use the weapon if Thora should make another attempt.

Then Rhodan stretched out again on the transmitter cot and waited patiently until Khrest connected him up once more to the apparatus.

As soon as Khrest had strapped him in, it was Bell's turn. The usual question followed: "Ready?" And the usual answer was given: "Ready."

And" again they were overcome without any transition by the deep unconsciousness of the hypno training. It was as if somebody with one well aimed movement had covered up all the universe with a dark, heavy blanket.

CHAPTER THREE

While Tako Kakuta got himself an entirely new wardrobe in one of Pittsburgh's big department stores, his mind was preoccupied with thoughts of the increasingly difficult problem of procuring sufficient financing for the enterprises of the Third Power. Ever since the Arkonide cruiser had been destroyed on the moon, they had sorely felt the lack of enough suitable objects for bartering with Earth's industrial concerns. Their supply had become so scarce that they now had to save just a few items for the most important business transactions. Tako had managed to reach Pittsburgh without difficulties. Rhodan gave him a free hand in selecting the best spot for carrying out his mission, and Pittsburgh, with its huge industrial concentration, had seemed a good starting point.

Tako was fully aware that he was in a more advantageous position than any other member of the Third Power who happened to be outside the base in the Gobi-nobody knew who he was. No one had the faintest idea that he was working for Rhodan. Tako intended to use this advantage as long as possible. But he would have to drop his convenient anonymity the moment the negotiations started.

As he left the department store Tako glanced with pleasure at his reflection in the store window-young executive type, dressed conservatively in a gray flannel suit. But now the real task must begin. He went to the next taxi stand and directed the driver to take him to a ferroplastic production enterprise that seemed right for his Plans.

Ferroplastics, Limited, was part of the big Du Pont concern.

Tako knew how to impress the young lady receptionist. He was ushered in to one of the office managers, who assured him that he would get him an interview right away with one of the directors of the firm.

Tako made it very clear to the young man: "Don't forget to mention that I intend to place a big order!" He had given a false name, for which he had been supplied with the necessary identification. But he did not indicate where he came from or who his bosses were. Let them believe for the time being that he was an emissary of the Asiatic Federation. It was well-known that the Asiatic Federation was far behind in the field of metal plastics.

Tako waited awhile, sitting near the receptionist's desk in the spacious entrance hall. He seemed absorbed in one of the many magazines that had been placed there for visitors. But his glance was fixed just above the rim the paper he held in front of his face. This way he could study leisurely what was going on around him. A constant stream of activity filled the huge hall, but there was nothing to cause him any alarm. Twenty minutes later the young man who had promised to get him to see one of the big bosses reappeared. He grinned. "Mister Lafitte will see you right away. Follow me, please!"

Mister Lafitte's office was on the top floor of the gigantic building. Tako enjoyed the wide view over the city as he was led along a hallway. The young man took him as far as Mr. Lafitte's door, which he held open for Tako. Mr. Lafitte rose behind his desk as Tako entered motioned to the young man to leave them alone.

"Have a seat, please!" He motioned toward a chair by his desk.

Tako sank down in the comfortable cushions and politely refused a cigarette that Lafitte offered him from a gold cigarette case. Slowly and casually Tako looked around the luxuriously furnished room. Lafitte grew restless, but that did not seem to bother Tako.

Finally the Japanese glanced up at Lafitte and asked "Where can we talk business?"

Lafitte seemed nonplussed. "What do you mean? Here, of course! This is my conference room. This is where all my business discussions take place."

Tako just smiled politely. "My mission is of such a difficult and delicate nature that I cannot take the

slightest risk whatsoever. I hope you see what I mean. just look at this pretty vase here. Doesn't it make a marvellous hiding place for an electronic listening device? I fully appreciate your precautionary measures. But therefore, you should understand mine as well." Lafitte's face ran the gamut from initial uneasy surprise to sudden anger and finally a cunning grin. "Apparently, dear sir," he remarked a bit too smoothly, "your bosses have sent me one of their brighter agents." He got up from behind his desk, walked around next to Tako's chair and added, "I am willing to carry on negotiations at any place that will suit you. What do you have in mind?" "Let's meet in my hotel," suggested Tako. "I'll ask them to reserve a conference room for us." Lafitte pointed to the phone on his desk. Tako placed a call to his hotel and ordered one of their smaller private meeting rooms.

While they were descending in the elevator, Tako closely observed all of Lafitte's moves. There was no indication that he gave a secret order to anyone to follow them. And yet Tako could not help feeling that Lafitte had something up his sleeve that Tako had not foreseen. The taxi ride to the hotel was uneventful. Tako looked through the rear window several times but could not see anyone following them. If there was a tail, he must be exceedingly skilful. That was one possibility that could not be excluded, thought Tako.

Their conference room was ready, Tako gave orders not to disturb them during their negotiations. They sat down at a small table, and Tako proceeded at once to place Lafitte under the influence of his small hypno set, while he dictated his order.

"... the wall of a sphere, with a diameter of exactly 1,000 feet, thickness of the wall two and a half feet. Made of ferroplastic A-10 with wolfram additives. To be delivered in easily transportable sections. You will receive further instructions as to the method of delivery."

"Our payment will consist of a so-called degravitator. This apparatus can nullify gravity and counteract any gravitational pull up to ten G's. This valuable instrument will pay more than adequately for the ferroplastics you will supply us. It is of utmost importance to observe the exact date of delivery. Either we will be in receipt of the order within four weeks or we will be forced to cancel the order. There will be no written contract. We have full confidence in each other."

Tako stood up. Lafitte stared at him with blank, eyes, typical for people under hypnotic influence.

"If it should ever cross your mind that I am an agent of the Third Power," Tako concluded, "you will forget this at once! I am an emissary of the Asiatic Federation, which is quite backward in the field of ferroplastics, as is generally known. The ferroplastic sphere will serve as a housing for a nuclear reactor that is under construction. That is all Mr. Lafitte. I hope that everything will proceed smoothly and that our order will be filled to our satisfaction. Here are the exact details for delivery."

With this Tako handed Lafitte several typewritten pages that he had painfully composed the previous day on one of the rental typewriters supplied by the hotel.

Tako switched off the hypno set and observed how Lafitte's face gradually regained its normally alert express. Lafitte rose from his chair and said with obvious pleasure, "I am glad that We reached this agreement so quickly. I'll propose this matter to our board of directors immediately. I do not foresee any difficulties. After all we will be more than amply paid for this order." Tako opened the door of the conference room. The corridor outside was deserted. Bright sunlight entered through a wide window and was mirrored in the highly polished floor.

›Don't forget to inform me at once what decision your board of directors makes. My people are most interested in a speedy delivery. Otherwise, I will be forced to place our order elsewhere." Lafitte waved his hand and laughed. "Don't you worry! Everything will be in order. You will hear from us by tonight." Tako accompanied Mr. Lafitte to the elevator. As soon as he descended, Tako rushed to the front window leading to the street and observed Lafitte leaving the hotel calling a taxi and driving off without once looking back.

Tako waited at the window, One minute later an inconspicuous looking car that had been parked across the street, drove off and followed the taxi.

Lost in thought, Tako returned to his room. The gray car that he just had seen was no real proof that anyone had followed Lafitte or shadowed Tako ... but one could never be absolutely sure. Back at his room, Tako phoned Ferroplastics, Limited. A pleasant voice answered his call.

"This is Mr. Yakamura calling," said Tako. "I had the honour of discussing a big order with your Mr. Lafitte just a few minutes ago. Mr. Lafitte indicated that he would meet at once with his board of directors. It is quite likely that I will have to get in touch with him shortly in order to supply some further data. Will I be able to reach him directly through you? Will the meeting take place in your building?"

"You can talk to him at a moments notice," replied the switchboard operator. "I'll connect you directly with the conference room a few doors down the hall from me."

"Thank you so much," said Tako. "You have been -most helpful."

Then Tako proceeded to take off his new suit and put on the Arkonide transport outfit that Rhodan had given him to take along on this mission. He hid a gun in his belt, as well as the hypno rod.

The doorman at the hotel, entrance viewed Tako's unconventional outfit with obvious displeasure; but Tako was sure that he must be used to all kinds of outlandish costumes worn by exotic guests from primitive countries. Once again Tako hailed a taxi and asked to be taken to the Ferroplastics, Limited, plant. En route he reexamined his plan for any weak spot. Everything seemed so incredibly simple that Tako began to have doubts about the primitive structure of his own ideas. But he calmed his apprehensions when he recalled the most unusual means at his disposal, which would justify the apparent crudeness of his strategy.

At about the same time, M. V. R. Lafitte was storming through the visitors' waiting room at Ferroplastics, Limited. He had managed to summon the members of the board of directors, and he was confident of obtaining their consent within an hour. As he passed by the switchboard, Miss Defoe called out to him.

"What do you want?" he asked impatiently. "I'm in big rush." "Mr. Yakamura has called. He wanted to know if he could get in touch with the board of directors' meeting through this switchboard."

"Mr. Yakamura?" Lafitte replied with a frown. "What did he want?"

"He just wanted to make sure he could reach you, case he had to give you any further information regarding the deal while your special meeting was in session."

Lafitte nodded briefly. "That will be fine. just connect him with the meeting room, if he should ... Well, what's going on here?" A tall young man had entered the hall and stopped next to Lafitte, looking rather worried. "I followed your car, we as had arranged. Is everything in order?"

"Yes, Morgan. Everything is in order."

Morgan hesitated. He half-turned to leave but still remained. "Sir, are you really sure that everything is okay?"

Lafitte's fist pounded the switchboard operator's desk in aspiration. "Get off my back! I'm absolutely sure everything is final!" Morgan seemed unconvinced. He just murmured, "Well, if you think so!"

Then Morgan left the visitors' hall and went out to the big stairway leading up to the building entrance, where he had parked his car temporarily. Slowly he drove his car to a shady place in the company's big parking lot. Then he returned quickly to Miss Defoe's desk. Lafitte had left. "What is this all about, Morgan?" asked Miss Defoe. "What are you afraid of?"

Morgan pulled a chair up to the switchboard and sat next to the operator. He shrugged. "I am not quite sure myself. They seem to have concluded some enormous business deal. Lafitte moved heaven and Earth to get all his board of directors together for a meeting right away."

"I don't know why that should bother you so much." "Have you ever witnessed the way Lafitte goes about making business deals?"

"No, of course not."

The bigger the deal the longer he needs to make up his mind. Lafitte has never negotiated for less than five hours. This interview lasted that many minutes before they came to an agreement. Well, maybe it took a quarter of an hour, to be exact. And now he has called this urgent directors' meeting. This means this deal is so enormous that he cannot decide for himself. But to conclude negotiations within fifteen minutes ... ! That's what bothers me. It just doesn't seem right." Miss Defoe grimaced. "I wouldn't lose any sleep over it." But Morgan insisted, "Just let me listen in if this Japanese fellow should call, will you?"

"Oh no, I will do nothing of the kind." Miss Defoe was most indignant at Morgan's request. "I never permit anyone to overhear any conversation." Yet Morgan won out. He persisted until she reluctantly agreed to his demand.

The two continued with some small talk until the heavy door to the foyer was opened. The noise made Morgan turn around and look at the door. The wide, heavy panel swung outward, then inward, and bounced to and fro until it came to its original position of rest again. Morgan wiped his eyes, as if trying to erase this unbelievable picture; but the picture did not change. There was the usual hustle and bustle in the

busy foyer, but nobody could be seen near the door.

Miss Defoe noticed his uneasiness. "Now what's the matter?" The door opened by itself, but nobody came in!

The phone rang. Miss Defoe answered. Then she turned her attention back to Morgan. "You are ready for your vacation, Morgan. You're beginning to see ghosts in broad daylight."

"But in this moment something strange occurred. An office boy was crossing the hall, carrying a pile of papers. Suddenly he stopped, as if he had collided with an invisible obstacle. He dropped the papers and threw his arms up in alarm, screaming.

Morgan rushed over to his side. "What's going on?" The boy's face was distorted with fear. He was trembling, and his words came slowly. "I ... he ... there was somebody ... something ... and I bumped into it! Just here, right on this spot." Morgan stepped over to the spot the boy had pointed to. "Nonsense!" he snorted. "There is nothing here!"

The boy shook his head, still frightened.

"Well, so what was it?" asked Morgan.

"I really can't say for sure what it was. It could have been a man; but he did not wear a regular suit. It felt hard to the touch." Morgan scratched his head. "Didn't you see anything?" "No! That's just it!"

"Well, just forget it." Morgan bent down and helped the boy pick up the scattered papers. "Just forget the whole thing. I wouldn't mention it to anyone. They'll only think you are seeing things that aren't there."

"Thank you, sir," muttered the boy, and continued on his way.

Morgan went back to Miss Defoe's desk. "What was wrong with him?" she asked.

"He collided with an invisible man."

Miss Defoe began to laugh hysterically.

"I wonder if he was really imagining things or ..." Morgan said seriously and with emphasis. She stared at him incredulously, and stopped laughing. "You don't mean to say that..." He did not reply. He cupped his face in his hands and sat there thinking.

A few moments later the door swung open again, but this time two of the members of the board of directors walked through. They seemed to be in a great hurry.

They passed the switchboard, talking to each other animatedly. Morgan followed them with his eyes. The two men walked over to a double swinging glass door that led to a short, wide hallway from which the conference room could be reached. Morgan saw clearly how both men passed through the glass door. The left wing closed again at once while the right side remained opened for a few seconds. The two men had walked down the corridor a few steps before the right wing swung back again.

There was no doubt in Morgan's mind that some invisible person had followed the two directors through that double glass door. He was just going to alarm the guards. But then he realized that he had no real proof of his suspicions. No one would believe him. They would just laugh at him. No, if anything could be done, he was the one to do it. It was now up to him alone.

It was plain to see how proud Lafitte was to have entered negotiations for such a fabulous deal. With incredible self-assurance he elaborated to his board of directors about the offer. He did not seem to notice that the faces of his listeners grew longer and angrier by the minute.

Finally Whitmore rose abruptly, sending his chair sliding back halfway to the wall. "In my capacity as the presiding officer of this board of directors, I want to express my deep concern at this strange offer you have presented to us, Mr. Lafitte."

Whitmore's face had turned beet red with anger, and he shouted furiously, "What kind of a joke is this, Mr. Lafitte, to have each of us interrupt whatever we were doing, rush over here and then tell us about this idiotic order somebody wants to place with us! How dare you act so irresponsibly!" Whitmore seemed near apoplexy; his face took on a bluish tinge. "Stand up, Lafitte! Explain yourself! Otherwise, we will be forced to take measures that would be rather unpleasant for you. You deserve to be taught a lesson that you won't soon forget!" Whitmore turned around to retrieve his chair and was just about to sit down again, to listen to Lafitte's explanation, when suddenly something seemed to occur to him. "Hold your horses, not so fast!" He waved to Lafitte to take his seat again. "What did you say the buyer was offering to pay us for this order?"

"They will give us a so-called degravitator." Lafitte repeated his previous explanation of the conditions of the sale. "An instrument that can nullify gravity up to ten times the gravitational pull of Earth. An ideal means for transporting heavy loads, which can't be matched by anything we have so far at our disposal." Whitmore seemed pleased with this elucidation. "Well, that sounds quite reasonable, gentlemen." He nodded with obvious satisfaction, looking at his colleagues sitting around the conference table. "If this is what the buyers intend to pay, then these terms seem most acceptable to us. Don't you agree, gentlemen?" Everyone in the room nodded approvingly. Any memory was wiped clean from their minds that but half a minute ago they had considered Lafitte's suggestions a stupid joke. It did not occur to anyone to inquire who could offer such an instrument, which so far had been dreamed of only in the wildest imaginations of scientific inventors. Suddenly it was sufficient for the board of directors that someone had offered to supply such an apparatus. There was not the slightest doubt in their minds about the absolute sincerity of their customer. Lafitte read out the terms of delivery, and everyone agreed that they were most reasonable and easy to carry out.

Just as Lafitte had promised, the meeting lasted barely an hour. The offer was accepted, and the necessary instructions for the various department heads were given out at once. The members of the board of directors congratulated each other on having concluded the most advantageous deal in the whole history of Ferroplastics, Limited.

The man who had assisted them in making this momentous decision waited until all the directors had left the conference room. Since he no longer needed to have all the energies of his body at his instant complete disposal—as indeed had been the case when he had started to exert his hypnotic influence on the members of the board—he now preferred not to return the same way he had entered the building. He wanted to avoid causing another unpleasant incident. Therefore, he concentrated his thoughts on a lot near—a rather empty street corner in the vicinity of the Ferroplastics building and transplanted himself there with a telejump.

Exactly the way he had visualized it, he landed on a weed covered lot near the Ferroplastics works. No one could have observed his sudden appearance out of nowhere.

Tako walked down the street and waited until an empty taxi came along. A few minutes later the taxi deposited him in front of his hotel. Lost in thought, he walked by the hotel desk without even looking up and got into the elevator that took him up to his floor.

He was very well pleased with the result of his day's work. The only thing that worried him was that he had been unable to avoid bumping into the office boy since half a second before he had had to step back to avoid someone else. He had not failed to notice that the tall young man who had come to the office boy's assistance had believed more in the boy's account than Tako liked. It looked as if there was now someone who would follow him like a bloodhound; and if he was sufficiently unprejudiced to accept the story of an invisible man with whom the office boy had collided, this person might turn out to become a rather dangerous opponent. Tako had got a good look at big face and remembered it well. He planned to submit the man to the influence of the hypnorod as soon as he could find the opportunity.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tako opened the door of his hotel room and entered. He had almost reached the table on which he had placed his new suit, when he heard a voice coming from behind him. "Don't get scared mister. I won't do you any harm." Tako spun around swiftly, eyes narrowed, and with lightning speed drew his gun, ready to shoot if necessary.

He saw an older man sitting in an armchair near the door. The man had raised his arms when he saw the gun pointed at him. His face had turned deathly pale in fright.

"For heaven's sake," he panted "put that thing away, please! I am unarmed." Tako lowered the barrel of his gun. "Who are, you? What are you doing in my room?"

"It doesn't matter who I am in this case. I am nothing but a figurehead in this game. I have been sent here to deliver you a message. Call me Webster, if you want to." Tako examined the old man. He was dressed a trifle too flashy for his age; he did not make a very reliable impression.

"What is the message you have for me?"

"Listen! We know that you want to get various things that will cost you a lot of effort and also might be quite dangerous for you. We offer to act as go-betweens for you and promise to supply you with anything you want to purchase."

Grinning and pleased with himself, the old man leaned back in his chair. "For a price, of courser" he added slyly.

Tako looked at him and pondered. But before he could add anything, Webster quickly leaned forward in his chair and said hastily, "Before I forget-we are aware that you have a bag of tricks at your disposal. You can probably influence me and force me to tell you all I know. But this wont do you any good. First of all, I don't know the man behind the scenes, the boss. Furthermore, he would interpret your tricks as a kind of vote of no confidence and break off negotiations at once. But if you want to deal fairly with us and pay us well, you will find us to be the most loyal partners you can wish for."

"Who is 'we'?" asked Tako. Webster Shrugged. "Sorry, I really can't tell you because I don't know myself." Tako was frowning. He dropped into a chair across from Webster. "How did you get into my room?" he asked.

"Oh, dear..." Webster grinned with obvious amusement at Tako's naïveté. "There are a thousand ways for an experienced man to get into any room."

"All right, then. I am willing to listen to your proposal. Where do I have to go hear it?"

"This is the address. But wait!" Webster pulled back the slip of paper that Tako was about to take from-his hand. "Let me tell you once more-no tricks whatsoever, mister. We will subject you to a thorough examination before we start dealing with you. We are running great risks even offering to have dealings with you. We must minimize that risk a much as possible. Do you get me?"

He held out the address to Tako. "This offer is good for ten days. If you are willing to accept, then call this number and say, 'Holloway will come at 2 P.M.' or '8 A.M.' whichever time will be more convenient for you. Is that clear?" Tako smiled. "You won't have to wait long for me, Webster." Webster

took his leave. He left behind a rather perplexed Tako. What Webster had referred to as "tricks" were probably the extraordinary feats he could accomplish with the help of the Arkonide suit. But how could anyone have found out about them?

At the same time he was wondering about Webster's personality. There was no doubt that Webster belonged to the lower social classes. The way he dressed and his mannerisms clearly indicated this. But who had sent him, who was behind all this? The kind of answer he'd given when asked how he had entered his room seemed to indicate that he must be a burglar or something of the kind. Could a burglary ring be of any help to Tako in his mission? Did they intend to steal for him all the necessary equipment for a 1,000 foot long spaceship? This thought was so amusing to Tako that he regained his self-assurance. He had nothing to be afraid of! Nothing as long as he was wearing the Arkonide suit and was capable of teleportation.

Therefore, he did not even bother to change clothes for dinner. Dressed in his Arkonide suit, he went down to the dining room and completely ignored the surprised looks the other guests sent in his direction.

Webster entered a room that contained nothing but a table and two chairs. On the table were a telephone and an intercom set.

Webster carefully closed the door behind him, after he switched on the light. Then he pushed a button on the intercom set. A little lamp lit up, and a voice inquired, "What is it?"

"Webster speaking. I think he will come."

"Good. Anything else?"

"No."

"I have something to tell you, Webster."

"Go ahead!"

"Finch has found out some guy who is spying on that Jap. His name is Morgan, and he works for Ferroplastics, Limited. He is one of their house dicks. You Will have to help Finch keep an eye on that guy till Yakamura has finished his business with us. We can't afford to have some idiot stick his nose into our affairs. No need to be gentle with him anything goes!"

"Okay, boss," Webster replied.

"I want something else from you. Connect the intercom with the phone. I want to hear if the Jap should call."

"Will do, boss!"

Webster pushed a button at the base of the telephone.

"Finch has his headquarters in Fratellini's Cafeteria. Hurry up and get there as quick as you can."

"Right away, boss."

"Get going. That's all for today." Webster switched off the intercom and took a pistol from the table drawer. Then he walked to the door, turned off the light and left the room.

He walked through an office with a row of writing desks and chairs. Everything was covered with a truck layer of dust. A door led to the outside.

The Eastern Transport Co. was a fictitious firm that existed only on a big, sign on the office door. Anyone who place an order with the firm would be politely informed that the firm was completely filed up with orders for the next six to eight weeks and could therefore not accept any new orders.

The outside door opened on the thirteenth floor of a modern office building. The hallway was deserted at this hour. Quietly Webster walked to the elevator and took it to the ground floor. He waved a friendly

hello to the doorman, hailed a taxi and drove off to Seventh Avenue to Fratellini's Cafeteria. Finch was sitting in a special room that Fratellini reserved for his special customers. Webster sat down across from Finch.

Finch glued up. "It looks as if the fish has just slipped through the net!" he said slowly.

Jesse Morgan had a great deal to do with the temporary defeat that Finch's people had suffered. Morgan was a Pinkerton trained man who was working for Ferroplastics, Limited. He possessed all the good qualities typical of Pinkerton detectives. It had not taken him long to find out that he was being shadowed constantly while he was trying to get close to the elusive Mr. Yakamura. He noted that several people took turns following him, and all of them seemed experts at their job.

It was quite an effort to shake these bloodhounds. It took several taxi trips, two movie tickets, a huge milkshake, which he unfortunately did not even have time to taste, and some strenuous muscular effort while racing through some side streets and around corners. But finally he managed to get rid of them.

Still, this cops and robbers chase foiled his original intention to get to Yakamura's hotel room, at least for this evening. He tried to figure out who these pursuers might be. But since Lafitte had not found it necessary to inform him about the peculiarities of the Japanese, Morgan considered this affair something to satisfy his own private curiosity. If any beneficial results for Ferroplastics, Limited, should ensue, they would be of only secondary interest to him.

Morgan had rather definite ideas concerning the identity of the Japanese. Until a few weeks ago, when a sudden lull occurred, the newspapers had been full of reports about the strange events in the Gobi Desert caused by the people who called themselves the Third Power. Many of these news items had become distorted, exaggerated and altered during their transit from Chinese to American news agencies—so much so that the U.S. papers were full of half truths that even quite unprejudiced readers would shrug off as ridiculous. Morgan, though, was capable of extracting from such reports the facts based on reality. In this particular case therefore, it seemed highly probable to him that Yakamura was not acting on behalf of the Asiatic Federation, as Lafitte had revealed in some hints, but rather as an agent of this Third Power.

Such an agent, speculated Morgan in his ignorance, would be liable to fall for a cheap trick he had planned.

As soon as he was absolutely sure that he was no longer being followed, he entered a coffee shop, sat down way in the back and ordered a cup of coffee.

After a few minutes he got up and went to the phone booth and closed the door to make sure no one could listen in to what he had to say.

He dialled the number of the Atlantic Hotel, where Yakamura was staying. "This is Robert Donovan calling. I would like to talk to Mr. Yakamura."

"Just a moment, please. I'll connect you with Mr. Yakamura's room." After a little while a high pitched voice answered the phone. "Hello."

"My name is Donovan," announced Morgan in slow and distinct tones. "I would like to present an offer."

Yakamura seemed to be taken by surprise, to be at a loss for words. But then, he inquired, "Who do you presume is interested in your offer?"

"You, Mr. Yakamura, of course! I have many valuable connections, and everything you would have a hard time locating and purchasing, I could get for you in no time!"

"And why would you do such a thing?" came Yakamura's sarcastic reply. "Out of sheer love for your fellow man?"

"No, sir. There is a price for everything."

"So what do you suggest?" asked Yakamura.

"Why not get together and talk things over?"

"Where?"

"You say where," answered Morgan.

After thinking it over for a moment or two, Yakamura spoke up. "I don't know this place. Let's say we'll meet in a little bar down the street from the Atlantic Hotel, to the left."

"That sounds fine to me. When?"

"One hour from now."

"Very good, Mr. Yakamura."

The Japanese hung up. Morgan could not repress a smile of satisfaction as he left the phone booth.

No one who did not have rather unusual and effective resources at his disposal would have fallen for such an obvious trick. Morgan did not doubt that Yakamura must be sure of an attempt to get him, although he had promised to come. The Japanese must therefore be very sure of himself and his protective means to walk into such a trap.

Morgan paid for his coffee and started to walk over to the little bar for his rendezvous. Although there was still another hour to go, he wanted to arrive there well before the Japanese.

Finch received two bits of news almost simultaneously. The first report worried him; the second pleased him.

"Pete says that the Japanese fellow is leaving his hotel just now," he remarked with obvious annoyance to Webster. Then his face lit up, and he added, "But Vale has found that Ferroplastics dick again. He is sitting in a bar on Washington Boulevard, down the road from the Atlantic Hotel."

Webster gazed at Finch with concentration.

"I think it's about time to teach that fellow a lesson," said Finch. "How about it, Webster?" Webster rose to his feet. "That's fine with me. Do You have any suggestions?" Finch scratched the back of his head. "Get him to come out of the bar under some pretext and then drive him out somewhere and beat him up. Tell him that the next time he'll get more than that if he doesn't stop interfering with us. He must keep his nose out of our affairs!"

"Will do, Finch."

Webster left and took, a taxi to Washington Boulevard. When he saw one of Finch's people waiting near the curb he asked the driver to stop. He paid and got out of the taxi. "Where is he?" he asked Vale.

Vale pointed with his thumb over his shoulder. "In there."

Webster looked down the street. He knew that the Atlantic Hotel was just a couple of blocks down the road. He did not like the idea. It occurred to him that the Ferroplastics detective might have an appointment with the Japanese right here in this little bar.

Webster's fears were suddenly confirmed when he saw the Japanese coming out of the hotel and leisurely walking down the boulevard. He kept stopping in front of store windows to look at the displays. This gave Webster a chance for some quick action. "Where is your car?" he asked Vale

Vale motioned to an old Ford parked in front of the entrance to the bar.

"Try to detain the Japanese, if he should get here too soon!" snapped Webster, and then ran into the bar.

He knew what Morgan looked like and recognized him at once. Without hurry he walked over to his table, trying to figure out some excuse that would arouse the least suspicion in Morgan.

Morgan glanced up at Webster. "What do you want?"

"Mr. Yakamura would like to talk to you."

Morgan seemed surprised. "Why, of course. Isn't he coming here?" The same instant Morgan felt like a fool; he could have bitten off his tongue. How could he be sure that this man had really been sent by Yakamura?

Webster felt relieved at hearing this information and seized the opportunity that had been so thoughtlessly presented to him. "No, he can't come here, unfortunately. But he would like you to meet him at his hotel." Morgan did not reply. He just stared at Webster, who grew impatient.

"Mr. Yakamura seemed to be in a great hurry when he sent me over here to ask you to come to his hotel. He has to leave Pittsburgh by tonight, sooner than he thought."

"Oh, that's it." Morgan seemed to accept this explanation. He motioned to the waitress and paid his bill. Webster walked out with him. "My car is parked right here in front. It will be quicker this way."

"No, thank you," Morgan declined cautiously. "I'd rather walk over to the Atlantic, it's so close." But in the meantime Webster managed to pin him against Vale's car at the curb. Unnoticed by the passersby, Webster had pulled his gun and pushed it against Morgan's ribs. "Do as I tell you!" he ordered. With a fast glance he noticed that Vale had accosted Yakamura and was busy talking to him. "Open the car door and get in!" ordered Webster.

Morgan obeyed. He had no choice with the cold steel of Webster's gun barrel punctuating his words. Webster sat down next to Morgan. Vale was still busy with the Japanese. Webster ground his teeth impatiently. Vale was doing too good a job delaying Yakamura. Webster rolled down the window and whistled to Vale. Vale tried to leave, but with a stubbornness that exasperated Webster, the Japanese stayed glued to Vale. Cold sweat covered Webster's forehead. Finally Webster heard Vale's

words. "Have fun, sir. I'm sorry, but I absolutely have to leave now." Vale ran over to the driver's side of the car. But Yakamura, who could not be deterred by such brusque leavetaking, approached the car from the curb and peered in. He had discovered Morgan before Vale managed to start the engine. As the motor started, Webster snapped, "Get going!" But before Vale had a chance to obey this command, Yakamura said in a strangely compelling voice through the half-opened window, "Hold it! I want to come along with you!"

Webster hesitated, unsure of himself.

"You can be reached at AN 2-3551, if I am not mistaken," continued the Japanese.

Webster nodded impulsively..

"Then you'd better take me along. I would not like anything to happen to this young man here. I can make sure of his loyalty in a much more effective way!"

"Okay. Get in, sir!"

Yakamura opened the front door and sat down next to Vale.

"Where did you want to go to?" the Japanese asked Webster.

"Just the nearest way out of town"

"That suits me fine," remarked Yakamura agreeably. "Go ahead!"

Vale drove off. Soon he reached the freeway that led out of the city. Soon after that Vale left the freeway and drove onto a sparsely travelled side road leading into fields. About a mile from the freeway he stopped the car.

"Not yet" ordered Yakamura. "Drive on a bit farther."

Vale looked at the Japanese and then at Webster. Webster shrugged helplessly.

Vale started the car again and drove for another two miles.

"Stop here!" commanded Yakamura. "That will do." Then he turned around to Morgan, in the back seat, and said, "Get out of the car!"

Morgan complied at once. He got out of the Ford slammed the door and then walked off, as if in deep thought, toward the freeway.

"Hey, hold it!" protested Webster. "That's not what I was given orders to-"

"Don't get excited!" Yakamura smiled gently. "You'll see in just a moment what I plan to do." Yakamura looked at Vale. "Would you mind driving on a bit farther from the freeway and then turning around to go back where we came from?"

Vale shook his head and took off. Webster peered through the rear window, nonplussed by Morgan's strange actions. Morgan had set out on his way back to the main road without even once looking back at the car driving off in the opposite direction. Vale continued on for another mile, then made a U-turn and drove back. In the meantime it had started raining.

Ten minutes later they spotted Morgan. Yakamura suggested, "Stop the car when you see him trying to hitch a ride!"

Morgan, In the meantime, had taken refuge from the rain under a tree by the wayside. He had pulled his jacket halfway over his head to protect himself from sudden downpour He was frantically waving his thumb toward the freeway.

Vale braked and came to a full stop just in front of Morgan.

Morgan came running from under the protective tree and quickly opened the door. "Heavens!" he panted, and let himself fall into the seat next to the utterly amazed Webster. "I was out here trying to catch a thief and I thought I was hot on his trail, when that rainstorm came on of a sudden. Would you please be so kind as to give me a ride back into town?"

The Japanese smiled obligingly at him. "Why, of course. Did you have any success with your chase?"

"No. I seem to have lost his trail when I came onto this side road here."

He continued with his story about a thief he had pursued. He rattled on and on, with the most minute details. Yakamura listened attentively, and Webster and Vale began to understand slowly with growing horror that Morgan had lost any memory of what had really happened to him.

And that was not all! Morgan had fabricated an artificial memory and would therefore never remember a Japanese by the name of Yakamura whose trail he had so hotly pursued.

Yakamura ordered Morgan to be let off at the outskirts of the city. Webster, who had finally got over his initial shock, stared asking all kinds of questions.

But Yakamura did not answer. Instead he requested, "Stop at the nearest phone booth. I want to call AN 2-3551."

The Preparations leading up to the arranged meeting gave it the character of a mysterious plot. Webster insisted that the Japanese should be blindfolded while he was being driven to the meeting place. Tako did not resist. He went along with their game.

He did not even endeavour to memorize the various bends in the road. There was not the slightest

doubt In his mind that these business negotiations would be concluded most successfully and that he would return unharmed.

He was most pleased that the Morgan affair had wound up so easily. How fortunate for him that chance had been on his side, saving him a lot of time consuming trouble.

At last they reached their destination, and the long walk through halls, up and down staircase and around corners came to an end.

The blind fold was removed from Tako's eyes. He found a fairly well lit but not tastefully furnished room. Several men standing around a large table looked him over curiously. They seemed to fit in with the style of the furniture.

"Good evening, gentlemen!" Tako said in the most friendly manner.

The men began to grin. "Good evening!" one of them replied. His face seemed familiar. His picture was frequently in the newspapers. Tako remembered the rumour that Stan Brabham's word meant more in the steelworkers' union than that of the big boss. Tako was not very surprised by what he saw. He had expected something of the kind.

"Let's sit down here!" Brabham suggested cordially, and pulled over a chair for Tako. "And let's start right away with business, Mr. Brabham," added Tako. Brabham looked startled. "How come you know my name?"

"From the papers," replied Tako curtly. "Anyhow, what does it really matter? Let's come to the point-do you want to help me?" Brabham answered with a brief nod.

"Why?" continued Tako.

"First of all because of the money and, more important still, because we sympathize with the Third Power."

Tako did not manage to hide his surprise. "Why? And how did you find out?"

"We have our people everywhere, and they know how to keep their eyes and ears open," explained Brabham with a wide grin. "We also have friends working at Ferroplastics, Limited, for instance. To make a long story somebody got wind of the whole thing, and we were smart enough to figure out what it all added up to."

Tako looked straight into Brabham's eyes. "What will you be able to do for us?" he inquired. Brabham was fiddling with a pencil stub and doodling on a piece of paper in front of him on the table. "We can get you about anything you want," he remarked calmly. "This is no exaggeration, either."

Tako fully believed him. He had heard about the tremendous influence wielded by the American trade unions.

"What will be your price?"

"Five percent gross," stated Brabham without blinking an eyelid.

That was quite a lot. Still, it was far less than Tako had expected to have to pay. "Why aren't you charging more for your services?"

"That's all we need," replied Brabham. "And besides, I have already told you how much we admire you. You have every chance to become a third world power. Indeed. We, the workers, don't want to be left out and wait passively when we see such a chance to bring about final peace on Earth."

"But do you realize that you are working against the laws of your own country?"

Brabham shrugged with deliberation. "This particular law is nonsense. Everyone will come to that conviction in a few more years."

Tako thought for a moment before he shot off his first question. "Can you get us some magnetic bottles with a volume of 1,000 cubic yards each?"

Brabham turned to the man next to him. "Jeff, how about it?"

"No problem," affirmed Jeff. "We'll get them for you." Brabham turned again to Tako. "You have heard it yourself. How many magnetic bottles will you need?"

"Five."

"When?"

"As soon its possible."

"Jeff, how long will it take you?"

"Four to five weeks."

"In five weeks, will that do?"

"Okay with us."

"Anything else you need?"

"That will be all for the time being, Mr. Brabham. I don't want to play all my cards before I have seen positive proof that you can really deliver what you promise. I hope you understand my being cautious." Brabham laughed out loud and slapped his hand on the table. "I understand. But we will Convince you that we mean business."

"I will leave it up to you how you go about seeing that no one finds out who placed the order," Tako said.

"Don't you worry," Brabham reassured him. "We are not interested in risking our own necks, either." After discussing the terms of delivery, Tako left the meeting with shining eyes, very satisfied with what he had accomplished. Back at the hotel, he paid his bill, and he left Pittsburgh early the next morning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rarely had Perry Rhodan felt such gratitude toward anyone as he did now for Khrest. For the Arkonide scientist had made sure not to be around when Rhodan regained consciousness after the hypnoschooling session.

Only Rhodan's friend Bell was present. As soon as Bell awoke he sat up and turned his back to Rhodan; then he leaned forward and supported his head in his hands, as if its weight had suddenly become more than he could bear. An hour went by without a word being spoken. Rhodan stared inside his brain and saw an endless cave in which he could perceive everything clearly. In the cave was stored all types of information, innumerable items of specialized superior knowledge. All he needed to do was to formulate any wish in his mind, and instantaneously he would have the solution to it, if it was something of a mathematical or scientific nature.

He tried to estimate the extent of the cavern which was his brain. But he was incapable of perceiving any limit to it. It seemed infinite, and as far as he managed to peer into it he never encountered any wall; there was always still another path leading farther on.

He looked up. His glance fell on the telecom. He felt absolutely convinced that Thora was observing him on the other end in her own cabin. She was surely studying his reaction upon awakening. He did not want to give her the satisfaction of seeing him brood over the newly found insights that the superior, Arkonide treasure of knowledge was giving him.

He got up. Bell was annoyed and grumbled about the noise Rhodan was making. Perry walked along the corridor until he came to the open door leading into Khrest's room. Khrest was sitting in a jointed chair staring at the telecom screen in Thora's cabin. Upon hearing Rhodan entering, Khrest turned his head. "Well?" he asked, and smiled with a trace of concern.

"Oh, nothing." Rhodan shook his head. "I have found a mistake."

Khrest straightened up with a shock. "A mistake?"

"Yes. The solution of the problem seems to be of a fairly recent date. I suppose that your people were too phlegmatic to look at everything properly."

Khrest appeared to wince. Rhodan winked an eye toward the telecom, to make Khrest understand that his words were really for Thora's ears. "Very interesting, indeed!" whispered Khrest. And what kind of mistake have you detected?"

"The problem of reproducing hyperflight routes-do you remember Rhodan asked as nonchalantly as he could. "The differential equation on which it is based is unstable and cannot be solved according to formula. The differential equation is one of the seventh order. But you were using a numerical approximation of the thirteenth order. That means that it is by several degrees more unstable than even the differential equation itself. In the field of nonstability small deviations grow to big mistakes.

"Even in our own mathematics here on Earth there are approximately solutions of the seventh order for such basic equations," continued Rhodan. "Shall I tell you why this mistake was made on Arkon?"

Khrest could say nothing in reply.

"The reason is that the approximation method used is conveniently easy to apply," roared Rhodan harshly, "and because these methods are made to order for your automatic calculating machines, as I have discovered from another source of information now stored in my brain. Your scientists' inertia made them neglect to examine the basic equation for its stability, and only that same inertia caused them to employ the usual procedure." Rhodan's voice now assumed a severely sarcastic note. "And this same inertia permits a considerable number of mistakes in the result and as a consequence uses an immense

amount of energy to reproduce a once used hyperflight route."

"Do you realize"—and now Rhodan's words came with the impact of repeated hammer blows—"That one-tenth of the calculated energy used would be sufficient!" Rhodan felt pain as he observed how Khrest reacted. Khrest collapsed into his chair, sat bent over, muttering fragments of sentences, shaking his head in desperation.

Rhodan avoided looking at the telecom screen. He knew that Thora was observing him and could understand him. This farce was really intended for her benefit rather than for Khrest. The mistake did exist, but the way he had brought up the subject was aimed at her. Rhodan would have loved to be able to see her face.

Slowly Khrest regained his composure. Rhodan smiled at him reassuringly to help him regain his equilibrium.

"I really had not intended to discuss this mistake with you, Khrest. I came here to thank you for everything you have done for us. You can't imagine how much we are in your debt, how appreciative we are." Khrest saw through Rhodan's attempt to cheer him up. He started to smile but managed only to produce a rather painful grimace. "Please don't, Rhodan," he murmured feebly. "You are not the one who should be grateful. It is just the other way around—we ourselves must thank the fate that let the paths of our two races cross." Khrest leaned forward again. "Do you know that no one has ever dared to absorb the knowledge of ten levels of developmental steps at one time? Do you realize how long I had to observe you before I was sure you could risk this jump without endangering your mind?"

Khrest breathed deeply. Then he continued, "I had expected you would need several days to recover from the tremendous shock of the ten level schooling. And what do you do? You get off the couch, and hardly has the transmitter been disconnected before you come to me and tell me, 'This is where you fools made a mistake!'" Khrest's voice grew loud and strong. "Do you realize what that means?" Anyone could guess the answer. Khrest sank back again into his chair, breathing with effort.

The loud clatter of hurried steps became audible rushing down the corridor approaching Khrest's room. At the same time Rhodan could hear Bell mumbling something to himself. Now the stocky figure of Rhodan's redheaded friend appeared in the door. "Listen Perry!" he said earnestly. "They have made a mistake - you know that, don't you? When they tried to reproduce mathematically a hyperflight they applied a differential equation of the seventh order. And in addition..." Rhodan burst out laughing, startling Khrest. It looked as if Rhodan's uncontrollable peals of laughter were painful for Khrest to hear. But then Khrest overcame his feelings of hurt and mustered a quiet, resigned, smile and an occasional chuckle at the grotesque situation.

An hour later the vessel left its orbital spin around Earth and set course for the moon. Rhodan had taken over the guidance system, applying the newfound information he had obtained during the hypnoindoctnation.

Reginald Bell flew as co-pilot. Khrest sat in the background, staring straight ahead. From time to time Rhodan turned around to check up on him. It seemed odd how long it took for a person of such mental magnitude to find his emotional balance again.

Thora did not come to the command center until the vessel was already heading straight for the moon. Rhodan did not bother to turn around as she entered. He heard her say, "This ship has an automatic guidance system. You are wasting your time, Rhodan!"

It was intended to sound sarcastic, but she was furious to note how poorly she succeeded.

Bell had turned around. "We are familiar with the workings of the Arkonide automatic guidance systems," he countered calmly. "One of them made quite a mess of fighting off an attack by three hydrogen helium rockets from Earth -didn't it, Thora?" Rhodan was unable to observe Thora's reaction to Bell's squelch. He noticed only utter silence on her part. When Bell turned around, facing front again, the corners of his mouth were twitching while he tried to suppress a loud chuckle.

They carried a large assortment of highly sensitive radiation counters on board. Rhodan hovered above the spot where they had located the remains of the former Arkonide cruiser while Bell carried out the necessary measurements for lingering radiation.

There had been no fallout on the moon. Whatever radioactivity had been generated by the bombs had either been shot straight out into space or remained on the ground. The lack of atmosphere at the same time lessened the danger for those who wanted to approach the site of the explosion.

Whatever remained of the cruiser did not reveal whether any part of the gigantic vehicle had escaped total destruction. Rhodan knew that there was hope for the innermost cell. Its walls had been constructed of a type of metal plastic. This material possessed a field of crystallization that imparted a degree of hardness and constancy of temperature beyond that known by terrestrial metallurgy. Any hull made of this metal plastic would stand up to unbelievable stress and would withstand temperatures up to 80,000 degrees Celsius.

The outside walls of the cruiser formed a chaotic tangle of molten and congealed material. Even if the innermost cell had remained undamaged, they would have to find a way through this confusion of highly radioactive plastic metal to get at the cell.

Bell announced, "Two microroentgens per hour!"

"At an altitude of fifty miles," completed Rhodan. That means we will have to expect about fifty to a hundred roentgens per hour down at the origin of the radiation, considering the extent of the source."

Reginald Bell nodded. "That means we can't use our own protective suits." Rhodan turned to Khrest. "This ship has protective clothing against high radiation on board, and we also carry a decontamination unit. There is no reason why we shouldn't land and inspect the wreck from nearby." Khrest had no objections; he simply nodded agreement.

Rhodan landed the vessel about a mile from the outer limit of the area where the remnants of the former Arkonide cruiser lay scattered about.

"I want to go out there with Reg. Whatever has to be done must be carried out quickly; we are just the right people for such a job. Khrest, I want to make sure that we remain in constant radio communication. I don't want to run any more risks." As an additional safeguard, Rhodan stepped over to the steering console, disconnected the motors that supplied the propulsion power and ran them down to zero output. That would guarantee a delay of at least half an hour if anyone suddenly decided to start them. He wanted to make sure Thora could not take off at lightning speed, leaving them stranded in this radioactive hell.

Khrest managed a faint smile of amusement. Thora did not move, but in her eyes the red pupils were scintillating with bright fury. Bell left the room to get the protective suits.

These were far more efficiently constructed than the suits Rhodan and his crew had used for their first moon landing with the Stardust. It had then taken them about twenty minutes to put on their protective space suits, a feat that, if properly executed with all required control measures, taxed their patience. They were pleased that they could simply slip on the Arkonide suits like ordinary coveralls. A little light came on at the left wrist indicating that everything was in order. There were no cumbersome oxygen tanks, no heavy radio in the helmet, no insulating bulges around the neck to interfere with free head movements and prevent them from throwing their heads back if they wanted to look upward. The Arkonide suit

produced its own oxygen supply from chemicals that took up hardly any space and were of negligible weight. The miniature telecom took up less space than a fingernail. The helmet was part of the suit and did not require airtight fitting.

Rhodan and Bell armed themselves with needle ray beamers. It was most likely that the three exploded bombs had blocked off the access to the interior of the cruiser. The needle ray beamer developed a focal temperature of close to 90,000 degrees Fahrenheit. They would have to resort to more efficient but heavier instruments if none of the hatches of the inner cell could be opened easily.

Khrest gazed after the two Earthmen as they left the ship via one of its air locks. Thora paid no attention to them. She stood in front of a screen and stared at the wreckage of the formerly proud Arkonide research ship.

"Watch her!" Rhodan admonished the Arkonide scientist, and it did not matter to him at all whether Thora heard his words.

They switched on the generators and slowly penetrated the area of the explosion. The molten, formless pieces were a frightening sight at close range.

No word was exchanged between the two men. Only Khrest's voice could be heard from time to time: "Everything okay aboard ship." Rhodan landed near the largest heap of wreckage he could find. It was most probable that it would contain the inner cell of the cruiser.

Bell moaned as he threw his head back to see the top of the mountain of rubble.

They began to work at once. The needle ray beamer cut the debris into big chunks and opened a passage for them. The dosimeter recorded ten roentgens, and they had been away from the ship barely ten minutes.

The only reassuring factor was Khrest's repeated reports: "Everything okay aboard ship." An hour later they had advanced about twenty yards inside the rubble heap.

Rhodan worried that the structure would not be sufficiently stable to tolerate a twenty yard wide bore

in its interior. He asked Bell to stop working for a while and proceeded to knock at the surrounding material. He left his hand resting on the spot for a moment to watch for any unusual reactions. But he could not detect anything besides the vibrations that were to be expected from the metal plastic.

Rhodan motioned to Bell to resume the work. In another hour they were really making headway. They reached large fissures and gaps inside the wreckage and could advance large stretches without having to use the needle ray beamer.

"We have penetrated almost fifty yards," murmured Bell "We should have reached it by now."

"Maybe we are already inside it!" ventured Rhodan.

Bell turned around abruptly.

Rhodan nodded. "We have no guarantee that the inner cell was able to withstand the bombing attack. The crystal field might have failed."

Bell was breathing hard "Well, then . . . !" he snorted, and pointed the beam against the nearest obstacle in their way. A moment later he shouted triumphantly, "Look here, Perry! We've made it!" Rhodan peered over his shoulder. The last piece of metal plastic had been detached from an expanse of smooth wall. This wall had not been affected by the heat of the explosion; they could see this right away.

Rhodan knew that metal plastic crystal reinforcement was turquoise blue, the same as the wall Bell had uncovered.

They resumed their endeavours with renewed strength and managed to expose large parts of the wall. Khrest began to put questions to them, but they answered him only briefly.

"This seems to be a door!" Bell panted finally.

He had found the small indentation in the wall. The line ran diagonally, a sign that the inner cell had changed position because of the explosion. It took another fifteen minutes for them to uncover the door completely. Rhodan knew that the door had been automatically sealed the instant the explosion occurred. He would need to find the special code that would unlock it again, provided the opening mechanism was still in working order.

He pulled out the impulse set that he had brought along from the Arkonide vessel. It was a pencil-like rod about four inches long that contained a code sender; he pressed it against the door.

Suddenly he felt the ground tremble beneath him. The door seemed to strain, as if it wanted to open. There were heaving and squeaking in the door joints, but only a hairbreadth wide chink became visible. Then it closed again, unable to overcome the forces pulling against it.

Rhodan motioned to Bell. The door was about man size and not too heavily built. Human muscle power would supply the additional push needed to open it completely.

Once more Rhodan applied the impulse set; once again the ground began to vibrate and a tiny gap showed itself along the edge of the door. This time the opening was a bit wider, just big enough so that Bell could insert his gloved fingertips and get a firm grip on it.

He leaned heavily against the door frame, all the while pulling at the door with all his might. Rhodan kept the impulse set constantly pressed against the turquoise plastic metal of the door slab.

Bell changed his position and renewed his efforts. The obstacle gave way so suddenly that Bell was thrown violently back against the wall of the corridor. The fully opened door revealed a darkened closet size air lock.

Khrest's voice came over the radio. "Everything okay here. How is it going with you?"

"We are facing a difficult decision," replied Rhodan. "The door is finally open. The air lock seems to be in fine working order. We had a hard time prying the entrance open. if we enter now in the regular manner, we might risk not being able to open the door again from the inside when we want to leave."

"Well, what is your problem then?" inquired Khrest.

"I can open the other end of the air lock without first closing the door leading to the outside. But then the air inside the inner cell would rush out with explosive force."

"Would that endanger you?" asked Khrest. "Can't you take cover in time?"

"We can take care of ourselves; we are perfectly safe here," said Rhodan. "But how about any possible survivors inside the cell? How about their chances of living through that?"

Khrest's heavy breathing became quite audible. "This seems most improbable. If anybody had lived through the atomic bombing, he would long since have found a Way to establish communication with us."

"What if he was seriously wounded and could not move at all?"

Khrest sighed deeply. Then he spoke up calmly. "Just go ahead and open the inside door of the air lock. We can't afford to take any more chances now. We desperately need objects inside the cell. We must get them immediately!" Rhodan nodded, approving Khrest's decision. He would not have chosen a different solution, but in moments like these it seemed better to share responsibility. Reginald Bell took the impulse set from Rhodan and walked over to the other end of the air lock. "Here is a good spot where I can take cover. Perry, stay outside!"

The door to the interior functioned perfectly. As it opened a, rush of air escaped, accompanied by a cloud of dust and a few small objects that had not been fastened down. The heavy air wave lasted but a second. Then the atmosphere had completely vanished.

As Rhodan entered the air lock, Bell jumped up from behind his shelter. "Good grief!" he moaned. "That felt as if somebody hit me over the head with a sandbag."

Rhodan peered inside the cell. It was pitch dark. He switched on the searchlight on his helmet and lit up the way that leading to the interior of the cell. He noticed that the interior had been much more severely damaged by the force of the explosion than had the outside hull. The pressure had turned everything upside-down and even torn heavy instruments from their positions.

Many items had been destroyed or damaged beyond repair. But quite a few things could still be used. They would save themselves a lot of trouble if they brought everything back to Earth with them.

Bell was eagerly investigating this treasure trove, just as Rhodan was about to call out to his friend, Khrest's excited voice came over the radio. "Emergency! Rhodan, Bell! Return at once!" Rhodan stopped. "What's happened?"

"Hurry back as fast as you can! Don't lose a moment!" urged Khrest. Rhodan whirled and took off. Bell followed. They switched off the artificial gravity and pushed out through the sinuous corridor they had blasted for themselves a short time ago.

Once outside, they set their generators for countervalues and sailed in a high arc over the Arkonide ship. Khrest had already opened the air lock for them. They lost precious seconds while the air lock was pumped full of air.

Khrest received them directly behind the inner door to the air lock. He was trembling, and his eyes shone red.

"What's the matter?" inquired Rhodan abruptly. "Something terrible has happened," whispered Khrest.

Rhodan ran toward the command center. Khrest hardly kept up with him.

"Thora has activated a hyperprobe. This was not against our agreements, and I did not prevent her from doing it."

Rhodan nodded briefly, removing his space suit while still hurrying to get to the command center. Hyperprobes were intended to locate the directional beam of a hypersender. The beam could be aimed to a fraction of an inch, and wherever it did not hit directly, it was unnoticeable. However, there were fully automatic probes, small vessels the size of a man's hand, that could search a certain area inch by inch and find any hyperdirectional beam that might be present. Rhodan and Khrest reached the command center. Thora was standing leaning against the control panel, her face turned toward them. Rhodan recognized the mixture of pride and sarcasm in her expression.

Rhodan wasted only a brief glance at her.

Khrest continued his report, his voice quivering with excitement. "The probe searched for some time outside without any success. But suddenly it did locate something."

"What did it locate?" Rhodan urged impatiently.

"The impulses of our hypersender ..." Khrest motioned quickly over to the picture screen that showed the image of the destroyed cruiser. "Coming from our wrecked spaceship over there. Automatic emergency signals. Do you know what that means?" Rhodan understood at once. More than that, he also understood the consequences. Each Arkonide spaceship was equipped with a hypersender whose capacity was, of the same structure, seen mathematically, as that of the hypergravitational field that made possible the faster than light flight though the universe. Hyperwaves travelled with barely any loss of time across any distance and therefore represented the ideal means of communication in an era that calculated in light-years with the same matter of fact attitude as earthlings had done with miles until recently.

Every hypersender had an emergency switch that was activated as soon as anything happened to the spaceship carrier, regardless of whether it was caused by outside interference or mechanical failure inside the ship. Once set in motion the sender broadcast a certain signal uninterruptedly. Furthermore, it compressed the beam and directed it toward the next receiving station.

Rhodan was informed that the receiver to which the signal was beamed from the destroyed cruiser emergency was on Myra IV. He knew that was nothing but cold deserted planet in the vicinity of a dying sun, about 800 light-years from here. This planet was so inhospitable that the Empire had stationed only the usual outpost detachment of robot ships.

The consequences could be easily foreseen. The robot ships would receive the emergency signals, then set out to approach the sender. They would determine that the cruiser had been destroyed by rockets, and they would then proceed to locate the spot where these missiles had originated and take revenge on the perpetrators of the attack.

In this case the perpetrators were Earthlings, and therefore they, as well as all other inhabitants of Earth, would be annihilated, together with their planet. There was no doubt that it was in the power of the robot ships to mete out full punishment to the offender.

The hypersender of the wrecked Arkonide exploratory vessel on the moon was sending out the emergency signals. This meant simply that within forty-five days after the destruction of the ship, someone would try to turn Earth into a rubble heap. And the way things looked now, Earth would not be able to fend off this attempt.

The only people who could help Earth in its plight were not at all in accord.

Rhodan glanced over at Khrest. Khrest seemed to guess his thoughts.

"I have started the motors already," he said.

Rhodan was relieved and thankful. "Let's start as quickly as possible, then."

CHAPTER SIX

Umanak Fjord, David Strait.

This is, according to anyone who has ever been there, where it is impossible to distinguish the gray sky from the equally gray icebergs.

There hardly exists a more disconsolate place on Earth. On the other hand, nowhere else on Earth are such important decisions made.

Umanak Fjord is headquarters of the International Intelligence Agency, which for the time being was

just as overrun by foreign agents as by those of the IIA.

Very little was to be seen above ground. A few thick walled wooden houses belonging to a Danish trading firm were lived in by some Eskimos. On one of the houses a primitive wooden board nailed above the front door said in crooked painted letters that furs were sold in this establishment. But no one had ever purchased any furs from the Umanak Fur Co.

The Eskimos were well trained special agents. The manager of the post was a Dane. In reality he held the rank of first lieutenant and was Allan D. Mercant's special pet. The rest of the installation was hidden under ice and rock. More than ninety-five percent of all activities at Umanak fjord were carried on underground.

About 500 people lived permanently at Umanak Fjord. Only ten of those were familiar with the extent of the underground installations. The agents of the Asiatic Federation and of the Eastern Bloc who lived here during these days of enforced cooperation knew only the two upper stories.

Colonel Mercant's living and working quarters were on the lowest level of the tract. He was surrounded by security guards and safety installations. Not that he was afraid for his own personal safety. What mattered to him and to those responsible for these precautionary measures was the tremendous number of valuable and secret documents stored in safes built into the lowest floor. Mercant worked in his private office, which he had furnished according to his own taste. The furniture was outsized. Any visitor had to look around this office and its gigantic furnishings to locate the colonel. Mercant as a rule he sat behind a giant writing desk, comfortably leaning back in an armchair that was far too big for his slender figure. His head was hardly visible above the edge of his desk.

Mercant did not adhere to any fixed schedule. He worked until he got tired and felt that his efficiency was not up to par. Then he went to bed and slept until he felt sufficiently rested to carry on his work. The even illumination of his rooms enabled him to abandon the normal twenty-four hour rhythm of the world above.

The only ones to suffer from such an unorthodox time schedule were Mercant's orderlies. Most of them loved well ordered activity and well regulated hours for rest. But according to Mercant's point of view, world security should be neglected because of subaltern officers' preference for well regulated working hours. That day he had risen at 3 o'clock, not bothering whether it was 3 in the morning or in the afternoon. He had started to work on some papers that he had been forced to lay aside before he had gone to bed. At 3:15 sharp Sergeant O'Healy had appeared and announced, "Nothing special has happened, sir, during the past four hours." Then he had left the room, to return a few minutes later with some coffee and cookies. He waited patiently until Mercant had swallowed a few gulps of the boiling hot beverage and asked him the usual question: "What is the time now, Sergeant?"

"Three twenty-three, sir."

Mercant peered over the rim of his coffee cup and looked at the clock on the opposite wall. It showed 3:22.

"Which time of the day?"

"In the morning, sir."

Mercant smiled with satisfaction. Then O'Healy saluted and left the room. He no longer pondered about the odd ceremony, although he had considered it a silly joke when he first started working for Mercant. Medical cosmetics were capable of a few tricks that were quite difficult to detect. Therefore, to protect himself against any eventualities, Mercant had ordered his sergeant on guard always to tell the time one minute faster than it really was. Also he had to say that it was morning when it was really evening and vice versa.

O'Healy was convinced that Mercant would shoot him on the spot if he ever told him the right time by mistake. But he was wrong to assume that. Mercant considered it sufficient identification when O'Healy announced the time one minute too fast. However, the announcement of the time of day was a source of genuine information for him. Not until O'Healy told him that it was morning did he know that it was indeed afternoon. Half an hour later he received Captain Zimmerman, who came to give his daily report.

"To begin with the most important bit of news—the interview with the officers of the Asiatic Federation. Major Perwuchin from Moscow arrived as an observer."

"What does he intend to observe?" inquired Mercant in a bored voice. "Do you have any idea what these orientals want from us now?"

"Rumour has it that they have brought along many new proposals that they would like to discuss with you, sir."

"What kind of proposals? For a lasting world peace?"

"No, sir. Proposals on how they could get at those deserters in the Gobi Desert."

Mercant raised, his right hand and carefully inspected his fingernails. "Don't keep on calling these people 'deserters' Zimmerman! I have heard a great many good reports about them, and I would not like to judge them before I have learned what their motivations are." Zimmerman did not reply.

"Anything else?" asked Mercant.

"Nothing else for the time being, sir."

"Thank you."

Zimmerman saluted and left the room.

Rhodan made a landing 180 miles inland on a smooth expanse of gray blue ice. The icy plain was of limited size and was surrounded on all sides by mountains of considerable height. There was no danger that the spacecraft might be discovered accidentally. Besides, 180 miles was quite a considerable distance for conditions on Greenland.

Thanks to the technical aids he had on board, Rhodan had experienced no particular difficulties in eluding the numerous radar stations in the area. He was certain that the observers had not even noted a slight flash on their radar screens.

Rhodan had not been worried at all about being detected by direct optical observation. The visibility ceiling was extremely low over Greenland, and it was easier to remain above the uninterrupted cloud cover than to surround the whole craft with an energy consuming deflector screen.

While flying back from the moon, Rhodan had informed Tako of all that had happened and had requested him to return to the Gobi Desert Base. Right now there were more important matters to deal with than to try to negotiate with the mighty captains of industry. Rhodan was justifiably convinced that the Third Power would soon no longer be forced to place its orders secretly, constantly afraid of detection by hostile agents.

Rhodan left the Arkonide spaceship in the afternoon. He was armed with a needle ray beamer and dressed in an Arkonide transporter suit. Bell remained aboard ship, since Thora's rebellious attitude had entered a new active phase following the discovery they had made on the moon. Khrest was no match for her-she needed more efficient surveillance. With the help of the Arkonide transporter suit Rhodan could cover the 180 miles to Umanak Fjord within an hour and a half. The flight was uninteresting and tedious. In addition, Rhodan was plagued by feelings of uncertainty about the situation he would have to face in Umanak Fjord.

The only indication Rhodan had regarding Mercant's friendly attitude toward the Third Power was Lieutenant Klein's statement that Mercant was aware of the double role Klein was playing and that Mercant seemed to approve of it. Rhodan used the deflector the moment he left the spaceship. The deflector field obtained energy from a microgenerator in the transporter suit. This field controlled electromagnetic radiation on all wavelengths between 2,000 and 8,000 angstroms and forced the waves to flow around the transporter suit like water around a rock. This meant that the wearer of such a suit could not be seen by the naked eye, by ultraviolet light or by infrared light. The suit was powerless against detection by radar, but on the other hand, the wearer of the suit presented too small a target to be picked up on a radar screen.

Rhodan landed right in the middle of the Umanak Fur Co., still not sure where he would have to go to find Mr. Mercant. The only thing he knew was that Mercant was somewhere below the surface of the earth. Rhodan's first task, therefore, was to find the entrance to the subterranean structure. Even wearing a cloak of invisibility presented its problems to Rhodan, trying to avoid discovery by people. Umanak Fjord was as busy as a beehive. When two persons approached Rhodan from two different directions, he had to use a great deal of concentration to get out of their way.

Toward 4 o'clock in the afternoon Rhodan believed he had found the spot, where the underground installations could be entered. From the outside nothing could be noticed, just a few low storage sheds. Rhodan had been standing nearby and observed a number of people that disappeared into the building or emerged from it. Rhodan walked over to the door and waited nearby until the next man went in. Rhodan slid inside with him and entered the big hall. The interior was illuminated by arc lights, and the opposite wall showed the opening of a tall, wide shaft.

The heavy traffic in this shaft represented quite a danger for Rhodan. While passing down the next fifty yards from the entrance to the elevators, he was incapable of paying attention to anything but watching out that nobody bumped into him.

There were fifteen elevators. Rhodan did not dare to use one alone. He waited until a man entered an elevator, and then he quickly slipped inside.

Unfortunately for Perry Rhodan, that man descended only two floors. Rhodan remained alone in the elevator. A uniformed guard stuck his head inside the cabin.

"Okay," mumbled the guard. "Ready to go."

The moment his attention was diverted, Rhodan pushed lowest floor. The elevator started to move the button for the down swiftly.

As soon as the elevator had stopped, Rhodan left it. A tunnel stretched out to either side, looking similar to the shaft above. A lit up number 15 was visible on the wall opposite the elevator entrance. Rhodan had been counting as he descended. This, then, was the fifteenth floor below the ground.

Several guards were stationed below the lit up 15. Two of them walked over to the elevator from which Rhodan had just alighted. One of the guards inspected the empty cabin and called out to his colleagues, "Hey! What do you know! Somebody pushed fifteen from the inside, but there isn't anybody. Where did he go?" Two of his friends approached, and they in turn searched the empty elevator. They seemed to be quite puzzled, and one of them marched down the corridor toward a telephone. Rhodan had to jump aside to prevent the man from running into him. The man began to make his call, but Rhodan could not understand what he was saying.

Rhodan cursed himself. He should have known better! He should have remembered, from his days at Nevada Fields, this special type of elevator that indicated outside whether it had been set in motion from inside or outside. He should have guessed that Mercant would have this kind of elevator installed in his secret hideout.

The man left the phone, returned to the other guards still busy at the cabin and called out to them, "Stop the elevator At once! Zimmerman wants to have a look at it!"

One of the men pushed the stop button, and they stepped aside to await Zimmerman's arrival.

O'Healy reported, "An unexplained incident on the fifteenth floor, sir Somebody took the elevator down to the fifteenth, but when the guard inspected the inside it was empty." Mercant looked up. "Well, there was nobody inside. What does Zimmerman have to say to this?"

"Captain Zimmerman has called in some experts who are examining the interior of the elevator for fingerprints and such."

Mercant rose, sighing. "It will take them about three months to establish everyone who has left fingerprints in that elevator! Where did you say? On the fifteenth floor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come along with me! We'll go up there."

In the meantime Rhodan had found out that the fifteenth floor was not the lowest. He went toward Captain Zimmerman, as the captain walked through the tunnel and tried to determine where the captain had come from. This way Rhodan found the two elevator shafts that led farther down still but not up.

These elevators were even more closely guarded than the one he had taken down from the surface. There was no doubt that the guards would react immediately at the slightest movement of either elevator.

Rhodan waited. A little while later Zimmerman returned from the other end of the tunnel with one of the sergeants. The guard saluted, and Zimmerman entered the elevator with the sergeant.

Rhodan jumped into the elevator, close behind the two. He avoided any noise and pushed himself flat against the cabin wall to avoid touching his two co-riders.

Zimmerman seemed puzzled. "That's strange. I am almost led to believe that the man must have leaped out of the moving elevator. But that's impossible!" Suddenly the elevator came to a halt. Rhodan had been counting the floors and realized that they had descended another six floors.

Because he was afraid his shoes would clatter on the uncarpeted floor of the tunnel, Rhodan failed to jump out fast enough. The sergeant brushed past him and bumped into him.

The sergeant stopped in his tracks, which caused Zimmerman to collide with him. Rhodan held his breath and tiptoed to the side with tiny steps.

"What's the matter?" asked Zimmerman. "I . . . I ran into something just now sir." Zimmerman frowned. "Where?"

"Right here, sir!" stammered the sergeant, and pointed into the air.

Rhodan saw that they were at the end of a corridor. The narrow side of the wall was two yards to the left of the wall. The two guards who had been standing across from the elevator exit approached.

Zimmerman laughed. "How long have you been working here with us, Sergeant?"

"Two years sir."

Zimmerman nodded understandingly. "That explains it. When I was stationed here for two years, I began seeing little green men, marching through the halls."

Zimmerman shoved his hands fairly close together to demonstrate how small these men had been. He seemed to want to cheer up the sergeant. "With all this secrecy," he added kindly, "it is no wonder if you get hallucinations after some time."

The sergeant pulled himself together. "Yes, sir!"

Rhodan was relieved. Zimmerman walked down the corridor with the sergeant, while the guards stayed behind, still grinning. Cautiously Rhodan walked past them and followed the two men down the hall.

"Here comes Zimmerman, sir!" announced O'Healy, as he opened one of the steel doors in front of Mercant. These steel doors divided the lowest tunnel into several sections. Zimmerman saluted smartly. "This is Sergeant Daniels, sir. He was the first one to notice the incident."

Mercant turned to the sergeant. "You have ordered the whole elevator cabin searched for fingerprints?"

"Yes, sir. Not the whole cabin, though, only the pushbutton for the fifteenth floor."

"Very clever, very clever indeed," came Mercant's sarcastic reply. That will keep a lot of your specialists happy for some time." Zimmerman squirmed uncomfortably. "I have-"

"Doesn't it occur to you, Captain, that this man-if such a person really exists-might have employed the time honoured device of wearing gloves? He seems to be an ingenious guy to begin with if he managed to penetrate the Umanak station. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, sir, that sounds reasonable," admitted Zimmerman meekly.

"You bet your life it does!" snapped Mercant. "Who besides yourself has seen that empty elevators?"

"All the guard posts stationed in front of the fifteenth floor elevator exit, sir," reported Daniels.

"Did you send for the repairman to check the elevators out for some failure of the electronic system,

Zimmerman? inquired Mercant.

"Not yet, sir. But I will see to it at-"

Before Zimmerman had a chance to complete his sentence he was interrupted by a sudden shrill whining sound. All hell seemed to break loose. The ear piercing noise drowned out all other sounds. The steel door near which Mercant was standing was set in motion automatically, knocking Mercant toward the back part of the tunnel. Mercant seized O'Healy's arm in time and pulled him back with him behind the closing door. Zimmerman and Daniels were left on the other side. "Radar alarm!" shouted Mercant breathlessly. "Come on, O'Healy!" They turned about-face and stormed down the corridor. They could not get to Mercant's private office, since the steel doors could be opened only by special order in such an emergency. Mercant did not want to issue this order as long as he did not know exactly what had happened. Therefore, he went into one of the offices in this section of the shaft. He sat down at one of the Writing desks and called the security center via intercom. "Mercant speaking. What's the matter with the bottom tunnel?"

"Radar alarm in Sector A, sir."

"What caused this alarm?"

We don't know, sir. we've been scanning the whole sector, but nothing can be seen on the screen."

"Have you got in touch with the A Sector offices?"

Yes, sir. We did this right away. But they haven't noticed anything unusual. "Mercant was thinking hard. Sector A was the first a person had to pass through coming from the elevators. If someone came down from above he had to get through that way.

"Give the all clear," Mercant said simply.

They could hear another siren howling outside in the corridors. Mercant called to O'Healy to follow him back to the door where he had been talking a couple of minutes ago with Zimmerman. Zimmerman and Daniels were still rooted to the same spot as before.

"Have you noticed anything here; did you see anyone?" Mercant asked the two.

"No, sir. Nothing whatsoever. May I ask what-"

"Probably a ghost in making its rounds," answered Mercant with a smile. "Or an invisible man, at least."

With cautious steps he walked past the two men farther down the hall. Zimmerman and the two sergeants were about to follow him, when Mercant waved them back. One of the doors on the left side of the corridor opened. A man stuck his head through the door, but Mercant angrily motioned him back into the room.

Suddenly Mercant came to a halt and drew himself up, as if he had found something. He peered down at the floor, then up again into the air; finally he turned around and came back smiling.

"There is nothing here. I can't find a thing. Enough of this tomfoolery!" Mercant said with amusement. "Zimmererman! Send those fingerprint experts home again. I believe we will be able to solve this mystery all by ourselves." Mercant looked over to see the two sergeants. "O'Healy and Daniels, get back to your jobs. O'Healy, I will expect you to report to me at the usual time." Then Mercant marched back to his office without bothering about the perplexed faces that stared after his disappearing figure. Cautiously he opened the door to his private office. A grin of satisfaction covered his features. He went to his desk, fell back into his armchair and pulled out a drawer, from which he took a gun.

Then he pointed the weapon at a spot between the door and the first filing cabinet. "Whoever you are," he said to the void, "you may remove your cloak of invisibility now. don't know what you have in mind. But if you should intend finishing off old Mercant, I assure you that I still have enough strength to pull this trigger. I know exactly where you are standing, as you see. Well?" A few seconds went by. Then a cloud formed right at the spot Mercant was aiming at. The cloud began to take shape and solidified into a man dressed in a strange looking suit.

Mercant's eyes grew wide with astonishment. "Major Rhodan!" Perry Rhodan shook his head. "Address me only as Rhodan. The major has quit the service."

Now it was Rhodan's turn to express amazement. "How on Earth did you guess that I was hidden in this room?" Mercant smiled. "People are saying about me that I can smell the presence of a person in a dark room. I have never experienced it as distinctly, though, as just now. Have a seat, please, Rhodan!"

Rhodan sat down. He seemed free and easy.

"Your outfit is ineffective against radar detection, it seems," Mercant stated calmly after a while.

"Yes. And I didn't know that you had a radar warning system down here."

"It was nevertheless a remarkable accomplishment, Rhodan!"

Rhodan shrugged. "Let's come to the point. It's quite serious, Mercant."

"All right! Shoot!"

Rhodan reported what had happened on the moon recently. He concluded, "I want to make this quite clear we must expect the arrival of a number of robot ships in the near future. They will not ask if we were justified in destroying the Arkonide cruiser. They will simply attack and we will be defenceless."

Mercant did not indicate whether he was impressed by the report. He asked quietly, "Your auxiliary spaceship-didn't you say that it was well equipped? Can't you ward off the imminent attack with it?"

"Well equipped compared with what we humans have at our disposal, Mercant! But any means of defence we have will be no match for the approaching robot ships. We will do whatever is in our power, but the world, too, must get ready for the attack."

"How do I know that you aren't simply trying to bluff me in order to take unfair advantage of us?" countered Mercant. "You don't know, and nobody can tell you," Rhodan said coldly. "You either believe me or not. You will find out in time that I am not bluffing you." Mercant looked unimpressed; he seemed

to reflect over what he just had heard. In reality he was trying to probe Rhodan's brain. Mercant was well aware that he had the beginnings of telepathic abilities. He was capable of perceiving thoughts if the person was concentrating on them and if that person was not too far away from him. In most cases, though, he could perceive only the total concept and furtively whether the gestalt of certain ideas. And he knew intuitively whether that thought was the truth. Rhodan's brain was different. Mercant had been able to locate Rhodan by sensing the presence of his brain. This is how he had pinpointed Rhodan's position from outside in the hall and then inside the office. But Mercant could not penetrate into Rhodan's brain at all. It was as if he had put a solid barrier around his thoughts. Although Mercant could not grasp any of his visitor's thoughts directly, he nevertheless sensed that his intentions were honest. He stood up. "Let's forget the thing about the bluff, Rhodan," he said finally. "What would you suggest we do?" "Make sure that the right people are informed about what we will have to expect soon. Describe it to them as vividly as you can and then explain that a proper defence system can be created only if everyone will cooperate with each other."

Rhodan's voice grew more intense. "In addition to that, will you see to it that this ridiculous embargo against our supply line with raw materials or any other products we need to buy is lifted. Even if we succeed in fighting off the first attack, others will certainly follow. In order to be in a good defensive position, we must make sure of having at least one effective spaceship at our disposal. Even if the industries should get permission to supply us with whatever we need, it will take us several months to construct the ship from the raw materials and the half-finished parts. But in case we have to procure all these things underground, we could do it only within a year or two!" Mercant kept his eyes fixed on a spot on the floor. "I'll do my best, Rhodan. Do you realize what you are asking me to do? I'll fly to Washington and tell the people there, 'Listen, Rhodan has found a hypersender on the moon, a hypersender that is emitting automatic emergency signals. Two weeks at the most a fleet of robot ships will arrive and bombard our planet. Rhodan wants you to lift the embargo against his lines of supply.' What do you think the people will answer me?" Rhodan mobilized all his reserve powers. "You are capable of exerting a tremendous influence on people, Mercant," he said softly but intensely, while locking his eyes with those of Mercant. "You will use this influence and persuade the people of the absolute necessity of avoiding any delay in the defensive measures that you will initiate against the ending attack from outer space. Is that clear, Mercant? Go directly to the President of the United States! Talk with those persons who believe you personally, not just because you are the chief of the IIA. Is that clear, Mercant?"

Mercant nodded obediently. It did not occur to him that never before had anyone dared talk to him in such a manner. It could not occur to him for the simple reason that Rhodan's command had been given in form of a hypnotic message. Mercant was compelled to carry it out exactly the way he had been ordered to. Rhodan relaxed his grip on Mercant's mind. "I would appreciate if you would escort me safely back to the surface." Mercant opened the door. "As long as you are with me no one will dare stop you."

While they were walking along the corridor Mercant remarked, "I will have to remain in touch with you, Rhodan. Inform Lieutenant Klein that he will receive any news for you by ANP code. Will you remember that?"

Rhodan stopped. Mercant was amused to notice his surprise.

"Who did you say should I inform about the ANP code?" replied Rhodan. "Klein? Lieutenant Klein?"

"That's right."

"How did you know that he was working with us?"

"I did not know it for sure," said Mercant. "I simply presumed he did. Didn't I tell you that my sense of intuition is developed to an extraordinary degree? I can 'smell' certain things." Rhodan recovered from his surprise. "Klein will be most pleased to learn about this. He was in constant fear of being found out by someone who would not approve of what, he was doing."

Mercant began to chuckle. "Never mind that. I still consider him one of my best agents!"

They reached the elevators, where the amazed guards gave a smart salute to their superior Mercant and his strange looking companion.

"How would you explain your attitude toward Klein, Mercant Rhodan asked.

Mercant hesitated before he replied straightforwardly, "It is my belief that mankind should collaborate with you. I am convinced that you intend no evil for the human race and that it would be to our advantage to make our peace with you."

Rhodan looked up at Mercant, his eyes filled with astonishment. He stretched out his hand to Mercant.

"Thank you, my friend."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Allan D. Mercant was one of the few people the President would receive at any time.

Both men wielded power and influence in a comparable manner, the only difference being that the President was officially authorized to do what Mercant accomplished under the mantle of secrecy. But in this particular case Mercant depended on the Presidents assistance-only he was empowered to give the signal for an atomic alarm.

President Nyson had invited a special adviser to be present at the interview. Next to Mercant, Mr. Wildinger was considered one of the most lucid minds in the world.

Mercant had not been able to persuade the President.

President Nyson protested, "No one could possibly demand that I should act on a mere rumour and release the atomic alarm and start spending money wildly. Do you realize, Mercant, that such an alarm would cost about a billion dollars?"

Mercant remained unruffled. "I can't imagine why this should matter to us in such an emergency." President Nyson reacted impatiently. "Wildinger! What are You waiting for! Let's hear your opinion!" Wildinger had been listening to the discussion, comfortably settled in his big armchair. Now he leaned forward. "This is a rather ticklish affair," he began. "We might decide to economize and not spend the billion dollars but, lose our lives a few days later because of it. On the other hand, it might turn out all right if we don't proceed with the atomic alarm. After all, we have heard nothing but suspicions from Mr. Mercant, no concrete facts. Unless Mercant can supply us with all the information he is basing his report on, nothing can be assumed as certainty." Wildinger lit a cigarette and continued "I am in favour of a compromise. Let's prepare for the eventuality of an impending alarm, so that we will be able to act immediately if necessary. That will cost only one-tenth of what a real alarm would come to." Mercant breathed a secret sigh of relief. This was exactly what he had hoped to accomplish. He had insisted on calling a state of emergency, with full atomic alarm, but he knew he would have to settle for a state of alert.

Nyson gave his consent to Wildinger's proposal, and Mercant did so with apparent reluctance. He

rose from the conference table, concluding with a soft voice, "I'll inform the other parties about that. I Wouldn't want them to believe that we are secretly preparing for a hostile confrontation with them."The other parties Mercant referred to were the two power blocs centered in Moscow and Peking. Nyson had no objections to Mercant's suggestion.

In Moscow and Peking, Mercant's report of the impending attack from outer space was received with the same attitude of disbelief as it had been in Washington. But disbelief soon gave way to amazement and fear. According to the reports from the secret agents that Moscow and Peking had stationed in Washington, the Western world was indeed preparing for the possibility of an atomic alarm. To maintain the delicate balance of power, the two big powers were forced to initiate the same state of atomic preparedness. They did so without really knowing the score.

The population of the three power blocs remained ignorant of what was going on behind the scenes. As a result an atmosphere of calm and peace reigned over the world.

The Arkonide vessel returned to the base in the Gobi Desert. The robots were busy completing their task.

Tako had come back the previous day and brought along the news of the hypersender that was just about to bring havoc to Earth. Manoli and Haggard, the two physicians who had remained behind on the Third Power territory, had been cut off from direct communication with Rhodan and group during their recent expedition to the moon. The doctors had almost reached their mental breaking point by the time the spacecraft with Rhodan landed near the Stardust I.

Rhodan called his friends Manoli and Haggard and told them in detail about everything that had happened in the meantime. Both physicians, who did not possess the remarkable knowledge of Rhodan and Bell, reacted to the news of the threatening danger with great shock.

A briefing session followed for all the members of the Third Power. Manoli and the Australian participated in it but they were depressed and silent.

Thora was just as silent but not at all depressed. Her face still showed an expression of triumph. Rhodan could understand her feelings. She saw the day approaching when she would no longer have to

depend on these Earthlings she so despised. She planned to ascend in her Arkonide to evade the attacking robot spacecraft. They would identify her auxiliary vessel as the last useful remainder of the destroyed Arkonide cruiser and would take it aboard their own robot ship. Then they would transport her and Khrest back to their home planet, Arkon.

Rhodan opened the meeting with the words "There is no doubt in our minds that we can neither Change nor influence the plans of the approaching robot spaceships. That means that we cannot prevent them from attacking Earth. Once these robots start out, in response to an emergency Signal that was sent as a result of an enemy attack the enemy can do nothing to escape the robots punitive measures."

"Therefore, it is no use even to think about finding a way to escape from the robots mission of vengeance. The only other solution would be to work out a plan to attack and destroy the robots before they even get near our world, which they intend to change into a rubble heap."

The question had been thrown out. The only ones even capable of making effective considerations of the problem were Thora, Khrest, Bell and Rhodan. Tako, Manoli and Haggard did not possess the necessary intellectual prerequisites. But of the four who did, Thora preferred to remain silent. Khrest was so overwhelmed by the apparent hopelessness of the situation that he could not judge rationally. His superior mental faculties were rendered inefficient by his emotional attitude of defeat. The only two capable of remaining lucid in face of the seemingly insurmountable odds were Bell and Rhodan.

"Let's look at this matter from a tactical point of view," suggested Bell. "According to the emergency signal code we must count on being attacked by five robot ships. The only question is, what will the reactions of these ships be?"

"In case we simply do nothing and wait here until they arrive in our solar system, they will first go to the moon. There they will approach the destroyed cruiser to find out who or what caused the destruction. As soon as they have determined that the attackers originated on Earth, they will proceed to attack us here. But since robot ships of a galactic empire would be programmed to think in terms of entire planets, we cannot expect them to try to determine which of the inhabitants of this planet actually sent the H bombs to the moon. They will annihilate the whole planet.,

"But what will happen if we interfere with the approaching robot ships? What will their reaction be if they determine that the enemy is still somewhere in the vicinity of the destroyed object? They will proceed to attack him of course! We know that the robots are skilful tacticians. They won't pursue our small auxiliary vessel, all five of them at the same time. One of their number will be entirely sufficient for this purpose, namely, to seek us out and turn us into dust."

"This is where our only hope lies! We have no chance whatever to overcome the robot ships when all five are together. But if we succeed in separating them and then engage each singly, the odds will no longer be stacked against us."

Rhodan fully agreed with his friend Reg. Bell's reasoning even tore Khrest out of his lethargic state and seemed to instill a trace of hope in him. Thora on the other hand, remained silent as before. But she looked a trifle less self-possessed than she had a short time previously.

They continued discussing Bell's plans. Rhodan added more details. Thus they created a program that could be fed into one of their computers for evaluation and detection of possible errors, for which the machines would also supply the corrections.

This very evening Rhodan became involved in a strange conversation.

During the afternoon, Lieutenant Klein had reported that all the three big power blocs were preparing for a state of readiness in case of an atomic attack from outer space. They made reparations so that large populations could be evacuated from endangered areas within a few hours, if the necessity should arise. Rhodan was filled with satisfaction at bearing this news. From the time the robot ships were sighted there would elapse at least several hours until they would have determined what had happened on the moon and who the culprit was. Then, of course, they would fly toward Earth to destroy it.

This same evening Thora visited Rhodan. For the first time since they had been living aboard the same ship, she came into his cabin.

Rhodan was startled to such a degree that Thora could not fail to notice it. "It's amazing, isn't it, Rhodan?" she inquired with slight sarcasm. "You're right, Thora. It is amazing!" Rhodan replied. "Why have you come here?"

"I have something to propose to you."

Rhodan motioned toward a chair. "Sit down, please. You have no idea how pleased I am to listen to you."

Thora seemed startled, but she could not detect any of sarcasm in his voice. She sat down in the chair and leaned back. "In another five or six days, Rhodan, your dream of a United world and of becoming heir to a galactic empire will come to a sad end."

Rhodan did not interrupt her, although he did not agree with what she said.

"In a few days," she went on, "our robot cruisers will appear and discover what caused the destruction of our, exploratory cruiser on the moon, and then they will turn the planet Earth into a highly radioactive rubble heap, destroying all the inhabitants. at the same time. There. are only a few people that are worth saving from this holocaust. And you, Rhodan, are one of those!"

Rhodan, who had been listening attentively, leaned forward as if he could run after her words, capture them in order to hold them once more close to his ear and listen to them again.

"Who? Me?"

Thora looked very serious as she resumed speaking. "Yes, you, Perry Rhodan! And perhaps also your friend Reginald Bell, since he has had the advantage of our hypnoschooling. Maybe Haggard, too, because of his medical knowledge that enables him to cure leukaemia. And finally Tako Kakuta, who has such remarkable faculties. I am herewith offering to save all of you. As the commanding officer of an Arkonide exploratory ship I am authorized to do so. You will be brought back to Arkon with us. We will find some use for you there."

Rhodan began to guess what was really at the bottom of all this talk. "What makes you assume that we are worthy to be saved?"

"Your special talents," replied Thora without hesitating. "They would mean a valuable addition for our Empire. You could be employed wherever vitality was desirable. You have this quality, as well as the special knowledge of our superior Arkonide technology. And, the others, those like Tako Kakuta, could undergo the same hypnotraining that you and Bill have received."

Rhodan remained expressionless. "Did you also consider our usefulness for possible breeding purposes to create a new racial strain?"

She did not seem to notice his biting irony. "I can't imagine," she resumed, cooler than before, "that any female Arkonide citizen would even remotely consider any intimate relationship with a member of the human race." Rhodan looked at her and uttered one comment: "Ahem!"

Then he waited. Thora had a tremendous capacity for patience. It was almost fifteen minutes before she made as laconically a comment as he: "Well?"

Rhodan got up and walked over to the video screen that was set in the wall of the cabin instead of a window. He gazed at the limitless expanse of the desert sand in front of him. The stars in the sky were shining, illuminating the landscape with a dim light. This light created a diffuse shadow that made the furrows and depressions in the appear deeper than they were.

"Listen to me, Thora!" said Rhodan with determination. "One handful of this dry desert sand is worth more to me than all your decaying Empire. I am not at all interested in obtaining some more or less important position in your realm. I am solely concerned with this world here. And can you guess why?"

He turned around on his heels. "All we need to do is wait a little while longer. Maybe three or four thousand years. What does this time span mean in comparison with the long way we have come since the Stone Age? At the end of this time we will get the ruins of your whole Empire for a song! I would not want to be the person who taught the Arkonides the tricks that would enable them to delay temporarily the advance of the human race. Not stop it, only delay it.

He advanced toward her a couple of steps.

Cold rage was rising in her. She wanted to get up and leave so that she would not have to listen to his words. But his voice seemed to affect her suddenly as if she no longer had a will of her own. For the first time Rhodan was unconsciously endowing his utterances with the suggestive power that was a result of the hypnotraining he had undergone. His voice kept her chained to her seat.

"You see what will happen if we don't succeed in beating back your robot ships? They will attack Earth and annihilate us. But some of us will survive. Maybe a hundred, a thousand, or even a million. These people will never be able to forget what has been done to their fellow human beings. They will be possessed by the thought that nothing like their own fate will ever befall their descendants. You don't realize the extent of our vitality yet! It will take about 2,000 years for the human race to catch up again with our present level of development. But in the meantime your galactic Empire, which is already ripe

with decay, will have to face us as an enemy. The odds will then be all in our favour; there is no doubt about the outcome of this confrontation. It will be a fight to the bitter end, because for as long as we can go back in our history, we have always kept battling against our opponents to the death. It will not be any different in the future war against your Galactic Empire, but then the human race will end up becoming the rulers of your realm." Thora tried to gather up all her strength in order to leave the room. Before she had reached the door, however, Rhodan had started to speak again, and he kept her rooted to the spot.

"But we are not that far yet. You know as well as we do that there is a solid chance that we might wipe out the robot ships. They will believe us to be the harmless explosion. They might even perhaps take us aboard their robot vessel in a rescue mission, before attacking our planet. That will provide us the right opportunity for action. There is still hope for us here, we are far from being lost!"

She tried to advance a couple of steps toward the cabin door, but he yelled, "Stay where you are!"

The brutal energy of this command gave her a violent headache. She whirled around.

But to her utter surprise he was just smiling at her. "Here on Earth we know of many cases like yours. Young girls that have been brought up in a sheltered, wealthy environment and who one day find out, to their utmost horror, that the majority of mankind lives in poverty and must struggle for sheer survival.

"You are not at all different from these young girls in your attitude. You feel compelled to despise us for the simple fact that we are a younger race than your own.

"The day that you come to me and tell me how foolishly you have behaved during the past weeks, I will confess how much I am in love with you, Thora!"

Now she was utterly confused. She wasted some precious moments trying to make up her mind whether to reply. Finally her pride won out. She turned abruptly and left the room.

His declaration had shocked her far more than she cared to admit to herself. For on Arkon during the course of many thousands of years the rules of the game of love had been subordinated strictly to the laws of reason. It would have been considered a sign of mental decrease if a man had confessed his love for a woman after having scolded and insulted her but a short while before.

She understood, however, despite her anger, that it was not possible to apply the same standards here on Earth. She sensed that Rhodan's timing of his declaration of love, was part of a skilful manoeuvre. She felt quite helpless in the face of such calculated illogic. For the first time she recognized with clarity how terribly young the human race really was and the amazing and horrifying forces that were hidden in that youth.

The big event they had been awaiting came two days later. Rhodan had not heard anything more from Mercant. That meant that no further developments had taken place among the big power blocs. Those in charge were waiting for the threat from space to materialize.

Manoli was sitting at the radio. The robots had finished their work and returned to their stations, where Khrest switched them off for the night.

Thora kept very much to herself. She made a point of avoiding Rhodan. Rhodan knew why.

Bell and Haggard played interminable games of chess.

Manoli was mostly bored. The Arkonide auxiliary vessel had excellent receiving sets. He could listen in to everything without difficulties whether it was the Peking police short-wave broadcasts or the news from the space station Freedom I or the long wave broadcasts of international senders. But the news had become rather dull in the last few weeks, and this post at the radio was no longer entertaining for Manoli.

But things changed radically that day! Manoli was just listening to a program of the space station, when it was suddenly interrupted by an important message from the announcer. "Squirrel to Aphid, Squirrel to Aphid. Located an unidentifiable object, direction phi 210, Theta 89. Distance 2×10^6 yards, speed about 2×10^4 yards per second. Shape cannot be determined. The object is approaching the moon. Over."

Aphid promptly confirmed receipt of the message and requested, "Send all further news in code!"

Manoli had taken down the message in shorthand. He tore the note off his writing pad and ran out of the cabin. He raced at high speed down the corridor toward Rhodan's cabin and could hardly wait until Rhodan let him in. Manoli read the note to Rhodan, who reacted in a very excited fashion that puzzled Manoli.

"That's incredible" Rhodan exclaimed. Then Rhodan no longer paid any attention to Manoli; he called Khrest via intercom, asking him to come over to his cabin. Only then did Rhodan turn again to Manoli. He commanded, "Inform Tako to watch out for Klein's signals we will soon find out more about this." Manoli nodded briefly and left. Khrest appeared in Rhodan's room a moment later. "We intercepted an announcement from the space station that an unidentified object is approaching the moon, coming from the direction of Mars," said Rhodan calmly. "I would like to hear your opinion, Khrest."

Khrest listened attentively to Rhodan's words and then inquired, "Any further details you can give me?"

"Speed 2×10^4 yards per second."

"Shape of object?"

"Unknown."

Khrest gazed at Rhodan.

"Thanks to the hypnotraining you should suspect the same as I do, Rhodan. Our base on Myra IV is no longer in the hands of the Galactic Empire. The approaching spaceship is not one of our robot cruisers but must originate from some rebelling part of our colonial fleet. Its crew appears to be rather inexperienced."

"Let's hope this spaceship is alone!" added Rhodan.

Within half an hour Klein had arrived with some additional information. In the meantime the strange object had come nearer and it was possible to recognize its shape. While Klein conversed with Tako at the perimeter of the energy dome, more bits of news were received constantly, which Klein deciphered

on the spot with the help of an automatic decoding mechanism that he carried on him. Tako had receiver set that picked up the new data, which Manoli transmitted to him as soon as he obtained them himself via the powerful Arkonide communications apparatus.

The unknown object was spindle shaped, like, two torpedoes that had been cut through the middle and then put together again with their pointed ends facing each other.

Rhodan listened in to what Klein was deciphering. He knew that spindle shaped ships belonged to the older models of the Empire and that their use was generally discontinued except in remote colonies. This proved to him what he had already suspected-the unknown approaching vessel could not possibly be one of the expected robot ships.

Khrest confirmed Rhodan's suspicions by adding, "The Fantan people own a number of spindle shaped transport vessels; they can't afford better ones. I am positive that this is a Fantan boat. The Fantan group is not too far from our Myra base. They might have occupied Myra IV and intercepted our emergency signal coming from our destroyed cruiser on the moon." They found the final proof for their identification of the Fantan ship in the fact that it did not shield itself against radar or optical detection. The spindle shaped Fantan ship came closer to the moon, at miserably slow speed, as if it were alone in the universe and had nothing to fear from anywhere or anything.

This one Fantan ship was the only craft that had come Earth's corner of the universe. Thora had plugged into the telecom circle and had heard that Klein was reporting from the outside. When Tako returned from the meeting with Klein, Rhodan sent him to Thora's cabin to ask her to come for a discussion of the situation. The Japanese found Thora lying unconscious on the floor. The disappointment had proved too great a shock to her delicate system.

CHAPTER EIGHT

One hour later Lieutenant Klein announced more startling news. "The chiefs of defence request an interview with Mr. Rhodan!"

Rhodan was surprised to hear this. "Which chiefs?" he barked.

Klein seemed to find his reaction amusing. "A supranational security committee came into existence just a few minutes ago, Sir. The chairmen are Ivan M. Kosselow from the Eastern Bloc Secret Service, Mao-tsen of the Asiatic Defence Forces and last but not least Allan D. Mercant, our patron Saint."

Rhodan grasped the implication at once. "I'll be willing to receive these gentlemen without delay. When can they be here?"

"They are all agreed that things are most urgent. Mercant is already in Peking. He and Mao-tsen can travel here in about forty-five minutes. Kosselow won't take much longer to get here." Rhodan thought for a moment. "Well, Lieutenant, announce the people as soon as they arrive. If need be I can let them in here one after the other."

Exactly one hour after this discussion the chiefs of the terrestrial secret services arrived at the Akonide auxiliary vessel in the Gobi Desert.

Rhodan arranged for Khrest to participate in the meeting.

Rhodan learned that the evacuation of the population as well as the most important industrial concerns, was already in full swing.

"We would like to find out from you Rhodan, how much sense all these precautionary measures make under the circumstances," said Mercant, "if you take into consideration the likelihood that the attacking robot ships will most probably make a hypercritical reactor out of this whole planet."

Rhodan enlightened Mercant about the conjectures he and Khrest had arrived at regarding the approaching ship. "I am presenting the facts to you the way they really are," he added. "We have a good chance to get rid of these attackers with one single well aimed shot."

"But if you should then give the all clear signal you would make a grave mistake. For we must count on the possibility of failing with our counterattack measures, as hopefully as they, might seem to us.

"In addition to that, I do not believe that we will have to face only a single enemy ship. Even if we should succeed in destroying it, others will surely follow, ones that have intercepted the automatic emergency signal sent by the bombed Arkonide cruiser. In case we should overcome the first enemy onslaught we would gain a short breathing spell of a few weeks or at most a few months. We must utilize this brief span to get ready for the next attack, out having to cope with any additional risks.

Rhodan gazed intently at Mercant. "You know very well what I am referring to with this remark, Mercant! The nations of this world can no longer afford to keep up the embargo against the Third Power. We are the only people who are capable of protecting this planet against the threatening attack. We must have full freedom of action in order to make efficient use of the means that we have at our disposal to defend Earth."

Mercant looked at the two men who had come with him. Then he turned to Rhodan. "As far as the NATO group is concerned, we no longer consider the embargo to be in force from this moment on. We would also like to assure you that we place full confidence in you in all matters relating to the defence preparations for the impending enemy attack from space."

Rhodan's face bore an expression of utter amazement, the same moment Kosselow declared, my own government shares the views just expressed by Mr. Mercant."Mao-tsen added smilingly, "My people, too, join the other two governments in lifting the embargo against the Third Power, Mr. Rhodan."

Rhodan's reaction was one of complete surprise. He was overwhelmed by the unexpectedly swift acceptance of his suggestion. Then a slight smile played around his lips as he said with a hint of sarcasm, "Gentlemen! From the moment your governments are willing to extend the same confidence they show in us regarding the defence measures we will take against the threatening danger to all other areas from that moment on, the Third Power will cease to exist. We will abandon this base here in the Gobi Desert, and put at mankind's disposal all we possess and all the knowledge we have obtained from the superior Arkonide technology."The discussion proceeded along the lines of working out the necessary details. Rhodan described his plans intercepting the approaching hostile spindle ship while it was still in outer space. But in case these plans should fail, he gave instructions how to protect the inhabitants of Earth. Mercant, Kosselow and Mao-tsen were busy taking down notes.

As a conclusion to the meeting Rhodan declared, "Gentlemen! I wonder whether you realize that you cannot count on the support of the Third Power in case we should not succeed in annihilating the spindle ship. This is a fight to the bitter end. Whoever loses will lose not only the battle but also his life. Since we must reckon with such an eventuality, I have written down some of the matters that are important for mankind to know. This document will be deposited in a safe place, where it will weather the impending attack on our planet.

"I am confident that these notes will be of help to man kind. In case of almost total destruction these descriptions should give a good start to the survivors of the holocaust. From this day on we must never forget that we are not the only living beings in the universe. We must accept the fact that other races exist, and we must be prepared to recognize that some of them will be hostile toward us.

"With this in mind I have-described some of my recently acquired knowledge of matters."

The documents turned out to be quite lengthy, costing precious hours for Rhodan to complete. In the meantime the spindle ship had reached the moon's orbital path. It remained in the same orbit, following the moon at a constant distance of about 6,000 miles. Rhodan had called his men in for a short meeting. Thora did not join them. She needed rest. Rhodan's suggestion that Tako and Dr. Manoli should remain behind on Earth was generally accepted. The two would find safe refuge there within the energy dome in the Gobi Desert. There they would be completely protected against any attacking force and later radioactive contamination. Tako received Rhodan's document for safekeeping with the promise to hand it over to mankind, Or whatever remained of it, only at such a time as there was no longer any doubt that Rhodan and his companions had been destroyed, together with their, ship, during the battle with the approaching invaders. Tako and Manoli took up quarters in the former Stardust I. Rhodan started out immediately afterward on his mission.

They ascended in the Arkonide auxiliary vessel to a height of about sixty miles. Rhodan had mapped out a plan of action that could not be accomplished with the automatic guidance system. Reginald Bell was his co-pilot, and Haggard and Khrest stayed in the central cabin.

The ship hovered motionless. The light of the automatic controls was dark. A small screen in front of them showed the position of their ship in relation to Earth's surface. All instruments except the altimeter registered zero. Only the panel where Bell was sitting was illuminated, by five shining green bulbs. They indicated that the five nuclear storage condensers, each a giant of its kind, were charging and storing up their energy for the right moment when their full potential would be needed and discharged.

This stored up nuclear energy would be sufficient to surround the auxiliary vessel with a hypergravitational field that would insulate it from its surroundings. It would thus also take it out of the four dimensional space time continuum. A body inside such a hypergravitational field no longer existed within normal space. It passed into a space system of a higher order, which was subject to the same physical laws although of quite different values. Rhodan had called this superspace system "the path behind the curvature of space" when he had learned about it during his hypnotraining sessions. This also

explained the Principles of the problems of hyperflight. Any body, such as the Arkonide ship in this instance, could penetrate into this superspace system by piercing through the convex surface of the space time continuum, then proceed in a straight line and, once at its destination, come out again through the surface.

But no one had ever tried to cover a distance of more than a light second by means of such a hyperjump. The difficulty in this case was that the relatively small auxiliary vessel was not equipped to store sufficiently large amounts of nuclear energy. Therefore, it would need enough time after the completion of its jump through hyperspace to store up new energy again. Its storage capacity was exactly calculated to provide energy for twice penetrating the space time surface. After the completion of one set of jumps, the craft needed a certain period of recuperation before resuming its flight. But unless their jump placed them in the exact spot Rhodan had calculated, this needed pause would afford the enemy enough time to locate them and assume a favourable position for attack.

According to Rhodan's calculations their jump should terminate within the shadow of the moon. The spindle shaped ship of the Fantan people still remained on the same course as before. It moved along the orbital path of the moon, still maintaining a distance of 6,000 miles behind Earth's satellite. The auxiliary vessel, however, would reappear in front of the moon. Rhodan placed his hand on the red pushbutton that would initiate the jump. Then he pushed down hard on it. The button clicked softly; then the video screens grew suddenly dark, without any transition whatsoever.

This lasted just one second; then the video screen lit up again. The image on the screen had changed. In front of the ship appeared the thin crescent of the moon, illuminated by the sun, which had just come out from behind Earth.

Rhodan leaned back in his chair.

Khrest looked at him with a radiant expression on his fine face, "Excellent!" he exclaimed with admiration.

Rhodan did not rest. As soon as five minutes had passed the time they needed for recharging the storage condensers with a minimal amount of energy-he started up the engines again.

The rest seemed like child's play. Rhodan steered the space sphere into a crevice of the huge mountain wall of the crater in whose center lay the remains of the wrecked Arkonide cruiser. He was convinced that the Fantan people would eventually risk approaching the wreck and that he and his companions would be safest waiting for this moment while hidden in the deep shadows of the crater

wall. Khrest had asked to be excused from any participation during this enterprise. Rhodan had granted his wish, since he knew the mentality of the Arkonide scientist. The era in which they had built their galactic empire had long since gone. Fighting represented an action horrible beyond belief for the Arkonides, grown old.

Haggard was stationed at the radar, Bell at the artillery of the ship, while Rhodan remained at the steering console, in case he had to manoeuvre it manually.

The auxiliary vessel carried two types of artillery-weapons with a range of up to one light minute and those with a shorter range.

Rhodan was reluctant to use the far reaching rockets. Although the Fantan ship was of an old-fashioned type and equipped with rather weak defensive fields, one still could not discount the possibility that they might have installed some improvements before undertaking such a dangerous trip. These far reaching missiles were also liable to be detected too early. This would allow the Fantan people to evade them. Judging by what Rhodan knew of their mentality, the crew would not make a stand and fight but would probably turn and flee. But Rhodan was determined to force a decisive victory and not one that included the likelihood of the opponents flight.

Some hours went by. Khrest was lying down resting, his eyes closed tight.

No word was spoken. Haggard sat in front of his radar screen, which remained blank, while Bell had his place before a panel covered with a series of buttons and wheels, his battle station.

Only once did Bell speak up. "I don't like this at all Perry! We should take off and attack them. I'm not keen on lying here in ambush to wait for the enemy to make a wrong move."

"Nonsense, Reg!" answered Rhodan. "I don't want to run any unnecessary risks, and besides, you know what the Fantan people are like, don't you?" There were no more discussions after this. Many hours passed. Rhodan felt a strong desire to get up and see how Thora was getting on. But he was too much aware that the quiet hours they had been lying in wait could change within one second.

"Here they are!" said Haggard suddenly. "Location phi 15, theta 30."

"What speed?" Bell asked.

Fifty yards per second in direction Phi zero. Distance 500 miles."

Rhodan turned to Bell. "What is our position?"

"Favourable. That means we could lift up a few yards to get to the rim of the crater wall."

The boat started upward. It glided close to the wall of the pitch dark crevice in the crater mountain range, until it reached the rim of the towering rocky bulwark.

"Stop!" Bell called out. "That will do!"

This very instant the spindle shaped enemy ship became visible on the screen, Rhodan examined it thoughtfully. It was still about 500 miles away. it hardly seemed to move. The Fantan people were very cautious and preferred to creep, up slowly on their target. This tactic must appear to them safest, the only chance to make sure of attaining a certain measure of security.

The Fantan ship was now sliding along at the same height as the rim of the circular range. They would have to ascend slightly to get over the edge of the crater wall. Such a manoeuvre would command a certain amount of their attention; therefore, it would be the right moment for the Arkonide vessel to attack the enemy.

Yet many hours would pass before they came to this point, considering the slow speed of the Fantan ship.

The circular mountain range was fairly small, with a diameter of about sixty miles in the center.

Rhodan kept hoping that they would concentrate their attention on the crater itself and not on the wall around it. There was no doubt that the dome of the Arkonide vessel showed itself for two yards above the protecting rim of the crater wall. That was not much within the extensive rock formations, but still, it would be enough if the enemy was really alert.

Rhodan turned to Bell. "How do you plan to proceed?"

Bell Pointed to a yellow switch and a hand wheel. "Neutralization of the crystal field," he replied. "All that will remain of their ship will be a whirling fog of hydrogen, carbon and metal atoms."

"How long will the bombardment last?" inquired Rhodan.

"I intend to let them have all we have."

"Is that really necessary?" asked Rhodan.

Bell was surprised. "Why, of course. I want to make absolutely sure."

"I would like to show something to Haggard," said Rhodan. "Just demolish their ship. The crew can't save itself, and they will no longer constitute a danger to us."

"Okay," agreed Bell. "I will bombard them for twenty seconds then."

Just then Haggard announced, "They appear to be increasing their speed; 100 yards per second, distance now about 350 miles."

And in the same breath he added, "What do you want to show me, Rhodan?"

"Something that should prove to be most interesting to you as a scientist. just wait and see."

Tension mounted; yet time seemed to advance more slowly. The enemy ship grew bigger on the screen and showed its immense dimensions. Rhodan estimated its length to be about 1,000 feet. In the middle it was narrowed down to a diameter of approximately 100 feet. Even though this was an old-fashioned model, it was most likely far better equipped than the Arkonide auxiliary vessel. Unless Rhodan and his crew succeeded in destroying this formidable opponent, the fate of Earth appeared to be sealed. Rhodan was not confident about the future of mankind in case of defeat, despite what he had so firmly asserted in his talk with Thora.

"Two hundred fifty miles!" Announced Haggard now, after what seemed an endless interval.

At 60,000 yards, Bell would start shooting.

Rhodan did not think that the Fantan people had located them. It was against their nature to continue their flight after having determined the presence of an enemy.

Nevertheless... "One hundred and eighty thousand! They are increasing their speed!" And a few minutes later Haggard called out, "They have stopped! They are not advancing any more!"

Rhodan reacted immediately. "Fire!" he commanded.

Bell bit the switch of the decrystallization field and then yelled, "Let's get out of here fast! We must go up higher!" Rhodan started the ship instantly. With a sudden jerk he pulled the craft up beyond the rim of the crater wall and shot up to a height of several hundred feet. All the while Bell kept firing away.

His aim was perfect. The telescope screen showed the picture of the destruction of the Fantan ship. It was incapable of moving. The crystal structure of its outside wall crumbled away, and the nose of the craft dissolved to dust. Bell's weapon kept on devouring the Fantan ship and made inroads into its center. Suddenly yellow lightning flashed from across the miles toward the Arkonide ship. Rhodan was blinded by the bright lights and closed his eyes for a second. When he looked again at the video screen he saw the landscape bouncing around madly.

They were still shooting! Incredible! They had hit the energy mantle around the Arkonide ship and caused it to vacillate wildly.

"Faster!" hissed Rhodan.

Bell did not react. With deliberate concentration he directed the decrystallization ray, which continued with its destruction of the hull of the Fantan craft.

There was another salvo coming from the enemy vessel. The shot glanced off the energy screen surrounding the Arkonide spaceship, causing it to vibrate violently under the impact. Bell's directional beam lost its aim for a while but then regained it and finished with its destructive work. Nothing remained of the outside wall of the enemy vessel. At the same time all its generators were pulverized. Whatever remained-some parts of the equipment, interior walls, doors, instruments and the bodies of its crew-fell crazily whirling to the ground.

Bell breathed a sigh of relief. "Mission accomplished!" he shouted jubilantly.

Rhodan flew at low altitude across the center of the moon crater, past the wreck of the Arkonide cruiser, and approached the spot where the Fantan spindle ship had just been annihilated.

Haggard had left his post at the radar equipment and was peering intently at the video screen.

"What I want to show you, you won't be able to see from here, Haggard," remarked Rhodan. "Wait until we land." He put the ship down close to the circular area on which the metal dust of the strange craft and its few remaining objects had settled.

While he was closing the helmet of his Arkonide protective suit, Rhodan said, "Come along with me, Haggard!"

Haggard was ready at once. They left their ship and flew with broad jumps to the spot where the biggest heap of wreckage lay.

There was not much to be seen of the crew. Apparently they had been surprised by the attack with opened space suits. Their bodies as well as their suits had been shredded to fine pieces through the explosive decompression when the outer hull of their ship dissolved.

Haggard found something that looked like a piece of skin. "Is that all that remains?" he asked with obvious disappointment.

Rhodan simply shrugged his shoulders. "I believe that should give you enough to go on in your examination."

Both men returned to their spaceship. Rhodan debated whether to visit the wrecked Arkonide cruiser once again and silence the automatic emergency signal or to fly back to Earth and bring the good news of the outcome of the battle to mankind, which had been unable to watch the fight, since it had taken place on the far side of the moon.

Rhodan decided on the second alternative. His reasoning was: The same instant that the Fantan ship had realized it was being attacked, its hypersender had broadcast an emergency signal out into space, just as the Arkonide cruiser had done before. There could be no doubt that the SOS call of the spindle shaped ship was beamed in such a way that it had to hit its receiver. Therefore, it was out of Rhodan's hands to prevent a further arrival of hostile forces from outer space. A process had been set in motion that could no longer be influenced, let alone controlled or stopped, by anything Rhodan could undertake against it.

This was an additional reason for Rhodan to hasten his return to Earth. From now on the minutes would count even more than before. Their next opponent would certainly surpass the first Fantan ship in number and in cunning.

There was a flurry of excitement during their return flight to Earth when Haggard examined the skin shreds of the Fantan people with the supermicroscope of the Arkonide ship.

"Their skin is like leather," he explained excitedly, "and it is covered with fine scales. The fleshy

remnants that are attached to this skin piece show a quite different structure and segmentation from the muscles of man or any other known animal species."

Rhodan smiled with amusement as he asked, "So what conclusions do you draw from all this, Haggard?"

"There must be a considerable biological difference between the human and Fantan races."

"Can you imagine what these creatures look like?"

"Unfortunately not. These few skin pieces don't give me enough of a clue."

"Well then, imagine a cylinder with rounded off ends, my dear Haggard," Rhodan began to lecture in professorial tones. "This cylinder is elastic to a certain degree and is completely covered with fine scales. In its upper part this cylindrical body contains several openings, which to us would look like so many dark holes. But in reality they do fulfil the functions of eyes, nose and mouth.

Six identical extremities branch off this cylinder at various places. They serve as organs of locomotion, food intake and the usual functions of our own legs and arms. The only difference is that there is no difference between the Fantan people's extremities; they are all alike."The Fantan race is asexual and is propagated by a process similar to one known in some of your house plants, Doctor Haggard, where a branch of a shoot off the parent plant gives rise to a new offspring.

'This is what the Fantan people look like. Did you assume that all intelligent races from the universe must have the same appearance as you or me or Khrest? In time we will meet up with intelligent living beings that will seem more repulsive to us than our toads or tapeworms."

On Earth the news of Rhodan's victorious mission was received with indescribable jubilation. The atomic alarm was terminated without delay and the population returned to their cities. The interruption had cost the world's economy a total of \$80 billion. But what was this cost compared with the tremendous progress the nations made toward a united mankind! Shortly after landing back on Earth, Rhodan received the special envoys of the three big power blocs. They had come to tender their thanks in exuberant phrases. Each had brought along some high and impressive medal to honour mankind's hero, who only yesterday had been considered enemy number one. Rhodan let them carry on with their ceremonies and waited patiently until it was his turn to speak.

"Gentlemen, I regret that I am unable to share your great joy. You can't realize yet, the way I do, that this encounter was but the first in a series of hostile confrontations with alien intelligent races that inhabit the universe. We were very lucky that we could ward off this first attack. But luck alone will not be sufficient the next time around." "I am very happy that world opinion approves of the steps we, the Third Power, have taken. Not only that; they even bestow medals and honours on us," he added with a faint trace of irony in his voice. "But please relay this message to your governments—we have won only the first round of a war that might consist of a thousand or more battles. I want to emphasize in the strongest terms to all concerned parties that you are witnessing here the beginnings of a development that will stretch over centuries or even millennia. The decisions we make here today will affect the fate of mankind for all time to come!"

"Take this message back home to your governments! Tell them that there is no ally more loyal than the Third Power as long as the welfare of the entire human race is concerned."

"We demand from them in return recognition and full freedom; for the time being we are the only power capable of preparing effective defensive measures to fight off the next attack from space."

He paused briefly and allowed himself the luxury of a faint smile. "Spread this message to the four corners of the world, gentlemen! Make mankind understand that a new chapter in the history of the human race has just started. We are forced to think in terms of thousands of years, for we might perish otherwise!"

The next day the first partial delivery of metal plastic sheets arrived from Pittsburgh. The delivery took place via the same route any businessman would have used for a normal shipment of goods from the United States to the Gobi Desert.

Rhodan looked at this as a sign that the governments had reacted favourably and acted in a hurry upon his wishes. It reinforced his hope that mankind would see the light shortly and realize the enormous energies it possessed if only it were united.

He saw himself close to achieving his preliminary goal of a united mankind. He marvelled at the relatively short span of time in which this development had taken place.

He realized, though, that this progress had not drawn its strength from within itself. The automatic hypersender and the Fantan ship it had lured to this part of the universe had played important roles in accomplishing this process of unification of the formerly divergent factions of mankind.

That evening Rhodan received an invitation to participate in a conference of the three big power blocks in Cairo. The invitation was extended to him by the same special envoys he had met the previous day.

Rhodan accepted the invitation with a great deal of satisfaction, since it was proof of the posthypnotic effect his interview had left in the minds of the special envoys. These men did not know that from that moment on they had become so convinced of his arguments that they were now representing his views, rather than those of their own governments.

The Third Power had been asked to participate in the Cairo meeting, not as an observer, but as a full fledged member.

Still later that night he had a conversation with Thora. For the first time since the spindle shaped Fantan ships had been located by the space station Freedom I, she left her cabin. She came into Rhodan's room just as unannounced unexpected as a few days earlier. Rhodan offered her a seat. She accepted with a friendly smile.

"I have had a lot of time to think about a great many things," she said. "I am sorry for having acted differently than I should have in many instances."

Rhodan was startled. He had never believed she would get that far in examining her inner self.

"I am gradually realizing," continued Thora, "where the way that you have chosen leads. I have complete confidence in you. You are a born leader of men, and mankind will follow you. But as far as mankind itself is concerned, I cannot yet judge. The little I know of them is not encouraging. Up till now they have been busy mostly with cutting each others throats. I am not sure whether your expectations in

your brother man are really justified.

"To come to the point-in the future you will no longer have to contend with me as an adversary. I will sit back and wait to see what comes of your plans. Your plans are good. Perhaps, given sufficient time, your fellowmen will turn out to be that race which will become heir to the Arkonide Galactic Empire. But until the Earthlings have reached that level in racial development, I will wait with my final decision."

Rhodan stood up, walked over to her and stretched out his hand. "This is a human gesture," he said. "Take my hand! I want to express my thanks to you!"

With some hesitation she grasped his hand, then responded firmly to his sincere handshake.

"I respect your viewpoint, Thora," he replied, "and I assume that Khrest will react in the same manner."

Knowing full well ahead of time that she would protest, he said, "Please, Thora, don't misjudge Khrest. He is just as much a member of the Arkonide race as you are. What ever he did so far was as an expression of his gratitude for our having cured him of leukaemia. Perhaps he also had better insight than you in the situation. But he will remain an Arkonide for as long as he lives. He will never act like a human being." He winked at her with a mischievous grin to signify that the serious part of their discussion had come to an end.

But as far as you are concerned, my dear, there is still "hope!"

He did not care that his final remark might offend her. She made a face and left the cabin. He knew that her days of proud aloofness were numbered. And while he was thought about this, he felt again how much he loved her.

Outside, the robots were busily storing the newly arrived metal plastic sheets.

What we need most urgently now, said Rhodan to himself, is to obtain some scaffolding as quickly as possible. We must start immediately with the construction of a battle worthy spaceship. This is more important for us than any thing else.