

Introducing

PERRY RHODAN

AND HIS ELECTRIC PERSONALITY

By

Forrest J Ackerman

As Tom said to Jonathan, “The race belongs to the Swift.”

Or are you too young to remember Tom Swift? (*In the Land of Wonders, his Planet Stone.*) And Roy Rockwood and his Clarke’s Tours of the solar system. (*Air Express to Venus-air?!–By Space Ship to Saturn.*) The Carl H. Claudy classics, including *The Mystery Men of Mars*. These boys’ sf books of a less sophisticated generation never won any Hugos (and not just because they were published prior to the establishment of the annual science fiction “Oscar” awards) but they did generate a great deal of entertainment.

Then there was Gordon, who was flashy, and Rogers, who was always bucking the baddies. You probably heard of Buck and Flash in the movie serial or comics or TV re-vivals or camp posters.

Now comes, roaring into the 70’s–PERRY RHODAN ... earth-tamer ... planet adventurer ... star-seeker ... Peacelord of the Universe!

America, for once has lagged behind—we are 8 years behind the Germans in discovering the world’s greatest spaceman. In the pulp era of our past we have had many great continuing characters: Doc Savage, the Shadow, Captain Future, G-8, et al. Savage started in ’33 and ended in ’49 and is, 20 years after his disappearance, enjoying a renaissance in paperback. But the 16 years of Doc Savage’s exploits cannot possibly compare with such an impressive record as Perry RHodan’s because Doc, most of the time, appeared only monthly, sometimes bimonthly, whereas Perry, since the beginning, has been published *weekly!*

Ain’t that outasite? (I hope I’m hip to the mod slanguage because I’m so old that I remember when people blew their noses instead of their minds.) Over 400 adventures of Perry Rhodan, Thora, Gucky (the mouse-beaver), Atlan and all the characters you will come to know and who will grow on you—*over*

400 have already been published abroad!

Every week in Germany a new Perry Rhodan plot appears and sells out an edition of 130,000 copies (No American science fiction periodical equals that record even on a *monthly* basis.) Germany—with a population of only one-third that of the United States! If Germany had our population it would mean that approximately 400,000 people would be reading Perry every seven days!

A second, reprint, edition of the earlier episodes now runs 50,000 copies a week in Germany.

And the *third* time around on the republication of the earliest ones, they're printing 20,000 copies—to make an incredible total of 200,000 copies of Perry Rhodan's cosmic conquests being read each week! (By U.S. population comparison, *600,000!*)

Plus! Pocketbooks (wholly different adventures) ... hardcovers (revised from the magazines) ... comics.

Perry Rhodan has appeared for three years in France, is now in Dutch!

Over 500 Perry Rhodan Clubs flourish in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, complete with membership pins. Regional and national Perry Rhodan Conventions are held annually!

The first Perry Rhodan film, S.O.S. FROM OUTER SPACE, has exploded on the screens of Europe.

To satisfy the demand, a corps of half a dozen or more writers is kept busy creating new plots from the master history—more complex than anything ever dreamed of in the future histories of Asimov, Heinlein or Doc Smith—masterminded by Walter Ernsting (Herr Science Fiction of Germany) and noted sf author K.-H. Scheer.

In Germany, all serious sf buffs claim to hate Perry Rhodan, but *somebody* (in unprecedented numbers) is certainly reading him. When I went to the Science Fiction Film Festival in Trieste in 1965, I also took a trip to Frankfurt, Germany, and when I got off the train at the station, at the depot magazine stand the first thing I saw was an ordinary looking middle-aged businessman buying (you telephoned it!) a copy of PERRY RHODAN!

The PERRY RHODAN series may never win a Hugo. It *may* be panned by both professional critics and in the fan magazines, USA. But if Perry's American reception parallels that of the land of his origin, you are holding in your hands a collector's item that will be sought after by those who, like you, will be hooked on Perry and reading him ten years from now. Which means, if we can get production up to one a month, by 1979 about 130 Rhodan adventures will have been published—and the Germans will be 800 adventures ahead of us! (This could cause an increase in the USA in the studying of German.)

Can we ever catch up with Perry Rhodan? Well, there's no time like the present—and no place like this pocketbook—to start. Ahead lie innumerable encounters with alien intelligences, robots, invisible men, monsters, survivors of Atlantis, zombies, giants, micro-men—all part and parcel of the infinite panorama of the most colossal space opera series ever conceived!

CHAPTER ONE

At the northern entrance to the center's main underground building, the heavily armed sentries saluted sloppily. Lieutenant General Lesley Pounder, commander of the Nevada Fields Air Base and Chief of the Department of Space Explorations, passed them by, satisfied. Under unusual circumstances like these, he was not greatly concerned with being given an exact military salute. He was interested only in seeing that his men were alert and on the job.

At precisely 1:15 A.M., according to plan, Pounder entered the main control room in the center. With him were Colonel Maurice, chief of staff and F. Lehmann, scientific supervisor of the project. Lehmann was known primarily for his position as Director of the California Academy of Space Technology.

Pandemonium seemed master inside the center's main building, which housed the electronic "nervous system" of the spaceport; but this apparently senseless commotion was, in fact, a series of last minute preparations for Zero Hour. The general's sudden appearance caused no interruption in the beehive activity of checking, and double checking. The general had arrived; that was all there was to it.

General Pounder, square of body and mind, was well-known for his uncompromising talent for getting things done *his* way. This was cause enough for the admiration of his colleagues and the dismay of those in the Capitol in Washington. Now he proceeded to the control room's huge closed circuit TV screen.

A view that had not been clearly discernible in the press room glistened here at close range on the slightly convex glass of the tube.

Pounder leaned heavily forward with both hands on the back of the swivel chair, motionless, staring intently at the screen. He remained like this for several moments. Professor Lehmann nervously fingered his rimless spectacles. He was boiling inside with impatience. Here the Big Boss was reinspecting all the unimportant little details that had been checked out repeatedly before his arrival, when there were far more urgent things to attend to. He shot imploring glances in General Pounder's direction.

Colonel Maurice shrugged his shoulders almost imperceptibly in a wait-and-see gesture. Pounder was as well informed as any of the team of esteemed scientists, but he obviously still had a few questions that bothered him.

"Beautiful! Breathtakingly beautiful and overpowering," Pounder murmured, gazing at the big video screen. "Something inside me persists in asking if we might not be going too far. The experts in the department still consider it madness to risk a blast-off here from Earth. Not only must we overcome atmospheric resistance, but in addition we must struggle to attain a speed we could have achieved naturally had we departed from a space station."

"You're referring to the orbital velocity of our manned space station, sir," added Professor Lehmann hastily. "That is not the determining factor in this case. It you will only consider the tremendous problems that would present themselves if we should try to assemble prefabricated parts in empty space under zero gravity conditions... Experience along these lines has proved very unsatisfactory. It is easier by far to construct a spaceship here on Earth than to do so some 1100 miles above the surface. Why, the savings amount to more than 350 million dollars per unit!"

"They found your statistics very impressive in Washington," said the general with sarcasm. "Well, it's

too late to change anything now. Let us hope that the splendid results of our trial run justify today's effort. Professor, my four best people are going to be on board that ship. If anything goes wrong, you won't hear the last of it."

Lehmann changed colour under the general's icy stare.

Colonel Maurice was a cunning strategist at handling the ball tossed eternally between the warring fronts of "scientific concerns" and "military interests." Now he steered the conversation away from such unpleasant possibilities with his usual suave diplomatic skill. "Sir, may I remind you of our press conference? Our foremost reporters are no doubt awaiting you most anxiously. I've passed out no further information."

Pounder suddenly raged like a mad dog. "Is this really necessary, Maurice? I have other things to worry about."

The colonel smoothly eluded him. "Sir, I would strongly advise—"

The astrophysicist, Dr. Fleet, shielding his mouth with his hand, coughed spasmodically. He was responsible for the affairs of space medicine and therefore for keeping the test pilots in perfect health.

Pounder smiled abruptly. "All right then, let's go. But only by way of the video intercommunications system."

The disaster, Maurice felt, had grown even worse. The technicians who were standing around suppressed a grin. Wasn't it just like the old man?

"Sir, for heaven's sake! The people expect your appearance in person. I promised them!"

"Then unpromise them," returned Pounder, unimpressed.

"Which one of these speakers shall I use? Make the announcement, Maurice."

The chief of staff implored him, "Sir, they'll make mince-meat out of us in their editorials. You know that."

"I'll keep these guys under lock and key until they've cooled off again. We'll see. Switch on, please."

In the sparsely furnished observation bunker, the loudspeakers came to life. Pounder's face appeared on a TV screen. He greeted them with a sickeningly sweet smile and, "A beautiful good morning to you, gentlemen!" (It was shortly after midnight, local time.) Then the general became more matter-of-fact. He overlooked the grim faces of the reporters.

Very briefly, in a tone more appropriate to the reading of a recipe for chocolate cake, he said, "Gentlemen, what you've been seeing on the screen in your bunkers for the last few minutes is the familiar three stage rocket, in which, however, individual units have undergone considerable innovation. The final preparations are under way, and blast-off will follow in approximately three hours. The four test pilots are still asleep. They will not be awakened until two hours before blast-off."

So far, the reporters remained uninspired. Manned space flights were no longer a rarity. His eyes narrowing somewhat at the thought, Pounder enjoyed dealing his trump card in a startling manner.

“In view of past experience, the Space Explorations Command has renounced assembling the spaceship in orbit. The difficulties and failures of our earlier attempts are well known. Therefore, the first rocket to land on the moon will be launched from Nevada Fields. The ship’s name is *Stardust*. The commander of the first lunar landing expedition is Major Perry Rhodan, thirty-five years old, test pilot for the space force, nuclear physicist with a subsidiary specialty in ion reaction engines. You will recall Major Rhodan as the first astronaut to circumnavigate the moon under the auspices of the space force.”

Pounder was silent again. He noted with satisfaction the uproar of voices that gave proof of a very high degree of excitement.

Someone shouted for silence, and it became quiet again in the bare room.

“Many thanks,” said the general with a polite cough. “You were a bit noisy. No-please, no questions now. My information officer will see to your questions immediately after blast-off. At the moment, I can give you only very brief hints. My time is limited. The *Stardust* will be launched with a select four man team. In addition to Major Rhodan, Captain Reginald Bell, Captain Clark G. Fletcher, and Lieutenant Eric Manoli will participate in the expedition. You are no doubt familiar with all these names. We have here a special military scientific team. Each test pilot has a degree in at least two additional fields, and these men are among the greatest experts in the western world. It is what we call a complementary team. They are adjusted to each other psychologically and in the coordinated employment of their diverse specialties. For them, space has become a home away from home. Photographs and fact sheets concerning the astronauts may also be obtained from the information officer.”

General Pounder seemed unwilling to favour his audience with a long speech. He was already glancing at his watch. Rudely interrupting the noise, he said, “Please, gentlemen, your inquiries are fruitless. All I can give you are basic facts. The *Stardust* has been equipped for a four week stay on the moon. We have designated a research program for the landing team. After the successful remote controlled landings of unmanned space probes, today we risk the lives of four men in the attempt. Let us hope that we have made no mistakes. You know, of course, that this Earthbound launch will devour a huge sum of energy, particularly since the final stage must land on and lift off again from the surface of the moon, under its own power. With our conventional engines, this would not have been possible for a three stage ship of relatively limited dimensions.”

“Technical data!” someone shouted excitedly into the microphone.

“You will get your data,” growled the general. “The full length of the ship is 275 feet—the first stage being 109.5 feet, the second 74.5 feet, and the third, the spaceship proper, 91 feet. Starting weight, with full tanks and the payload, will be about 6,850 tons. Nevertheless, the moon rocket looks hardly larger than an ordinary supply ship. The reason for this? Only the first stage runs on liquid chemical fuel. Stages two and three are, for the first time, operating with nuclear power.”

That was Pounder’s second bombshell. He had let it drop quite unexpectedly. Undaunted, he continued, “You will receive further data shortly. Gentlemen, the *Stardust* will blast off at three o’clock. It will land near the Newcomb Crater, close to the lunar South Pole. We are interested in finding out something of the dark side of the moon; but owing to the limitations of radio communication, we must remain with one foot (so to speak) on the near side of Luna. Radio waves unfortunately require a direct line of vision in space. Our four men will nevertheless undertake extensive ground travel on the lunar surface with a new kind of exploratory vehicle. That is all, gentlemen. Further information, particularly technical data, will be released by the information officer, following the launch.”

General Pounder laughed grimly as he interrupted the audio-video collection with the quick flip of a

switch. The babel of voices from the loudspeaker ceased abruptly.

Now all eyes were on the chief. Pounder had spoken with such calm and confidence that one might have thought that hundreds of ships had landed on the moon before the *Stardust*. Yet no one knew better than Pounder himself that the optimism he had demonstrated was entirely unfounded.

He glanced at his watch. It was countdown hour forty-eight, 19 June.

His voice sounded somewhat less excited now as he said, "Dr. Fleet, would you please awaken the men."

At exactly one o'clock, Dr. Fleet stood before the four sleeping men. For the last fourteen hours they had been resting under the effects of psychochemical narcosis. It was the only means by which mind *and* body, particularly mind, were afforded total relaxation. A mind encumbered by worry and anticipation, even in sleep, would be most undesirable.

For a few moments, with a feeling of undefinable pity, he hesitated. Then he administered the antidote. With this, consciousness would return with this, thought would be reborn; and with this, all those things which one had sought with greatest effort, to ward off would return to haunt the men.

A sleepy and irritable, physically and mentally restless astronaut would be of little benefit here, as partner to soulless computer and nuclear reactor, both running at full tilt. The human mind would have to remain clear, because in the long run, it alone would have to be master of the situation.

Dr. Fleet was waiting. Beside him, with bated breath, stood the men of his medical team. Of course, there still remained the usual tests and examinations. These would take approximately an hour. The last hour, then, would belong to the systems engineers. The astronauts would be permitted to board the *Stardust* a mere ten minutes before blast-off. Once within the command center, they would have nothing to do but stretch out on their contour couches with the least possible effort, excluding any mental strain.

Once the launch had begun, however, any relaxation would be totally out of the question. Everything would follow in rapid succession. Then would begin the ultimate test, which would strain mind and body to the limits of endurance. Then would begin their torture in the narrow body of this roaring monster of molybdenum steel and synthetic fibres.

A gentle light haloed the four flat couches. Millions of pores in their foam rubber mattresses inhaled and exhaled like the alveoli of lungs. These were the last comforts for men who soon would have to endure horrendous stress.

Major Perry Rhodan, ace astronaut of the United States Space Force, opened his eyes. Instantly, almost without transition, his sleep became a state of acute wakefulness.

"You've treated me first?" he asked. It was less an inquiry than a statement. With delight Dr. Fleet observed the commander's ready reflexes. Without a doubt, Rhodan was "all there."

"Exactly as planned, young man," he confirmed softly.

Deliberately, breathing very deeply, the test pilot sat up. Someone removed the thin blanket that seemed itself to breathe. Rhodan wore a loose cut hospital gown that spared his resting body any constricting limitation.

“If I had gorgeous gams like you, Doc,” said Rhodan with dry humour, “I might perhaps go along with this masquerade.” There was a bright twinkle in his eyes. All the same, his lean and narrow face remained almost devoid of expression.

This mumbled curse upon the nonsense and bother of the “mummery” provoked the first grin on the lips of the men. Offering a catharsis of sorts, it had a magical effect in this somehow unreal situation.

The sound of hollow, stentorian breathing made Rhodan turn his head. Fascinated, he watched the waking-up exercises of his “problem-child,” who, like him, had already circumvented the moon. It remained still a mystery to Perry Rhodan how this chubby faced giant, this paradox with the tender skin of a newborn baby and the dishpan hands of a care worn washerwoman, could squeeze into a narrow space capsule.

Captain Clark G. Fletcher, the crew’s navigator, was a specialist in astronomy and mathematics, with a secondary interest in physics. He awoke with a display of noise worthy of a mammoth.

“Has my baby arrived yet?” Fletcher’s voice roared at once. The imminent blast-off was obviously of far less concern to him. “How about it, Doc? What do you hear from my wife? Have you been looking after her?”

Dr. Fleet sighed in exasperation.

“Listen, son. You have at least another three months to wait. I can’t help it if you believe your wife is an anatomical wonder. But if you ask me one more time—”

“*It could* have happened, couldn’t it?” interrupted the giant with the boy’s beardless face. “The index of variability for a mathematically unstable structure like the human organism is almost infinite in range. Why, all manner of— That means I’ll just have to wait?”

With a wave of soft laughter, the third man on the team indicated that he too had awakened.

Lieutenant Eric Manoli, physician as well as geologist, was the least conspicuous man of the team. He was probably also the most relaxed and most emotionally stable.

He greeted them wordlessly. His glance flew to the clock. Of course, Dr. Manoli would observe the astronaut’s most holy unwritten law, which stated clearly and concisely, “Thou shalt never discuss the blast-off, except when absolutely necessary. You have slept, that mind and body may rest undisturbed. Do not defeat the purpose by believing it necessary to occupy yourself immediately with the seriousness of the matter.

It was a simple formula that had proved highly effective.

“Everything all right, Eric?” inquired Rhodan. “I see by your enormous growth of beard that your whiskers have been awake all the time.”

“I inherited it from my Italian ancestors,” said Manoli, rubbing the black stubble that had appeared on his cheeks during the hibernation. Then he continued, “What is the matter with Reg? He sleeps the sleep of the dead, it seems.”

Captain Fletcher swung around on the couch. His right hand landed with a loud slap on the well upholstered shoulders of the fourth crew member, a short, heavysset man obviously inclined toward a pot

belly.

Those who knew Captain Reginald Bell would have likened him to an incredibly elastic rubber ball. His apparently plentiful adipose tissue would deceive the simple minded. Indeed, Bell had withstood the eighteen G's in the giant centrifuge far better than the short and sinewy Manoli.

"Idiot!" Bell hissed from among the foam rubber cushions. A broad expanse of face, densely populated by freckles peered out from under the covers. Squinting in Fletcher's direction were a pair of pale blue eyes almost devoid of colour.

"I've been wide awake for the last hour," Bell insisted nonchalantly. "The sedative dose was, of course, too weak for a man of my caliber."

"Why, of course," agreed Rhodan, with a straight face. Reg seemed to wither under his gaze. "I admire your consideration. You must have been breathing less than Tutankhamen, just to keep from disturbing us."

"You'll get a medal for that," Fletcher piped up. Snorting and grunting, he rolled his weighty bulk off the flat couch. "But expectant fathers and other wretches have their turn first," he added with emphasis. "I'd still like to know, what real need there is for them to examine us again."

Fletcher suddenly fell silent. With some embarrassment, he looked across at the commander. He had almost broken the unspoken edict.

Rhodan, however, acted as though he had heard nothing. Yawning with studied indifference, he said, "Begin with the baby, Doc. Our circulatory systems should probably be in perfect working order, but please keep the neutralization shots handy anyway."

Perry Rhodan began to consider his own reactions. He too felt a gnawing unrest in the deepest reaches of his unconscious mind. The senseless chatter of the men was obviously a psychological gambit, a displacement activity to relieve their anxiety.

For heaven's sake, don't say a word about the blast-off! It was sure to overwhelm them soon enough, Rhodan was quite certain.

Riding on the roaring gas jets of a nuclear powered, chemical fuelled rocket would very likely be indistinguishable from blasting off in an ordinary ship, at least where the subsequent moments of G pressure were concerned. Yet the real pressures would make themselves felt in those depths of the mind which were almost beyond one's control.

The men were afraid. Of course they were—no one had ever denied it. But these men could overcome their fear. That was all that mattered.

Rhodan made a keen but inconspicuous observation of his men. They all seemed well enough. Clark Fletcher was perhaps a bit too restless. He thought too often of the expected baby. If Perry Rhodan could have his way, they would leave Fletcher behind this time. But the team, so carefully coordinated, could not be dismembered. An unknown astronaut could not replace Fletcher successfully, for he would not be assimilated into their Gestalt.

Rhodan had therefore, with resignation, accepted the unavoidable. Otherwise? he could find no grounds for negative appraisal.

CHAPTER TWO

The contour couches were masterpieces of engineering. Hydropneumatically controlled, with autogyros that balanced out the slightest shift in weight, they could not have been more comfortable or luxurious.

When the first manned space capsule was designed, great emphasis had been placed on bedding down the astronauts in their couches while they were fully attired in weighty and cumbersome space suits. Then, as now, the men were forced by safety regulations to wear even the pressurized helmets with their transparent visors during blast-off.

Of course, small injuries sometimes occurred as the result of high G forces during acceleration. The most tragic instance had occurred when the first orbital space station was being constructed. An improperly fitted space helmet had caused a broken neck when a ship's acceleration had mounted up to 11.3 G's.

Perry Rhodan had never worn a spacesuit during blast off. This was his special privilege, which he had also extended to his crew. The technicians, however, still considered this unnecessarily risky. With the least tear in the ship's outer shell, an explosive decompression and the consequent creation of a vacuum in the cabin were bound to result. They knew only too well how quickly blood could be brought to a boil under such conditions.

Yet Rhodan had harvested a run of good luck. His ships had never been struck by meteors or torn by engineering stresses while lifting off.

The four men were lying on their contour couches, dressed only in their tight blue uniforms. The spacesuits were hanging on hooks nearby, ready for use at a moment's notice. Rhodan had spared his team a most painful additional strain and certainly the unavoidable pressure sores and bruises.

The last series of control checks was being completed. Far below them, some eighty yards away, the technicians finally withdrew, satisfied with the durability of the stabilizer fins on the first stage.

Captain Bell, electronics technician and specialist in ion reaction engines, needed more time to take stock of his instruments than Rhodan would need in checking out the autopilot ignition and the remote control guidance system.

Fletcher and Manoli were seated behind the two main couches. For the moment, they had nothing to do. The cabin was necessarily very narrow and webbed with countless cables, rubber pipes and flush instrument panels. Everything had been custom built and made to specification. Below the command center were the small living quarters, with their own kitchenette and bath. More space could not be provided the astronauts. Both these rooms lay close beneath the nose cone of the rocket.

Under the cabin and recreation area there was the storeroom, its provisions stocked with utmost care. The men could not approach the remaining section of the rocket. Isolated in the next level were the tanks of liquid hydrogen. Then, pumps and additional pipelines crowded a chamber whose heavy steel alloy walls shielded them from radioactivity. This marked the end of the “safe” zone. Beyond it, there were only the high speed plutonium reactor, needed for the production of power, and the great cavern of the combustion chamber, with all its high pressure valves and thermo-pipe conduits and cooling systems. Here the hydrogen, now volatilized, was brought to expansion.

The minute hand of the chronometer leaped forward to the next number. It was 3:01. The blast-off was scheduled for exactly 3:02.

Rhodan turned his head. He did this with difficulty, now that the foam rubber cushions of his couch had swallowed him up. “Everything okay?” he inquired.

The crew answered with smiles. They were all listening now to the monotonous voice that announced the last minute of the countdown: “Zero minus sixty seconds.” For a few moments, they lavished mental ridicule upon this eerie nasal litany. They had gone through this many times, and each time it bored them.

Now, however, even that had changed. It was a nightmare to know that the nuclear reactor was only yards beneath their feet.

“Eighteen ... seventeen ... sixteen ... Fifteen ...”

Rhodan pulled the microphone closer to his mouth.

“Final report. *Stardust* to center.” His voice boomed over the loudspeakers. It could be heard everywhere in Nevada Fields, even in the isolated press bunkers.

“All A-okay on board. Next report to follow after ejection of first stage.”

“... three ... two ... one ... zero... Ignition ... liftoff!”

Things were as they had been each time before. They found that the hull of a spaceship was, despite all efforts at soundproofing, like a sensitive echo chamber. Their ears rang, their whole bodies vibrating like violin strings.

White flickering tongues of flame devoured the darkness of night. With split second timing, the *Stardust* began to lift off. The slow, majestic ascent was followed by a sudden jolt and a frightening spectacle, as the third stage began to wobble to and fro. This was the single most dangerous moment during the blast-off of a large rocket. The autopilot struggled against the powerful engines to stabilize the ship, which had barely started to ascend. The shouts and exclamations of the reporters were drowned out by the noise from this battle. It seemed like the end of the world. In sheer magnitude of uproar, only Hiroshima could have equalled this gigantic tumult. Not even within the soundproof bunker could men hear one another speak. Those not wearing acoustic earphones were sentenced, in this moment, to total deafness. Lips were moving, hands were fluttering, but not a word was understood. Every gesture told a tale of utmost worry and concern.

Then, at last, the *Stardust* began its flight. With the passing of these brief moments of unendurable stasis, the titan surged up suddenly, urgently, as if returning to its natural element.

Prodigious in its production of noise, the *Stardust* rose up into the blood hued sky of evening.

Moments later, the ship could be seen on camera as a fireball glowing white. Vertically, now in perfect balance, it roared skyward until only its flaming exhaust could be detected, and then as a weak pinpoint of light, which finally disappeared into a cloudless starry sky.

Only a few clicks could be heard over the intercom system. Pounder's face appeared on the video screens. He made the routine announcement. "The *Stardust* was launched at 3:02 A.M., Pacific Standard Time, according to plan. No irregularities were noted. Later, you will be able to overhear the astronauts reporting from space. The separation of stage one will follow shortly, when acceleration approaches 9.3 G's. According to our calculation, the *Stardust* will come within the range of the space station within three minutes. Afterward, you will once more be able to see the ship clearly and to follow the separation of the second stage. Now, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that no one is permitted to leave the Nevada Fields area until the *Stardust* has landed safely on the Moon. This time we are planning a surprise. That is all. Thank you, gentlemen."

General Pounder finished with a smile.

"Five seconds to first stage separation," the voice of a technician droned over the loudspeakers in the control room. "No deviation from course. Everything proceeding as planned. Two ... one ... contact."

The electronic autopilot computers switched over with incredible precision. No one moved: no one even lifted a finger. On one side of the room were the engineer's, with goggling eyes and nerves on edge, and on the other, in contrast, the newsmen waited with stoic composure.

From the loudspeakers, there issued the signal that acknowledged the completed separation. Now two separate blips were seen on the radar observation screen. Remote control took over the landing of the cast off section of the rocket, the booster stage.

The subsequent interval of recovery gave the crew of the *Stardust* eight seconds. The electronic brain was already preparing the procedure for the acceleration of the second stage.

Perry Rhodan's voice was calm but perhaps a bit choked. "Rhodan speaking. No deviation. Vibration within normal limits. Crew is ready for the ignition of stage two."

He did not have to say anything more. This was enough for the scientists and supervisors in the ground stations on Earth. The *Stardust* was racing through space.

Rhodan glanced quickly around the cabin. Reginald Bell was all right, and neither Fletcher nor Manoli seemed to have suffered from the 9.3 G's. Now it was time for the reactor to do its part in adding thrust to the second stage. Rhodan could feel the moisture in his palms. With senses as keen as an animal's, he waited; but he heard nothing out of the ordinary. For a few moments, all had become quiet.

A sudden jolt came next. This was accompanied by a howl that seemed to penetrate every single molecule of the ship and its crew. Once again, the broad hull of this vessel had become an echo chamber.

Immediately thereafter, the acceleration increased to eight G's. So far, no means had been devised to lessen the ordeal to follow.

Rhodan could feel the drugs working on his circulatory system. His body was still holding out against the stress, but breathing was an agony. Unable to move a muscle, he stared heavy-lidded at the video

control panel suspended close above his head.

It seemed an eternity before the G pressures were reduced once more to the normal value of one gravity. It was a brief respite for the crew, a momentary interlude, lasting approximately seven seconds, which had been exactly calculated to take the best advantage of the efficiency of the power plant.

Rhodan croaked his customary "Everything okay!" into the microphone. His eyes responded to the bright symbols flashing by his face, but he no longer understood their meaning. Then came the second interval, for the further acceleration of stage two.

Three seconds later, they had exceeded escape velocity. Once the speed of twelve miles per second had been attained, the separation of the second stage followed so abruptly that the zero gravity it produced had the effect of a sledgehammer blow.

The men felt themselves pulled upward, and their bodies strained mightily against the broad straps of their contour couches.

For a few seconds, Rhodan lost consciousness. When he opened his eyes again, the red glow in front of his eyes had subsided. They were already well along in free flight, with speed undiminished. By that time, the *Stardust* had passed beyond the orbit of the space station and was drifting, as though suspended in a fluid media, some 2,000 miles above the surface of Earth.

Now they had a short time to recover. Theoretically, the present velocity of the ship would suffice to free them from the attraction of Earth's gravity. Theoretically, without any additional propulsion, they could travel to any point in the universe.

But the distance was great between theory and practice. Although they had overcome her gravitational pull, Earth insisted on making her presence known by restraining the flight of the spaceship.

Furthermore, it was not enough simply to continue straight through in this trajectory. One still had to perform a great many manoeuvres for which data had not yet been computed in every detail. They would have to calculate and compensate for the smallest deviation from course.

Rhodan's contour couch doubled up to form a softly upholstered chair. The instrument panel adjusted itself to a new position. Now it was hanging in front of him, rather than above his head, and he welcomed the change.

With a volley of Anglo-Saxon phrases rarely in evidence in polite society, Reginald Bell recovered. Captain Fletcher opened his eyes with a hoarse cough. There were flecks of blood at the corners of his mouth.

Rhodan shook his head. "This was tough, much tougher than before. During the last few seconds, they must have taken us as high as 15.4 G's. We were thundering through the dangerous Van Allen belt at that acceleration... Fletch! What's the matter with you? What's wrong, boy?"

Clark G. Fletcher had gone pale. The ruddy glow of his chubby cheeks had faded away altogether. Had it not been for the luster of his straw-blond hair, Rhodan might not have recognized his ghastly, waxen face.

Fletcher drew his lips together with a grimace and moaned, "Damn! If I'm going to pull any more stunts like that, I might as well get off right now. I still had the tip of my tongue between my teeth while

we were at seven G's! What foolishness! I'm telling you, isn't that idiotic? The first thing they teach every student of the academy is, by all means, to refrain from such impulses. And *me*, of all people!"

He concluded with a shrug of his shoulders, his face drawn in pain. Rhodan looked at him questioningly from behind a masklike smile.

Bell's magnetic soles clamped onto the foil beneath their feet. Swaying from side to side, he was struggling to regain his balance. As long as the engines of the *Stardust* were silent, they were still in zero gravity. It was fascinating to watch him walk, or try to walk. With each step, he would lift his boots up with great difficulty and then let them fall heavily onto the floor. Without a word, Bell plodded heavily across the cabin to Dr. Manoli.

After a quick check of Manoli's pulse, he was nodding with relief.

"He's okay," he said briefly. "His pulse is right back again, regular as clockwork." Moving to Fletcher, he said, "Show me your tongue, Fletch. Go on, open your mouth." Glistening, livid droplets of blood rolled out. Rhodan had seen enough. This was a matter for Dr. Manoli.

The commander turned the volume regulator toward the right, and confused noises on the radio finally became clear again. Meanwhile, Dr. Manoli had revived.

Rhodan heard the low hiss of the hydropneumatic valves. Manoli's couch changed into a chair. In a moment, he was standing beside Fletcher.

The men lost time in vain debate. Manoli knew that the commander was only awaiting his professional opinion.

"It could have been worse," came his diagnosis. "Luckily, you didn't bite it through completely. I'll need ten minutes. Twelve would be better. Is that possible, Perry?"

"Fair enough. Reg, take the latest values from computer central and transfer them onto magnetic tape. I want a controlled calculation. We'll postpone everything for twelve minutes. When you're finished, let me know the result. We should be able to compensate for the loss with about four seconds of full thrust."

Some seconds later, Rhodan's face appeared on the ground station's giant video screens. Pounder, waiting nervous and restless by the microphone, breathed a sigh of relief.

"*Stardust* to Nevada Fields," Rhodan's voice rang out loud and strong and completely clear. "Captain Fletcher has sustained slight injury—bit his tongue. Manoli is stopping the bleeding. The wound can be healed quickly with plasma concentrate, if you can permit us a twelve minute delay. Over."

Pounder rose to his full height. A glance toward Professor Lehmann said everything that needed saying under the circumstances. The scientist nodded briefly in reply. It was possible. One always made allowance for such eventualities here at Nevada Fields.

The electronic brain began to work. The corrections were available instants later. These were automatically transmitted to the *Stardust* by way of special relay transmitters.

The diagram lit up in front of Reginald Bell. The smaller but highly efficient computers aboard the *Stardust* itself acknowledged receipt of the signal. A multitude of most carefully calculated previous figures was simultaneously discarded. New data raced into space in the guise of UHF radio impulses. In

a moment, a grand plan was overthrown and replaced by entirely new measures.

Bell's fingertips tapped the data into the keyboard. Rhodan gave the usual routine report on altitude, radiation, temperature, cabin pressure and the health of his team.

Manoli had need of only eleven minutes, By then, Fletcher was perfectly all right again. His lacerated tongue had been carefully and almost invisibly mended.

Fletcher looked around awkwardly, his eyes full of naive embarrassment.

"This time, try your thumb, chum," said Rhodan, with a trace of a grin. "It can stand a lot more than your tongue."

Their seats tilted back again. Shortly afterward, they heard the roar of that machine whose function they still regarded with mixed emotions. They listened with an amalgam of instinctive fear, expectations of high esteem and a curiosity that gnawed at their nerves.

It was, of course, the nuclear chemical power plant, which had performed so admirably during the operation of the second stage.

Once again, there came the rumble and the jolt. This time, however, the G's increased to only 2.1, causing neither Rhodan nor the others any particular discomfort. On fiery jets of gaseous hydrogen, the *Stardust* plunged into the vacuum of the universe.

But now that the initial difficulties of a space launch had been overcome, the real challenges of manned spaceflight became apparent and would have to be mastered.

Rhodan was lulled by the nuclear powered engine's roar, which had now become an even hum. The void close below the cylindrical stem of the ship held an ice blue incandescence. There, liquid oxygen, heated by atomic power, burst forth with tremendous pressure in the combustion chamber.

The radioactive elements in the reactor would last for at least a year, but the liquid hydrogen and oxygen had to be handled with greater economy. Their supply was limited. Once the tanks were empty and there was nothing more to be released, even the most efficient power plant was condemned to total impotence.

Breathing heavily, Rhodan lay resting on his contour couch. While he submitted his short reports to the control center on Earth at carefully timed intervals, he thought fleetingly of the nuclear reactor, so wonderful and yet still so primitive.

For now, they would still require the intervention of the atomic pile, in order to achieve the necessary thrust. But if they should one day possess *apure* nuclear reactor, a mighty engine permitting velocities close to the speed of light...!

Rhodan moved his lips with effort. He felt like laughing bitterly. Reginald Bell also seemed to occupy himself with similar thoughts. In a moment, he whispered heavily to Rhodan, "Heroes in fiction have it so much easier. They don't have our problems with sudden acceleration, and they never bite their own tongues! Fletch, how are you? Do you feel all right? It'll be only a few more minutes. For about five seconds, we may go up as high as 8.4 G's. Okay?"

"Okay," grunted the giant, by way of the intercom system. His breath could be heard rattling in their

close headsets. "Everything A-okay. Good lord, we're on our way! Up, up and away with four men. One of these days I'll be telling my son all about it. Listening to me, his eyes will be as round and shiny as polished marbles."

Fletcher was exhausted. A rugged body and a lot of practice were needed if one wished to speak clearly under the force of two G's. These men could do it. Only Dr. Manoli ignored the opportunity. Instead, he gave an indication of his emotions with a meek smile.

Yes, they were on their way. The blast-off was practically behind them now. The cruel but unavoidable stresses were almost over and done with. What still remained was more a matter for reason and instant reflex. They watched Earth recede into the background. Earth, that swollen blue green globe with all its vast array of oceans, continents, and cloud shrouded mountains, not to mention its billions of human inhabitants.

They could easily experience feelings of godly exaltation and a lofty detachment from Earthbound existence.

Rhodan alone, his mind ever wary, did not participate in this chaos of sensations. No one saw the sceptical cast to his gray eyes. They were not there yet. Not yet had they landed, and not yet had they begun the voyage home. This enterprise was not just some relatively innocuous circumnavigation of the moon. No, here they were to face an incredibly difficult lunar landing. They were destined to be the first men ever to set foot on the moon.

CHAPTER THREE

This time even Perry Rhodan had, been cautious. The counterthrust applied throughout the braking manoeuvre had momentarily increased G pressures to an unnerving degree. The *Stardust* had fallen into orbit around the moon with a speed of approximately two miles per second. Only then had he given the order to put on spacesuits.

The men had carried out his instructions without comment. While the *Stardust* was being drawn into ever-narrowing orbits around Luna, in obedience to the space station's computerized remote control guidance system, they had donned the ultramodern protective suits. These garments were relatively light and yet quite monstrous looking, being fully pressurized and hermetically sealed, each with its own power pack, air conditioning, oxygen supply, and so on. The transparent helmets were even bulletproof, made from an artificial alloy as hard as steel.

Next Rhodan had insisted that they close their helmets. Only the valves on either side remained open, so that the men could still breathe the usual air of the cabin. The built-in aerostat would automatically seal the valves in an instant, should pressure drop below normal.

Thus had Rhodan done all he could to reduce to a minimum the chances of an accident.

The *Stardust* was flying with stern forward, permitting the jets to bring their thrust against the direction of flight. The trajectory of orbit was from pole to pole; consequently, when the ship sank beyond the line of sight in its path across the other side of the moon, it disappeared from within range of remote control, since radio signals from the ground stations on Earth could no longer reach the *Stardust*. Once the ship was within the shadow of the moon, therefore, the autopilot on board the rocket assumed control of their flight, which would lead, after a fifth ellipse, to a landing on the lunar surface.

The braking process continued as the fifth orbit began. On the visible face of Earth's only satellite, the sun had risen on one of the long lunar days. Six percent of the opposite hemisphere already lay in deepest darkness.

Only on the radar screen could a clear picture of the torn surface be obtained. The dark side of the moon was in all ways indistinguishable from the familiar bright side, but this had long been known. The moon held no more mystery in that respect.

Once again they emerged from the cone of darkness in the wake of the moon. Their altitude was approximately fifty-five miles, their velocity reduced by brief braking counterthrusts to a speed of 1.4 miles per second.

The autopilot announced with a shrill whistle that the powerful directional beam from the space station had locked onto the ship again, and the central computers aboard the *Stardust* received new instructions in the form of the latest calculations.

The rocket was visible on the screen as a green dot floating along one of the prescribed lines representing the landing orbit. The end of this line was close to the lunar south pole, just beyond the Newcomb crater. A red circle indicated the landing site, a flat, apparently rock strewn surface that offered the safest place to set down the rocket.

The crew could hear the voice of the project chief as clearly as they heard the autopilot registering the guidance impulses. There were short intervals between the reports, for ultrawaves, though travelling at the speed of light, still needed some time to span the tremendous distance.

Still flying at relatively high speed, the *Stardust* arrived above the western "shore" of the Mare Nubium. Immediately ahead, the big Walter crater appeared. It was not very far from the landing site.

"Ground control, General Pounder speaking." The voice came over the loudspeaker amid the crackling of static. "You will reach the turning point in seventy-two seconds. We will time the impulse taking into consideration the distance the radio waves will have to cover. We're switching off, in the meantime, in order to avoid any disturbances. We have you clear on our radar screens. Reception is very good; hardly any interference. Primary remote control autopilot starting operations. We'll set you down safely. Begin release of your landing supports. Contact me immediately upon landing. Until you touch down on the moon, we wish you all the luck."

Rhodan pulled a lever. The four telescoping landing supports of the *Stardust* thrust out, moving away from the ship's hull at an angle of forty-five degrees. The hydraulic system extended the long tubular structures farther and farther outward. At the outermost end of each, there unfolded a flat contact disk with a surface area of four square yards.

When the critical point in orbit had been reached, the *Stardust* was still on the flight line. They had compensated for even the smallest deviations in course.

“Everything ready?” Bell’s voice sounded strained. “Contact. Forward.” He could hear the heavy breathing of the other men. Almost everything hinged on this moment when their future hung in the balance.

Suddenly, without prior warning, a sound shrieked out of the autopilot monitor. The impulse had arrived, punctual to a split second.

The engines roared in a brief but violent counterthrust that decreased the remaining speed of the ship by another fifty percent, and subjected the men to a force of twelve G’s.

When this had passed, an interval for the correction of previous calculations took place. Lungs heaving, they began to breathe again. At the next braking thrust would come the sixty degree rotation in orbit. Then the retro rockets would have to be positioned exactly perpendicular to the lunar surface.

Following these operations, the ship would hover above the point of landing and descend on its own exhaust with a speed of twelve feet per second.

Lighting quick, the various data raced through Rhodan’s head. All had sounded so simple, so infallible. But now that he lay in this fragile structure, his mind seized the problems and perils with utmost piercing clarity.

The *Stardust* began its descent in a flat parabola. When the gravitational pull of the moon had grown strongly apparent, it was high time for the turnabout manoeuvre, when the jets from the combustion chamber would have to be turned from their horizontal position and aimed at the ground.

“Three seconds to go,” called Bell in a choked voice. “Two ... one ... contact!”

Contact followed. With it came such an incredible screeching and howling that it seemed as though a 1,000 kilowatt broadcast station were standing beside the rocket, beaming its full energy directly at them.

The sounds broke out of the control loudspeakers in a veritable flood. Deafening noise and ultrasonic whistling assaulted the ears of the startled men. For a fraction of a second, Reginald Bell looked totally devoid of sensibility, his broad face contorted in a grimace full of pain and panic.

Rhodan had stopped short, completely immobile. When he had overcome his initial surprise, however, he reacted with astonishing swiftness. His right hand slammed down on the emergency lever. Magnetic straps closed shut to imprison the men in their seats.

No one could avoid hearing the shrill warning signal from the autopilot. The *Stardust*’s electronic brain reported the disturbance. Flickering lamps gave proof that the impulse they had expected for the turnabout manoeuvre had not got through to them from the ground station. Even though the computer was denied the power of independent judgment, it had stated, with instantaneous reckoning, that this was cause for utmost alarm.

The diagrams were already lit up, having appeared automatically and without error. Reg glanced at them.

“Deviation!” he shouted, with a stampede of feelings. “No ignition impulse. We’re falling beyond the landing site. Interference is preventing reception of the remote control signals! Where are these things coming from? They’re only on our frequency. Perry!”

Rhodan abandoned any lengthy reflection. The surface of the moon, brightly illuminated by the rising sun, sped toward them. He did whatever a commander could, in such an instance.

With breathtaking speed, in an automatic reflex he switched off the main circuit built into the arm rest. The *Stardust* was thus beyond the range of the Earthbound remote control system.

An infernal caterwaul of the control instruments was cut off instantly, as if it had never existed.

A bell began to ring, and then a voice boomed through the cabin. It was the autopilot, speaking with a soulless voice prerecorded on tape.

“Central computer directing autopilot landing. Calculations are in progress. Completion. Landing initiated. Emergency signal QQRXQ has been sent with maximum intensity, via channel sixteen. Landing proceeding.”

This was the message some technician had recorded on tape before the blast-off. He had neglected to mention that these cheerful plans for landing starkly ignored all safety measures.

Bringing the helpless ship down at all costs, regardless of consequences, was nothing short of an act of desperation. An impromptu resumption of the flight at this stage was impossible. The ground was already too near, the velocity of fall had increased to more than 1.2 miles per second and the necessary rotation would take too long. It was an emergency. It made no difference whether, under the flame fountains of the *Stardust's* exhaust, there lay the charity of a flat plain or the cruel promise of a crater with its razor-edged eggshell jaws.

The engine howled. The rocket was violently whipped about by the realigned steering jets and brought abruptly into a vertical position. It fell with its face heavenward, its sharp nose pointed now into the dark and star-laden sky.

Whining gyros took over the stabilizing manoeuvres. Someone shouted; no one knew who.

Rhodan no longer gave commands or issued instructions. It would have been senseless. There was nothing anyone could do for the necessary calculations and manipulations could be executed only by the computers. In such circumstances, a human brain was condemned to failure.

The men's eyes were fixed on the video screens. The exterior observation cameras disclosed the jagged walls of a crater. They were blinded by the most intense white heat below them, wherein was concentrated all the force and fury of the rocket's thrust.

Bell shouted something in the nature of a helpless croak. With the pressure of 18 G's, it was remarkable that he could still squeeze anything out of his throat.

Next they heard a roar and muffled explosions. Another jolt pressed them back into their couches. Several fittings broke loose with a loud clatter as the hull seemed to split in two. There followed, immediately afterward, a period of rattling and vibration. Yet before these ceased entirely, there suddenly came utter calm. A green lamp grew bright above Perry Rhodan. It no longer flickered but shone steadily.

The absolute silence was torn by shrill, hysterical laughter.

“Captain Fletcher!”

Rhodan’s voice, though not loud, was as sharp as a knife. The cackling broke off with a piercing and unpleasant whine.

When Fletcher had again lapsed into silence, the hard lines in Rhodan’s face relaxed. A mild expression appeared in the bright eyes of the ship’s commander. “Easy, Fletch. It’s all right.”

His gaze fell once again upon the green lamp, whose light was so infinitely reassuring. Thus did the central autopilot computer give its wordless report. The rocket now stood on the surface, apparently hardly damaged.

Bell displayed a breathless grin. His reason seemed still unwilling to accept the facts for what they were. Dr. Manoli remained silent, as usual. In his pale face, only the coal black eyes seemed alive, and they held a question.

In a moment, Perry Rhodan would deal the men a traumatic blow. They naturally expected some remark from him regarding the successful emergency landing, some sign that all was once again well. They waited for something, even if it was only a short sigh of relief after the agonizing ordeal of the last few minutes.

But Perry Rhodan reacted differently.

“Fletch, you’ll have to determine the location and nature of this jamming station at once. You’ll find the data on the magnetic tapes of the computer. Let’s see how good a mathematician you are.”

He had nothing more to add.

CHAPTER FOUR

The slight, lively man with an oddly youthful face beneath a mighty bald dome was known as Allan D. Mercant. One could recognize him at once by his wreath of hair whose golden hue was interrupted so abruptly by the light silver white near his temples.

Allan D. Mercant was one of those gentle souls who, with a quiet feeling of joy, remove worms and other bugs from the garden path to avoid treading upon them. But that was the purely private aspect of Mercant’s character.

As far as his profession was concerned, Mercant was the power behind the throne and a power to be reckoned with. He was identical with the almost omnipotent Chief of International Defence, who worked in closest collaboration with national defence and secret service organizations throughout the west. NATO had supervised the creation of the Division of International Defence, otherwise given official designation as the Security Intelligence Agency. Mercant was thus answerable only to the high command of NATO.

When he entered the conference room, accompanied by an older gentleman, the murmur of low conversation subsided.

General Pounder, chief of Space Explorations Command, acquainted the people present with one another. This was a secret session on the sixteenth floor of the NASA building in Washington.

Allan D. Mercant began abruptly. Underneath a high vaulted forehead, his tanned and boyish face seemed friendly and exceedingly sympathetic.

He pointed to a pile of newspapers at a corner of the long conference table. "Gentlemen, we need no longer discuss the breaking of this news. I can understand, General, that you could not hold the reporters at Nevada Fields for all eternity. In any event, we have begun to receive quite a number of vocal protests, which Colonel Kaats has nevertheless been able to deal with satisfactorily."

The older man at his side nodded slowly, bemused. Kaats belonged to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, functioning also as a member of the President's special cabinet for internal security.

"Far more disquieting is the coverage in the newspapers and on television. According to their version, our *Stardust* is not only lost, but has crashed. They have, in part, given such accurate information that we can only wonder, with great concern, in how great a percentage of these reports the truth is really involved. More important still would seem to me to be the sources of these reports. We are proceeding with our investigation in the meantime. Well..." Thoughtfully, Mercant looked at his watch. "The *Stardust* has been lost for more than twenty-four hours. Let's say 'lost,' because that still contains an element of hope. I am interested in your opinion of the editorials of some of our leading newspapers, wherein it is contended that an SOS from your spaceship has indeed been intercepted. They refer to the short signal QQRXQ that signifies, in the code of the Space Command, as much as attack, intentional disruption of remote control guidance systems, and initiating a crash landing. If that is the case, please let me have further details."

Mercant nodded amiably to the assembly and sat down. Wearily, General Pounder rose. His brows were knit, his face was hollow checked, and his voice sounded half broken. "That is correct, sir. QQRXQ can be equated with those conditions. It's a mystery to us how any reporter could get at the code. I've asked our security people to investigate—so far without any result, unfortunately. On the other hand, the reception of the SOS is less of a surprise. Several of our larger radar stations were awaiting signals from the lunar south pole area. We had also asked for the support of the great observatories. There something may have leaked through. Of course, this still does not explain how they could decipher the meaning of QQRXQ. That's all I can say."

"Let's forget about that for the moment. What has really happened to your spaceship? Do you in fact accept the possibility of wilful and premeditated disturbance of your guidance signals? It was explained to me by experts that this could be accomplished only by a powerful transmitting facility situated on the moon."

Pounder lowered his head. In, his eyes shone a helpless fury. "Yes, that is indeed the case. There is no other possibility, as crazy as it might sound. We've double checked all our instruments in the past twenty-four hours. Each is functioning at one hundred percent efficiency. There could be no possible failure in any phase of operation. But we've arrived at two other likely explanations."

Pounder wiped his perspiring forehead with a huge handkerchief. Heavily breathing, he continued, "Either Major Rhodan has released the wrong code signal or the radio equipment on board the *Stardust*

has, as you say, been put out of action by a strong transmitter. As far as Major Rhodan is concerned, we consider it out of the question that he should have committed such a serious error. Rhodan is our top man; everybody knows that. In addition, our calculations prove beyond any doubt that at the decisive moment, the ship was pulled out of remote control. The vehicle must have been forced to land. Considering the known angle of fall, lunar gravity and the mass of the rocket, it must have touched ground some forty to fifty miles behind the polar region. It's entirely possible that we're dealing here with a harmless crash landing. Still, a total loss of the rocket must also be considered. No one *knows* what happened—we can only speculate.”

Mercant's clear eyes were hooded with shadow. Colonel Kaats cleared his throat respectfully, announcing in this way that the data given agreed with the findings of internal security.

“Supposing, General,” Mercant offered slowly, “just supposing that the ship's instruments really were exposed to interference. What would you conclude from that?”

“Of course, we had word from you, sir, that the Asiatic Federation had launched a lunar rocket at the same time as the *Stardust*. If this vessel arrived there earlier and if it set down in the approximate area of our landing, then this could have led to a well prepared radio disturbance of our wavelength.” Ponder was now snarling like a Great Dane, his pale face flushed.

“That would be presuming that these people possessed very exact knowledge of our plans, wouldn't it?” asked Kaats sceptically.

“Naturally!” Ponder declared heatedly. “To find that out should be the job of the security services. I'm only a rocket man, Colonel. Certainly, our plans had already been made six months ago. Once again, however, I wish to stress that this radio interference could only have been the product of an installation on the moon—always provided that *we* are dealing with an attack in this form. There should be motives aplenty for this, don't you agree? We were broadcasting our directional impulses from the most powerful relay stations in the world. Even if interference had been attempted from Earth, we would have gotten through anyway. The sender *must* be up there on the moon.”

Ponder sat down abruptly. He seemed exhausted.

Allan D. Mercant studied him without uttering a word. His forehead had grown furrowed. “We'll take on this case within the framework of international defence,” he decided. “We'll know shortly if a regrettable error has occurred with regard to the *Stardust* or if foreign interest groups have intervened. Besides, there may very well be still other possibilities we can imagine. I'm thinking, for instance, of failure on board the rocket.”

Professor Lehmann thrust his narrow skull upward. He had been at a loss for words, but at last he grumbled excitedly, “Sir, the *Stardust* has not had a failure. Not a single switch could have been responsible. It would carry us too far afield at this point to indicate the overwhelming evidence for that. We only hope now that the crew will make contact with us. If the men have landed safely, then Rhodan will find a way. The receivers of our space stations are operating around the clock. If Rhodan can succeed in establishing a direct line of sight with Earth, he will be able to broadcast a signal. Until then, we'll have to wait. There is no other alternative.”

“How long will it be before the sister ship of the *Stardust* is ready for launching?” inquired the chief of the security services.

“At least another two months,” Ponder said with emphasis. “If my people are alive now, they will

certainly have suffocated by then. Their oxygen supply is good for five weeks at most. In extreme emergency, perhaps six weeks; but that is the maximum. Sir, will you please find out what kind of mixup has occurred up there? If necessary, we may have to land an unmanned probe near the lunar south pole. It is highly uncertain whether this means of sending provisions and replacements would succeed, because the probe, after all, would first have to be found by my men. We are confronted with a desperate situation.”

Allan D. Mercant abruptly closed the session. For the moment there was nothing further to say. The *Stardust* was lost and remained so. In its place was a mountain of riddles.

Before the Secretary of International Defence left the room, he said with a masklike smile, “Gentlemen, I’m very sorry ... but the Asiatic moon rocket of which you speak exploded in the air shortly after launching.”

Pounder reacted quickly. He sat up, pale, unable to utter a sound, and gaped across at Mercant.

The little man wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “I am genuinely sorry. Well, then, whether you like it or not, you’ll just have to search for another explanation. No ship has taken off along with your *Stardust*. Therefore, may I ask where this stationary lunar installation is supposed to have its origin? Several things seem quite unclear to me. You will, nevertheless, be hearing from me.”

Softly, he added, “Neither do we believe that the fault lay in any error on the part of the commanding officer of your ship. If you can prove the faultless functioning of the control mechanisms, then we’re up against a hefty problem. I would like to request that you submit the facts to the scientific committee of international defence immediately. We must arrive at a convincing conclusion, and you will please try to understand.”

“Rhodan could not have failed,” asserted Pounder. “You don’t know our men, sir. We will *prove* to you that the automatic guidance systems on board the *Stardust* were in operation. That we could ascertain in the final moments before the sudden change in angle of descent. We can even tell you, through electronic computation, with what thrust values they were working. Should that not be sufficient ... ?”

Allan D. Mercant made his exit. Much preoccupied, he climbed into the helicopter waiting for him on the heliport on the roof of the NASA Building.

He looked up at the cloudless June sky over Washington. “We’re facing very trying times, Kaats,” he mumbled. “They tell me I have a certain nose for knowing that. Well, just a few moments ago my intuition spoke to me.”

Kaats squinted. It was true that Mercant had this strange instinct. He could smell danger and difficulty the way a good bloodhound could sniff a scent. There were even rumours that this man possessed a uniquely developed brain with extraordinary faculties and that this was why he had become Secretary of International Defence.

CHAPTER FIVE

The rocket crew had had to wait for twenty-four hours before the radioactivity of the surface had decreased appreciably, dampened by the effect of absorbent chemicals sprinkled on the lunar soil.

When the geiger counter registered only minimal radiation, with a mark of less than thirty-five milliroentgens, Perry Rhodan had been the first man to leave the ship. It had happened quietly and without jubilation.

Searching one another's eyes, they had clasped hands wordlessly. They were extremely conscious of being the first human beings ever to set foot on the moon.

The number four landing support had been damaged by the sudden impact of landing, they found. Otherwise, the *Stardust* had not sustained any serious damage. The ion reaction engines could not be checked out because of the still excessive radiation, but a short trial run proved them to be in the best of order. The other support structures did not seem to be broken.

The power supply still functioned flawlessly. The reactor was working at peak efficiency, and the combined air conditioning and regeneration system seemed never to have been better.

The damage to the armatures could easily be repaired. Much more serious, however, was the dislocation at the base of the telescoping tubing of landing support four. It would have to be restructured and strengthened with special equipment. Reginald Bell estimated that repairs would take at least six days. After all, molybdenum steel was an inordinately difficult metal to work with.

“We'll make it all right,” he said. “It will mean sweat and effort, but we'll make it all right.”

Thirty-six hours following their crash landing, they brought the pneumo-tent, an enormous sphere of synthetic fibre, out of the storage room.

The contents of a small bottle of liquid oxygen were sufficient to inflate the pliable material into a huge structure that seemed as hard as steel. The absence of exterior pressure proved to have some advantages.

Now the oblong tent stood well anchored to the rocky ground, its highly polished surface reflecting the brilliant light of the sun. All were engaged in installing the airlocks and the air conditioning system, but for the time being only the interior walls of the tent contained oxygen. This structure had been tested on Earth under the stress of simulated moon conditions. Only meteorites, and nothing else, would represent a danger.

The simplest thing had been the exact calculation of their position. Inasmuch as numerous orbital surveys had placed excellent special maps at their disposal, they had been able to work out their location with precision. The *Stardust* had landed a scant sixty miles behind the lunar south pole. The sun was visible as a crescent, just peeping over the nearby lunar horizon.

The craters in the vicinity of their landing site and a small plateau between two huge overhanging

ridges, were known and recorded. It seemed quite improbable that the rocket should have landed just here in its blind fall, It might just as easily have descended between the sharp spines of the high crater wall. Then it would probably have been curtains for them.

Earth was no longer visible. It hung in orbit far below the horizon. Therefore, no radio communication was possible. Rhodan had acknowledged these difficulties with only a boyish pout of his lips. No one else aboard the ship showed any sign of morale loss, although Fletcher had become quieter.

Rhodan had taken note of this without comment. Fletcher thought too often of his home, of his wife and the expected baby. This was cause for concern, even if not great concern. Rhodan had decided to pay special attention to the chubby cheeked giant.

Now Rhodan stood atop one of the numerous summits of the crater wall. Within the rim, the walls fell steeply and suddenly to the flat space, where the lunar soil was pockmarked with two smaller craters. These were typical signs of meteoric impacts to which this airless heavenly body had been exposed, without protection, for many millions of years.

He turned around slowly and cautiously, since here he weighed considerably less than on Earth, in spite of his heavy equipment. Some 400 yards below him, the pointed nose cone of the *Stardust* jutted out toward space. The solar crescent, which could barely be seen above the horizon, was shining fiercely and mercilessly. On the forward side, most fully exposed to the sun's rays, the rocks had already begun to warm up. Here near the twilight zone it was still somehow bearable.

Rhodan was not particularly disturbed by these things. He was fully aware of the dangers and difficulties, and thus he was psychologically well prepared to deal with them. Furthermore, he knew that the technical evolution of science had permitted more and more than would have seemed impossible only twenty or thirty years before.

Rhodan's spacesuit, for example, was a micro-mechanical miracle of the first rank, he pondered as he checked it over. Perhaps a thousand agile intellects had combined to construct it. One wheel had to fit into the next wheel, and one area of knowledge into others. Without a doubt, it represented a mammoth accomplishment for all mankind.

His suit was still in order. He nodded with satisfaction and directed his glance further across the vast terrain of such overwhelming, such foreboding aspect.

This area was not so torn and fragmented as other regions on the moon. Nevertheless, there was no sign of life. The stark contrast between brightest sunlight and darkest shadow painted the landscape with nightmarish contours. There was no shade, in the true sense of the word, no comforting transition between extremes of light and darkness.

Far away, no longer visible on a horizon that seemed so near, there lay the well-known outlines of the polar region. There was good reason why Perry Rhodan had ascended the lofty crater wall.

He could see no sign of any object that did not fit into the natural landscape. The *Stardust* and the pneumo-tent with its mirror-like surface were foreign bodies, obviously, but these now "belonged" in the picture.

An imperceptible smile played about his lips. Sceptically, with his characteristic detachment, he asked himself what right he had to think such thoughts. He arrived at the conclusion that here he was dealing with a certain audacity of the human mind. What man had conquered at the cost of great effort, that

would he treasure and call his own. Therefore, the *Stardust* belonged with the landscape!

Rhodan chuckled to himself when he caught himself at this train of thought. Shortly thereafter, the small loudspeaker in his spherical helmet began to crackle. “What’s the matter? Hey, Perry, what’s going on? Have you run into trouble?”

Rhodan chuckled quietly to himself again, and his eyes narrowed as he continued his reverie.

“Perry, why don’t you answer?” Reg shouted louder, having naturally overheard Rhodan’s laughter through the open communications channel. “What’s the matter?”

“I’ve taken the liberty of laughing,” said Rhodan into his tiny microphone. “If you don’t mind.”

A short cough followed a harsh oath.

“He’s standing on a moon crater all alone, and he’s laughing.” Reg could not help taking a dim view of it. “Who ever heard of such a thing? Fletch, he’s standing up there and he’s laughing.”

›Well, at least *I’m* doing something,” came Fletcher’s grumbling reply. “For half an hour I’ve been trying desperately, with all ten finger’s, to scratch my back. Nothing doing, though. Right where I’d like to scratch, I’ve got these damned oxygen tanks.”

Reg was roaring. Rhodan turned the volume dial a bit toward the left. The voice of his redheaded friend could wake the dead. “Hey, Perry, what’s the air like up there?” the loudspeaker croaked.

“A thunderstorm is coming up,” replied Rhodan dryly.

Reg fell silent, nonplussed. Rhodan’s peculiar humour always affected him this way.

“Because the air is so highly charged on the moon,” he added softly.

“All right, Commander; but what good is it to know something like that?”

“That’s precisely my point; but I was trying, even on the moon, to convey the information as factually and exactly as I could. From now on I will no longer depend on sound but on sight. Okay? Now, my friend, approximately how far away from you am I in the direct line of sight?”

“About 850 yards,” said Dr. Manoli, amusement in his voice. “I’m seated at the radar screen now, and it has established your distance, accurate to the inch. Efficient, isn’t it?”

“More than efficient,” laughed Rhodan. “All right, Reg, here’s something for you to do, but I want you please to make a clean and thorough job of it. Take your MPi and adapt your sights to ten times magnification. Distance 848. Fire half a magazine onto the rocky outcrop that looks like the head of a giant, about fifty yards to my left. Do you see it?”

“I see it,” confirmed Reg just as briefly. “May I ask what this joke is all about?”

“I seldom make jokes when I’m dealing with serious matters. I would like to know how our rocket missiles perform in miniature, especially their force of impact and power of detonation. Begin, and pay close attention to the effect of the recoil under present gravity.”

“There’s no recoil whatsoever,” asserted Reg. “Every shell has its own propelling force, according to the RAK principle. There can be no recoil. Quite the contrary. I’ve been informed in great detail on this particular point.”

“Very efficient,” Rhodan said sarcastically. “Now *fire* and please don’t mistake me for the rock.”

Reg laughed abruptly. Fletcher observed him silently as he bent to the floor and gathered up the weapon with the short stock and thick barrel. Rhodan’s explicit command was that they were never to leave the *Stardust* without arms.

Reginald Bell stood in front of the half-finished pneumo-tent. To one side, hardly thirty yards away, the spacecraft reared up into the lunar sky.

Very carefully, he adjusted the reflex lens on his telescopic sights. Magnification ten times, distance 848 yards.

Reg hesitated for a few moments. The target was far away though it seemed to leap so much nearer through the lens.

“Let’s get going,” came the insistent order. “What are you waiting for? Just imagine that it was this rock that destroyed our remote control guidance. Well?”

Reg swore loudly. At last he understood what Rhodan’s intentions were. The experiment took on greater significance and the thought of needless tomfoolery was quickly forgotten. “For the first ten shots, with your permission, I’ll fire only single projectiles,” he said. “First I want to see what distance I can make with this thing.”

“Very well. Begin.”

Reg set the stock of the weapon against his shoulder. In the strong magnification of his sight, the rock became clearly visible. He decided that this distance, easily bridged, would be negligible for the incredibly fast missile. Considering the lesser gravity of Earth’s satellite and the absence of atmospheric resistance here, the path of trajectory would be an almost straight line. The lens had been constructed for just these conditions. Reg could quite as easily have fired across a distance of several miles. The probability of a direct hit would still be remarkably high.

Fletcher held his breath as Reg touched the trigger. No sound whatsoever followed. On Earth there would have been an indescribably shrill whistling. Here the discharge took place in an eerie silence.

From the oval muzzle of the barrel, bright flames emerged and were extinguished at once. It was as if nothing had happened.

Reg was a bit startled. “Did you notice anything?” he asked breathlessly. “What the dickens . . . ? You’ve got to get used to this kind of marksmanship. I didn’t feel a thing.”

“But I did,” came the dry reply. “The rock fragments flew as far as where I’m standing. The missile was here before you had bent your finger properly. Incredibly fast. The outcrop shows a hole about a foot across and just about as deep. That’s really something—after all, that was solid granite. Try it now with a longer burst of fire. So far the RAK has hair trigger accuracy.”

Reg pulled the trigger all the way back. The fiery exhaust blinded his eyes, but from where Rhodan

was standing, he could see a bright and whitish shining trajectory trace. This was the path of the burning solid propellants of the small missiles. Where they penetrated the head of darkness close below the hills, a brilliant line of flames arose. Reg's magazine emptied itself before he could even adequately appreciate what was going on.

There were now only a few wretched remains of the huge rock. The stone fragments that had been blasted upward fell to the ground in exasperating slow motion.

Rhodan had been able to follow the countless explosions carefully. They had been silent and without shockwaves. Only the shower of debris and the flashing glow had indicated their occurrence.

"That will do," he said briefly. "A nice toy the armaments division has loaned us, I've got to admit. How long did you hold through, Reg?"

"Perhaps two seconds," came the astounded reply. "The magazine is empty. Good grief! Ninety shots in that moment."

"To be exact, the rate of fire is about fifty shots per second. All right, the experiment is over. I'll come down. Eric, how far along are you with dinner?"

"You can come now. I've been hard at work."

Rhodan looked around once more before sliding down. Then his wide leaps brought him easily over any obstacles in his path. For a man who was used to the null gravity of space, the insignificance of the moon's gravitational pull offered few surprises.

Twenty minutes later he appeared at the entrance of the pneumo-tent. The construction of the air lock was completed. The air conditioning equipment had been joined to that of the greater installation on board the *Stardust*.

"Filling this tent cost us a few gallons of liquid oxygen," declared Fletcher. "Will it be worth our while to waste such a precious commodity this way? I wonder if one day we won't need it more for the control center of the *Stardust*. Our supply is limited."

Rhodan halted in front of him. Though he was tall, Fletcher still towered above him for another inch and a half.

"Fletch, you worry unnecessarily. For the repair of the landing support we will need skill and unlimited mobility. If I chose to work on the molybdenum steel myself, I couldn't be encumbered by that clumsy spacesuit and on the other hand, I wouldn't want to stand in this gaping void in the first place."

Fletcher blinked up at the dark, incredibly clear starry skies.

"I was only thinking . . ." he muttered, and a hesitant smile appeared at his lips.

"You were thinking about the journey back home, weren't you?" asked Rhodan gently. "Or of the baby or what?"

Fletcher was silent. His lips were pressed close together.

"Okay, we fully understand that. But you really ought not to think of it too often. Our plans are made.

We've discussed them long enough. We will not undertake any exploratory expeditions until the *Stardust* is completely restored to working order. We cannot risk a short blast-off followed by a landing on the other side of the pole. The damaged telescoping support could not stand renewed stress. Of course, in space we could navigate for a few miles and, with a brief manoeuvre, come into the direct line of sight with Earth; but then, as I say we would still have to land again. And it is entirely possible that then the *Stardust* would be so seriously damaged that we could no longer repair it with the tools we have on board. In other circumstances, I would really think twice about using the oxygen to fill the pneumo-tent. But now there are no objections to our doing so. Is that clear?" Rhodan smiled blankly.

Fletcher was still gazing up into space. "Clear, entirely clear," was his hollow reply. "But another alternative has occurred to me. Wouldn't it be better to prepare now for the return flight to Earth? We managed to have a crash landing. Okay. But why should we put ourselves out to repair that landing support? The landing on Earth will depend on the efficiency of the bearing surfaces of our wings. We'll set down with our landing gear. It will no longer matter whether the landing support is broken. We'll have a safe descent anyway."

He looked down, his eyes flickering.

Rhodan lost neither patience nor presence of mind. Only his tone of voice changed, becoming sharper to an almost imperceptible degree.

"Fletch, your proposal could of course be carried out, but it would be tantamount to desertion. Let me put it this way—we have here a mission to accomplish, and a slightly damaged landing support will not deter us from accomplishing that mission." His face again became masklike. "Besides, I have the unpleasant suspicion that we would not be allowed to reach space unhindered. There's something here that we must get cleared up first."

Fletcher got hold of himself at once. His blue eyes begged wordlessly for forgiveness. Reg began to grin. The case seemed to have been dismissed.

"Okay, forget what I said," the heavysset man muttered, clearing his throat. "It was only, a thought. After dinner we'll find out where the interfering transmitter is. I've calculated the important data; afterward I'll feed it into the computer."

"I'll be anxiously awaiting the result," said Rhodan, nodding. "Now, then, let's see what the good doctor has concocted for dinner."

An indignant snort was audible in their space helmet. Dr. Manoli began to explain, at great length, how and why the master chefs' often lauded art of cuisine was wholly identical with a simple mastery of chemical processes. It all sounded splendid, but somehow it didn't quite ring true.

At the edge of the still mildly radioactive landing area, below the engines of the *Stardust*, Rhodan stopped. Before him was suspended the wide net transport basket of the freight elevator. The long arm of the crane swung forth from the open hatch of the storage room, situated immediately beneath their cabins. Rhodan had renounced the use of the ladder along the ship's hull. They would have had to step between the widely outspread landing supports and walk dangerously close to the radioactive engines.

"For the time being, someone will have to do without the culinary delights we so eagerly expected," Rhodan announced with a grin. His eyes studied the faces of both men. "Well, Reg, will you be so kind as to take over the watch out here? I'll relieve you in about half an hour. Up there on the hill is a good place. Take a look around. We'll keep in touch via radio."

Reginald Bell was silent. Rhodan's dark voice had told him enough already. As calm as the commander seemed on the outside, within he was tortured by unrest. Before Reg left, his weapon at readiness, he said slowly, "One more question. Are you still thinking of that report according to which a manned moonship is supposed to have been launched by the Asians?"

"You've hit on it," agreed Rhodan. His eyebrows rose upward. "It's quite possible that someone wanted to make certain that we crashed; and they wanted to see it happen at close range. In my opinion, the interfering transmitter must be near the polar region. So keep your eyes peeled. Our automatic frequency direction finder is systematically probing all possible wavelengths. If we hear something out of place, things will start moving very quickly around here." He looked around, wearing an expression of ostentatious boredom.

Further up, in the cabin of the *Stardust*, Dr. Manoli began to feel a chill. He suddenly felt very uncomfortable. He was among those men who would endure the risk and labour, defying any challenge, in the interest of Science. But it would be quite a different matter if this led to surprising complications. For such as this, Manoli was not well equipped. Plagued by heavy thoughts, he listened to the hum of the crane motors as Rhodan and Fletcher came up in the basket.

On the video screen Reg's image, becoming smaller and smaller, was still to be seen. Finally, however, it disappeared into the deep darkness of a sun shaded overhang.

In a moment a whistling sound issued from the air locks. The equalization of atmospheric pressure had been completed. When they entered, the most Manoli could manage was a forced smile.

"Hello," he said weakly. "We've heard nothing from the direction finder. Nothing at all, except your conversation."

Rhodan peeled off the space suit. Fletcher's face was covered with perspiration. With joyful gurgling he rubbed his itching back against the wall.

"Ah!—oh!" he sighed. "That's like heaven on Earth."

"On Earth they'll think we're lost," Manoli interjected gently.

Fletcher's cooing stopped.

"Yes," agreed a nonchalant Rhodan. "That they will, but not for very much longer, I give you my word. Right after dinner we'll begin repair of the landing support."

Manoli thought of his wife, and Fletcher of his baby. No one talked about it, but everyone knew it. Here was a situation that demanded a firm hand and an iron will to keep things under control. Rhodan possessed both these characteristics.

CHAPTER SIX

They were all alone on a strange world, without air, without water, and without life....

The thin molverdin skin of the low slung full track tank could undoubtedly have withstood fire from heavy cannon. Yet it afforded them no feeling of safety and security.

Beyond the sheets of steel began the void—the absolute vacuum of space, with all its dangers, known and unknown. It was, however, not so much the constant threat of death that strained the nerves of these men; it was more the forlorn, incredibly alien landscape, more the blazing crescent of the white shining sun, and the high rising crater walls interspaced with barren planes torn by deep ravines. It was caused by the bizarre ridge and summit of mountain chains that had never been gnawed by the jaws of weather.

Even the most desolate wasteland on Earth would have seemed familiar and welcoming compared with this.

All this exerted a psychological pressure not to be underestimated. These were the dangers to mind and soul that one had to accept somehow. One either rose above them and adjusted to them with stoic unconcern or perished. There was no remedy for the insidious corrosive influence of these surroundings.

In view of these considerations, Rhodan had left Clark G. Fletcher and Dr. Eric Manoli behind in the spaceship. At least two men had to remain at all times in the *Stardust*, and the commanding officer did not believe that either Fletcher or Manoli had the necessary powers of endurance.

Fletcher had been given explicit instructions, in writing, to start the *Stardust* and to bring it into the remote control area should Rhodan not return within eighteen days.

Captain Fletcher had nodded silently. He was quite capable of launching the fully automated rocket. It would be relatively simple to pilot it into space and follow through with the necessary procedures.

They had required only five days to repair the broken landing support. Only another twenty-four hours had been needed to set up and equip the lunar tank.

After an extended period of sleep under the effects of hypnobarbitone, Rhodan and Reginald Bell had departed. The full track vehicle had been tested under the most rigorous conditions. Failure was inconceivable. Each and every part had been checked again and again by a multitude of highly specialized technicians.

The tank was an unarmed overland transport vehicle with a spacious four man cabin. Its transparent silicon steel dome could be darkened according to need. For the time being, the small loading platform behind the pressurized dome contained only the necessary provisions and spare parts. Rhodan was unwilling to carry out any of the many orders for exploration and research during this expedition.

Here the major issue was survival, and that meant establishing contact with Earth relay stations. The tank's transmitter could operate, at maximum capacity, with a power of twelve kilowatts, which should enable them to communicate with Earth.

By now, they had been on their way for the last twenty-four hours. Only five of these had been sacrificed for sleep. Then, with screeching E-motors, Perry had forced the vehicle across the next swell in the ground.

The solar crescent had rounded considerably as they neared the pole, where Earth would come into their direct line of sight.

They still wore their spacesuits but had pushed their helmets back onto their shoulders. The pressurized dome of the vehicle was just as safe as the control center on board the *Stardust*. The hull of special artificial alloys could be damaged only by brute force.

With eyes shaded, Reginald Bell looked ahead. He did not like the looks of the high mountain summits. Again he studied their special maps.

“The Leibnitz Mountains, no doubt,” he said under his breath. “Stop a moment, will you?”

Rhodan drew the lever back to zero. The high whine of both E-motors in the front wheels faded into quiet as beneath the heavy radiation shield, the reactor lowered the rate of nuclear fission to a minimum.

Rhodan wiped the sweat from his brow. Without a word he began to polish the dark lenses of his sunglasses. The ultraviolet radiation had become very unpleasant.

Meanwhile, he was looking across to the mountains. The tip of his tongue moved across his lips, which were broken and chapped.

“Roughly five more miles, not any farther. You can be very much mistaken here when you guess at distances. Before us lies the Husemann Crater, which is not visible from Earth. Another ten miles or so should bring us to the other side of the pole, but not if we follow this course. We must turn to the left and move eastward. Otherwise, we’ll come into the Leibnitz mountain range, and that would be distinctly unpleasant.”

Reg’s dirty index finger pointed to the map. Beneath his day old beard, his broad face looked haggard and puffy. The drive had become torture. Rhodan had been racing like a wildman. If they had played on a straight path, they would have reached the polar region long ago; but again and again they had had to circumnavigate countless obstacles. On the map their recorded route looked like the scrawl of an imbecile.

Rhodan cleared his throat. Without a word he passed the water bottle to Reg.

“Okay, we’ll turn here. Leibnitz will be a problem. I don’t want to get into those ravines. We’re approaching the eastern ridge now. The main mountain range stretches farther to the west. We’ll get through all right.”

Reg drank several huge swallows. As Rhodan began to cover the hull of the tank with additional highly reflective screens, a burdensome silence was evident in the cabin. The sun was too much for them. Soon it would become a problem even to dissipate the heat.

Finally Reg said soberly, “Something’s bound to happen. My neck is itching. Something is bound to happen. Here, take a look at that.”

He again tapped on the map with his forefinger. The new course passed through the circle that Fletcher the mathematician had drawn earlier.

“Yes, I know,” said Rhodan broadly. A masklike grin hovered about his face.

Agape, Reg stared at him. His lips were dry and cracked in many places. "We ought to drive in a huge detour around ... that certain place ... and first make certain that our broadcast to Earth arrives without fail, Then we can see our way further. How about it?"

For a few moments Rhodan gazed out into the void. When he finally turned to face the other man, Reginald Bell saw a face heavily engraved with lines. Rhodan's eyes sparkled like molten steel.

"Problems are made to be solved. Whether we want to or not, we must attack this affair. It would be of little help to us to delay the outcome with lame excuses. I prefer a quick operation, so we'll take the shortest path. Very much will still depend on which party is faster. The other side must also be suffering from the conditions of space, perhaps even more than we are."

"We sure are some heroes!" said a disgruntled Reg. "Okay. From now on I'll take care of the infrared prober. But with the faintest signal, you'll have to drive like the devil himself."

As if unconsciously, his hand felt his weapon. Now they were wearing heavy, fully automatic weapons that worked on the same principle as the larger machine guns.

Rhodan thrust forward a lever, and the tank started with whining E-motors. After they had driven around the crater wall, they reached a wide even stretch full of small rocks. Dust was whirled up behind the racing chains. Oddly motionless, individual particles of dust remained floating above the ground until at last they began to descend so slowly that it seemed it would take forever. Nothing could have more clearly illustrated the absence of wind and the reduced gravity.

When another six hours had passed, the sun became fully visible. Now they proceeded very quickly. After they had passed the critical point without any particular incident, they drove over the borderline into the direct line of sight. In a moment the great crescent of the Earth loomed up large. It was almost full and easily recognizable. Radio communication was certainly possible, although Earth was still quite low above the northern horizon.

Rhodan cast a brief glance to his right. They had become very sparing with words during these last few hours.

Reg grinned, all the while whistling shrilly and quite off-key. Rhodan forced the vehicle up a steep incline. The chains dug into the ground, and the labouring roar of the motors rose louder. Arriving at the top, they stood on a small rocky plateau. At their right, a dark ridge wall towered high into the void. But far ahead of them hung the illuminated orb of Earth. They had made it. They said little at this point. Lines of exhaustion were deeply embedded in their faces. The necessary manipulations followed quickly, perhaps a bit too hastily. Both had the vague notion that it was high time for action.

Rhodan brought out the parabolic direction finder, and Reg connected the reactor, full strength, to the transmitter. Rhodan adjusted the antenna, and Earth was soon suspended in the crosshairs of their sights. Hesitating, with a clumsy movement, Rhodan turned the seat around. In front of him the needles of the control dials were jerking. The instruments were in perfect working order. He moved the microphone closer to his mouth. With some ceremony, he tuned in the automatic frequency selector.

"Ready?" Reg asked roughly. He stood hunched over in the cabin, the heavy RAK automatic ready in his hand.

Rhodan nodded. The normal static blanket of space was audible on the loudspeakers of the receiver. In no way could this be compared to the hellish crackling and whistling of the controlled interference that

had caused them to crash.

As a tired smile played about Rhodan's lips, he switched over to BROADCAST and spoke with muted voice into the microphone.

"Major Perry Rhodan, commanding officer of the *Stardust* expedition, calling ground control, Nevada Fields. Please reply. Major Perry Rhodan, commanding officer of the *Stardust* expe—"

It came as suddenly as lightning out of a clear sky. A sudden shimmering reinforced itself into a stark green glow that limned their upturned faces in the ghastly hue.

Directly above them, the antenna began to glow with a greenish fluorescent fire of such intensity that Rhodan buried his agonized eyes in his hands with a moan.

It happened with astounding swiftness and, moreover, in complete silence. Above the squat lunar full track tank hung a broad hemisphere of pulsing flame. In comparison, the sun faded into a dimly lit body. Their surroundings became indistinct.

Before Reg could utter his horrified cry of warning, a crackling sound began to emanate from the radio. A bright spark of electricity bolted out of the plastic wall covering and acrid acid vapours rose from the box. Small flames played about the smoking insulation.

Rhodan's kick came just in time, interrupting the connection to the reactor conduit. Reg hardly realized that Rhodan's hand was smashing against his helmet. Only when he was able to fill his wheezing lungs with a welcome breath of oxygen did he realize he had been screaming.

Perry Rhodan sat motionless in his seat. The incident seemed to have passed over him without effect. The enigmatic glow had vanished just as suddenly as it had appeared. Nothing further was to be seen, not the slightest flicker.

Only the completely molten antenna and the smouldering radio were witness to an event that lay beyond ready comprehension. Reg moved awkwardly about in the cabin. Wildly he searched for a tangible opponent, his weapon drawn and threatening; but nowhere was such a form to be found.

The sharp hissing of the dry foam fire extinguisher made him turn again abruptly. Rhodan sprayed the gutted radio with a face bespeaking such indifference that Captain Bell began to swear. He swore intently and quite loudly, though his lips were hardly moving in his puffed up, deathly pale face.

The fire was out. The air conditioning drew out the noxious vapours as fresh oxygen streamed into the cabin. The affair had cost them a few more gallons of precious breathing air.

Rhodan removed his helmet. Slowly, entirely devoid of expression, he gazed upward. Then his voice sounded. It vibrated rather like a resonant mandolin string. "Finished. Finished completely. That's what they were waiting for."

"Good Lord, what was that?" whispered Reg. He sank back into his seat, fully exhausted. "What was it?"

"A particularly funny way of interfering with our broadcast, but don't ask me how they've done it. I'm innocent; I have no idea; I don't have the faintest notion of an idea. I only know that the glow appeared all of a sudden just as our transmitter first began to operate. That means they were lying in wait for us

with a fully automatic direction finder. The mechanism switched on at once. And that's all I know."

Reg slowly swallowed a capsule of concentrate. His eyes had grown narrow. The capable engineer in him, that part of his brain wherein was stored a wealth of expertise in electronics, awakened.

"Otherwise, you're feeling all right, aren't you?" he inquired. "I've always thought of you as a clear headed, exemplary pupil of the Space Academy.

"And you don't any longer?" asked Rhodan, with a line of bitterness showing around his lips.

"Not at the moment. You were just now talking like Superman in the funnies. What do you mean by 'fully automatic direction finder'? Do you realize what you've said? Man, we were working with a sharply defined directional beam. The antenna was pointed toward empty space. How could they locate such impulses so quickly? Perhaps you have an explanation for that greenish glow? Can you imagine what great energies they were working with?"

"You'd better not ask, or I'll have to give you an answer that sounds absolutely crazy."

"We were lying under a bell-shaped dome," Reg insisted obstinately. "I saw it clearly. A ray of green light darted out of it toward the bottom, and that was the end of our antenna. Perry, I tell you, nothing like that exists. Otherwise, I could understand everything, really everything. I might even have accepted the idea of controlled bolts of lightning; but here my brain stops working."

Rhodan did not move from his rigid posture. His eyes alone stirred, and violently.

"Well, then, we were dreaming, were we? In your place I would have said simply that my reason had reached its limit. Someone heard my broadcast at once, and someone just as swiftly went into action. How he did that is of only secondary interest to me, since I can make neither heads nor tails of this, even with my technical background. Much more important, it seems to me, is that this 'someone' intends to make us prisoners on the moon. I'll bet my head that the *Stardust* couldn't take off even one mile into space. Don't ask; I just feel it. No, *I know* it. What remains to be done now?"

Reginald Bell changed colour even more. Now completely pale, he looked hard at his commanding officer, whose bright eyes had darkened considerably. "You're the most cold blooded guy I've ever seen," he gulped. "You have nothing else to say?"

"Insoluble problems range too far outside the boundaries of our consideration. We should not waste our breath on them."

Reg cleared his throat. Colour seemed to return to his cheeks. "Okay. Let's hide our head in the sand," he laughed bitterly. His glance searched the landscape. It seemed unchanged, desolate and lonely. "Still, I don't understand anything any more. If it didn't seem crazy to me I would talk about a force field. But how could it be constructed practically out of the blue? No poles, nothing at all. Who wants to get rid of us here?"

"Perhaps the rocket from the Asiatic Federation landed a few hours before us. They might have new inventions on board. How about that greenish glow?" Rhodan observed his friend's reaction closely.

Reg grinned. His heavy hands were dangling across his knees like unwanted appendages.

"Let's drop this pointless discussion," conceded Reg. "You don't believe that yourself, old man. I've

now arrived at a point where, in the final analysis, nothing matters to me any more. I'll swallow a rusty nail if the Chinese have invented something of the sort. That was an overpowering display. What are you planning now?"

Rhodan smiled with uncommon geniality. Such a broad grin meant, for Reg, alert procedure number one. He knew the tall man with the lean face.

"Let's drive there and have a look and, if possible, pull the trigger a tenth of a second faster than our opponents. I can no longer see any other possibility. If we remain where we are, we'll suffocate in a matter of weeks, and if we try to leave, we'll surely be shot down."

"Negotiate?" asked Reg doubtfully.

"Oh? With pleasure, even. I only wonder if we can negotiate with these people. Events seem to indicate the contrary. Why wouldn't they let us begin transmission? Who would be threatened by it? Everybody on Earth must know by now that the *Stardust* has landed on the moon. It seems senseless to interrupt our communications so drastically. What's at the bottom of all this? This affair seems like the game of a madman. It seems simply irrational. Even if they tried to kill us, I could still see some sense or purpose to it; but they don't seem to have considered that at all. Why haven't they?"

Again Reg began to whistle shrilly. "Well, after all, they *are* killing us slowly," he pointed out. "And *very* slowly indeed. Once our oxygen has been used up..."

He fell silent, but his brow showed evidence of concern. Briefly he added, "All right, Commander. I'll chart our new course on the map. Let's make short work of it. In eight hours we can be there,"

"First, let's get some sleep, for exactly eight hours. Then we'll shave neatly and make ourselves presentable. I don't want to give the impression that we're savages."

Reg stared through the transparent dome of the tank, quite speechless. Finally he was able to collect his wits. "Shave?" he groaned. "Did you say *shave*?"

"Unlike ourselves, the Asiatics will have no such heavy growth of beard," declared Rhodan with a strange smile. "They might not appreciate it."

Reginald Bell suddenly felt a chill. What did his commanding officer have in mind?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Less than twenty miles from the pole, toward the dark side of the moon, the infrared sensors had come to life. A body radiating heat in excess of the norm was in the vicinity. The source lay exactly within that limited area which Captain Fletcher had estimated as the probable location of the interfering

transmitter.

They had left the tank and continued on foot along the edge of the huge crater, a mighty edifice never visible from Earth. The ring of mountains rose to a height of more than 1,800 feet. Then, after about half an hour's climb, they had passed the last obstacle. They were still at the foot of the crater wall but now somewhat farther north.

The portable direction finder had given more and more indication that they were nearing their goal. They were shortly to find the other rocket.

Then Reginald Bell's collapse had come.

He was crouching and then kneeling on the ground, his hands thrust out before him. His incoherent babbling was picked up by the microphone and broadcast from his helmet transmitter.

Perry Rhodan did not utter a sound. Instinctively he had taken cover but now he was struggling for his self-control with all his might. The sight alone had delivered the *coup de grace* to the frayed nerves of these men.

"No, no ... not that! Not that!" Reg began to moan over the speaker. The same words followed in singsong rhythm, again and again.

Rhodan sat up with a jolt. His fists, once clenched relaxed. More roughly than necessary, he pulled his friend behind the cover of a big rock. Reg rallied from his state of shock. Trembling, he riveted his eyes on Rhodan. The helmet visor clouded over from his heavily perspiring face. Rhodan switched on the small ventilator within the helmet. Reg sorely needed it.

"Calm yourself. Don't lose your nerve. Take it easy for heaven's sake. Don't talk. If they turn that green glow on our antenna, all will be lost. Get a grip on yourself."

Rhodan took refuge in the utterance of stereotyped phrases. They might have sounded monotonous in their constant repetition, but for this very reason, merely through the lulling effect of the words, they became effective. Rhodan had thought himself mentally prepared for it, but the sudden confrontation with the truth had bowled him over. They were no longer alone. They had never been alone.

This realization upset him and dealt a telling blow to his equilibrium. He felt as if he were facing a tremendously tall, unscalable wall. Reg's sobbing helped him to get his feelings under control again.

Perry Rhodan needed a few more minutes. Then again his face assumed a firm expression. The wild pumping of his heart decreased. His glassy eyes regained their sober glow. Only his hard grip around Reg's upper arm remained steadfastly the same.

He decided his friend would need longer to regain his grip. This was probably the greatest shock Captain Reginald Bell had ever suffered.

Cautiously Rhodan raised his helmet above the rocky outcrop. His gaze devoured the titanic structure that lay before him. His last doubts had disappeared. No, this was no longer a dream. Before him lay the vast and tangible reality.

He was silent until Reg began to speak once again. Rhodan no longer intended to forbid radio communications. It was almost a certainty that it would have been quite senseless.

“You knew that all along, didn’t you? You’ve known it for hours already!” Reg’s hoarse whispering came over the loudspeaker. “That’s why you wanted me to shave. What gave you the idea, Perry?”

“Don’t get upset, old boy,” Rhodan replied. It won’t do you any good. This spaceship was never built in Asia. In fact, it is probably untouched by Earthly hands. I suspected something of the sort when the green glow came. Nothing human could produce such a field of energy. No one of our race could have interrupted our broadcast by such means. Control yourself, old boy. We must bear it. We have no other alternative.“

Reg sat up erect. No longer was there a dull cast to his eyes. Now he too was looking eagerly ahead.

“They’ve made a mash landing,” he said after a little while. “They’ve grazed half the crater wall, with a force such as one can hardly imagine. Who are they? What do they look like? Where do they come from? And...” Reg set his jaw, before completing his sentence with a somber undertone of sudden suspicion. “And what do they want here?”

This question roused Rhodan completely out of his momentary stupor. He regained his cool composure. His lips were drawn up in a faint smirk as he said, “That we will soon find out. Now an apparently senseless action begins to make sense. Of course they had to interrupt our communication. Obviously they’re not at all anxious for Earth to learn of their presence here. They evidently assumed that we had already noticed them, that we had seen this gigantic thing here shortly before our landing. Now the affair makes sense.”

Of course it made sense. Suddenly Rhodan looked at the structure through different eyes. Though his brain still signalled danger with the rapid fire of nerve impulses, he regarded the foreign ship this time with the sober eyes of a scientist.

No irregularity could be detected in the smooth surface of the spherical giant. There was not a single protuberance and no visible opening. At the height of the equator line, however, there seemed the impression of a ring-like bulge.

The ship stood motionless at the edge of the splintered crater wall. Although it was quite clear that it had broken through the ring, it seemed to bear no scars from the encounter.

The whole structure was resting on short supports rather like pillars. These were arranged in a circle and had obviously emerged from the lower quarter of the sphere. That was all the two could see. In the bright light of the sun, the material of the mighty hull was shimmering in a pale copper glow. In order to see the upper part of the spheroid structure, they had to tilt their heads all the way back. From behind the concealment of the crater wall, they had come very near the ship.

By now Reginald Bell had also got hold of himself again. His voice, rough and measured as ever, was proof enough of that. “A perfect sphere. The ideal structure for a giant spaceship, provided one has the correspondingly great propulsion system. Good heavens, that thing measures some 500 yards across. At least 500! It’s almost higher than the crater wall. It’s enough to drive you out of your mind. How could they launch such a mass into space? I’m only beginning to have some notion of what kind of engines they must have on board. I’d better not even think about it or I’ll feel only two feet tall.”

More softly, in a slightly choked voice, he added, “And there we were, so proud of our success! We’ve reached the moon with such a tiny thing. Ha! with such a pitiful little spaceship, and we could just barely make the absurd and insignificant leap to the moon. Beyond us lies the galaxy, and of course, first

there is still our own solar system. Do you have any idea what we proud little men are in comparison to those beings over there?"

"If you're about to compare us to monkeys I'm going to explode!" said Rhodan icily.

Reg grinned sheepishly. "Something of the sort was just on the tip of my tongue. You're really a very proud human being, aren't you?"

"I'm proud of my humanity, proud of our race, proud of our rapid development, and proud of our future. We've conquered this little moon, and someday we shall also conquer the stars. This improbable spaceship has not at all proved yet that its occupants are more intelligent than we. It might be nothing but the heritage of 10,000 industrious generations, something that simply fell into their lap. Ignorance is by no means the same as stupidity. You should take into account whether the ignorant person has been given the opportunity for learning, and even if he has had that opportunity, it would still depend on the degree of wisdom possessed by the caretakers of knowledge. One cannot assimilate more knowledge than is supplied by one's teachers. We human beings are a young and hardy race. Our brains are like sponges. There is a lot that can still be absorbed by them, I give you my word! So don't ever let me hear you say that you suddenly seem to yourself like a kind of monkey."

Rhodan had really grown furious. He seemed to have forgotten that an alien spacecraft, with all its cargo of menace and mysteries, stood before them.

Reg laughed, then tentatively placed his hand on his bolstered automatic.

"Leave that alone," warned Rhodan. "We can't solve our problems with that. We must resign ourselves to knowing that we are not the only intelligent forms of life in the universe. For me that comes as no surprise. People of our breed should already have given thought to such a possibility. Any man who gets out into space *must* have considered it at least once, if only in reverie. So now, stop that. The situation is quite unlike our first estimate of it."

"I'd feel much more secure if this were a lousy rocket from the Asiatic Federation," whispered Reg. Then, more urgently, "And what happens now? Fortunately, *you're* in command. A burning curiosity is slowly rising within me."

"I've noticed that for quite a while already," Rhodan said with grim emphasis. "It is almost beyond comprehension—it looks as if these creatures are really not out to get us. And there's still more."

He gazed over at the splintered ridge again. "A reasonable commander would never have landed in such a manner, would he? *I* certainly wouldn't. If you raze nearly half the wall of a crater during your landing it is to be presumed that this was not a matter of choice. It almost looks to me as if these unknowns had crashed. That makes them *almost human*, doesn't it?"

Rhodan grinned. "Something isn't quite right over there. Since I'm supposed to be such a good loser, I'll see to it that we get a closer look at things." He rose to his full height. A sarcastic smile hung from his lips.

"Are you Crazy?" hissed Reg. "Get down! Don't be a fool!"

"Not at all a fool. Consider our situation. We can't get away from here any more. By the time General Pounder sends another rocket up here we will have been long since dead. And the fate of the next crew will be identical to our own. There is nothing further to consider. Perhaps the deeper meaning of my

words will penetrate even your thick skull.”

Besides, truth be told, Rhodan was consumed by curiosity. It was the original human instinct, invincible, eternally restless, urgently asking, “What lies *beyond*?”

Suddenly Rhodan’s eyes widened. Someone had laughed. It was only a momentary, almost inaudible sound. But someone had laughed!

Reg drew himself up, his weapon in readiness. His face had again become contorted. “Did you hear that too?” he whispered breathlessly. “There’s somebody on our wave-length, dammit!”

“What did you expect?” Rhodan’s voice sounded very cool over the speaker. “And why do you think I was performing this play with all this extensive dialogue. Of course they’re listening in! The fact that they chose not to destroy our miserable helmet transmitters is a sign of their intelligence. They know very well we can’t get through to Earth with them. The logic is simply overwhelming. Let’s go.”

Reg remained standing, motionless. His weapon dangled loose in his hands. Drawling with a chill undertone, he said, “Well then go if you want to. I’m not at all interested in running into the clutches of sentient cuttlefish or similar monstrosities. I’m staying right here.”

Rhodan’s face hardened. “You’ve been reading too much space opera my friend. Living creatures a la octopi will never construct spaceships, even if, against all probability, they should become intelligent. Don’t confuse your fantasy with well founded fact. These are realities, neither more nor less. There are an adequate number of respected intellects on Earth who consider it quite probable that some form of intelligent extraterrestrial life does exist; but they do not imagine them to be monsters at all. So don’t talk any more nonsense. Just come along. Shall I insist once again that we have no other way out?”

“Perhaps we still do,” mumbled Reg, still greatly disturbed. “I simply don’t like the idea of running into that ship like some helpless, bleating sheep. That is strictly contrary to my instinct. Get it?”

“Of course. I always understand reasonable argument, and the human fear of the unknown is probably the most reasonable reaction that the creator implanted in us. That is all very well. But under certain circumstances we must also be capable of overcoming the dictates of instinct. You can follow me if you like. I shall give you no further orders in this affair.”

Rhodan turned. With broad, even steps, he emerged from behind cover. In his word and deed, reason had won the upper hand. He knew that he had the “choice” of a single alternative. Therefore, Major Perry Rhodan drew the consequences.

Rhodan’s machine gun dangled on a strap over his right shoulder. His hands hung loosely at his sides. Rhodan was not about to turn this encounter—the first encounter of a human being with an alien intelligence—into a debate conducted with bullets. It would have been an unseemly and reprehensible welcome, unworthy of a man of his clear and tolerant outlook.

He felt a certain emptiness well up within him. The nearer he came to the gigantic structure, the more he felt the unendurable sadness of this confrontation. The strangers had obviously seized the initiative. Still, they had acted only indirectly. Rhodan was led inevitably to the conclusion that the radio interference had probably been more a precautionary measure than an omen of imminent destruction. This thought calmed him. He trusted to the benevolence of these no doubt lofty souls for whom he could very well make allowances.

He had been quite mistaken in his estimate of the distance. The gigantic vessel was much farther away than he had believed. The crater walls vaulted upward, mightier and mightier. They loomed ominous, oppressive. When he had gone still several hundred additional yards in the blinding sunlight, he could no longer see the spaceship in its entirety. It had a diameter certainly in excess of 1,500 feet.

It was supported on massive pillars ending in flat platelike structures. Be smiled weakly when he noticed this resemblance to the *Stardust's* construction. The aliens must have thought processes similar to those of man, he decided, for there were evidently some common denominators in their technical and scientific vocabularies.

He suddenly became aware of Reg's rapid breathing over the speaker in his helmet. Immediately afterward, the shadow of his friend appeared.

Reginald Bell accompanied him without another word. He uttered not a single further sound. Silently Rhodan nodded to him, an awkward gesture because of the bulk of the pressurized helmet. Reg grinned back feebly. With all his self-control, he could not disguise the glow in his eyes.

Their steps became slower and slower as they approached. Above them rose the incomprehensible sphere. The sun lit up only that part of the ground which lay underneath the towering mass, and where a heavy darkness began, Rhodan stopped completely. He looked up until he had bent his upper torso all the way back.

His eyes seized upon the wide gaping opening at the lower edge of the equatorial bulge he had previously noted. Now it was a mighty ring more than seventy yards in diameter.

"If they were to blast off now, we would be atomized," he said blandly. His hand motioned upward. "These are probably the jet exhausts, if our propulsion systems are at all related. This glazed ground surface around the ship must have boiled once in white heat. Hmm. I estimate the initial payload of this craft, under Earthly gravity, to be about two million tons. How does one launch such a tremendous mass?"

"I would suggest a firecracker," offered Reg. Within his chest a dull fury demanded release. Obviously no one seemed to be paying any attention to them. He could hear again the inner voice that made mention of monkeys. Reg could not overcome that feeling, try as he might; he did not possess the remarkable self-confidence of his friend, so he took refuge in his rather offbeat sense of humour. This was, in effect, his last resort when his reason could carry him no further.

Rhodan maintained his composure. It was his guess that within the ship, discussion was in progress. Probably the unknown entities were also grappling with this perplexing situation. They would of course know that they could do away with both these human beings with little effort. One push of a button, very likely, would suffice for that.

Rhodan considered this very fact to be a point in their favour. If the strangers were not in possession of an entirely alien ethic—if they were familiar with the concept of tolerance—then they simply could not do a thing. Their only choice was between continued silence or the communication of some sign of life. Therefore, Major Rhodan armed himself only with patience.

Reg reacted quite differently. After a few moments, he said loudly and ironically, "Below your ship stand two horrible monsters with thirst in their throats and hunger in their bellies. Hello, there! My name is Reginald Bell. You were kind enough to force us into making a crash landing. Now we're coming to present you with the bill."

He stopped talking. Under different circumstances Rhodan would have laughed, but now his throat began to dry out. Reg's uncompromising behaviour did not seem wholly appropriate to the time, the place and the nature of the event.

They spoke no more. Now, however, Rhodan too felt tempted to clutch his weapon. Quite a while ago Reg had got a firm hold on his RAK automatic, while Rhodan had continued his restraint. Rhodan's disapproving glance elicited only a grim shrug of the shoulders from Captain Bell.

The blinding light came just as suddenly as had the greenish glow a few hours before. Rhodan was startled. Quite against his will, drawn as if by a magnet, the automatic weapon slipped down into the crook of his arm. He muttered a blunt oath. Raging inside, he pushed the weapon back onto his shoulder.

A wide opening appeared in the hull of the sphere. The bright light was issuing forth from within. This had taken place, like any process on the moon, in complete silence. Rhodan had never before missed the sound conducting property of atmosphere as much as he did now.

Something was thrust out of the opening. When its base had touched the ground, it unravelled into a flat, broad band. That was all. Nothing else happened.

With measured tread, Rhodan stepped up to this weakly fluorescent band. Close in front of it he stopped.

"An invitation," he said softly. "A welcome mat. No steps. Hmm. The hatch is still a good ninety feet above us. The *Stardust* could fit comfortably into the space in between."

"Probably a little IQ test, likely as not" Reg snorted nervously, meanwhile looking upward. Not a living soul was to be seen.

Rhodan stepped onto the slanted surface. It rose up to the hatch at an angle of at least forty-five degrees. When he felt himself being borne aloft, he instinctively stretched out his arms, wishing to balance himself, before he realized that here there was no question of falling. Nevertheless, his shoes did not touch the band, but hovered a few millimetres above the fluorescent material. He was carried as gently along as if he had been standing on a moving escalator.

Reg was cursing. He could not detach his hands from an imaginary support. On all fours, he followed Rhodan.

Once they had arrived at a large anteroom, the conveyor belt deposited them safely aside. This was the origin of the bright light. Again they heard nothing as the air locks dosed behind them.

They were inside the alien ship.

"No one would ever believe this," said Reg in a low voice. "Not a living soul, and I doubt if we'll ever be able to talk to a human being again. What do you plan to do?"

"Negotiate. Use my head. What else? The situation no longer appears fantastic, if one looks at it objectively. It's nothing but a matter of instinct. Try to silence your fears for the time being."

They became aware of the hissing sound of penetrating air. At this point it was impossible to tell whether human beings could breathe this mixture of gases. Rhodan realized that they were indeed

undergoing a test. Had he opened his helmet now, trusting to good luck, his rash action would undoubtedly have been considered a demerit. He could not know what kind of gas they had blown into this room. He therefore kept silent until the interior air locks opened.

They found themselves in a high, wide arched passageway, ending at a fluorescent shaft. They went ahead. There was no longer anything else they could do. The ship seemed devoid of life. It was an unreal dream-like situation. Reg was certain that he could not stand this stress much longer than another five minutes. Then he would simply lose his nerve. He felt like ranting and raving or running amok. If only he could have *done* something!

The clear voice, in the flawless enunciation of an English teacher, came next.

“You may open your protective suits now,” it said. “You will find the air suitable for breathing.”

Rhodan let his breath out with a “Whew!” Without uttering another sound, he removed his helmet.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Khrest was his name. His race apparently knew no distinction between first name and surname. He was a humanoid. He had two upper and two lower limbs, a compact torso, and a large head, all combined in a fashion most human beings would recognize. Though frail in appearance, with a fragile bone structure, he was at least one head taller than Perry Rhodan. To judge from his colour, he might have belonged to some velvet skinned Polynesian tribe. This illusion was shattered, however, by the contrast of his white hair and the reddish, almost albinoid pigmentation of his eyes.

From beneath a high vaulted forehead, those eyes emerged to impress one with their almost hypnotic effect. He wore the ethereal expression of a very old and very wise man whose skin had remained firm and youthful in spite of his years.

His outward resemblance to man was quite remarkable; yet he radiated something alien, something unreal. Undoubtedly, the real differences would lie in areas invisible to the naked eye. Rhodan guessed that it might be an unusual organic structure or a metabolism wholly unknown on Earth or something else along these lines. Nevertheless, Khrest was an oxygen breather.

The heat was almost intolerable in the chamber where Rhodan stood, illuminated by an exceedingly bright blue light that probably bordered on ultraviolet.

The mode of illumination and the oppressive room temperature indicated that this creature had come from a planet with a hot and brilliant blue dwarf sun. This was all Rhodan could ascertain, for the time being.

No, there was something more. He had noticed it at once.

Khrest looked weak and emaciated, like a person deathly ill. His movements seemed almost helpless. Rhodan thought back to the cropped off mountain top and wondered if there was any connection between that and the apparent weakness of this alien.

There were two others in the room. Both were male. Rhodan squinted as he surveyed the scene. This was his first encounter with such lethargy. These people were so obviously apathetic, indifferent and generally lifeless that even a poor observer would immediately have been struck by it.

Compared to the others, Khrest seemed, for all his weakness, lively and energetic. It was extraordinary how little stir their arrival had created. When Rhodan and Bell, strange and otherworldly visitors to the aliens, had entered the room, none of them had even turned their heads. They acted as though Rhodan and Bell simply did not exist.

They lay listless on their mattresses and stared up at oval video screens above their heads. They seemed transfixed. Rhodan could find no significance in the instruments to which they gave their rapt attention. He could discern only a kaleidoscope of colours, appearing and vanishing, flickering across the screen. Abstract geometrical patterns were formed in enormous variety. Additionally, he could hear a high whine and whistling.

Rhodan began to feel uncomfortable. Something was not quite right in this otherwise immaculate spacecraft. There was an almost palpable atmosphere of sickness and decay, as though he had stepped into some asylum by accident. The ship itself was spotless, but Rhodan had the feeling that cobwebs and mildew would be more appropriate.

Khrest addressed one of the other aliens. He elicited a charming smile, but after the merest pittance of a reply, the other alien returned once more to his video screen.

Astounded, Bell stood there gaping. That changed abruptly, however, when she entered. Rhodan felt a sudden chill. It was easy to see why. With her whole manner, she seemed to generate coldness, insensitivity and arrogance. Indeed, she deigned to give them only a sideward glance and then proceeded to ignore both Bell and Rhodan.

She was as tall as Rhodan and had the luminous red hued eyes of her race. On Earth, she would have been declared a singular beauty. Nevertheless, this thought quickly lost itself amid others, as Rhodan's instinct issued a warning. This woman, who so coolly regarded him, was dangerous, and dangerous because it was obvious that she would not face the facts. In her eyes, he and Bell were neither more nor less than some form of creeping prehistoric sea slime, devoid of intelligence and burdened with lips that uttered naught but gibberish.

This realization hit Rhodan with painful impact. He had never before been the object of such scorn, such nose-in-the-air contempt.

He changed colour, and clenched his fists. The woman wore a tight fitting suit-like garment with red fluorescent symbols on the breast. Rhodan was only later to learn that they represented insignia of rank. He felt much more at ease with Khrest, whose boyish face and easy aristocratic manners could enchant as well as impress. With a fluent mastery of English, Khrest introduced the young woman as Thora.

Rhodan thus found himself welcomed by attitudes he could not reconcile. The clash of opposites and paradox was everywhere to be found. Within a spacecraft whose very presence testified to the existence of alien creatures far superior to man, he was ignored by incredible lethargy. On the one hand he was

greeted with utmost courtesy, on the other, confronted with icy rejection. These were the strangest moments of his life. To Bell, it was like dancing on a powder keg. It suddenly struck him that they had not been asked to surrender their weapons. This, too, was more than peculiar.

Khrest studied them for a long while, so openly and obviously that it seemed not in the least offensive or intimidating.

Thus far, Rhodan had hardly said a word. He simply stood tall and straight in the center of this room, which was silent and spotless and without furniture, surrounded on all sides by a multiplicity of video screens, instrument panels and the like.

Khrest leaned back on his cot. Behind a weak smile, he was breathing heavily. Then Rhodan recognized, for the first time, a look of genuine concern on the face of the young woman Thora.

She called out sharply to the other two aliens. One of them rose halfway up from his mattress, then returned with an idiot smile to his surreal pleasures.

Rhodan knew that now was the time for action. Bell could stand the tension no longer. One needed only to look at this face—shock white, with a rigid jester's grin—to know that.

The veiled expression was now gone from Khrest's dark encircled eyes. He seemed to sense that his guests had had quite enough of this affair. Rarely had Rhodan observed such curiosity in the eyes of another. Khrest seemed only to lie in wait of that word which would bring him salvation.

What role did he play aboard this ship? Did this woman wield any power? In what capacity did she serve?

Thora turned swiftly as Rhodan came a few steps closer, his helmet dangling on its hinges. Like a threat, her hand flew to her belt with a blur of colour. Rhodan countered her glance. Hers was an expression of utmost disgust, but his own communicated such cool unconcern that she was more startled than repelled. Bell's plaster cast of a smile relaxed. His eyes narrowed. He knew Rhodan, and he knew that Rhodan had just switched over. They could either discuss this in a sensible manor, or they would have to settle for a split-second duel to their mutual disadvantage.

Rhodan brushed past Thora. She recoiled as though she had been touched by some venomous scorpion.

Khrest watched tensely. When Rhodan stood close beside him, he closed his eyes. Reg had never heard his commanding officer speak so softly.

“Sir, I know you can understand me. How and why this is so is of no importance to me at the moment. Nor does the current situation concern me greatly. My name is Perry Rhodan. I am a major in the United States Space Force and the commanding officer of the terrestrial spaceship *Stardust*. You have forced me to make an emergency landing. However, we need not discuss this just now.”

“If you take another step, you are going to die!” rang Thora's voice, half retching with unrestrained rage.

Rhodan's nerves jarred at the sound of this dark voice. He slowly turned his head and displayed his famous grin.

Apparently, this woman had also switched over. For a moment, it seemed she was enveloped in a silken halo; or that was the way it seemed to Rhodan. A mixture of shock and surprise swam in her eyes. Slowly Rhodan began to understand. She was obviously possessed of such a superiority complex and such interplanetary chauvinism that she regarded his very proximity to Khrest as a kind of blasphemy. Rhodan revised his initial estimate of the reasons behind her all too apparent contempt. Here, she was the rational being and he was the scion of a fine old Stone Age family. *That* was it. At last he understood the situation completely.

Khrest seemed to have guessed what was going on in Rhodan's mind.

"I am sorry," he said weakly. "It was not in my power to circumvent these difficulties. You see, we were not prepared for your arrival. According to my information, the third planet of this solar system is supposed to have been an undeveloped world inhabited by primitive mammals. There was no mention of... Well, things seem to have changed a great deal since our last exploratory flight. We had no desire for a confrontation between our races."

Thora intervened. "Leave at once! You have violated the laws of the Imperium. I am forbidden contact with creatures below developmental stage C." Her face was on fire. "Leave immediately!"

Rhodan's hopes collapsed like a house of cards. "Creatures," that is what they were, in the aliens' eyes. A helpless fury welled up within him.

"Then why have you let us enter your ship at all?" he asked sharply. "Why? What do you mean by it?"

"It was at my suggestion," said Khrest. "You will not understand this at once. Your race is still in its infancy. Because of my disease, I am permitted certain privileges by the Law. There are special provisions for these circumstances. We may take up contact with inferior forms of life as soon as our existence becomes—"

"I understand," Rhodan interrupted. "I understand completely. Sir, you are in need of our help."

Thora snorted at the absurdity of such a statement. Nevertheless, she seemed once more to be worried.

"You are very young and spirited," murmured Khrest. "Is It thus with all of your race?"

Rhodan was moving his lips. Khrest could be sure of that much.

"Have you no doctors on board? Why can't you be helped?"

"There is no cure," returned Thora tersely. "Now, will you go? You have humiliated me quite enough. Khrest has seen you. My patience is at an end. I am commanding this spacecraft."

"Huh?" was all that Reg could find to say. Following this, he sank slowly into a stupor of amazement. He had had quite a different conception of the first encounter between alien intelligences. All this seemed too fantastic, too much like a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta.

In reply, Rhodan removed his helmet. His eyes were burning. Henceforth, he would simply ignore her. Khrest grew even more attentive. His gaze was an inquiry and an analysis.

"You are refusing?" he whispered faintly. His astonishment knew no bounds. "Do you not know to

whom you speak?"

Rhodan was rude. He replied, with sarcasm, "Yes, indeed I do. Yet, through no fault of my own, I can claim a high IQ, although your commanding officer would prefer to think otherwise. It is therefore obvious to me that I have a ship full of either mental or physical invalids on my hands. If I consider your scientific advancement, I can find no reason why your sickness should not have been treated by now. Your people just don't seem to give a damn. You and your commander are probably the only sane individuals aboard. I have a feeling that all of you are only the decadent descendants of a formerly highly developed civilization. You have my sympathies, but just take a good look at those two men over there. On Earth, they'd be sent to a sanitarium for treatment."

Rhodan turned abruptly. He brandished his weapon, now menacing, his finger on the pushbutton trigger.

Thora paled, but in an instant there were two whirring metal monsters at her side. The only robots Rhodan knew were the bulky machines and electronic computers of Earth. These, however, were huge automatons in human form, with ingeniously equipped appendages for tools and weapons. They were just, suddenly, there. Empty eye sockets in bullet-shaped heads defied him. The barrels of unknown weapons, emerging en masse from metallic holsters, were aimed at him.

"Stop this nonsense!" Rhodan's voice was high and shrill. "Let's use the *intelligent* way and discuss our differences. You yourself know that I've spoken the truth. If it bothers you that these conclusions come from a 'savage,' then you should never have let us come aboard."

His finger lay ready on the trigger. Reginald Bell had already taken cover behind a couch.

Thora's face was now ugly in a paroxysm of rage, as she gazed, quite pale, at Rhodan's weapon. "How dare you?" she shrieked. Her fists were clenched and her fingers drawn in angered spasm. "How dare you speak such heresies in a vessel of the great Imperium! How dare you! Unless you leave immediately, I shall have you annihilated on the spot!"

"Agreed. I'll go along with that. Then you will let us leave without any interference? Will you let the *Stardust* blast off again? This is only the Earth's satellite. We can't live here."

"I cannot permit that. I cannot allow you to spread the word of our presence here among the inhabitants of the third planet."

"Very well. So you think it's perfectly all right to let us suffocate here, or what? We haven't the technical know-how you seem to have inherited from your illustrious ancestors. We can't produce oxygen from stones, nor food from dust. We've only just begun the conquest of space."

Rhodan would have thought impossible the response that followed in the wake of his statement. This stranger Khrest, previously so decidedly tranquil, uttered a wild cry. Once the very antithesis of strength, he seemed now to have forgotten all weakness.

"What did you say? You have just begun with what?"

"With the conquest of space," Rhodan repeated, matter of factly. "Does the thought disturb you? We shall go our way, and someday we too shall possess great ships like your own, but much sooner than you would ever believe possible."

“Wait!” moaned Khrest. “Please.”

Nonplussed, Rhodan paused. The RAK automatic was lowered. In that moment, there ensued such a heated discussion between the bedridden alien and his feminine superior that he felt his presence there quite superfluous. Rhodan joined Bell on the sidelines.

“The most idiotic situation of a lifetime,” Bell whispered hastily. “What’s going on? It looks like a battle to the death. I’m not at all happy with those robots watching over us. Shouldn’t we get out of here while there’s still time? What do you think?” His questions followed in rapid fire succession. He had waited too long with curiosity’ unquenched.

Rhodan observed the proceedings closely, trying to interpret what was going on, and in a low tone of voice he said, “It would seem to me that our fate is being decided. Certainly, he has some authority, or she wouldn’t yield so much ground to him. What a woman! It still escapes me how they can speak and understand our language so well. What do they mean by ‘the great Imperium’? It sounds to me as if mankind has lived for thousands of years alongside the most astounding events and been wholly ignorant all along of what was going on. That’s a frightening thought. Obviously, these are not the only intelligent creatures in the universe. There are tremendous possibilities here.”

“Pull yourself together, old man. We’re staying. This is a great game, even if it does seem ridiculous. These people must think in concepts far beyond our comprehension. They are accustomed to things whose mere mention would cause our statesmen on Earth to break out in uncontrolled weeping. Don’t let them notice your surprise. We must speak up while we have a chance. Here we are the representatives of mankind, and I would like very much to see mankind at last united, strong and mighty. Do you understand that?”

“Of course I do,” Bell replied. “But I’d also like to come out of this adventure alive.”

“I have an idea that Khrest is reaching a decision now. Look at that! Thora’s growing more and more meek and nervous by the minute. Something is happening. I can feel it. Just watch.”

Thora seemed to be beside herself. Her eyes, which so fascinated Rhodan, had become the colour of bronze. Khrest added something that sounded hard and decisive. In response she assumed an angular pose that impressed Rhodan as a respectful salute with which she honoured her superior.

He caught her enigmatic glance. She was pale and plainly disappointed. With no other ado, she turned and left the room, accompanied by the two hulking robot servants.

Then they were alone with Khrest. The two wraith-like forms, reclining glassy eyed on their cots, did not count.

Exhausted, Khrest had sunk back onto his couch. A feeble gesture of his hand urged Rhodan to step forward. He bent over the alien with a feeling of honest compassion. Only then, at close range, did he first realize that he had before him, in reality, a very old man. His ageless complexion was a mask behind which many tales were left untold.

“Sir, I have an outstanding physician on my ship,” Rhodan insisted. “You must be examined and treated. You have not convinced me that you can find any help here. How long have you been on the moon?”

Khrest recovered somewhat. The sharp lines of exhaustion were now less pronounced. “We have

been here for what you would call four months.” He hardly seemed to breathe. “It was an accident, an involuntary crash landing. However, we have made use of the opportunity to learn the predominant language of your planet. Improbable as it may seem to you, our brains are utterly unlike your own. We have photographic memories and the power of total recall. Of course, we were eavesdropping on your conversation. It was very simple. We have been monitoring your broadcasts for weeks, and from what we have heard, we were fortunate in not having landed on the third planet itself. You are about to commit a horrible transgression against the laws of life.”

“Atomic war—yes,” muttered Rhodan sadly. “It grieves me to have to admit it. The crisis is almost at the boiling point; but rest assured that mankind really doesn’t want this war.”

“But it will lead to it all the same. Our conclusion was, therefore, to regard your species as a still primitive form of life. I have now changed my opinion. You are young, curious and ambitious, with very receptive, lively minds. After careful consideration, I have officially classified you under developmental stage D. It is my prerogative to make such a decision. I have given Thora the command to enter this revision of your planet’s status in the memory banks of our positronic brain. I am the scientific leader of this expedition, Or that is what I imagine you would call me. Thora is responsible only for the effective operation of this ship. Can you understand this? Are there similar differences in your terrestrial chain of command?

Rhodan confirmed that there were.

“Your words have had direct influence on the classification system of the Imperium. Living creatures who have already undertaken the conquest of space may be upgraded by an authorized scientist. This I have done. Consequently Thora’s objections have become invalid and irrelevant. We may therefore take up contact with your species.” He smiled weakly, silent triumph shining in his eyes. Rhodan understood.

“Sir, you need our help,” Rhodan repeated. “Let me fetch our physician. Something must be done.”

“In time. First, listen to me. I do not believe that you can help me. Though we may resemble one another in appearance, I should nevertheless have a basically different body chemistry. Our organic structures may also vary. At any rate, in the judgment of the Imperium, you have met the basic requirements. You are intelligent and, in your behaviour, recall the lives of our ancestors. and you have successfully applied the newly discovered source of energy toward constructive goals. I refer, of course, to atomic power. Thus far, you have still not committed the cardinal error of using nuclear power in order to bring about the extinction of a major proportion of your species. I am, as I have said, one of the leading scientists in the service of the Imperium. I am also one of the few whose motivation and strength of will still remain strong. Are you surprised at Thora’s position?”

Bell glanced uneasily at the other aliens. They lay unmoving, as before, while they watched the peculiar programs flickering across their video screens. The kaleidoscope of geometrical designs seemed to have changed but little, but now a torrent of sparkling sounds could be heard.

“Is that the reason?” Rhodan asked. “Degeneration?”

“Your conclusions are correct. My race would be several million years old, in your reckoning of time. Once we were even as yourselves—hardy, inquisitive, adventurous. Then a few thousand years ago, we noticed the onset of progressive decay. The galactic empire was splintered, subject races rose up against our might, and the great Imperium, which had endured for millennia, was shaken to its foundations. Unlike other alien intelligence in the universe, we were rulers known for our benevolence. Now, it is all at an end. The Imperium is in decline. We are struggling for dominance, but to no avail. Dozens of highly

evolved races clash in devastating wars conducted throughout the galaxy. But you would not know this. Your solar system lies far removed from these events, in an insignificant branch of the Milky Way.”

“And what,” interjected Reg, “are you doing about all this?”

The old man spoke sadly. “Nothing. Nothing any more. We have weakened and surrendered out will. Yet I am, like Thora, born into the ruling dynasty on Arkon. Ah, yes. Arkon is a world nearly 3,700 light-years from Earth.”

Rhodan had turned pale. The magnitude of the figure struck him like a hammer blow. “That means you’ve mastered faster-than-light space travel!”

“Certainly. It has been thus for hundreds of your centuries. We knew Earth some thousand years ago, at the time of our last visit. It was during that period when degeneration began to set in among the Arkonides. Exploratory flights ceased, and our spacecraft remained inoperative at their bases. A view widely held is that one cannot escape the laws of nature. Still, we are planning and dreaming, and in our minds we have laid the theoretical foundations for the renaissance of empire. However, this is where our efforts end. We lack the energy and application necessary to realize our design. We are beginning to overlook things of immense importance. With each day, the empire declines more and more. The ruling class on Arkon itself has fallen into decay. We seek only beauty and a peaceful life and indulge ourselves with the luxury of passive pleasures. We are resigning, we are yielding. We are spent with age. We have simply been used up, and . . .” Khrest stared at them. “And heretofore we have found no race with the promise and potential that once was ours. You would seem to be the exception. You see why I have upgraded you. It is not only my right but my duty.”

Once again, the scientist in Rhodan awakened. There were limitless questions to be answered and mysteries to be solved. “You say you’ve been here for four months. Why haven’t you taken off again?”

Khrest nodded slowly. His glance grew more intense and searching.

“That could only be the question of a creature who takes inexhaustible energy to be his birthright. You would not ask if you could see life through our eyes. Why have we not done this? Our engines failed us, forcing us to resort to an emergency landing on your moon. We are no longer occupied with the problem of our ship’s upkeep. There is only minor damage, but we do not have the spare parts with us. We simply did not think of it. That is why we are stranded here. We wait and wait, and nothing happens. My illness prevents me from doing the necessary work myself. We are in urgent need of certain fluidic micromodules. I do not believe they can be found in your world.”

“Then we’ll *make* ‘em!” interjected Bell. “Show us how it’s done, and we’ll get them for you. Don’t underestimate us, sir. We’ll put the best brains on Earth to work on the problem. If necessary, we’ll pluck the stars out of the skies, if only you tell us what’s needed. There are colossal industries back home. We can do anything. I said anything!”

Khrest was aroused by these optimistic words. “I believe you,” he whispered excitedly. “You must now convince Thora. The women of our race have been less affected than the males by our general debilitation. Therefore, many of our important positions are held by women. This has been happening for centuries. Prior to that, women knew only the duties of the household. Thora will prove shrewd in any bargain, I assure you. You are the right man for the task, Major Rhodan. She is afraid of you, which I find quite remarkable.”

Rhodan gulped. So that was it. Bell was grinning. Nevertheless, the situation had not become any

clearer.

“You should not be surprised that I am able to converse in terms you understand,” Khrest continued. “It has always been my business to negotiate with the inhabitants of other worlds. I easily adapt myself to the conceptual perspectives of alien races. That is why we were not surprised by your appearance. In fact, we always count on such a possibility as a matter of course. You are solemn, sorely vexed, overwhelmed. You did not know that you were not alone in the universe. I could cite many similar instances. The sudden arrival of superior beings always comes as a shock. You have already overcome that shock, I see.

“What are those people over there doing?” inquired Rhodan. The strange music had changed once more and now resembled an urgent whispering.

Khrest turned his head painfully. “They are engaged in the usual simulator game. It has contributed much to the collapse of will and spirit among my people. Billions of Arkonides stand vigil by those screens daily while games are created by different masters of the medium. Highly complex. It is the audio-visual representation of elements in the subjective psyche. My people would waste their lives in this fashion. The situation is gradually worsening. For example, there are only fifty persons on board. Rarely do I get to see them, but when I do, they are seated, trance-like, before the fictif screens. Our degeneration is not to be found in the realm of normal attitudes or ethics but rather in a total relaxation and surrender of will. We have become indifferent to everything. For us, nothing remains exciting, nothing stimulating. Nothing evokes any response in us. The work of a new fictif artist takes precedence over all else. They are preoccupied, you see, with experiencing the latest creation as quickly as possible. I suppose we have always been too peaceful, too cited. We seldom engaged in war. We were able to conquer the galaxy through the mere fact of our superior science and technology. No one dared defy us, in war or in revolt. No, it would not be a colonial system, as you use the word. It should not be regarded as such. The attending circumstances were—and are—not so simple. It will not be possible for you to understand this in a matter of moments.”

“So they’ve just let you lie here and suffer and weaken for four months—is that what they did?” Speaking these words, Rhodan was uncommonly emotional. “Without doing anything whatsoever, without even making any attempt to find a remedy! It should have been simplicity itself for your people.”

“It would have been simple if only someone were willing to apply himself to the task. The medical supplies aboard ship are ordinarily quite sufficient, but I have contracted an illness unknown in our world. Numerous tests and analyses will be necessary. These may require time, effort and intensive work, however, and will therefore not be done. Among the crew are important artists who are constantly creating new fictif works. Our robot crew is attending to the maintenance of the ship. Your emergency landing, Major Rhodan, was also supervised by the automatons. Intricate safety circuits—you might say ‘safety valves’-were involved. Upon learning that we were not permitted to communicate with you, the positronic brain took action accordingly. It was very simple.”

“Very simple,” muttered Rhodan. He was appalled. “You regard, as ‘elementary things that are to us almost beyond imagination. By the way, what do you mean by positronic? We have our own electronic brains, computers, but a positron has an extremely fleeting existence.”

Khrest laughed. His expression suggested the tolerance with which an adult might view the antics of a two year old. Bell bit his tongue to keep a curse from escaping his lips.

“You’ll understand, one day. We are simply unable to take off again. May I ask for your help?”

In an instant, Rhodan once more became the commander of the *Stardust* and, not least of all, a human being. Gone was his boundless astonishment. He was thinking again with the steely precision of a machine.

“Sir, I know from our latest intelligence reports that the outbreak of war between the Western world and the Eastern bloc is almost inevitable. Neither can I explain in only a few words, why this war can be avoided with only the very greatest effort. As the causes, conflicting ideologies are at the bottom of it. You may not be aware of this, sir, but that’s the way it is on Earth. Now I have a simple question for you—”

Khrest sighed deeply. “The ‘simple’ question,” he repeated. “So you say. I have not heard such a phrase since my youth. We no longer ask such questions, I’m afraid. Please, tell me—what is it that you want?”

“Do you have at your disposal means powerful enough to prevent a disastrous confrontation with nuclear weapons? If so, what do you have.”

“What manner of nuclear weapons?” asked Khrest with interest.

“Two kinds, sir. Nuclear reaction by means of fission and fusion.”

“Ah, yes. We are familiar with the primitive technique of fission. Fission processes may be counteracted by a complete absorption of the free neutrons. In the absence of neutrons, as you call these particles, it is impossible.”

“Yes, yes, of course. We know that too. But we have nothing by which to achieve that effect. And what is it, then, with the fusion weapons, the hydrogen bombs?”

“Also an obsolete procedure, which we have long since abandoned. The antineutron screen is not effective in the case of nuclear fusion.”

“Indeed. But as yet, sir, we know of only the so called hot modes of reaction. That means that thermonuclear fission must be used to bring the hydrogen loads to reaction in our heavier bombs. If the fissionable material serving as detonator malfunctions, it will never go so far as the fusion of light nuclei. Am I not correct?”

“You are a scientist? Very good. Provided you are still, as you say, working with the more primitive technique of fission, I can assure you of a total failure of these weapons. We need but a small device for that.”

Rhodan trembled. “For the whole Earth?” he asked.

“After all, it is only a small planet. Do not forget that we are emissaries of a galactic empire. We will succeed.”

Rhodan swallowed hard. He did not dare look into Bell’s wide open eyes. The catalog of all these technical miracles was making him dizzy. The alien spoke of these Earth shaking machines in the same way as a boy back home would speak of last week’s football game.

“Then it would make sense to take you to Earth and have you undergo the proper diagnosis and treatment there. But first you must be examined by Dr. Manoli. He’ll be able to find out what is really

wrong with you. As a diagnostician, he has no peer. Could you perhaps supply him with information on the nature of your physiology and metabolism? I assume he'll find this necessary."

"I'm driving off in the tank," Bell declared, now restless. "Good Lord! If I don't get back in time, Fletcher's going to blast off without us! Then all hell will break loose."

"You need not drive to your vessel," whispered Khrest. "Speak to Thora. You do not know of what we are capable, Major Rhodan."

Mentally, Rhodan readily agreed.

CHAPTER NINE

Captain Clark G. Fletcher was trembling convulsively. He had completely gone to pieces as he stood looking around in the dome of the gigantic alien spacecraft. What Rhodan and Bell had swallowed, he would have to digest gradually, in small doses.

Thora fixed him with her iron gaze. Dr. Eric Manoli had long since disappeared. He had pounced upon Khrest with all the mercurial enthusiasm of the explorer, in the true sense of the word. There were still others in the command centre. Khrest had described them as being among the more active members of his race, but they offered a pathetic sight.

Rhodan suspected that they were longing with every fibre of the minimal will to watch the next *fictif* program. Though wearing the uniform of the "Great Empire," they seemed to think only of their simulator screens.

This, then, was a portrait of the descendants of a once mighty stellar race. One could hardly imagine that, once upon a time, beyond memory of man or mother Earth, their ancestors had founded a galactic federation reaching across a broad path of the universe. Khrest had assured them that the Arkonide expansion had taken place with a minimum of conflict. Rhodan, however, had his doubts on that score.

He could not conceive of how such a colonization could have occurred, save by blood, sweat and tears. Still, that was long since past. He stood before what were very nearly the last remains of this once great people whose technological and scientific heritage now lay gathering dust. Just the thought of the so-called rescue operation made Rhodan's head swim.

Thora had been alone in the command centre, surrounded with the most astonishing array of mechanisms. Rhodan had not counted the robots, although in the final analysis, it was they who had done the job.

Fletcher had almost lost his mind when the *Stardust* was seized by a "mysterious force." He shuddered at the thought of it.

“It was horrible,” he had declared with a gurgle. “The solitude had already become almost unbearable. Eric and I took turns standing guard. We were always anticipating the sudden appearance of an Asiatic scout probe. But more than that, we were worrying about you and the message you were supposed to send. Then, all of a sudden, there was this jolt. Something lifted the ship off the ground, as though it were little more than a feather. Panic stricken, I pushed the ignition button. I shifted from autopilot into manual control, full speed ahead; but it was no use! On the contrary, the reactor suddenly stopped working, and we were left without any power at all. So the *Stardust* was carried over the craters at maddening speeds. An instant later, we got a look at the giant sphere. They landed us so gently that we hardly knew it. I was overjoyed when I saw Reg’s face. You haven’t got any more surprises in store for us, have you?”

Thora had then interjected a brief explanation of the phenomenon. It had been “merely” a rather ordinary transport field for the movement of solid bodies. It was quite common on Arkon.

She had chosen her words carefully, but she had been unable to hide their sting. She had still not forgotten. It would probably be a great while before she could forgive them. For her, *Homo sapiens* was, as before, a primitive creature with whom one might collaborate only in view of the crisis at hand. This alone she had been able to accept, nothing else.

They stood in a small anteroom, awaiting Dr. Manoli. He had been given enough visual material to provide him with some idea of the Arkonide anatomy, inside and out. In any event, Rhodan was certain of this much—he had tackled a problem unique and extraordinary in the history of medicine. Many questions would arise. It was too much to ask of any doctor in the world, that he be able to treat a wholly alien organism with no more than intuition to go on. Such could be a branch of learning in its own right, quite apart from any estimation of damages that might ensue from medication and therapy.

It would simply have to be a game of chance, played with high odds, with the alien’s life at stake. No one could say how he would react to the terrestrial medications.

Nevertheless, Dr. Manoli was a man worthy of the highest esteem. One could trust implicitly in his verdict. If immediate help was not forthcoming, then the best minds on Earth would just have to be consulted. Rhodan was prepared to set all the pharmaceutical industries of the world on their heels, working at breakneck speed, if this were necessary. This stranger must be saved, no matter how; and the devil take the hindmost.

Dr. Manoli had already been gone for about ten hours. Lacking his medical background, none of the others could help him. Thora grew restless. She seemed to divine that she was standing on the threshold of a decisive turning point in her life. The ambivalence of her position on the chances for man’s development was still more oppressive.

Rhodan observed her worriedly. She made every effort to conceal her anxiety beneath biting sarcasm and haughty condescension. At the same time, she felt that this tall man with the twinkle in his eyes was seeing right through her.

It would have been so much simpler for Thora if these alien intelligences had not so much resembled the people of her own race. That confused her and depressed her, all unconsciously. It presented her with a most distressing situation. She could have dealt very easily with creatures of monstrous appearance, but *there . . . !* She felt the obstinacy of Rhodan’s will. He wanted to be recognized. He also wanted to be regarded as a fellow rational being, as an equal! So casually had he permitted himself the liberty of comparing himself to her, the Arkonide!

That brought her to the edge of eruption. She knew suddenly that the human race held a position unparalleled anywhere else in the universe. Never before had she encountered such candour or such insolence and belligerence. She was accustomed to submission. It was natural for her to expect an unconditional surrender to her immeasurable superiority. But this . . . *man* . . . seemed not in the least intimidated by her. With his impertinent grin, he had irritated her to the boiling point. Then, to add insult to injury, he had treated her like some silly creature!

Thora was quite beside herself.

She sat up erect when Rhodan again approached her. Her furious glance produced only a friendly nod in reply. Could he not feel the power of her presence, or had he simply chosen to ignore it? Obviously, it was the latter. She found this frightening.

“I’ve got another simple question for you, ma’am,” said Rhodan. “Or rather, I’m wondering about a certain pragmatic issue. . . . Tell me, is there such a thing in your world as ‘money,’ or means of payment, or standards of exchange? You see, One offers it in purchase of certain goods, and—”

Sardonically she declared, “With a galactic trade between more than 1,000 inhabited planets, we could hardly avoid such a thing.”

“Very well, then,” he laughed, unmoved. “I shall have to take Khrest back to Earth. We have neither the required medications nor the needed diagnostic instruments on board the *Stardust*. An operation might even be necessary. What can you offer us in return? If only banknotes, letters of credits, or something of the sort, we’re not interested. We wouldn’t know what to do with them. So what do you have? How about your precious stones, crystals, artificial elements or other such materials?”

“We have with us the customary items of exchange for worlds in developmental stages C and D. These are tooling machines with automated control units and their own power supplies, guaranteed for some eighty of your solar years. These may be applied to all branches of industry. In addition, I can offer various micromechanical devices, such as portable spectrometers for the detection of element, an antigravity apparatus for one man flight, and—”

“Stop, stop!” moaned Fletcher. “This is too much for me. You’re going to him everything topsy-turvy on Earth. They’ll be killing each other off just to get a chance at your magic machines.”

“That is *your* affair. We are merchants. We deal in only those things which we consider harmless, even in the hands of primitives such as yourselves.”

“And what,” asked Rhodan, “do you have for ‘genuine’ rational beings? Never mind, you don’t have to answer that. I can just imagine. Then will you please see to it that the *Stardust* is equipped accordingly. Pack everything that will be needed by Khrest, plus . . .” He paused, with a sharp glance at her as he continued. “Plus, don’t forget the *other* instruments. They might come to be of great importance. You do remember our conversation, don’t you?”

She examined him slowly. Was it respect that he found, newborn, in her eyes?

“You are risking your life, do you realize that? Your reasoning meets with my approval, nonetheless. It seems better for all concerned. After all, who knows what brute response will come from such low—I mean—”

“Don’t hesitate,” Rhodan smiled. “Finish what you were saying. It doesn’t bother me at all. I shall be tolerant; I shall regard you as one who is simply not responsible for her actions. Just forget it. Please start loading the cargo aboard the *Stardust* immediately. You may throw out whatever remains in the storage room of the ship. We won’t need it. The payload should not exceed sixty tons, all told. I have a very difficult landing operation ahead of me. Or perhaps, if you would reconsider . . . why not let us have one of your auxiliary vessels? With one of those, we could be back on Earth in an hour.”

She corrected him. “Within five minutes. I’m afraid not, however. This is the limit of my hospitality. Nothing, except Khrest and some few instruments, may ever find its way to Earth. I simply cannot permit it. I have my orders.”

“Khrest has rated us one stage higher on the developmental scale, don’t you recall?”

“And lucky for you. Otherwise, these negotiations could not have proceeded even this far. Nevertheless, I am not permitted to send a minicraft into your atmosphere. The positronic brain would never assent to such a move, and there is no way to override its decision. The computer’s circuitry cannot be tampered with. Please understand that this was not the enterprise we foresaw when we left Arkon.”

“What was?” Rhodan asked this with mounting discomfort.

“Once again I regret. . . . Suffice it to say that we did not land here by choice. Our destination lies elsewhere. Light-years from here, in fact.”

At just this moment, Dr. Manoli appeared, looking pale and weary. His manner was brusque; he fended off their attentions.

“Spare me your questions. It was more than strenuous. I find that they are not as different from us as I had feared at first. A rather novel arrangement of their inner organs, and the skeleton is also of a singular nature. Yet they do have the same blood composition as we. It was this fact, I suppose—the hunch that their blood was like ours—that aroused my diagnostic suspicions that first minute I saw him. We are dealing here with a case of leukaemia. I’ve exhausted all the possibilities of our shipboard laboratory but the blood tests have proved this beyond all doubt. Two years ago, after many unsuccessful attempts at conquering this seemingly incurable disease, an anti-leukaemia serum was finally developed. Now, I only hope that it will be effective in Khrest’s case. Even though the Arkonides are physiologically similar to ourselves, we must not overlook the possibility that the serum could still have disastrous effects. This must be kept in mind. Yes, I am certain—it is leukaemia.”

Rhodan was again perplexed. Thora showed signs of being highly distraught as she inquired into the nature and cause of this anomaly. By now, she had dropped her pose of prideful superiority.

“Let’s get on with it,” said Rhodan firmly. “Don’t ask questions. We’ve got to start loading up right away. Our time is running out. Your crew and their dream worlds can go to hell, for all I care. What a waste! I can’t understand such ‘supermen’ whiling away their lives with the pleasures of lunatics.”

Thora seemed to weigh it in her mind before answering at last with a face devoid of feeling. “you wished to know what we were looking for in this sector of space. I will tell you. We are seeking to preserve the lives of our last great minds. We have not yet succeeded in escaping death and decay. We have had partial successes, but nothing more. My instructions were to proceed to a planet that is known to us from previous exploratory missions. The inhabitants of this planet hold the secret of biological cell preservation, which must be equated with a prolongation of life. Not only is Khrest our most important

personage, he does not suffer from our general debilitation. Save him, please. *Do everything* in your power. Everything possible, everything imaginable. I will give you any support you may require, Major Rhodan, and that means a great deal. Do everything. If you should encounter opposition, you may call me by way of this device. Your advice will be acted upon. It must be apparent that the combined strength of all your terrestrial forces is but a ridiculous nothing that I could sweep away, with simply a twist of a dial, for all time. A single one of my energy cannons would suffice to change any of your larger continents into a boiling sea of lava within a fraction of a second. With this ship alone, I could destroy your entire solar system. Just remember this. Call me, please, before it is too late.”

She left without another word. Captain Fletcher turned as pale as a ghost.

“If I’ve never believed in anything before,” he whispered roughly, “I believe this; I accept all this completely, 100 per cent without reservations. But good God, what have we gotten into? Where is all this going to lead? Things will be chaos in Washington! They’ll never believe this.”

“On the other hand, they might not be that surprised.” Bell interjected this with such emphasis that Fletcher started. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing.” Bell stared with a vacant expression at his commanding officer, and after Fletcher had gone to check on the exhausted Dr. Manoli, he once again queried him.

“Perry, what have you got up your sleeve? Something doesn’t seem quite right here. Have you made some kind of deal with Thora?”

“Perhaps I offered her my hand in marriage,” was Rhodan’s dry reply. He now had the serpent’s eye stare of a merciless conqueror. Or at least that was Captain Bell’s impression. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“No.” Bell asked no more questions. He had abruptly fallen silent when robots filed into the room. According to carefully made plans, the *Stardust* was being equipped from the gigantic arsenals of the alien space sphere. These mechanisms would weigh 60.3 tons under Earth gravity.

Rhodan went to Khrest. With an encouraging smile, he said, “Sir, we’re ready to start. Unfortunately, Thora still refuses to put the space vehicle at my disposal. Isn’t there any thing that would change her mind? I’ll have to subject you to enormous stresses in the *Stardust*. We know no means of counteracting natural inertia. Thus we must submit to high G forces during acceleration.”

“I have no influence over Thora’s decisions, but you will not have to suffer under these conditions. A small null-gravity adaptor will be brought on board. You will not feel a thing.”

Once more, Rhodan was swallowing hard. He realized that he would simply have to get used to the miraculous. The Arkonides obviously made use of techniques that still seemed, for human scientists, to beckon remotely from the limbo of insoluble problems.

CHAPTER TEN

“They’ve made it! They’ve made it!”

General Pounder, chief of the Space Exploration Command and of Nevada Fields, uttered these same words over and over again. He stared with rapt attention at the gigantic radar screen.

After a flight of fourteen hours, the *Stardust* had entered the upper layers of Earth’s atmosphere. She had then begun the third orbital braking approach.

While still out in space, her high velocity of free fall had been throttled to three miles per second. The efficiency of the new nuclear chemical power plant had not been overestimated. It had enabled them to perform manoeuvres ordinarily denied to a ship using chemical fuel.

The ship had been turned around close above the first molecules of air. The autopilot functioned with precision and reliability. Another failure seemed highly unlikely.

Major Rhodan’s explanation for the cause of his long silence had sounded somewhat peculiar. According to his account, given via radio just a few minutes previously, some trouble had occurred in the circuits of the reactor; but he could make further details available only after they had landed safely.

Moments earlier, the *Stardust* had again come within range of the relay stations in Alaska and Greenland. Its altitude was then only 110 miles and its velocity somewhat less than 5,000 miles per hour.

Pounder turned around angrily. The little man had announced himself by clearing his throat.

Allan D. Mercant, head of the NATO security organizations, could not be persuaded to remove himself from the control center. He knew very well that his presence there was a disturbing factor, but this did not bother him.

He had shown up suddenly three hours before. His companions had silently departed, and shortly thereafter the armoured tanks of the U.S. Fifth Reserve Division had arrived. Never before had Nevada Fields been so thoroughly quarantined.

Next came heavy transport vehicles with special crews. The FBI (internal security section) had provided their best people. With an enormous array of men and ammunition, they were waiting for the landing of the *Stardust*.

General Pounder had been furious. Allan D. Mercant smiled as affably as ever.

“I’m sorry, General. You brought the avalanche down on your own head. Now I would like to know what really happened up there. The report from the commander of your ship sounded rather off, you must admit.”

“But there was no need to mobilize an emergency division of 10,000 men just for that!” Pounder had sputtered in a rage.

The Defence Secretary could only offer his regrets. He had deemed it necessary. For a moment Pounder thought of warning his four astronauts by radio.

But when a number of conservatively dressed men began to appear in the control center, he had to abandon any such thought.

Pounder could find no explanation for this. The technicians and scientists were nervous, and the chief of military security at Nevada Fields had been temporarily put out of action.

“Now what do you want?” snarled Pounder. “Can’t you see that the *Stardust* is landing according to plan?”

“No longer,” Mercant said with emphasis. The friendly smile was gone now. “Deviation. You can see for yourself. What is that supposed to mean, General?” Pounder whirled about. Just then there came the alarming report from the remote control autopilot computer. A bright light lit up, and the loud hum died down.

“Contact interrupted,” droned the mechanical voice. “Manual control assumes command of vehicle.”

“Has Rhodan lost his mind?” Pounder roared, shaken to his roots. With a few great leaps, he bounded over to the microphone. The video Screen was blank. There too Rhodan had broken the connection.

“Rhodan, General Pounder speaking! What is the meaning of this? Why have you discontinued remote control guidance? Rhodan! Where are you, Rhodan?”

There was no reply. The general grew pale. Helpless, he stared at the security intelligence chief, who walked slowly toward him. Allan D. Mercant had lost every trace of good humour, and fury shimmered in his blue eyes.

“You see?” he said coldly. “I had a premonition. There’s something amiss here. Send out an alert to air defence. Unless Rhodan changes course at once I will have them open fire. Inform him that at this present altitude, he is in range of our new ground to air missiles.”

In the same instant, however, an emergency signal from the *Stardust* squeaked from the receiver. It was a conventional SOS without any attempt at code. The SOS signals came through again and again. The first signs of panic appeared in the Nevada Fields control center. Men looked agape at each other. Why had Rhodan sent the universal distress signal? There were so many other ways to inform them of an emergency situation. Why had he chosen the SOS, and why on the international frequency?

Allan D. Mercant went into action. With a few terse commands, he activated the continental warning system. The men of air defence, who had been on standby alert for weeks, ran now to their battle stations. At that moment the *Stardust* was continuing its flight over the Taimyr Peninsula in northern Siberia.

Once again the *Stardust* changed course. Continuously broadcasting an SOS, Rhodan turned south. He flew across Siberia.

In the headquarters of the Eastern Defence high command, the command to fire—already given—was cancelled at the last moment. They had recognized that they were dealing with only the harmless American moonship. A hand withdrew from the red button. It had been very close to sending 7,000 atomic ICBMs into the sky.

This overflight had caused an international crisis and almost triggered a nuclear holocaust. Marshal

Petronsky stared silently at the screens of his infrared stations. In its mad descent, the *Stardust* flew south over the Siberian steppes. Computers were calculating the probable point of landing from moment to moment. If the American vessel kept to the same course and held its velocity of fall, it would come down in the vicinity of the Sino-Mongolian border, somewhere in the middle of the central Gobi. Marshal Petronsky could have shot down the ship with no particular difficulty. Yet, being a practical man, he abandoned such a course of action.

The giant transmitters at his headquarters were set to work instead. He personally directed the operation.

The commanding officer of the Twenty-second Siberian Army Corps received detailed instructions. Those obtained by the division's commanders a few minutes later were still more explicit. The Eighty-sixth fully motorized border patrol in particular, then assigned to the area of the Obotuin-Chure and Goshun salt lake, were given orders to start marching.

The Fourth Mongolian Airborne Division, under the command of Lieutenant General Chudak, was put on emergency alert.

With this, Marshal Petronsky had done everything possible to guarantee capture of the American moon rocket—provided it still touched down within the Mongolian border.

If, on the other hand, the ship should land *outside* the border, in the territory of the Asiatic Federation, serious problems would undoubtedly arise. The marshal requested and received an immediate line to Moscow.

Concluding his discussion, he stated briefly, "It is to be assumed that serious failures have occurred within the ship's control system. The *Stardust* is presumably under manual control and piloted by an astronaut of the American Space Force. Our evaluation of radar data confirms this. I have abandoned the idea of dispatching high altitude jet fighters. I suggest we wait until the *Stardust* has landed and then, and only then, proceed with those measures which seem to be in order. I request special jurisdiction in this area."

Petronsky was granted his authority. But he had not counted on Major Perry Rhodan.

Immediately upon reentry into the Earth's atmosphere, the rocket had proceeded in the proven manner to the aerodynamically effective glider flight. The mighty delta wings had taken over the weight. As the air envelope became denser, the rudders proved more and more effective. The high velocity lost itself through increasing air friction. Landing in this manner, it became necessary only to slowly and progressively decrease speed. The outside temperature rose to 870 degrees Centigrade, particularly on the moon rocket's surfaces and its nose cone.

The automatic transmitters were continuously broadcasting "SOS" over the international emergency frequency. Rhodan had taken for granted that this would accomplish exactly what it did—there was no thought, in any of the capitals of the world, of bringing the *Stardust* under fire. Of course, all the Eastern powers were intensely interested in examining the *Stardust* at close range. For this, however, they would need a ship that remained intact. A pile of radioactive debris would be of no use to anyone.

Perry Rhodan landed the rocket in northern China, on a rocky plain near Lake Goshun. Although a salt lake, the Goshun was fed by the fresh water river Morin-Gol. This was in the middle of the vast central Gobi, scarcely south of the Mongolian border, just 102 degrees east and 38 degrees north.

Rhodan landed the *Stardust* as though it were a regular aircraft. The huge tires, designed specifically for this purpose, touched ground perfectly. A few moments later, the nose cone of the ship that had at last returned home pointed like some signpost at the nearby banks of the Morin-Gol.

The high whine of the auxiliary landing engines became silent. Rhodan detached his hand from the steering lever, suddenly aware that it was painfully cramped. Once the *Stardust* had overcome the first dangerous moments of reentry and landing approach, it was easy to land the ship like some heavy air freighter. Earth had one benefit the moon had probably always lacked—namely, a supporting air envelope.

With a quick movement, Rhodan had freed himself from the upright contour couch. His hand sprang so quickly to the open holster of his automatic that Captain Fletcher could not even begin to act.

Fletcher stared as though frozen into the barrel of the exceedingly dangerous RAK automatic weapon.

Bell remained unmoving in his seat, and Dr. Manoli did not venture to lift a finger. Khrest, occupying the fifth couch, made plain a lively interest in the proceedings. Fletcher had raved with a madman's senseless fury since their deviation from course. Try as he might, he had been unable to free himself from his seat, for Rhodan had locked the automatic fastening mechanism. Now, with a last rash effort, Fletcher tried to reach the weapon shelves built into the wall behind his couch.

"Forget it, Fletch," Rhodan cautioned. "Just hold on. We're back home again. If I were you, I wouldn't try anything else."

Fletcher stared at him. He was shock white, with trembling lips. "Home!" he repeated loudly. "Did you say home?" He laughed furiously his face was misshapen with a maniacal rage. "Damn you, traitor! You've landed the ship in the middle of Asia! You must have had it planned all along; otherwise, you wouldn't have flown straight to this barren waste. You charted our course long ago. So that's it! You want to hand the *Stardust* over to the Chinese. Since when did you hatch such a treacherous plot? What reward will the ace astronaut of the United States Space Force receive for a job well done? How much—"

Rhodan interrupted him. "Shut up, Fletcher! Right now!" He had turned pale. A flicker of warning sparkled in his gray eyes. "Fletch, you can leave any time you want. No one will prevent you from leaving. You will see your baby, and Eric will have quite a lot to tell his grandchildren. But whatever you say, I never want to hear you suggest that I am a deserter or a traitor."

"And why *did* you land here?" Bell interjected calmly. He showed a frozen grin and narrowed eyes. Captain Bell was still himself in doubt. After all, one could not ignore the weapon in Rhodan's hand.

"I'd like you all to listen to me for a moment," began Rhodan. "I am not a man who has ever done anything without good reason, and this time it is no different."

"Oh, no!" Fletcher moaned in desperation. He tugged with all his might at the magnetic bonds that held him fast in his seat. "You've deceived us! You've forced us to play along with your game. We were helpless!"

"Of course." Rhodan nodded with a straight face. Khrest smiled. He knew Rhodan's plans, just as Thora before him had been informed about them.

"You must understand by now that the *Stardust* has become only a worthless toy. Even if it should fall

into Chinese hands, it would be hardly more than a joke. For on the moon there is a ship, and in that ship are people who, from this day forward, are the only important ones. It is they alone who have the power to prevent our world's total annihilation through nuclear war. From now on, the *Stardust* plays only a subordinate role. For the time being it makes no difference that in Moscow and Peking, as in Washington, they still believe her to be the greatest miracle of all time. This view is merely the result of sheer ignorance of the true situation. If our leaders had any idea of what we found on the moon, they would, with a wave of the hand, write off the rocket as entirely negligible. What matters exclusively is that mind we've brought to Earth with us. From now on, only Khrest counts, for he is heir to an immeasurably superior science. With him, mastery of the last secrets of Nature has come to Earth. Concealed in his photographic memory are things that will permit our space travel to leap across more than five millennia of painful development.

“You must understand that it is no longer a question of the *Stardust*. The problem now is Khrest, and the alien intelligences of the galaxy. The problem now is the union of all mankind—all human beings, irrespective of race or faith or ideology. The eternally misguided and misinformed will awaken, and men of goodwill may at last breathe a deep sigh of relief. It would have been the greatest mistake of all time to permit any one nation to capture Khrest.

Fletcher, who seemed more than amazed, shut his gaping jaws. He looked around helplessly.

“By now, Nevada Fields should be cordoned off by special security forces. Our people are hardly such fools. They could easily see that we must have experienced something out of the ordinary on the moon. The Eastern bloc, on the other hand, is still of the opinion that they are dealing with only an emergency landing. I have no intention of surrendering Khrest—the representative of an age old civilization and the unchallenged master of a superior science—into the merciless hands of some security organization.

“Let's be honest. Had we landed in the proper manner, Khrest would already have been taken into custody. Naturally, they would have had to do this. They would have placed him in isolation and interrogated him. They would have been extremely kind, considerate and polite; but still, he would already have been a prisoner. Khrest himself posed this condition—that he be permitted to act freely and without hindrance. He represents a third power on Earth. He is ill and needs our help. I consider it my duty, therefore, to guard him from all these embarrassments. He has the right to insist on freedom, even if he is an alien intelligence. Besides, he expects fair treatment, regardless of where we land. Any nation on Earth would be licking its chops if they could get a crack at his staggering knowledge. Every power would be embarking upon a feverish endeavour to win his ability for its own advantage. You cannot convince me that such a one sided concentration of power would be in the best interests of all mankind. His arrival in the United States would have led inescapably to catastrophic consequences. The Asiatic Federation would feel itself under threat. They would insist that they be allowed to share his knowledge. One ultimatum would only provoke another. It would lead ultimately to a worldwide crisis. That is precisely what I wish to avoid.

“I am a human being, and I would prefer to act in a human fashion. In other words, decently. No one is going to squeeze Khrest like a lemon and then declare, with a regretful shrug of the shoulders, that it was absolutely necessary for this or that reason. If he wants to give something of his knowledge to humanity, he should do so out of his own free will, without coercion. We will all profit from it. Foremost, however, by this freedom of action and movement for Khrest, we have won the guarantee that there will be no World War III. I now assume you will understand why the *Stardust* has become wholly insignificant. I have landed in this desolate area so that Khrest might have a chance to mount his special instruments before the inevitable armed opposition arrives. I have nothing further to add.”

“You might loosen my straps,” said Bell calmly. His brow furrowed, he turned to the alien. “I’ll help him. No doubt you realize we’ll be having some fireworks around here within an hour.”

“Let them start shooting! Someday, here on this very spot will arise a metropolis. Here will be built hyperlight spacecraft; and here the seeds of one humanity will be sown. What have you decided, Reg?”

The heavysset man laughed. He did it without ease, but the worry had left him. “I think I know people pretty well,” he said slowly. “They mean well, but all the same, they look out for their own advantage. I believe it better that Khrest remain uncommitted. That’s about all I can say.”

“Dr. Manoli?”

The medic raised his head. The colour had returned to his cheeks.

“Your conduct is not without its logic. If Khrest can guarantee that his knowledge will be used only for the benefit of all men, I have no objections. On the other hand, it would be a crime if he should prefer one certain bloc.”

“Rest assured,” whispered the alien, “that I have no such plans. My only request is that you respect my wishes and assure that I be safe from incarceration by any of the entities you refer to as ‘states.’ This would leave me with incalculable difficulties. Major Perry Rhodan has chosen to land here at my request.”

“How do you plan to defend yourself?” shouted Fletcher, quite beside himself. “I think this is nothing but a dirty trick. I think—”

“Fletch, if we had landed at Nevada Fields, by now we would already be in protective custody. There would simply have been no other alternative for our people. Unintentionally, or even under duress (or so they would tell us), we might have let slip some word about our experiences. This way, we act with motives that are, I think, honest and honourable.”

“But I’m an officer of the space force, and I—”

“So was I. But now, in the face of these events, I am only a human being who wants to see all mankind become great and powerful—and united. Do you believe this to be a crime? Individual nations are of no importance here. All that matters now is the planet Earth. And from now on, it behoves us to think on a cosmic scale. Are you incapable of understanding how utterly childish our Earthbound differences are, within the framework of the great Imperium? Can you not see that we must become unified as quickly as possible. An alien intelligence would refer only to the third planet of the solar system; but never would he speak of this or that nation. From a cosmic point of view, we are only inhabitants of Earth, and never Americans, Russians, Chinese, Or Germans. We are standing on the threshold of a new age. We will just have to get used to that. Once more I stress—under no circumstances must Khrest fall into the hands of any single power. We’re staying where we are.”

Bell stood up slowly. With a pained expression, as though offended, he murmured, “You could have told me that before now, while we were still on the moon. I knew something was up. Okay, let’s get a move on. Khrest, you’ll have to pull yourself together. When the first troops arrive, we’ll be in need of real protection. All the flowery language in the world, about the desired unity of mankind and our future significance in the galaxy, et cetera, et cetera, ad nauseam, won’t be able to fend off a single bullet. The warlords of the Asiatic Federation would split their sides with laughter, and then, of course, off you’d go to the interrogation room. All right, then. Let’s go.”

“I shall remain on board,” declared Dr. Manoli quietly, “until the necessary medications have arrived. It is my duty as a physician and as a human being to help a sick person. All the more so, in this particular case. It would be a great error to act so precipitately so soon after our first encounter with an alien being. You are right, of course. We must no longer concern ourselves with the question of profit to any one nation.”

Sitting in his chair quite rigidly, Captain Fletcher was silent. Khrest rose painfully.

Rhodan put his weapon away and said, “Fletch, we mean well. We have the best of intentions. My God, we’re no criminals! Could it ever be wrong to risk everything for the sake of humanity? I think not. Once again, we are at the dawn of a new era. We must be careful to do the right thing; we must be aware of our responsibilities. No one will ever lay a hand on Khrest. Take my word for it.”

Rhodan threw open the heavy bulkheads of the air lock. The fresh air of planet Earth streamed into the cabin. It was hot and dry, just right for Khrest’s lungs.

Rhodan stepped outside. So far, nothing could be seen of the army, but it would not be much longer before they arrived. Rhodan could just imagine what frenzied activity there must be now in three various command posts. And they did not even know what had been brought to Earth with the Stardust.

No one had any idea of their power yet, but it would not be long.

Even while Rhodan’s gaze measured the immense task that lay before him, something began to take shape in his mind’s eye. In images still remote and nebulous, he saw gigantic interplanetary vessels race into the skies and heard the hum of their faster than light engines; and he knew, proudly, that these were built by human hands.

He saw a global government. He glimpsed a world of peace and prosperity, a world that had earned galactic recognition. It was, of course, merely a vision but he had grasped it with all his senses. For a moment, it was real to Perry Rhodan.

As a mysterious engine began to whirl in the storeroom of the *Stardust*, the Third Power began its mission on Earth. Perry Rhodan stood smiling up at the blue sky. Then, slowly, he detached the insignia of rank from the epaulets of his uniform.

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