

Perry Rhodan 007 - Invasion from Space CHAPTER ONE Suddenly the man's eye, opened wide in utter horror, as if they had seen something beyond human comprehension. His eyes gazed up into the void, far into the depths of the blue sky that mirrored-itself in the dear waters of the little pond in the woods. Then the expression of his eyes turned into a fixed and vacant stare. There was not the slightest tremor in his hand, which was holding a fishing rod. His hand seemed to have become like stone. The man did not react when the swimmer was abruptly pulled deep below the surface of the water. The rod bent under the sudden strain for which Sammy Derring had been waiting so eagerly and in vain all morning long. If anyone had looked into his eyes at this moment they would have recoiled in terror at the sight of such horrendous fright mixed with inconceivable amazement. This lasted for exactly five seconds. During these five seconds nobody could have recognized in this man, Sammy Derring, statistical clerk, who had worked for many years at the Ministry of Defence of the Western Bloc and for whom all his colleagues and superiors had nothing but praise. He was a bachelor, and his hobby was fishing. Every weekend he drove out to this little lake in the woods, where he caught some trout for his landlady. He did not care for fish, but he believed in the therapeutic effect of fishing. Very soothing for the nerves. His little sports car was parked off to the side-Sam's other hobby. He had only these two vices. During the course of those five seconds, Sammy Derring could have been regarded as good as dead. His mind, his reasoning power, his soul, or whatever else people might call it, had left his body. Not of its own free will. It had been forced to do so. Something incomprehensible and far stronger had taken possession of his brain, had simply invaded it and pushed out what had been in there before. During these five unbelievable seconds Sammy Derring could observe himself sitting at the lakeshore. He floated Invisibly at a height of about fifteen feet and looked down on himself. He was unable to comprehend what was happening, but he simply saw his own body, as if he had become a stranger to his own self. He saw that he appeared to be dead but that he remained sitting there. Shouldn't he have toppled over? His body should by all rights have fallen down on the ground. But no. There he was, still sitting upright at the edge of the water, unaware that the fish were biting! Sammy's mind felt an urge to pull in the fishing rod, but the body down below no longer obeyed his thought impulses. But there was no more time left for all this. The five seconds were over. The picture of the peaceful little lake in the woods became hazy and soon disappeared completely for him as an invisible force yanked him away. He became dimly aware of a wild kaleidoscope of colours. For an instant he thought he saw, way down below, a huge globe, but then everything turned dark.. He felt drawn into something; then all of a sudden his reflexes returned. He could feel his body and his limbs, and he was able to move them. Now he could see again despite the darkness around him. Then he noticed that it was not totally dark. The room was filled with a faint glow. He wondered for a moment how on Earth he had come to this place. But then it did not really matter to him any more. He must have had some seizure, and they had taken him to the hospital. That must be it! He was ill. A great weakness overwhelmed him. Wasn't there anyone here to take care of him? He sensed that somebody was nearby. With great effort he tried to sit up, but he could not manage it. Had this sudden sickness overcome him while he was fishing at the little lake? Had people found him there and brought him here? How long had he been unconscious? And how had all this really happened? Hadn't he seen himself sitting down there at the lakeshore? Now his eyes had become adjusted to the dark and he could see again. But his weakness grew worse. He felt himself going to sleep. But there was something still active and wide awake in his brain, something that would not let him fall asleep-some observation he had made. It took a long time, precious seconds, before it reached his center of awareness and then changed into stark, maddening reality. His fingers ... his legs! With his remaining strength he opened his eyes wide for a last look and gazed, full of horror, at the ends of his four arms,

at the sharp claws with suction pads ...And then he perceived the trunk of his body, like that of a wasp with a very narrow waist, all covered with fine hair. The gruesome shape of the monster to which he had been transformed so swiftly impressed him as being so unreal that he closed his black multifaceted insect eyes with a sigh of relief and stretched out his legs. Of course! It was only a nightmare! Why hadn't he thought of that sooner! But the sudden flash of insight, that man never knows he is only dreaming while he is having a nightmare, came too late. His mind, held captive in an extraterrestrial body, sank into a deathlike trance ... As soon as the five seconds had elapsed Sammy Derring reeled in the line of his fishing rod. He stared at the fat trout without any special interest; then, after some initial hesitation, he pulled it off the hook and threw it back into the water. He flung the rod carelessly into the bushes growing near the edge of the water and began to walk toward the car parked nearby. His gait was unsteady as if he had been sick in bed for weeks. When he reached his car he hesitated again for a brief moment, just as long as it took to obtain all the necessary information from the memory banks of the intellect that had inhabited this body before him. Sammy Derring, who in reality was no longer Sammy Derring, started the car and drove slowly along the bumpy side road until he reached the main highway. There a swift glance at the road signs was sufficient. A few minutes later the little sports car raced toward the city. Mrs. Sarah Wabble was not a little surprised to see her tenant return so early from his weekly fishing expedition. But her amazement grew when he simply nodded to her and then went straight to his rooms, where he locked the door behind him. No friendly greeting and no trout, either! The being that was now Sammy Derring felt much relieved as soon as the door had closed behind him. Now he was safe from these human creatures. His experience in taking over the bodies of other organisms was still rather limited. In addition to that, the inhabitants of this planet were of a rather high intelligence, intelligence difficult to remove and to conserve. It would have been so much simpler to eliminate them entirely, but that would have been contrary to his commander's strict orders. His commander had not come down to this planet's surface. He was far out in space in an oval shaped spaceship that was revolving around the third planet of this solar system, invisible to these humans' eyes. This glittering metallic spacecraft had not been designed and built by human hands, but by extraterrestrial, nonhuman insect claws provided with suction pads, which were no less skilful than five-fingered human extremities. The intelligence that guided the movements of the six jointed limbs of the almost seven foot long insects, which somehow resembled wasps, was at about the same level as that of the Earthlings. But considering certain mental abilities of these insectlike creatures, it was safe to say that the wasps were far superior to the human race. One of their talents was the amazing ability that enabled the minds of these extraterrestrial beings to leave their own bodies and take over those of other creatures. It was like a regular exchange. They simply snatched the other beings' minds and replaced them with their own. But all knowing Nature had made sure that there remained one weak spot in this forced mind exchange. The mind of the seized host body could be subdued and captured only if it was imprisoned for the duration in the insect's own body. Only then full freedom of action was ensured for the mindsnatcher, who could do anything he wanted in his new body, pretending to be the victim himself. In case the host died before it was possible to leave his body, the mindsnatcher died too. And it was also fatal if the insect body that held the victims mind imprisoned was destroyed. Both host and victim lost their life in either case. Despite the limitations, these sinister insects were one of the most dangerous races of the universe. But the Earthlings had no inkling of that peril; not too long ago they had made their first step out into space by landing a rocket on the moon. Earth was like a lonely island in the sea of space, isolated from the happenings in the universe, believing itself all alone. Mankind knew nothing of the many intelligent races of the galaxies, of the galactic empires that had been founded and then destroyed again. But the extraterrestrial races who knew these insects and their uncanny

abilities called them the mindsnatchers, or the M.S., for short. And now the M.S., had located Earth. This so far completely unknown planet at the edge of the Milky Way had suddenly become the centre of events of a magnitude that could not yet be fully evaluated. The M.S. had been attracted by the emergency signals of an Arkonide cruiser. The Arkonides, masters of a vast realm of the stars, were the archenemies of the wasp creatures. It was impossible to conquer them in battle, unless the insects could track their ships down individually and then attack them. Such a rare opportunity seemed to have presented itself in this case. One of the Arkonide research vessels must have made an emergency landing in this solar system. But to the great surprise of the M.S., it had turned out that the third planet from this sun was inhabited by a rather intelligent race, which had developed a technology capable of space travel. Therefore, it was high time to investigate them, before the Arkonides would do so. This was the reason why the M.S. commander had ordered Terra to be infiltrated. He was absolutely sure that he could seize the most important organizations and key positions of Earth's political, economic, and scientific institutions within a short time. He had given the orders for the invasion. But mankind was unaware of all of this. All they knew was that some strange spaceship had appeared and had been destroyed. But they did not realize that the M.S. had come to their part of the solar system with more than just one spaceship. And in particular they had no idea, except for a few select people, who these M.S. were and what they intended. Monday morning Sammy Derring came to work as usual at the Ministry of Defence. No one could have detected any change in him as far as his looks were concerned. He entered his office and was soon busy managing through file cabinets examining all kinds of papers. Then suddenly he sounded a buzzer to call in his secretary. The young girl entered, ready to take the usual dictation. But Sammy simply shook his head and requested in all earnestness, "Will you bring me all records and documents pertaining to the national defence system. Then also all data regarding our present state of space exploration and rocket development. I am particularly interested in the effectiveness of our defence plans ... Don't stare at me like that! Get a move on!" The secretary swallowed hard and blushed. "Pardon me, Mr. Derring"- "Didn't you hear me the first time? Hurry up!" She was about to reply, when she noticed the look in Sammy's eyes. Their expression was so faraway and strange that she shuddered involuntarily. Totally consternated she just nodded and went out of the room, leaving behind a very contented Sammy Derring, or rather something that looked like him. Outside the door in her office, the secretary stopped for a moment as if rooted to the spot. Then she vigorously shook her head and walked straight over to her department manager, John Mantell. Mantell listened attentively to what the young secretary had to tell him. Finally he frowned, and replied, "Are you sure that Mr. Derring wasn't kidding?" "I am absolutely sure. He was dead serious. And then ... this strange expression in his eyes. I have never seen such a frightening look. Never, in all my life." Mantell contemplated his immaculately manicured fingernails. "Odd, very odd indeed. He wants to examine all the records of our national defence system. He certainly must know that such documents are accessible only to the secretary of Defence, but never to an ordinary statistical clerk." He looked up and smiled ironically at the pretty young girl. "Do you think that Mr. Derring might have lost his mind? He seems to be getting too big for his britches." For the first time the secretary dared smile back at her supervisor. "For all we know, he might believe that there is more than just a mere resemblance in their names! He told me once in a joking way that he and the Secretary of Defence had similar names, that someday they might even be mistaken for each other ..." "I don't believe that Samuel Daring would take too kindly to such remarks," commented Mantell. "I'll have to set Sammy straight on this. Tell him to come to see me at eleven o'clock, will you?" She hesitated. "But what shall I tell him now about the files he wants me to bring him?" "Oh, whatever you want. I'm busy. Don't bother me any more. Slowly the secretary left the room, but she did not return to her own office. For a few minutes she stood out in the hall, trying

to make up her mind what to do. Then suddenly she turned on her heel and marched directly into the lion's den, to the special agent attached to her bureau in the Ministry of Defence. Mr. Smith was quite astonished when he heard her story. He considered the matter far more serious than Mr. Mantell had. Mantell had most likely already forgotten the whole incident by now, but the Commissioner of Defence requested the secretary to come to his office and wait at his receptionist's desk for a while. As soon as she was out of his private office, he became very busy. He took a telephone from a wall safe, dialled a number, and then waited impatiently. Finally he reached his party. "This is Smith speaking from the Ministry of Defence. something very strange has happened, sir. Most irregular, unless somebody was just trying to be funny. But I received your instructions three days ago that I should investigate and inform you of any unusual behaviour"- Be was interrupted by the person he was conversing with. A precise question was addressed to him. Smith trembled slightly and sat up stiffly in his chair. He appeared to have great respect for the man at the other end of the line. "Very well, sir. One of our statistical clerks, Sammy Derring, requested our secret national defence plans. Besides, he demanded all information regarding the state of our space exploration program. He made these demands in all seriousness. His secretary told me that she has never before noticed such determination in him. And she was especially disturbed by the odd expression in Sammy Derring's eyes." Again there came an interruption. But this time so loud that it could be heard even without the receiver, if anyone had been standing next to Smith. "What is his name, did you say?" "Sammy Derring, sir." "And what is the name of the Secretary of Defence?" "Uh, Samuel Daring, sir. But you certainly know that yourself, sir." "Thanks, Smith. Here are my instructions: Act as if nothing unusual had happened. Tell the secretary to bring Derring the requested papers, but of course, only those that are out of date. Derring must not become suspicious. Do you get this?" "Yes, sir. Anything else?" "Don't breathe a word to anyone about all this! I'll be over at your office within two hours." "You are going to come here in person?" Smith was overawed. That was unheard of Allan D. Mercant, the mighty chief of the Western Defence and of the International Intelligence Agency, would fly over and investigate this affair! Such a piddling little incident! Probably it would all turn out to be just a silly joke that Sammy Derring had thought up in order to impress his secretary because his name resembled that of the Secretary of Defence. "Yes. I'll fly over to investigate what's behind all this. And better make sure not to let anyone know of it! That goes for the little secretary too! Absolute secrecy! That will be all for now." Smith replaced the phone in the wall safe. A pensive frown lay around his eyes as he called for the secretary. As she entered the room he motioned to a chair and then said in a matter of fact tone of voice, "Don't talk to anyone about what happened with Mr. Derring. He is probably ... well, let's say ... sick. Maybe some kind of delusion of grandeur. In about ten minutes I'll have a stack of files sent to your office. Please give those to Mr. Derring. Is that clear?" "Yes, but"- "Don't worry! You just tell Mr. Derring that the papers were on their way to him. And may I remind you once again-don't let anyone know what has happened." The little secretary could not help but remember having already told someone about Sammy Derring's strange request. She had spoken to her department manager, Mantell, before she came to the Commissioner. But Mantell obviously hadn't been interested in her complaint. Maybe he had even forgotten all by now. So she simply nodded. "Yes, Mr. Smith. I understand. I'll give the message to Mr. Derring. I only hope he won't look so odd and frightening again. He half scared me to death." "Oh, nonsense, Miss ... ?" "Thompson. Clara Thompson" "There is no need to be afraid, Miss Thompson. Mr. Derring seems to be suffering from a temporary delusion. It was pretty hot yesterday, and he might have got too much sun. Maybe a slight sun stroke." Clara Thompson did not quite agree with the Commissioner of Defence. She could not accept such a lame excuse for someone suddenly believing he was the Secretary of Defence. But she did not speak up. After all, who was she to tell the big boss what was right or wrong? So she

left and returned to her own office. She forgot all about Mr. Mantell. Sammy looked up when she entered. "Well, are you bringing the documents I requested?" They will be sent over in ten minutes." "Thanks. Bring them right in, as soon as they arrive." "I will, Mr. Derring." Clara could not get the door closed behind her soon enough. She felt ill at ease in his presence. Still, he appeared quite sensible, no more scary look in his eyes. Yet he still insisted on this idiotic order for the secret documents. Ten minutes later a messenger brought the files. They were in a big red envelope marked, TOP SECRET. Miss Thompson stared at the envelope. How important it looked! So impressive with the TOP SECRET stamp. But she knew that in reality its contents were completely worthless. Why was the Commissioner of Defence going along with that stupid request? It seemed childish to humour an employee who had lost his marbles. Or could there be more to the whole affair than met the eye? She took the envelope, knocked at Mr. Derring's door, and entered. Without a word she placed the big red envelope on his desk and looked at him, waiting for an acknowledgment. She noticed a gleam of triumph in his eyes. But there was something additional again, something that she could not interpret-something faraway and bottomless. It was as if she were gazing into an abyss so deep that one could fall through it forever, into eternity. Confused, she turned away and left the room abruptly. Sammy Derring waited until the door had closed behind her; then he opened the envelope and began examining its contents. A first glance told him that his mission had been successful. There they were, right in front of him, the greatest secrets of this world ... or at least those of one of the big power blocs. In other parts of this planet other M.S. would be just as effective in their efforts. By tomorrow the commander would be informed about the defence potential of this planet's population and the best strategy for starting an invasion. For it was not enough simply to take over the bodies of these clumsy two-legged creatures. They had to be made subservient to the rule of their new masters. To all outward appearances, though, they had to remain independent."While he was perusing the documents he noted with satisfaction that he had greatly overestimated the potential of the Terrans. It was almost eleven o'clock. A few doors down the hall John Mantell suddenly remembered the conversation he had had with Sammy Derring's secretary. For a moment he hesitated. Perhaps he should forget about the whole thing and not waste his precious time with the foolish jokes of one of his subalterns. But then his sense of duty won out. After all, such silly pranks occasionally turned into serious problems. Better stop that nonsense at once, before it went too far. He pressed the buzzer of the intercom. A young girl's voice replied."Miss Thompson? What's the matter with Derring? Didn't you tell him that I want to see him here in my office at eleven o'clock?"Clara had almost forgotten about Mr. Mantell. She stammered, "Oh, no, Mr. Mantell, I haven't forgotten. But maybe it would be better to ignore this incident? I am sure Mr. Derring was just making a harmless joke. I don't want him to get into any trouble ..." "Then you shouldn't have come to me in the first place. Well then, are you going to give him my message or not?" "I ... I ..."Puzzled, Mantell flipped a switch on the intercom to terminate that disquieting conversation. He got up with determination and left his office to walk over to Derring's room. Ten seconds later he encountered Clara Thompson as she was just about to leave her own office. She was startled and scared when she saw Mantell."What's wrong? Where are you going?"Her confusion seemed to grow worse. She could hardly bring out the words, "To ... to ... to see you, Mr. Mantell. I was coming over to ask you if that visit could wait. Mr. Derring is awfully busy right now. I can't disturb him when he has important work to do."Mantell's eyebrows shot up. "Important work? You don't say! This I have got to see for myself!"He shoved Miss Thompson aside, and without even bothering to knock he stormed into Derring's room. There he saw his subaltern, busily poring over a stack of papers. Annoyed at the sudden interruption he glowered at the intruder, obviously not understanding what all this was supposed to mean. It was five seconds before a glimmer of comprehension lit up his face."Oh, yes, Mr. Mantell. What can I do for you?" Mantell banged a fist

on Sammy's desk. "Are you out of your mind, Derring? What can you do for me? How dare you pull such stupid tricks on our personnel, asking this poor little girl to bring you our most secret documents! You act as if you think you are the Secretary of Defence in person! And even he himself is not authorized to ... What is the matter with you, Derring? Are you feeling all right?" An alarming change had overcome Sammy Derring. First his eyes gazed uncomprehendingly at the raging department manager; then his eyes became empty and lost their luster. When his eyes seemed to see again, they were filled with a steely lack of pity. He asked with an icy cold voice, "What is the name of the Secretary of Defence?" Mantell gasped. This was more than he could take. "Derring! Have you gone crazy? Now you want me to believe you don't remember the name of our Secretary of Defence?" Sammy nodded, apparently unperturbed by the enormity of his faux pas. "Yes. I don't know his name. What is it?" Although Mantell was unwilling to comply with every wish of the obviously insane clerk, the steely eyes of the man behind the desk seemed to compel him to do so nevertheless. He shouted, "Daring, Samuel Daring. You of all people should know this better than I. This isn't the first time that you have been into trouble because your names were mistaken for each other, Sammy Derring! But this is no excuse whatsoever ..." Mantell fell silent before he could finish his tirade, for Sammy Derring jumped to his feet, pointing to the documents lying in front of him on his desk. "And if I am not the Secretary of Defence, why did they send me the records I requested?" Mantell looked at the papers, the envelope marked TOP SECRET in particular. He could not understand this. But before he had a chance to say anything, the door flew open. In came Smith, Clara Thompson close behind him. He quickly grasped the situation. There was an air of annoyance spread all over his face. Mantell felt frightened. He knew that this inconspicuous looking man had been empowered with the final say in all matters concerning this section of the Ministry of Defence. "What's all this supposed to mean? What is going on here?" inquired Smith, who could have given the answer perfectly well himself. He addressed Mantell. "Didn't Miss Thompson pass on my orders to you not to interfere in this affair?" "He wouldn't listen to me," explained Clara Thompson. "She came and told me that Mr. Derring was trying to play a silly joke," defended Mantell. "I only wanted to ask Derring to stop such tomfoolery in the future. The resemblance of his name to that of the Secretary of Defence does not entitle him to"- No one had been paying any attention to what Sammy Derring was doing in the meantime. He sat down again, and all life seemed to fade from his eyes. He was sitting behind his desk, head held high. His eyes gazed just as expressionlessly into space as they had done the day before, staring up into the empty blue sky above the little lake in the woods. This lasted exactly five seconds. Then it was over. Life returned to his eyes. During these five seconds the same process had taken place as twenty-four hours earlier, but in reverse. The M.S. had fled from his host's body, after having recognized he had fallen victim to a case of mistaken identity. He acted rather panic stricken, for he could have smoothed over his mistake if he had tried to. But he preferred to return to his sleeping body and to release from it the imprisoned mind of Sammy Derring. Sammy's intellect returned to his own body. He lacked any memory of what had befallen him except for a few insignificant details that seemed more like a dream. Hadn't he just been sitting at the lake, holding his fishing rod? How was it possible that he was now sitting behind his desk in his office? He saw his department manager, Mantell, standing before him, next to him the Commissioner of Defence in person ... and over there at the door pretty little Clara Thompson contemplating him with consternation in her big blue eyes. Why could he not remember the last seventy-four hours? What had happened during this time? "Can I help you, gentlemen?" he inquired mechanically. Then he noticed the open files on his desk. He was puzzled by the red envelope marked TOP SECRET. Without understanding he stared from the files to his visitors. "What are these files doing here? How did they get here?" Before Mantell could give expression to the fury raging in him, Smith intervened. His clear mind was capable of lightning fast reactions. Although he did not

understand the reasons behind this incident, he recalled that his superior, Allan D. Mercant, was on his way to this office. And there must be compelling reasons for him to inconvenience himself by flying over here all the way from his base in Greenland. There must be more to this harmless appearing affair than met the eye. "These are some old reports, long since out of date, Mr. Derring. Would you please check them over. The Secretary of Defence requested that some reliable employee be charged with this confidential task." Sammy still appeared perplexed, but he answered eagerly, "Thank you for the confidence you have in me. I certainly won't disappoint you. How long will I have for this job?" "There is no special hurry, Mr. Derring. Come now, Mr. Mantell. And you, too, Miss Thompson. Let Mr. Derring get on with his work now!" He pulled the utterly startled Mantell by the arm and walked him to the door, which he held open for the little secretary scurrying after the two men. As soon as the door had closed behind the trio Smith breathed a deep sigh of relief. "It seems to have turned out all right after all. Listen, Mantell! You almost messed up the whole affair. I really couldn't tell you what's behind this, but Mr. Mercant is on his way here." "The Chief of Western Defence? The big boss of the International Intelligence Agency? Did I understand you correctly, Mr. Smith? But that can't be!" The words came in rapid fire succession out of the amazed Mantell. "That's the way it is, Mantell," said Smith. "Go back to your office and don't bother any more about Derring. That's an order! The Secretary of Defence will not learn about this regrettable incident, so don't worry. And the same goes for you, Miss Thompson. Just keep quiet about this. I'll explain everything to you tonight over a nice dinner." "But I"- "Would eight o'clock be all right? I'll call at your house-just leave the address with my secretary. O.K.?" "I"- "Fine! And now sit down at your desk and act as if nothing had happened. And if you look at it, nothing really did happen, did it?" "The the stratoliner from Greenland was flying at Mach-three toward his destination, the Ministry of Defence of the Western Bloc, and while Mercant was evaluating and speculating about the suspicious incident with Sammy Derring, the latter was sitting at his desk, checking the long since outdated documents, puzzled by this senseless task, wondering why he of all persons had been charged with it. As far as he could recall he had just been spending the weekend fishing for trout at his favourite spot at the little lake in the nearby forest. How on Earth he had suddenly been transported from there to his desk in the office was a mysterious to him. True, there had been some strange moments, he remembered now. Kind of a daydream. And then the big, dark cave with ... with ... oh, yes-that's right! With some monster that looked like a giant wasp. And he himself had been that wasp. Ridiculous! Had he lost his mind? But then he wouldn't be sitting here now in his office, being entrusted with some special, highly confidential task by his superiors. He sighed and decided to stop thinking about this whole silly thing. If he began asking all kinds of questions that would merely arouse unnecessary suspicions. And the office here would not have any use for him, if he brought up such crazy stuff. Nightmares or daydreams, whatever it was, he must have been asleep, for he could absolutely not remember anyone bringing these secret documents to him. Blond hair ringed the bald dome of the incredibly young appearing man whose harmless face reminded an observer of some peaceful nature lover. His innocuous appearance was quite deceptive, though, for he was one of the most feared and respected men of the Western Bloc. Until a few short weeks ago all the agents of the Eastern Bloc and those of the Asiatic Federation had trembled at the mere mention of his name. Allan D. Mercant, chief of the NATO Defence, was preparing himself for an encounter with a man whose body had been taken over by an M.S. This was not the first time he had met one of the M.S. Only a few days had passed since an M.S. had tried to put him out of action in the disguise of one of Mercant's closest collaborators whose body he had assumed. Only thanks to Mercant's rapid reactions and his faint telepathy had he escaped unscathed. The invasion, expected by only a handful of persons, seemed to have begun. Although it had been expected, the invasion still came as a

surprise. This apparent contradiction could be explained. An alien spaceship belonging to the M.S. had been destroyed near the moon's orbital path, and most people assumed that this was the only spacecraft the invaders had inside this solar system. Mankind prepared itself for further attacks but did not really believe they would occur. Without the help of the Third Power, mankind would perish. Mercant was fully aware of this. The first manned expedition to the moon under the command of Perry Rhodan had found there the crash-landed interstellar research craft of a highly intelligent but decadent alien race. The scientific leader of this research project, a certain Khrest, had become dangerously ill with leukaemia. He had been cured by the Earthlings, especially with the help of Dr. Haggard, the world's greatest specialist in blood diseases. The Arkonides, as the aliens called themselves, originated from a system thirty-two thousand light-years from Sol. They were searching for the legendary Planet of eternal life. The only two surviving members of the Arkonide expedition, Khrest and Thora, became allies of Rhodan. Together they founded the Third Power, whose base was in the Gobi Desert. This Third Power had managed, within three short months, to unite the three formerly hostile power blocs of the world. Then the first attack from outer space occurred. The M.S. had intercepted the emergency signals broadcast by the destroyed Arkonide spaceship on the moon. The M.S. had come hurriedly in order to administer the final blow to their age-old enemies, the Arkonides. But the M.S. had encountered unexpected resistance from the so far unknown Earthlings and had suffered a crushing defeat at their hands. This was the way things stood now. Perry Rhodan was the only person capable of saving the world. Mercant knew this only too well. Although the three power blocs did not yet fully trust Rhodan, they were on the other hand afraid of the M.S. and of the Arkonide weapons that were at Rhodan's disposal. Then there was something else that only a few initiated knew, besides Mercant—Rhodan had succeeded in gathering in several mutants that had been born as a result of the post-World War II atom bomb explosions. These mutants, whose abilities needed further schooling, formed the nucleus of a new troop that Rhodan had organized for the protection of the Third Power. Because of his telepathic talents, Mercant belonged to this mutant corps. But this was known only to the two men, Rhodan and Mercant himself, besides the other members of the secret mutant organization. The plane landed. A fast moving car brought Mercant to the Ministry of Defence. He was led to Smith, who was waiting for him in his private office. "Well, Smith, what has happened? Where is he?" "He doesn't have the faintest idea, sir. Shall I take you to him?" "Yes, please." Smith was very surprised to see Mercant take a gun out of his shoulder holster, release the safety catch, and then put it calmly into his pocket. He intended to tell Mercant that there had never lived a more harmless person than Sammy Derring, but then he thought better of it and kept silent. He led the way without a word. Mercant followed behind, not speaking either. Sammy Derring looked up, startled when the door was suddenly pushed open. He recognized Smith, but he was sure he had never met the harmless looking man before. But as he noted a little while later, the man was not as harmless as he had appeared at first sight. His eyes seemed to be lying in ambush for something. "Sammy Derring?" the unknown asked softly. "Just stay seated and don't move. Answer my questions without hesitation. At the slightest suspicious move on your part I'll shoot you. My name is Mercant." Sammy was nonplussed. His face assumed an indescribably stupid grimace. His mouth gaped, and he stared clumsily into the dark barrel of the gun that Mercant was pointing at him. "What do you want from me?" he managed to squeeze out. "Why did you request the secret files to which only the Defence Minister has access?" "Secret files? I did not request them. They were brought to me by Mr. Smith and Mr. Mantell. I am supposed to check them over. I wouldn't dream of requesting such secret documents. It is totally out of the question that I would do such a thing." "So you say they were brought to you? And you definitely deny having requested them?" "I know nothing at all about this whole affair. Anyhow everything seems to me like in a dream. Everything is so

strange." "Will you explain this a bit more in detail, Mr. Derring," urged Mercant, leaning forward with an expression of intense concentration. Smith stood next to him. Sammy hesitated. The whole story seemed odd to him, and now he was supposed to tell it to his superiors. How would they accept such a fantastic tale? "I was fishing," he began. And noticing the amazed look on Mercant's face he added swiftly, "I was fishing yesterday at my favourite spot at a little lake in the woods. Suddenly a strange sensation came over me. I felt as if I could leave my own body, and that's exactly what I did. A few seconds later I was in a big, dark cave. For a moment I thought I had seen Earth lying deep down below me. It was a crazy dream. Then I woke up, and I was sitting here in my office and Mr. Smith had just brought these documents to me. That is the truth, the whole truth, even if I can't explain it to myself. I don't know what went on in the interval." "That happens once in a while," Mercant admitted politely. "But in your case it would be advisable to find out what you have done in the past twenty-four hours that seem to have slipped from your memory." "Maybe my landlady could help you there. We could ask her." "That's a good idea. We will follow that up." Mercant gave some instructions. Smith went out to the secretary's little office. Five minutes later he came back. "Mr. Derring was home last night. He returned earlier than usual from his fishing trip, without bringing any fish to his landlady. That's the first time that ever happened, according to Mrs. Wabble, his landlady. Mr. Derring seemed not his usual self, very odd, and went straight to bed. This morning she could not detect anything out of the ordinary in her lodger's behaviour." Mercant looked at Derring. "Can you swear to it that you are again your own self?" "Can I swear to what?" "I want to know if you feel normal again. It is obvious that there is a gap in your memory. From yesterday afternoon until about two hours ago you were doing and saying things which you can't recall now. Something else had taken over your body and pretended to be you." "But that is"- "Yes, it is possible, contrary to what you may believe. Not for any human being, of course, but you might have heard that there are other living beings in the universe besides ourselves." "Yes, I have heard about the Arkonides." "No, not the Arkonides. I am talking about the M.S., an insectlike race that know how to snatch a person's mind from his body and replace it with their own minds. In your particular case, a case of mistaken identity has occurred. The M.S. who invaded your brain mistook you for the Secretary of Defence. Your names are almost alike. We don't yet know the M.S. methods of communicating with each other. It seems to be based on acoustics. Phonetic sounds, rather than writing. Daring sounds almost like Derring, particularly to some untrained alien ear, not familiar with the fine points of English pronunciation. The alien creature slipped into the wrong man. That's all. Mr. Derring, you have done a tremendous service to mankind, even if unintentionally, because of your name." Mercant had put the gun back into his pocket long since. There was no longer any doubt in his mind that the M.S. must have left his host's body some time ago. But to his surprise, Sammy Derring seemed to be none the worse for his experience. He looked healthy and absolutely normal. Therefore, the theory must be wrong that nobody could survive such a mind snatching episode. But at the same time Mercant realized that the Secretary of Defence would be the next target for the M.S. He must be put under strict surveillance immediately. And Perry Rhodan had to be informed of these events immediately, before any further attacks could take place. Mercant gave some more instructions to Smith. The agent disappeared to carry them out. He did not fully understand the game that was being played here, but he was used to carrying out orders promptly, regardless. He went straight to Miller, Daring's private secretary. He found Miller in a turmoil of activity. Orders sounded over the intercom, messengers brought sealed envelopes, locked files were dragged up from the safes in the basement, and Miller waved impatiently when Smith dared speak to him. "Don't bother me now; come back at some other time. The boss has no time." "Don't you know who I am?" "Of course I do, but that doesn't matter any longer. Or have you come to arrest Mr. Daring?" "Who knows," grinned Smith, seeing Miller gasp for air.

"Just calm down for a moment. I have a few questions I would like to ask you." "Be quick about it!" "What's all the excitement about? What's all this dragging by of files and documents supposed to mean?" "The Chief's personal orders. He requested all documents regarding national defence and rocket development. After all, he can't possibly carry all the data around in his head." "Is that so?" asked Smith, and had disappeared before Miller could figure out what had taken place. In the meantime Mercant had obtained a direct line to his headquarters in Greenland. From there a connection was established to Perry Rhodan's base in the Gobi Desert. Under the protective umbrella of an invisible shield lay the center of the Third Power, the latest power bloc on Earth, which had come into existence several months previously. But to his great regret Mercant was told that Perry Rhodan was unavailable. He was on Venus, Earth's sister planet. As Smith entered, Mercant was just ending his conversation. He looked up and said heavily, "Whatever is going to happen, Smith, we will have to carry the responsibility on our own shoulders. And now you can tell me that Samuel Daring, or whatever the thing is hiding in Samuel Daring's body, has ordered all top secret files to be brought to him. Isn't that what you just found out?" Thunderstruck, Smith managed only to nod.

CHAPTER TWO

The huge boulder lay on the flat surface of the desert plain. The sun was shining fiercely down on the rock. The air rose like a glimmering hot column, but nothing disturbed its shape, for there was not the slightest breeze to stir the burning air. All of a sudden the incredible happened. The rock lifted off the ground as if a giant, invisible hand had picked it up. Infinitely slow, the boulder began to float. Now it was resting on some invisible ledge a foot above the desert floor; it kept rising. If anyone had been able to watch this performance, he would have doubted his own sanity. The boulder weighed at least ten tons, but it behaved as if the laws of gravity had no application to it. It climbed upward like a gas-filled balloon, then moved a little distance sideways. Then it crashed down on the ground as if the invisible hand had suddenly released its grip. Dust rose whirling, then settled slowly again. The boulder lay on the ground as if it had never moved in such a weird fashion. Once again the sun's rays hit it straight on, heating spots that shortly before had been covered by the cooling shade. But this rest period did not last. The rock moved again, this time faster and more steadily. It rose up thirty feet into the air and then flew off sideways. Relentlessly it kept flying parallel to the flat surface of the desert floor, coming closer to the shore of a still salt lake whose waters lay quiet like a smooth mirror. Suddenly the boulder fell straight down into the lake, disappearing in a deep walled water funnel, leaving behind a series of concentric spreading waves that slowly ebbed away on reaching the shore. Several people stood at a distance of more than a mile from the salt lake, gazing over to its blue expanse. The oldest of the group, a white haired giant with an unusually high domed skull and a pale complexion, nodded with satisfied mien. Next to him stood a young woman who made a gesture to signify her appreciation. The short Japanese for whom this praise was intended merely shrugged his shoulders with embarrassment. "I bungled this job," he admitted without realizing how grossly he undervalued his capacities. "I simply can't do it, Miss Sloane." The young girl, Anne Sloane, turned to the white haired man. "Never mind what Tama thinks about himself, Mr. Khrest. Tama is just too modest. According to the frequency detector he is a mutant, and I have no doubt that he is one indeed. He managed to raise a ten ton boulder at a distance of more than a mile for almost seven feet, using only the strength of his mind. He has telekinetic powers, even if they are only in the initial stage. I needed several years to perfect my abilities. Tama, you'll have to be a patient pupil to become as good as myself at this. Don't lose heart!" The Arkonide scientist, who had crash landed on the moon and who had become Rhodan's collaborator, supervising all technical matters, tried to encourage Tama Yokida. "Don't give up, Tama. You need more training, that's all. After all, you possess an additional talent that will permit you to develop into an extraordinary human being. Although Miss Sloane is a master at telekinesis,

you can change an element into another and gather up the released energy at will and use it whichever way you want. That is a tremendously valuable ability. Together with your telekinetic predisposition, this will grow into a combination with a fantastic potential." Tama Yokida continued smiling humbly as before. "You are right, Mr. Khrest. I should be grateful to nature for having endowed me with such unusual talents. Do you wish to continue the instruction now?" Khrest gazed pensively out over the now calm surface of the salt lake. He placed a reassuring hand on the shoulder of the tiny Japanese. Then he spoke to Anne Sloane. "You let the rock fall down into the water, Miss Sloane. I am amazed at your telekinetic powers. I wonder if Tama will be able to influence the sunken boulder by way of telekinesis." Anne glanced at the young Japanese before she replied. I couldn't tell. As far as I am concerned I am positive that I could lift that rock out of the water again any time. Whether Tama can do this from this distance ... The saltlake isn't too deep." "How deep?" inquired Tama. "I would have to know." Khrest spoke into a tiny all purpose apparatus that he wore as a wide band around his wrist. "Dr. Haggard? Would you be so kind and send Miss Ishi Matsu out to us here? That's right. For a lesson." Anne Sloane understood. "Isn't that the little Japanese girl with the unusual gift of being able to see through solid bodies?" "That's right," confirmed Khrest. "She is what I would call a televisionary. She can perceive the rock lying at the bottom of this lake and thus determine its depth. She, too, will have to receive further training in order to fully develop her talents. Once she is able to penetrate optically big parts of the earth's crust, our mutant corps will be able to function like a living television installation." Tama smiled gently. "My little colleague and I complement each other splendidly," he confessed. "I hope the time will soon come when all of the mutants will learn to coordinate their efforts. Then no power on Earth will be able to resist us." "I think we have already reached that point," countered Khrest, while directing his glance toward the conglomeration of low lying buildings that had sprung up around the hull of the first moon rocket, the Stardust I, which had landed here after its return from man's first successful moon expedition. An invisible energy dome covered the complex and the surrounding area of almost thirty square miles. The invisible barrier received its energy from the inexhaustible Arkonide reactions. "We are not that deeply concerned with the mutant corps's ability to make a stand against other powers of this world," Khrest said, "but rather their ability to ward off attackers from space. The unfortunate emergency signals from our cruiser on this planet's moon will attract still more space travelling races. I am afraid Earth's isolated position in the universe has come to an end finally. Oh, here comes Miss Ishi." A slender, delicate young girl came walking toward the group. She was wearing blue jeans and a white blouse that made her slim but perfectly shaped figure look most attractive. Tama Yokida was obviously very impressed by his lovely compatriot. It was clear to all present that the two young people felt something more than lust casual friendship for each other. "You have asked for me, Mr. Khrest?" Her voice was just as sweet and gentle as the charming little person herself. "Yes, indeed, although you were already through with your daily lesson for today. Tama made an interesting suggestion to coordinate the different talents of the mutants. Over there is the salt lake; about six hundred feet from the shore, approximately over there where you can see that withered bush, a huge boulder of ten tons is resting at the bottom of the lake. Miss Ishi, what I would like you to do now is to estimate the depth of the water at that spot. Your friend Tama must have these figures if he is to complete his task. Do you get me!" The young girl nodded. Then she smiled encouragement to her fellow Japanese and placed herself in such a way that her face was pointed directly at the spot indicated by Khrest. She closed her eyes, for if her gaze could penetrate solid objects, then her own eyelids did not present any obstacle to her vision. She concentrated deeply, her effort creasing deep furrows into her smooth forehead. Tama kept close to her, almost touching the slender figure. But his physical nearness did not seem to

distract Ishi; quite the opposite. She stepped even closer to him and grasped his arm. She held it tight with both her tiny hands as if she needed his support. And then..."I can see the rock!" Tama called out all of a sudden. He stood there, his eyes open wide, staring out to the lake. "I can see it now. The rock is lying on the ground among other rocks and rubble. The depth of the water is not more than sixty feet." "Well done, Miss Ishi," Khrest complimented. "It is good to know that you can transmit your special ability. Tama, now will you start with your part of this task. Transform a tiny fraction of this rock into lead or gold, if you will. Release some energy. But not too much; otherwise, the lake will start boiling." Tama understood what Khrest wanted him to do. It was Khrest's duty to train the mutants. Perry Rhodan had given Khrest charge of his special corps, for Khrest was the only person capable of developing the mutants' talents to their full potential. They all stood without moving. Five minutes. Ten minutes. A quarter of an hour. Then, right above the spot where the boulder had disappeared below the water's surface, steam began to rise, slowly at first, then rapidly growing stronger. Air bubbles began to form, the water became agitated, sending small waves toward the shore, while other waves lost themselves along the watery expanse beyond the boiling whirlpool."That will do," Khrest said softly. "Tama, that's enough now. Tama, you can make the oceans boil if you so desire. I think we can conclude our lesson for today. By the way, Tama, what were you producing, gold or lead?" Ishi opened her eyes and answered instead of Tama. "Gold, Mr. Khrest. Whoever finds this rock someday will be very glad. There are several pounds of gold sticking to that boulder." Khrest was about to reply, when he was interrupted by a faint hum from his armhand. He lifted his arm and pushed in a tiny knob. "Yes, Khrest speaking..." It was Dr. Haggard, the medical specialist from Australia and discoverer of the anti-leukaemia serum that had brought about Khrest's cure. He was calling from the Stardust I. "Khrest, some unpleasant news. From Mercant The M.S. are active again." "I thought so. Where?" "One case has been observed in the U.S. Their Secretary of Defence has fallen victim to the mind snatchers. Mercant managed to prevent the worst in the nick of time, but he is powerless in those cases that remain undetected. He would like to know if we could help him with it." Khrest frowned. "Of course we will help him. Too bad though that Perry isn't back yet. Have you kept in communication with him?" "Not since his last call from the Venus base. They must have left already in order to return to Earth." "Establish contact with the Good Hope. Inform Rhodan of what you have told me. Maybe he will be able to locate the M.S. spaceship and destroy it. He has Tako Kakuta on board to help him, if necessary." Tako Kakuta was a teleporter. Once already he had succeeded in transporting himself into one of the M.S. spacecraft and exploding it, with the help of a bomb he had teleported with him. "I'll try to establish contact with Perry Rhodan in the Good Hope. But we should do something in the meantime." Khrest looked over to Anne Sloane. You are right. We can't wait. After all, that's what we have the mutant corps for. I am afraid our little troop will have to face its first trial..." The steaming jungles of Venus disappeared in the distance, and the planet itself became a gigantic silvery crescent whose brilliance surpassed even that of the near sun. This, of course, was an illusion. For the sun was in reality brighter even if smaller than Venus. However, the dense cloud cover reflected its light with such intensity that it became near impossible for the naked eye to look down on the second world of our solar system. The tall, lean man standing in front of the picture screen did not move. Dreamily he regarded the receding planet that he was including in his plans from now on. Perry Rhodan had come to realize that Earth had become too small for him and that he needed a world of his own in order to build up his domain. The ever silent Dr. Manoli sat close to Perry Rhodan. His slim body was hidden behind the back of his chair. Manoli, like Rhodan, devoted his attention to the planet that was now disappearing in the dark vastness of space. This planet so much resembled the way his own home planet, Earth, must have been one hundred million years ago. Far less impressed by this awesome celestial spectacle was

the third member of the crew inside the command center of the Good Hope. Reginald Bell's heavyset figure lay stretched out comfortably on his couch. The former engineer of the retired Stardust I was reading. His watery blue eyes skimmed rapidly over the pages of a book. His straight reddish hair seemed to stand on end, as if he were frightened by some horrible ghost story. Once in a while an ironic smile flitted across his broad features. He did not appear to be interested at all in the round globe of Venus, which seemed to shrink rapidly in size on the picture screen. He was the first to break the silence in the cabin. He shook his head in disgust and placed his book on his round belly. Now the picture on the cover became visible. It showed a jungle landscape with a swamp. In the middle of the swamp a slender space rocket could be seen. It had sunk halfway down into the morass. A man was standing at the opened air lock, defending himself with a ray gun against some gruesome monster that looked like a dinosaur. "What a guy! Such a thing should be illegal. His imagination is too wild. That isn't healthy!" Bell exclaimed loudly. Perry Rhodan did not take his eyes off the screen. Without turning his head he inquired, "Whose imagination don't you approve of?" "The author who wrote this novel." "Which novel?" Reginald Bell sighed deeply. "This science fiction novel, Adventure on Venus. Just imagine, the story was written more than twenty years ago. At that time nobody had any idea that we would be flying to Venus so soon. And that guy thinks up a story, has somebody construct a spaceship, fly to Venus, get stuck in the mud in a Venusian swamp and live there à la Robinson Crusoe. He battles heroically against dinosaurs and the sweltering heat until his friend arrives with a second space rocket and saves him. It's too incredible, Perry." Perry Rhodan swung around his swivel chair and stared at his friend, lying there on the couch. He would never cease wondering at the harmless appearance of Reg. How deceptive his exterior was! For both friends were the human beings with the highest I.Q.s in all the universe. They owed this superior intelligence to the Arkonide hypnotraining, which had endowed them within a few days with an extensive and advanced state of knowledge that far surpassed the total sum of all earthly intelligence. The scientific achievements of the age-old Arkonide civilization were safely stored in the memory banks of the two men. Reg most certainly did not look the part of a genius, quite the contrary. Even Rhodan was occasionally tempted to underestimate his friend's potential when seeing his harmless face. Still, he knew what was hidden behind those watery blue eyes. "What's so incredible about that? Wasn't that author right, after all? Don't we have such jungles and prehistoric monsters here on Venus? Isn't it hot?" Beg sighed again. "That's just it! The guy is so right in what he describes. Venus is just the way he imagined it to be. I am ready to believe this guy must have been here on Venus before us." Bell sat up and rubbed his right elbow. "It's simply uncanny." "Come on, Reg. You are a bit jealous of that writer. You shouldn't begrudge him his fabulous imagination, which let him experience vicariously twenty years ago what has come true today. He was ahead of his time, and you can't stand that." "But the ray gun ... what nonsense! Twenty years ago people did not even have the technical knowhow for such weapons." "But we used such a ray gun only the day before yesterday to drive off one of the fat beasts that intended to gobble up our ship for a nice dinner." Reg's face became distorted in a grimace of despair. "For crying out loud! We did not invent these ray guns!" "So what's the difference, as long as we have them. What does it matter that the Arkonides supplied us with these ray guns? Without the Arkonides we wouldn't be here either, for they gave us the Good Hope, too." Beg gave up the fight. "O.K., have it your way. No use quarrelling. That writer was a genius, way ahead of his time, wrote immortal works, even surpassing reality. If only he had been wrong in his imagination and had described it as a world filled with dust clouds ... ! But no, his description is so accurate! I am getting all riled up about this. We can't report anything new when we get back to Earth!" "Why do you read that stuff if it upsets you so much?" Reg had no answer to this question. He could not even attempt to think up a reply, for suddenly the air between the two friends

began to scintillate for a fraction of a second. Then a man materialised out of thin air where nothing had been before. Tako Kakuta, the Japanese mutant, had once again been too lazy to walk over from his radio communication center down the hall. The Good Hope was an auxiliary vessel attached to the giant Arkonide cruiser that had been destroyed on the moon by the combined forces of the planet Earth. Thora, the female commander of the research expedition, had been able to salvage the "lifeboat" from that catastrophe and had fled to Earth, where she found refuge at Perry Rhodan's base in the Gobi Desert. The auxiliary craft was tremendous measured by terrestrial standards. It had a diameter of over one hundred and eighty feet, was spherical, and could travel at faster than light speeds. The spacecraft could accelerate at any desired speed, since it was supplied with gravitation neutralizers that nullified the otherwise unbearable stress exerted on any living organism. The vessel was equipped with advanced types of weapons that surpassed all human imagination. The boat's effective range of five hundred light-years lay, according to Khrest, below the minimum needed by the Arkonides to return to their home planet, or even to reach the nearest base of their farflung galactic empire. The radio communication center of the gigantic spaceship was so far ahead of what was known on Earth that Tako could comprehend only a small part of its machinery and installations. He merely made use of the small transmitter that produced normal radio waves. Thus he established radio communication with Earth. It would take several months before he would understand the structure and workings of the other instruments of the Arkonide super technology. For a while the contact with the Gobi Desert base had been interrupted. The distance between Earth and Venus had become too great. But now they were rushing back to their home planet with such incredible speeds that soon they were able to hear Dr. Haggard's radio signals. They became so loud it was impossible not to hear them. That was the reason why the Japanese teleported himself into the command center where Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell were stationed. Bell reacted to this surprise, as usual, by being half scared to death. There was really no excuse for that, but he could not help feeling shocked every time he saw Tako materialize in the empty air before him. "Is that trip really necessary? Do you have to appear unannounced any time and anywhere?" Tako smiled gently. In the future I'll first teleport a letter to announce my impending arrival. Will that suit you better?" Bell's reply was not fit to be printed. Rhodan cut their banter short. Did you get in touch with the Gobi base?" "That's why I came to see you, replied a now very serious Tako. "Dr. Haggard had been calling for hours trying to reach us. Bad news, Mr. Rhodan. The M.S. invasion has begun. Mercant reported several cases where the M.S. have taken over the bodies of important personalities. It doesn't help though if they are found out, as Dr. Haggard said. The M.S. then simply withdraw and seek another host." Bell pushed aside the book that had so greatly displeased him some seconds earlier. He sat up straight on his couch, his eyes suddenly filled with cold fury. "What did you say just now? Invasion? But we destroyed the ship of the intruders?" "Then they must have more than one ship," remarked Rhodan, and turned to Manoli. Let's forget about Venus now, Eric? Switch the picture over to Earth. As fast as possible!" The picture on the viewing screens changed. A small greenish-blue globe became visible with a tiny dot near it, the moon. Both celestial bodies quickly grew in size while they were looking at them. Rhodan addressed the young Japanese. "Was there any-thing else?" "Khrest requests your immediate return to the Gobi Desert base. He wants to put the mutant corps into action. He sees no other possibility to proceed against the invasion. He would like to speak to you." "Then let's go," decided Rhodan, and walked out of the room. Tako briefly grimaced at Bell; then he disappeared just as suddenly as he had come. When Rhodan entered the communications center Tako was already waiting for him. He was calling Haggard. "Perry Rhodan wishes to talk to Khrest" Rhodan waited for a few moments; then he acknowledged Khrest's voice, greeting him across space. "Khrest, this is Rhodan speaking. What's the trouble?" "Listen, Rhodan, the situation is critical. Mercant is desperate.

He has asked for help. I did not want to do anything without first consulting you. How soon can you be back here?" "In about two to three hours. I hope the space sphere can take this." "Don't worry, Rhodan. If you should sight the M.S. spaceship, don't hesitate to destroy it. Have Tako teleport himself into the enemy ship with some explosives." "They will be more cautious this time, I am afraid. They have been warned by their first experience. They might have brought along some additional reinforcements." "That's out of the question. The M.S. mentality forbids them to contact any other race to come to their assistance. They believe themselves to be superior to any creature in this universe and to be able to overcome any opponent. In my opinion it is almost impossible to conquer them completely." "You underestimate us once again, Khrest. By the way, I have located a suitable place on Venus for us. We will establish our second base there and proceed with the training of our mutant corps." "This project will have to wait until we have defeated the invaders. Mankind has no idea what's in store for them. I fear the M.S. must have established a beachhead on Earth from which they operate. It would be too cumbersome for them to use a moving spaceship as base of operations." "Any idea where this base might be?" "None whatsoever. You will have to talk to Mercant about this. He has spoken with several persons who had been invaded by the M.S. and then have been abandoned by them. He received some information from these people." Rhodan was perplexed. "I thought anybody would die once they had been possessed by the M.S. Has anything changed there?" "We were wrong in assuming this. The liberated victims showed no harmful aftereffects." "Excellent. That's one thing to our advantage. Now, something else, Khrest—you realise that we must never lose the position we occupy in our relations with the world's big power blocs. They united only because of our presence, which they feared. Without this threat from the Third Power mankind will soon revert to the same chaotic conditions they have barely overcome. The old conflicts will split their newly found union apart. Therefore, I consider it vital to defeat the invaders as quickly as possible. This must have precedence over any other problems now. If we fall, we will forfeit everything we have gained. All our prestige will vanish overnight." Rhodan could almost see the amused smile with which the Arkonide scientist answered, "Our prestige would not be the only thing to vanish in that case! So would all of mankind. And we would be lost too. The positronic brain predicts that we are in exactly such a crisis." "And what are our chances? What does the positronic brain have to say to that?" "At least fifty fifty." Perry Rhodan thought for a while before he asked, the Good Hope has a range of five hundred light-years. Couldn't we attack the home planet of the M.S. with it?" Khrest sighed. "Your drive is rather frightening, Rhodan. So much energy! There might be a chance later on, but for the moment the prognosis is pretty hopeless. The M.S. avoid any direct confrontation, but they keep up their defence system. The Good Hope alone is not enough for an attack." "That remains to be seen," said Rhodan, who did not abandon the idea entirely. "Will you get in touch with Mercant. I'll expect to see him or one of his men at the base when I return. Then we can map out our strategy. Is there anything else?" "No, not for the time being, Thora is acting reasonable for a change." "Well, she had better!" commented Rhodan with a shrug of his shoulders. "So long then, Khrest" While Rhodan was walking back to the command center he seemed lost in thought. His mind was preoccupied with Thora, the commanding officer of the Arkonide expedition. What an unusual woman, even if she was afflicted with the morbid prejudice of racial superiority! The Earthlings were nothing but half savages in her eyes. Only under pressure had she declared her willingness to cooperate with Perry Rhodan. She realized that she was stranded here in this, to her, previously unknown solar system from which she could never find her way back home unless mankind would help her build a suitable spaceship. There was no hope that her own highly intelligent but utterly decadent race would lift a finger to search for her or even come to her rescue. Most likely no one would ever notice that the scientific research ship was missing" Thora was a woman of captivating beauty. Perry could almost have loved her if he had not hated

her even more. But was it really hatred he felt, or did he only imagine it? How good it was to have Khrest at his side, to explain the psychological reasons for Thora's incomprehensible behaviour. Rhodan shrugged and entered the center. The picture screen in the middle showed Earth with clearly discernible continents. They would soon be landing. Mercant had not come in person. The load of responsibility for the Western Bloc's security rested so heavily on his shoulders that he no longer left his underground fortress below the Greenland ice pack, from where he directed all actions. One of his most capable employees was Captain Klein, who worked for the defence system. He was also Rhodan's ally. Mercant had nominated Klein as his personal liaison with Perry Rhodan. Captain Klein was admitted through the momentarily lifted energy barrier. He was led to Perry Rhodan, who barely five hours earlier had still been on Venus. Khrest was sitting silently on a couch in the back of the room, together with Thora. Also present at this meeting were Bell and Manoli, Dr. Haggard and the telepath John Marshall, a member of the mutant corps. Rhodan greeted Klein and encouraged him to speak. "Let's hear your report, Captain Klein! I presume that Mercant authorised you to speak on his behalf and gave you all available information regarding the situation. How bad is it?" "Quite bad, even if we can't yet fully gauge the extent of the invasion that is proceeding in all secrecy. The M.S. are clever, they keep learning from their initial mistakes. At first they were rather clumsy and could be easily detected. This was not much help, though, since an M.S. simply leaves his host's body, permitting the victim's mind to return unharmed, except that the latter cannot remember anything that went on during the interlude when his intellect was imprisoned in the M.S.'s own insect body. The M.S. can then pick a new target. They have by now reached such a degree of perfection that it has become almost impossible to detect them. But even if they should be found out, the M.S. cannot be rendered harmless unless their host is killed on the spot. We know of no way out of this terrible dilemma." "But I do," insisted Rhodan. "I know the M.S. have established a base somewhere on this planet. This is where their bodies rest while their intellects change places with those of their victims. If we could find this base and then destroy their bodies we could succeed in killing off their intellects. For they are dependant on this link with their own bodies in order to survive. A rather complicated process for which we have undeniable proof." Perry Rhodan fell silent. He could hear Thora's excited whispering in the background. She was apparently trying to talk Khrest into something. Her golden eyes were flashing with a dangerous fire. Was she making another attempt to incite her fellow Arkonide against the human race? Rhodan felt anger rise in him, but he suppressed it. The day would come when he would prove to this arrogant woman how much need she had of mankind. "Go on, Captain Klein!" urged Rhodan. "What does Mercant propose to do about this?" "Place all important personalities under strict surveillance to avoid any infiltration. That's all." "Well, that is not too much," Perry Rhodan admitted. Khrest moved in the background. He stood up. "Yes, Khrest, what is it?" All eyes turned in the direction of the tall scientist, whose glance flickered strangely in a manner no one had ever observed in him before. His voice sounded a little shaky as he said, "Thora has been able to convince me that it is senseless to fight against the M.S. We have a lot of experience with them. So far they have conquered every solar system they ever discovered. If we had not surrounded our galactic empire with a dense ring of alarm systems, and if we had not destroyed every oval spaceship during its approach, there would no longer exist any Arkonide galactic realm. Nothing can stop the advance of the M.S." Rhodan frowned. "So what? Why are you telling us all this? Has Thora encouraged you to do so?" Khrest looked back to Thora; he seemed helpless. Quickly she came to his assistance. She jumped up and stood there like a goddess of vengeance with fiery golden eye. Her pale hair had almost the same colour as her delicate skin, which was barely beginning to show a tan from the strong desert sun. She was beautiful, of an un-Earthly beauty! "Yes, I have encouraged him, Perry Rhodan. You are aware lust as well as I myself that Khrest has been weakened by his long illness. And his mind in

particular has been affected by it. If we are going to remain here on Earth to fight a hopeless battle against the M.S., we will waste our last remaining shred of strength. I have suggested to Khrest that we should leave this solar system and search for another one that has not yet been discovered by the M.S. Khrest has agreed to my proposal. Our decision is irrevocable. Rhodan warned Bell with a stern look. His impulsive friend was just about to advance threateningly in Thora's direction. "So you want to leave our planet in the lurch," Rhodan said in a matter of fact voice, "The same planet that came to your rescue when you needed help." "Who helped whom?" demanded Thora. "The help was mutual. May I remind you that Khrest would no longer be alive without Dr. Haggard's medical skill and Earthly medical know how." "And if it had not been for you my crew would still be alive. But you killed them during the treacherous surprise attack on the moon. We are quits!" "Not by far! But I want to ask you something else. Please answer me honestly. Do the M.S. rank higher in the galactic classification than the Arkonides? Are they considered a superior race to your own?" Thora's face became flushed with anger. "How dare you even ask such a question! That insect race belongs to a primitive level, not worthy to inhabit the universe." "But you are still ready to turn tail when they threaten here?" Rhodan said ironically. "Isn't that amazing? Doesn't that hurt your pride?" "We are forced by necessity. Here we don't have the weapons we need to defeat the M.S." "How about trying this without these weapons? We can invent new ones that might be even better. Mankind is not willing to accept the M.S. invasion as an immutable fact. We will defend ourselves and chase them off. And you, Thora, are going to help us with that." "You can't force me to do so." "I am not so sure about that," countered Rhodan with studied deliberateness. "I have a way of forcing you. Without the Good Hope you are powerless, Thora. From now on neither you nor any of your robots will be admitted to the Good Hope. You are not to leave your quarters inside the base." "You place me under house arrest?" shouted Thora, full of fury. "You wouldn't dare!" "I am simply taking all necessary measures to ward off the M.S. invasion. Khrest said once that the Earthlings resemble the very early Arkonides in this respect. He is right. We are hard and determined to reach our goal. My goal now is to deal a crushing blow to the M.S. from which they can never recover. I want to find a weapon against them that someday will also be of use to your own nation. But you, Thora, will under no circumstances stand in my way! And neither are you going to desert with the Good Hope. Have I made myself clear?" Thora regarded him with hatred in her eyes-but there was something else besides hatred hidden in them. Rhodan was seized by a piquant thrill recognizing the significance of the sensation that was slowly rising from the unconscious mind of the woman opposite him. It was admiration and a bit of surrender-or even beginning love. Rhodan was confused, but he did not show it. There would be plenty of time later to analyze this paradox. Right now there were more urgent matters to attend to. Little did he know that at that moment Khrest came to a decision too. The scientific leader of the Arkonide expedition, who had met many races of the universe and had dealings with all kinds of peoples within the Arkonide empire, realized suddenly with absolute certainty that the human race was the one to become the heirs of this galactic empire. He felt no regret when he recognized this fact, which he then proceeded to register and store in his immense brain. Captain Klein interrupted the silence. "Lieutenant Li Tschai-tung, our ally from the Asiatic Federation, has disappeared. Mercant believes that the M.S. got hold of him." This unexpected shock jolted even Perry Rhodan. Lieutenant Li was one of the leading agents of the Asiatic Federation. At the time he was put into action against Rhodan, he was one of the first men to realize that the big powers had to unite if they wanted to stand up against the might of the Arkonides. But once this unity had been brought about he had understood Rhodan's motivations and learned to appreciate highly the former test pilot of the Western Bloc. Together with his colleagues Kosnow from the Eastern Bloc and Klein from the Western Bloc he had gone over to the side of the Third Power. Klein became the liaison between Rhodan and

Mercant, while Li became the link between Rhodan and the secret service of the Asiatic Federation. And now the M.S. appeared to have overpowered this man. Thus, Rhodan was attacked directly for the first time, apart from some insignificant episodes during their first attempt. "What do you mean by that '-he disappeared'? Li can't have disappeared into a void." "Li disappeared from Greenland and returned to China without being authorized to do so. Mercant thinks that the M.S. intend to undermine and ruin the big powers one by one." "Why would they pick on our liaison officers for that purpose?" Rhodan regarded Klein with some uneasiness. The captain noticed the feelings of distrust that were rising in Rhodan. He shook his head. "If you should be thinking the M.S. have got hold of me, too, then I must disappoint you. Is there no way you can ascertain the presence of an M.S.?" "How do you propose one could go about that?" "I have no idea; but I thought that you with your technical means"- "The frequency detector!" Bell interjected nonchalantly. Rhodan acknowledged the suggestion with an angry slap on his thigh. He was annoyed at himself for not having thought of this right away. Of course-that was a possibility. The highly sensitive detector set could receive the vibrations of the human brain and register their frequencies. The detector was capable of distinguishing between a normal brain and that of a mutant, despite the fact that the difference was rather slight between the two sets of brainwaves. How tremendous, on the other hand, must be the difference between the human brain and that of the insectlike M.S.! "You are right, Reg! That should give us an efficient method of determining whether somebody has been taken over by the M.S. The only question remaining is what to do in such a case. We can't simply kill that person, if there is any chance left of saving his life. There is no sense in chasing the M.S. from one human body to another." From the background came Khrest's voice, which could be heard over Thora's protestations. "The thing to do is to destroy the body of the M.S. that he left behind sleeping somewhere. This in turn will cause the human mind, imprisoned in the insect's own body, to return to his own. The mind of the M.S., on the other hand must die together with his own body. That is their only known vulnerable spot; we must exploit this weakness." "How do you suggest going about tracking down the M.S. mind on its way back to its body?" Khrest smiled enigmatically. "This is something you will have to learn by experience. This is where the mutants will have to come in. Perhaps they might succeed in bridging the gap between the M.S. mind and body." "Maybe," agreed Rhodan half heartedly. He considered it unlikely that they could ever trace a nonmaterial substance moving at the speed of light. Mind was a form of energy, and thus undoubtedly a form of matter. It was possible to detect it, but he was not so sure about pursuing it. Or could there be some chance...? Klein used the lull in conversation to remark, "Mercant asks you, Mr. Rhodan, to track down Li. He can't manage this task by himself. Li is liable to cause great damage. Mercant is of the opinion that the M.S. will try to shatter the world's newly found unity. A divided enemy will be an easier target for the M.S. That absolutely must not happen." "You say Li has gone to China?" "Yes. That is as far as we could trail him; then we lost sight of him. We are inclined to believe that he is now in Peking." Rhodan turned to Bell. "Get me Ernst Ellert, but quick!" Reginald Bell left without comment. Only Khrest's whitish eyebrows arched upward in surprise. "What is Ellert supposed to do?" Since Klein had never heard about Ellert's special talents, Rhodan saw fit to give forth with an explanation. "Ernst Ellert is a mutant. His abilities surpass anything that the human mind could conceive so far. He is a teletemporarian. That means that he is capable of sending his mind ahead into the future and thus looking back on the past of our present time. Maybe he will succeed in hunting down the secret hiding place of the M.S." "Teletemporarian?" murmured Klein, who was obviously at a loss to understand Rhodan's explanation. Then he shrugged and kept silent. He trusted Perry Rhodan to know what needed to be done. Ellert arrived, and at first sight it was difficult for those who had been told about his unusual gifts to suppress a certain disappointment. The German looked perfectly normal, showing

no indication of any special ability. However, his eyes burned with a steady, never flagging fire. These eyes had peered into eternity, Rhodan thought whenever he looked at them. "We are holding a council of war," Perry Rhodan told Ellert "The M.S. have started their invasion of Earth. Lieutenant Li, special agent of the Asiatic Defence System, has been taken over by them. Tako Kakuta will give you all necessary information. He will also accompany you. I hope you will be successful. Before you leave I will give you two frequency detectors and further instructions." Rhodan hesitated for a moment before he continued. He had to exert a special effort to bring himself to say what was on his mind. "I felt reluctant so far to make use of your special talents, Mr. Ellert. Will you permit me a private question? You have lived in the future more than once. That means you sent your mind ahead, while your body remained in the present time. By the way, the fact that you can leave your body at will and then let your mind slip back into it puts you on the same level as the M.S. However, you surpass them by far, since your intellect is not chained to our present time. Can you understand now why I have chosen to put you into action against the M.S.? If ever there was anybody who could represent a real danger to them, it is you! But back again to my original question. You were often in the future, Ellert. Have you ever any indications there that the Third Power will in the future? Will we defeat the invaders?" A shadow flitted across Ellert's face. "I am sorry to have to disappoint you. No, not in that sense. Don't jump to any conclusions yet! But the future is nothing concrete. Many ways lead into the future, or let me say, rather, there is not just one future. Our present time is something real that has evolved out of a past that by now has become a fixed reality. But the future is unreal and uncertain. The smallest event taking place in the present time can change it. Therefore, I have never yet been in a future that could not still have been changed, Do you follow me?" Rhodan slowly nodded to confirm that he did comprehend. Ellert continued, "There are thousands of potential futures, futures with and without Perry Rhodan. Yet only one of all these possible futures will become reality. I know that you must feel disappointed now, but my gift to be able to travel ahead in time even if only with my mind, is without any practical value for you. I could slip into the wrong time stream and then my report would not be true." "Why is it that you know all that and have never before discussed it with me?" asked Rhodan with a hint of reproach in his voice. "I did not know it myself," Ellert admitted, embarrassed. "I did some experiments in the last few days and had to learn that different worlds exist simultaneously. But only one of those will later turn into reality. I have no clues which it will be." "I see. Then you are totally useless to us as a prophet." Ellert made a gesture expressing regret. However the knowing fire still remained in his eyes. Was he not speaking the truth? Rhodan looked questioning toward John Marshall. But the telepath slowly shook his head. So Ellert was not lying. He spoke the truth. What then was it that give him this knowing look? "You might be useless to us as a prophet," Rhodan continued, but not as an opponent against of the invaders. You are capable of leaving your body to try to pursue the M.S." "I'll try to do my best, together with Tako, to solve the task you have set for me," promised Ellert. Then, after some hesitation, he added, "According to one of the many potential futures I will not be among the living in a few weeks. But as I mentioned already, this is just one possibility among many. This one has just as much chance of coming true as another where I will assist you way ahead in a far future to consolidate the existence of the great galactic empire." Perry Rhodan did not reply. He was very pensive as both Ellert and Tako Kakuta, the Japanese teleporter, left the conference room. CHAPTER THREE Another conference room. More than six thousand feet below the Greenland ice cap the three presidents of the big powers met for the first time-not as before, in order to hatch plots against Rhodan. This time they were searching for an effective way to beat back the invaders. Mercant was present. Perry Rhodan participated in the meeting via a television installation. The narrow end wall was covered by a huge television screen. Rhodan's life size figure could be

seen on it. All members of the little group in the conference room could see and hear Rhodan the same way that he could perceive them. Nothing indicated that they were separated by thousands of miles. Mercant opened the meeting and then called upon Perry Rhodan to explain the strategic situation. "Gentlemen!" Rhodan came to the point immediately. "Unless we proceed to act at once we are lost. Fortunately for mankind a union of our world has been accomplished, and thus Earth can finally be called Terra. All frontiers have practically been removed. You, gentlemen, are ruling the world, apart from myself, representing the Third Power and the might of the Arkonides. Also, in the field of economics, our efforts are being coordinated. "I request that my agents and all authorized personnel may move unhindered in your countries. They must have free access to all government offices and especially to those of your defence Systems. My people have been ordered to protect all important personalities of the world under strict surveillance in order to become aware at once if any of them have been invaded by the M.S. For this purpose I need unrestricted power of attorney. I must request you to give me complete authority." "An embarrassed silence ensued. No one dared refuse Rhodan's demand; yet...Mercant intervened. "There is no doubt that you gentlemen appreciate the necessity of this unusual procedure and will make your arrangements accordingly. This is what you intended to do, isn't it?" The President of the Western Bloc nodded consent Reluctantly, the President of the Asiatic Federation and the President of the Eastern Bloc followed suit. They saw no other way out of the dangerous situation they were faced with. Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief. He had won the first round. "Thank you, gentlemen! This, then, takes care of the defence measures to be taken against the invading forces, as far as you are concerned. You no longer need worry about it. I am confident of accomplishing whatever is necessary with the help of my own forces. As soon as we locate the enemy spacecraft, we will destroy it as we did their first ship. But let's discuss now the second point on our agenda. As you all know I have founded an organization, the General Cosmic Company. The manager of this trust concern is Homer G. Adams, the well known financial genius with the eidetic memory. Our industrial installations have sprung up everywhere on Earth. We dispose of a working capital in excess of thirty-five billions. If you are willing to cooperate also in this area with me officially, I am ready on my part to advance the sum of thirty billions for a project we are planning for all of us." The President of the Asiatic Federation leaned forward. "What project are you referring to?" he inquired eagerly. Perry Rhodan smiled. "A space fleet! Our planet must have a space fleet!" "What for?" "There are many reasons, Mr. President. One of these is purely economic. It is no longer a secret that war and military rearmament used to be part of the economic welfare of a state. This may sound rather cynical, but is nevertheless a sober fact. We must therefore proceed according to this well proved principle. With this exception, though-our efforts will no more serve to manufacture arms for war, but we will have a new goal, to build a space fleet. This will bring about an economic boom for all nations on Earth. New industries will arise, every able person will find work. We will stamp factories and huge industrial enterprises out of the ground. We will find new methods of producing new materials and manufacturing thus far unknown machines. "I have spoken about the purely economic aspect and the tremendous advantages for all of mankind. But there is also a military reason for having a space fleet You destroyed the Arkonide exploration cruiser on the moon. An emergency signal was released automatically when this happened. This S.O.S. is broadcast by radio waves with faster than light speeds throughout the universe. These signals are intercepted by space travelling races. The current invasion is a result of this. But other races might be curious too and seek us out Terra must be ready to ward off any further invasions. For this purpose we need a space fleet I hope that you will see the logic of this reasoning and agree with me." All present agreed, and Rhodan's proposal was accepted unanimously. But Rhodan was not yet through. His next request concerned the ways and means for forming a united government of the world.

Rhodan concluded his motion with these words: "Once and for all we must have the guarantee that no more divisions of power will occur among the nations of the world. The building of the space fleet will contribute to enduring unity. But we must take care in other ways to nurture this feeling of belonging to one larger entity, going beyond the national frontiers. The United States of the World must become a reality, this age old dream of utopians that has been ridiculed so long. Never has there been such a favourable prognosis for this federation of all men as today. The common danger we face and the common efforts we will have to make to build the space fleet will act as inspiration for all of us. Will you please, as soon as possible, begin all necessary negotiations. That is all I have to tell you, gentlemen. Please proceed now on your own. I am not interested in the internal problems. Mercant will keep me informed of all the essentials. Thanks for your confidence in me; you will never have to regret." The television screen on the wall grew dark. All remained silent until Mercant remarked, "Our goals have been determined, gentlemen. It is up to you whether we reach them. I wanted to make sure that we would get some tangible results out of today's meeting, and I have therefore, asked someone to join us here. This man will be able to advise us in all financial and economical matters. Gentlemen, may I present Homer G. Adams, manager of the G.C.C." Ernst Ellert and Tako Kakuta were holding a council of war in their hotel room in Peking. "You must be able to do it," urged Ellert "Just remember how you exploded the oval shaped M.S. spaceship. You teleported yourself, together with the bomb, into the enemy's ship. If you could transport a bomb with you then you also be able to carry along a human being. You have proved that you can teleport any matter that you touch. Also, Ishi Matsu can transfer onto others her ability to see through matter, even when it is far removed." "You might be right," admitted the Japanese with a polite smile. "We would have to carry out such an experiment I have never thought of such a possibility. It simply never occurred to me till now, to be truthful." "We must experiment to find out all about our potential. This goes for the rest of the mutant corps. It will take many years of experience to stabilize our forces." "How about taking me along into the future asked the Japanese in all earnestness. "We should reciprocate favours!" Ellert grinned impishly. "Is that how you imagine our much praised consolidation of forces to function?" he mocked. "If Khrest had any idea of this..." Tako turned serious again. They had had their fun; now back to their task, "We have found Li," he stated. "What are we going to do with him now? How can we know if he is going to do some foolish things, maybe even dangerous ones? We can't warn the government offices of the Asiatic Federation. Who can be sure how many of them have already been taken over by the M.S.?" He had hardly finished when the buzzer of both their all purpose sets began to sound. They pushed the receiver button and heard the voice of Ras Tschubai, the second teleporter of Rhodan's mutant corps. "Listen, there is some work for you Li just drove to the airport and bought a ticket for the stratoliner to Batang. The plane leaves tomorrow morning at six thirty-five." "What a ghastly time to have to get up!" moaned Ellert, who loved to sleep late. "What does he want in Batang, of all places?" "How should I know? He did not state a reason for his trip when he bought the ticket" "You have a point there," laughed Ellert "Why don't you come and join us here? Li won't get away during the night. When is he due to arrive in Batang?" "The flight lasts two hours. At about eight thirty, I should think." "We will meet him with a reception committee in Batang," said Ellert. "Okay, don't worry any more about Li. Just jump!" It took only one second for the heavysset African to materialize in the middle of the hotel room. He broke out in a grin when he saw that Ellert and Kakuta were startled at his sudden appearance. They jumped quite unconsciously, for no one can get used to seeing a person appear out of the void-not even another teleporter. "Do you have any idea what our friend wants in Tibet, of all places?" Tako asked. "Batang lies in direction of Tibet, if I am not mistaken." "You are not," confirmed Ras. "More than a thousand miles. Quite some jump, I must say. How will we do that?" "Well take Ellert between us,

and then we'll jump. Let's hope we can make it" Ras's eyes grew to saucer size. "Take Ellert between us, in the middle? Do you mean to say that we will take him along when we jump?" "Why not?" asked Tako. "He isn't as heavy as a medium sized bomb! So what about it?" The plane landed at the scheduled time. Li disembarked and walked to the airport buildings without looking right or left. He seemed to feel absolutely safe. Since a Japanese would not be conspicuous here at Batang, Tako had taken charge of Li's direct surveillance. He kept in constant touch with his two colleagues by way of his tiny transmitter, concealed in a bracelet. Li had no luggage, but he carried a large sum of cash. How he had obtained the money, no one knew, least of all probably Li himself. He took a room in one of the most expensive hotels, paid three days' rent in advance, and then did not leave his room for the rest of the morning. Tako kept watch sitting in a little bar across from the hotel. He was utterly bored. He was afraid of falling asleep and hoped to be relieved from this dull duty as soon as possible. Ras came to Tako's rescue toward noon. He ordered a drink and assured his Japanese friend that he would not at all mind staying in the little bar till evening. Not quite so sure about that and a bit unsteady on his legs, Tako left the bar and went straight to the hotel, where he was awaited by Ellert. "What on Earth do you think Li wants to do in this godforsaken town?" asked Ellert. He had been lying on his bed reading a book when Tako entered the room in a most conventional manner. Now he put his book aside and asked the question that had preoccupied him all morning. Tako was just as puzzled about Li's reason for being in Batang. "I haven't the faintest idea," he sighed, and flopped into the nearest chair. "We couldn't very well ask him personally. But couldn't you peek into the future and find out what his intentions are?" "I have no way of knowing whether I will reach the real future or simply some probability time stream. Fortunately, my mind is not tied to my body. It can move freely about, not being bound to any matter. I can travel even at right angles to the time stream, if necessary. But I never know whether what I am seeing will eventually happen." "Why don't you give it a try!" suggested Tako, who had only a vague notion about teletemporation. "I'll keep watch on your sleeping body here." Ellert nodded and remained lying on his bed. "There won't be any harm in doing it," he admitted. "But I can't tell how long this trip will take. Don't let anybody enter this room. Make sure of that!" Tako stood up and walked over to lock the door. When he came back to the bed, Ellert was lying there already motionless with closed eyes. Tako bent over his friend and stopped short. Ellert had stopped breathing-or was this only a delusion? His pulse was weak. Tako pinched Ellert's cheek, but there was no response. Tako decided to take a nap, since there was nothing much he could do now. His head had hardly hit the pillow before he was asleep. Nothing disturbed this peaceful afternoon. In the meantime Li was sitting in his hotel room a few blocks away. The intellect that had invaded his brain, there-by replacing Li's own intellect, had established telepathic communication with its commanding officer high up in space, travelling in an oval shaped spaceship. "We will have to abandon our plan to protect our base on the third planet. The human being by the name of Li has become suspect. But it would be senseless to try to take over another human body. We would have to start all over again. Besides, Li has only aroused suspicion; no one is certain about his state. Li will remain in Batang for two more days; then he will fly to the United States. Wait for further instructions." From that moment on Li's activities had no rhyme or reason. He wandered aimlessly around town, seeming to ignore the people that were shadowing him. On the third day he bought a ticket to Carson City, Nevada, by way of Hong Kong. Just as was to be expected, Ellert's attempt had remained unsuccessful. On the contrary, everyone was still more confused. Ellert had left the present time and had advanced into the future. His disembodied mind had floated above Li as he was flying from Hong Kong to Nevada. A horizontal shift in the time stream had shown another possibility. The same airplane, but without Li sitting in it. How could one tell which was the truth? It began to dawn on Ellert how little practical use could be made of his extraordinary ability. Each point in

present time was a pivot that led into all potential futures. There was an infinite number of different directions events could take. Only the present could determine the one path that would come true. Looking ahead into the future could only reveal all the various potential ways, but no one knew which of all these possibilities would become reality. Therefore, any event that had ever happened could never be changed again. Time could not be turned back for retroactive changes. While Ellert was mulling over these thoughts another idea had occurred to him. He was not yet capable of appreciating its full extent. He must discuss this with Perry Rhodan. If his theory should prove correct, then the days of the M.S. on Earth were numbered... Perry Rhodan and Ellert were sitting alone and undisturbed in the command center of the old Stardust I. This was Rhodan's favourite retreat, where he felt most at ease. This was where his fantastic career had started. Ellert began with his report. "We did not follow Li during his flight to the U.S.; we knew his destination. In the meantime John Marshall seems to have taken him under his wing. And according to what I was told, Anne Sloane is also staying in Carson City. I must agree to your notion that Nevada Fields must be Li's next stop." "This would make most sense," Rhodan confirmed calmly. "While I had left my body in order to observe Li in the future I made a remarkable discovery. The M.S. communicate with each other telepathically! I even managed to understand part of their conversations. Unhindered by our material hull, our body, our intellect works in a more perfect and advanced way. If need be, we could probably communicate directly with the M.S. via telepathy. But this would make no sense in my opinion. For it is much better if they never find out about this possibility. Another idea that came to me—I am convinced that it is possible to pursue a disembodied M.S. mind. Any teleporter should be able to do so. A teleporter travels by transporting his body and mind together into another dimension and later materialises at a different place. In this respect he is nothing but pure spirit, somehow related to that of the M.S. Under these circumstances it seems quite likely that Ras or Tako, or even myself, can attach himself to the M.S. when the M.S. leaves a human body in order to return to his own insect hull." Perry Rhodan had been listening very attentively. His brilliant brain considered the possibilities, evaluated the chances, and registered everything like an electronic robot. Therein he was assisted by the tremendous knowledge of the Arkonides. His memory banks discharged the needed information. He looked up and said to Ellert, sitting across the small table, "You are right, Ellert. You are absolutely right. We will try it; we will take that risk. We believe that Li flew to Nevada with some special reason. Miss Sloane will keep me informed about Li's every move. But there is something else I want to discuss with you. You know that I never have made any demands on your talent as a teletemporarian. At first I refrained from doing so because of ethical reasons. In the meantime we have found out that the presence of the manifold planes of probability forestall any attempt to obtain a clear vision of future events. Despite all this I must ask you to make an exception. Something very odd has taken place..." Ellert bent forward with great interest to view the newspaper article that Rhodan was pointing out to him. Huge headlines attracted his attention, and he began to read. SIX YEAR OLD SHOOTS FATHER WITH HIS OWN GUN Mysterious murder committed by a child. Mesilla, New Mexico, from our special correspondent One of the most mysterious murders of the century happened yesterday morning in Mesilla, New Mexico. Betty Toufry, a six year old girl, grabbed her father's gun, while sitting on his lap, and shot him. The child had never before handled the weapon and had no idea how to use it... Allan G. Toufry, the girl's father, as the article pointed out, had been an atomic scientist. He had been instrumental in the development of the latest type of atom bombs. He had been in charge of the most recent atom bomb tests in the desert. According to the report, the little girl had just minutes earlier run eagerly to greet her father. As he was embracing her, she had suddenly seemed startled. While she was seated on her father's lap the gun appeared to fly toward her hand. This scene was witnessed by the family maid,

whose eyewitness report should be regarded with reservation, since the woman seemed to be in a highly hysterical state. In any case, continued the report, the case should be investigated thoroughly by psychological experts. Ellert looked up to peer into Rhodan's questioning eyes. "How does this strike you?" asked Perry. Ellert shrugged. "Incredible! I am particularly intrigued by the family maid's statement. I am inclined to believe she was speaking the truth." "So do I," admitted Rhodan. "I have a hunch, but I'd like to be on safe ground. Therefore, I would like you to find out what will happen to this child in the future. Especially what kind of person she will grow up to be. Can you find out for me?" "Up to a certain point. Whichever direction the future will take eventually has no effect on the personality. That remains always the same regardless. It does not matter into which of the many potential futures I land; the main point is that Betty Toufry is alive now." "That's what I thought, Ellert. Will you have to travel to New Mexico, or can you manage from here?" "It would be more advantageous if I could be there. Besides, it would be close to Carson City." "Okay, Ellert. That makes sense. Leave at once. Keep me informed. I am most interested in this little girl." The telepaths were capable of immediately spotting the M.S. because of the aliens' peculiar thought pattern. The ring tightened closer and closer around the invaders but not without danger to their pursuers. Nevada Spaceport was the main installation for the exploration of space. A tight cordon was placed around the whole area in order to keep out trespassers. Unfortunately, this did not affect the M.S.; they could cross the security zone at any time and then find a safe hiding place in their victims' bodies. It was therefore essential for Rhodan's agents to keep watch on the inside of the cordoned off area and to be on the lookout for possible intruders. This did not especially please Captain Burners from the Security Forces, but he did not have much choice in the matter. After all he had to obey the orders of his chief, Allan D. Mercant. He did not always understand these orders, lately, for he had been used to clear rules. Anyone who had no legitimate business inside the zone was not allowed to enter. That was plain enough. And now, all of a sudden, all kinds of strangers were permitted to stick their noses into matters that did not concern them in the least. There was that Marshall, for instance. He was most exasperating. Kept smiling all the time as if he knew everything. What could that guy know, after all! Well, he was one of Rhodan's men, and Rhodan was supposed to have his fingers in every pie. John Marshall, the telepath from Australia who had foiled a bank robbery by reading the criminal's mind, was now in Rhodan's service. Marshall was authorized to move freely wherever he liked inside Nevada Spaceport. It was only natural for him to make good use of this opportunity and to familiarise himself thoroughly with the farflung installations of the spaceport. He knew General Pounder, Chief of the Space Exploration Command, as well as his assistant, Colonel Maurice. He was friendly with Dr. Fleeps, of the Department of Space Medicine, the same as with Dr. Lehmann, the scientific director of the California Academy of Space Flight. And of course, he was also acquainted with Captain Burners. So far Marshall had been unable to detect a single M.S. It seemed most improbable but was nevertheless the case. John racked his brain whether this was by accident or design, but could not find an answer. He kept all important personnel under constant surveillance and spoke with them every day, all the while exploring their thoughts, thanks to his mind reading abilities. Yet he could not discover anything suspicious. Today he had been invited by Dr. Lehmann for a game of chess. The elderly gentleman was a passionate player and was happy to have found his match in the person of John Marshall. It goes without saying that the scientist had not the faintest notion how Marshall managed to be such an excellent chess player—he simply read the old man's mind and thus knew in advance every one of his moves. "Check!" he said triumphantly, and moved his queen, believing he had won the game. With evident enjoyment he was puffing at his pipe, which gave off clouds of evil smelling smoke. "Are you sure, Dr. Lehmann?" inquired the Australian. "Do you think I forgot about my bishop? You are wrong there. Well, what do you have to say now?" Lehmann stared at the

bishop, completely nonplussed. Indeed he had assumed that his partner in the game had forgotten all about the bishop that had been standing in a corner, completely hemmed in for the last ten minutes. John lit a cigarette while Lehmann seized his queen between nicotine stained fingers. He raised the figure pensively. But in midair, Lehmann suddenly stopped moving. He seemed to turn to stone. John, who was secretly amused at his opponent's intention to threaten his bishop by a stealthy move of his queen, suddenly realized with a start that Lehmann's thoughts had broken off abruptly. He glanced at Lehmann, who was now sitting motionless like a stone figure. His eyes had assumed a vacant stare. His hand, still holding the queen, hovered above the chessboard. Not the slightest tremor could be noticed, not even a faint involuntary twitching of his eyelids. At the same time John felt something pushing into the space that, an instant before, had been occupied by the professor's mind. With lightning speed John withdrew the tentacles of his own probing, telepathic mind from within Lehmann's brain. He kept only in loose touch so as not to disturb the penetrating alien mind of the M.S. Marshall endeavoured not to incur any suspicion. He knew that within a few seconds one of the invaders would look at him from Lehmann's eyes. This should take about five seconds, according to Mercant. Indeed! When the five seconds had elapsed Lehmann began to stir. Like a puppet he put down the queen on a square where it made no sense at all. Life returned to his staring eyes. He looked questioningly at Marshall. "Well?" John tried to pull himself together. Never in his life before had he been faced with such an infernal situation. If only he could have penetrated into the alien's mind. But that was not as simple as that. The M.S. possessed some rudimentary traces of telepathic ability. He would become aware of his probing at once. Better not risk that. "Not a smart move, Professor! It would mean checkmate for you. Are sure you did not intend to do that really. I'll give you another chance." With these words Marshall seized his bishop and placed it in a rather unfavourable position. It should have been a simple matter for Lehmann to take advantage of John's gross negligence. But he did nothing of the sort. Apparently it took a certain time before the M.S. could appropriate all the information stored in his victim's memory banks. Lehmann's next move was nonsense and against all the rules of the chess game. John pretended not to notice, and he in turn made a move that was not any less clumsy. While doing so he tried to approach the alien mind, but he ran into a mental obstacle that he could not overcome. He wanted to avoid applying force, lest he draw the opponent's attention to himself. This then meant that the M.S. were capable of screening off their own thoughts by placing a barrier around them. Thus it would be impossible to learn their intentions by reading their minds. There might nevertheless be a chance that the barrier would loosen up when the M.S. took up telepathic communication with each other. John must be sure to watch out for such a possibility. The chess game proceeded in a most unorthodox manner, although the M.S. seemed to catch on fairly fast. John deemed it wise to let him win the game. Then he took his leave with a few harmless words. He concluded with: "I hope you'll keep your promise, Professor!" "What promise?" "The experiment. You haven't forgotten, surely. You suggested I should watch your next experiment with the newest combustion chamber. You wanted to test it in a couple of days." "Oh...of course. You can come with me." "Thank you, Professor. Good night." "Good night" Back in his room, Marshall took out the tiny but powerful transmitter from his suitcase. A few minutes later he was talking to Perry Rhodan, who was not pleased at first to be taken away from his early morning work with Khrest and the mutants. As soon as he heard John's voice, all his anger vanished. He listened attentively to Marshall's report. Then he said slowly, "Keep Lehmann under strict surveillance. I have heard from Anne Sloane. Li is on his way to the Nevada Spaceport. He is supposed to be travelling on Mercant's orders. He intends to meet with Lehmann. It is probable that the two plan to carry out some secret mission that will paralyse our space exploration program. Be constantly on the alert! Get in touch with Miss Sloane as soon as she arrives. The moment Ellert completes his current assignment he will join you in your efforts. It looks as

if Nevada Spaceport will soon become the turning point in the invasion."Rhodan could not know how justified he was in that assumption. It was not difficult for Ellert to trail Betty Toufry's path through the time stream. Five years in the future, he could recognize the best way of exploring her personality. All the parallel worlds coincided in a strange manner. While he was floating invisibly above the young girl and penetrating her mind, he experienced a shocking surprise-Betty Toufry was a telepath! She turned her head a little as if to listen; then a discreet smile flitted across her delicate features. She was sitting on the porch of the same house in which she had lived five years earlier with her father, when an unexpected event took place. "Who are you?" she inquired soundlessly with her thoughts. Ellert could understand her clearly. He decided to drop any pretence. There was no sense in attempting to deceive her; he felt that her telepathic powers were superior to his own. "I am Ernst Ellert, one of Perry Rhodan's collaborators." "Well?" She appeared surprised. Did Rhodan send you?" Ellert was astonished at that reaction. "What do you mean by that?" She seemed to reflect for a few moments. Then a little smile brightened her face. "I'm sorry, Ernst. I almost forgot You have already told me five years ago about this visit you would pay me in the future. It was thanks to this meeting that Perry Rhodan decided five years ago to take me under his wing. Since that time I have been working with the mutant corps. Do you understand that?" "Only partially," admitted the confused Ellert. "So you are working for Perry Rhodan; is that so?" "Yes, indeed." She hesitated awhile before she continued, "Listen, Ernst! I am a mutant. My specialties are telekinesis and telepathy. At the age of six I already had an I.Q. twice that of a normal adult. New mutants are being born in all parts of the world. The new type of man is coming into being gradually and so far unnoticed. Someday we will totally replace Homo sapiens." "What a horrible vision!" "Why? Do you regret that one stage of development will come to an end? I can't agree with you. Not Homo sapiens but Homo superior will become heir to the galactic empire." Ellert's confusion grew constantly. This little girl, whose intellect surpassed by far his own, spoke of things that were talked about only in whispers in Rhodan's camp. Well, he had almost forgotten that he was five years in the future now. And most likely in the dimension of reality."Would you answer a question, Betty?" "Yes, gladly." "Why did you shoot your father five years ago?" She seemed to hold back her thoughts at first, but then they came clearly. "As long as I can remember I would always read his thoughts. My mother had died when I was born. All my love was concentrated on him alone. That day, he came home, and my thoughts went out to greet him, when I encountered a barrier that was difficult to pierce. This is when I was confronted by the M.S. that had invaded his mind. It affected me in a horrible way, and I could hardly move. My father, or whatever that being was that was in my father's body, gathered me up in his arms and kissed me. Then he sat down, placing me on his lap. All the while I was reading his mind. His thoughts were all about the imminent destruction of our world, for the following day he planned to explode the subterranean atom bomb stores to let our continent go up into the air."Who would have believed my story? I was just a little six year old girl. I acted automatically. The gun he used to carry in his pocket flew into my hand by way of telekinesis. And then...well, then that's how it happened." Ellert remained silent. He let compassionate thoughts flow gently around the little girl. She lifted up her head, looking to the sky, where she presumed Ellert's spirit to be."And now, Ernst, go back to Rhodan and report what you have found out about me. There is one thing I can tell you-the M.S. invasion will fail! We will defeat them. But you, Ernst..." Her thoughts grew dim, he could no longer perceive them. "Go on-what is the matter with me, Betty?" "I am sorry. I can't tell you." "Why not?" "I am not allowed to, Ernst. Please, don't insist any further. You are the pivot around which the whole future history of mankind revolves. You are the turning point of human history. Your fate is closely linked with that of the galactic empire of a far distant future. If you had any idea of what lies in store you might try to avoid it That must not happen. Go along the path that your fate

has chosen for you, so that Perry Rhodan can reach his goal. You and I will never see each other again." "And in five years ... now? What is going to be then? Where will I be?" "In another five years? You will look upon this time as the dawn of mankind. You will look upon it from some lofty viewpoint that surpasses all human imagination. And now, will you please leave me alone." Ellert felt that Betty Toufry was erecting a shell around her mind, a shell he was unable to pierce. A few more seconds of indecision and then he returned to the present time. He knew exactly what he had to do.

CHAPTER FOUR

"You are convinced that the invaders' base here on Earth is somewhere in Tibet?" asked Reginald Bell. Rhodan nodded. Khrest was sitting next to him. Rhodan held a sheaf of papers in his hand, the latest reports from the G.C.C., telling about the new factories and industrial installations that Adams was having built in all parts of the globe. He had already started the construction of the terrestrial space fleet. The borders between the world's nations seemed to have come down finally, at least in this respect. "I know for sure, Reg. The M.S. intend to have Li proceed to their base. What their plans are once he gets there we unfortunately do not know, though. The M.S. changed their minds once they became aware of Ellert's mind probing inside the brain of Dr. Lehmann, who in turn had been taken over by one of the M.S. They did not abandon Li's body and select a new target. Li travelled to Nevada Spaceport and there met Dr. Lehmann. I am sure that the two have orders to deal a serious blow to our space exploration program there." "I have no idea how to prevent the two from carrying out their orders," remarked Khrest. He still seemed to doubt that anyone could ever manage to resist the M.S. His own decadent race had become too tired to fight effectively against the invaders. They have conquered whole star systems and subjugated entire races, and nobody could prevent it. "We most certainly will?" said Rhodan, hard and determined. "We have the means to do it, too. The disastrous atom bomb had something in its favour, despite the havoc it wreaked on part of mankind. Atomic radiation resulted in accelerating the development of the human race by a thousand times. Whatever man would have developed into within ten thousand years, he has already become today, at least partially so. Our mutant corps is nothing hut the precursor of the future human norm. And this did not happen any too soon, for without the assistance of our mutants we would be the helpless victims at the mercy of a merciless foe." Khrest looked straight at Rhodan. There was a fire burning in the golden hued eyes below his mighty brow—the same fire that Rhodan had once before perceived in them when they were discussing Earth's future fate linked with that of the Arkonide empire. Khrest's gaze was filled with admiration, joy, and trust, mixed with some worry. All this against a background of the unlimited knowledge of an age old race that had witnessed the rise and fall of many solar systems. "I have lately been preoccupied with the question whether fate or accident rules the universe," he replied. "I am almost inclined to lean toward fate playing the decisive role. How powerful and inconceivable must be the might of the one who has to weigh the..." "As far as our little world here is concerned, we are the ones to decide," interjected Bell in his usual prosaic manner. Quickly he changed the subject to what was now nearest to their hearts. "What will happen in Nevada?" Rhodan smiled enigmatically. "We will set a trap for them. In case they get caught in it, which seems most likely the way things stand at the present time, we should know shortly if we will win or lose our battle against the invading enemy. It all depends on whether Ellert's theory works out in practice." "Do you really believe his theory that our teleporters can pursue the disembodied minds of the Mind Snatchers when they leave their victim's bodes in a kind of a panic?" "Yes, I do believe this to be feasible, Khrest," confirmed Rhodan. "This will be our only chance to discover their hiding place. Once we are that far, the rest should not be too difficult. We might even be lucky and catch one of the M.S. in their natural form. Talking about this, I am reminded of a splendid suggestion that Ellert made to me. But all this depends on the outcome of the experiment in Nevada." "How about letting us in on the big secret!" urged Bell. "What are you planning to do

there?" "That won't take long to explain. You, too, should listen carefully, Khrest, I plan the following..." The new element had all the necessary prerequisites to become the future ideal propellant for space travel. It took up very little space in its solid form, which was one of its greatest advantages. Furthermore, it was absolutely harmless as long as it was not exposed to some harmless type of radiation, which could be produced at any time with the help of simple instruments. If that radiation process took place, then an atomic structural change was induced, which in turn depended on the intensity of the radiation. This radiation then was a catalyst; without it the new element remained nothing but a useless piece of metal. The experiments had not yet been concluded. Dr. Lehmann had succeeded in creating this new element. It was so cheap to produce that a trip to Mars would cost no more than a bus ride around town. Of course, this cost was negligible once the spaceship had been built. With the application of the radiation it was possible to release as much energy as was needed at that point. This new propellant would be ideal for faster than light flight. Of course, this was still only theory. But Dr. Lehmann was so obsessed by this idea that no one could deter him from carrying out the final experiments. One of the final steps was supposed to take place today. As the official representative of Allan D. Mercant, Li had access to all the installations of the research area. Lehmann would have been the last to object to his presence, since he knew Li to be really an M.S. like himself. The invaders intended to overexpose the new element to the catalytic radiation. This would result in an irreversible chain reaction, which would lead to the total destruction of the research center. Afterward, the two M.S. would leave the now useless bodies of their unwilling hosts and look for new victims. This was the point where some changes would occur. Ellert had claimed that only a panicky M.S. would flee in such a manner that could be pursued. Great hurry would preclude the necessary preparation for the flight. Ellert had argued that this would not leave them sufficient time to build up a protective mental screen that would blur the trail leading into another dimension. Although this sounded rather confusing, it was nevertheless convincing. This was why the catastrophe planned by Li and Lehmann had to be brought about as quick as lightning and then had to be stopped just in time, after the two M.S. had abandoned their two host bodies in a hurry. They would be forced to such haste unless they chose to die together with their victims' bodies. Lehmann and Li entered the room that housed the atomic reactor. They were in the company of John Marshall. Nothing seemed to arouse Lehmann's suspicion. The lab assistants greeted him and then turned to their work again. He obviously recognized them as being regularly employed in the lab. He hardly noticed, though, two or three new employees; least of all the new electrician, Ellert, who was busy with some levers located close to the huge switch gear box. Anne Sloane, who was scheduled to play the most important part in the coming catastrophe, was stationed inconspicuously somewhere in the background of the maze of instruments and installations. A dull thud marked the closing of the heavy lead door, the only access to the reactor center. Lehmann knew that a push from the inside would open it again. As soon as the chain reaction started there would be enough time left to get out of that lab and reach the safety of their own rooms, from where they would then leave to return to their own insect bodies. Lehmann, together with Li and Marshall, stepped over to the lead chamber. He pointed to a brick shaped metal bar that gleamed suspiciously behind the pane of quartz. "This is the new element, gentlemen. If we send an electric current through these points over there a radiation process is started that passes through the element, thus bringing about structural changes. So far we have not yet succeeded in making full use of the energy set free. The energy is changed into heat, which registers over there on that temperature gauge. The inside walls of the lead chamber are highly heat resistant. The whole process must be increased only very gradually to avoid a sudden blow-out. Well, you two laymen won't be able to appreciate the full extent of the progress that is hidden in this apparently insignificant looking piece of metal in there. Its

energy would be sufficient to propel a spaceship halfway through the universe at the speed of light."Lehmann walked over to the switchboard. For a moment he contemplated Ellert, who was dressed in a white lab coat. Ellert acted as if he had known the professor for a long time, realizing, though, that such a famous man could not be bothered to remember every little employee working in the lab. Similar thoughts were racing through the M.S. mind that was dwelling in Lehmann's brain."Is everything okay?" asked the scientist. "In perfect working order, Professor," confirmed Ellert, whose whole knowledge of the complicated machinery was limited to the manipulation of one single lever. This was the lever that regulated the switching on and off of the electric current that in turn determined the intensity of the radiation. "Fine, switch to the minimum." The lever flipped into the first notch. There were twenty of these notches. No one in his right mind would ever dare pull the lever over to the last notch, not even Lehmann, for this would cause the change to occur so rapidly that in all probability the whole lead chamber would melt immediately. No change could be observed behind the quartz pane, but the temperature gauge began to rise. Lehmann expressed satisfaction. "Heat! The temperature is rising. This position on the first notch would be enough to supply a whole continent with enough energy for hundreds of years. It's incredible, isn't it?"Li was standing next to Lehmann. He was silent There was, after all, no need for words between him and his fellow M.S. in the form of Lehmann. They communicated telepathically. It was not difficult for Marshall to probe cautiously these quick thoughts that rushed back and forth between the two aliens' minds. John had to be very careful not to make them suspicious of him. His scientific knowledge was too limited to appreciate the full extent of Lehmann's scientific achievement, but he did understand Li's question, "What is the critical point?" "When the lever goes up to the seventh notch," replied Lehmann via telepathy. But the words he spoke out loud to Ellert were, "Advance the lever another notch!" Ellert comprehended the devilish plan the M.S. had batched out. Lehmann would ask him gradually to increase the amount of energy until the seventh notch was reached, at which point the process would become irreversible and a chain reaction would set in. But all this would proceed at a very slow rate. Thus the two M.S. could leave the reactor room in all leisure, return to their rooms, and proceed to transfer their minds back to their own bodies, while in the meantime, here inside the reactor, the unleashed forces would begin their disastrous work. Anne Sloane realised that the time had come for her to act. Under no circumstances must Ellert be disturbed now. Like John Marshall, he must be able to concentrate fully on the two M.S. in order to follow them on their headlong flight. Ellert would leave his own body, yet remain in the present time. John would recognize the exact instant when the M.S. decided to flee. He would signal to the man who so far had kept inconspicuously in a faraway corner behind one of the huge generators. Tako Kakuta, the teleporter, would dematerialize his body and follow the M.S., the same as Ellert. Nothing could go wrong now, unless they had overlooked something. This did not seem likely, thought Ellert, who had stepped back from the switchboard. Lehmann observed the rising temperature gauge. A fanatic gleam was in his eye. He no longer tried to keep up the pretence. Li, on the other hand, remained calm. "Move the lever up to seven!" commanded Lehmann unexpectedly. The moment had come! Anne Sloane approached. Her eyes were fixed on the lever on Ellert's instrument panel. The lever began to move slowly, going beyond the seventh notch, advancing further and further. At the same time the total reserve current from the generators passed through the reactor, transformed into radiation that penetrated the metal block of the new element. Then it was caught again, ready to start the whole process over again. Anne knew that this could go on for twenty seconds before serious damage could result. For then a chain reaction would set in that could not be stopped. No one would be able to escape the inferno that would break loose inside the reactor room, if the only door could not be opened.She turned around and directed her glance toward the heavy lead door. The invisible energies of her mind penetrated the metal and

bolted the exit from the outside. Now the door could no longer be pushed open from the inside. They were an prisoners in a burning hell that was about to turn everything into incandescent gas. Twenty seconds were left, not an instant more. Professor Lehmann spun around. For a moment he lost his composure when he saw the lever approach the maximum point The lever seemed to be moved by some invisible hand. Lehmann was so startled by this sight that he let precious seconds elapse before he could search his memory banks for the necessary information for such an emergency. Now he knew! It would take twenty seconds before the catastrophe set in. But before he managed to reach the lever and push it back into a safe position, the electric circuit blew out under the overload. Sparks were flying and lightning flashes jumped across the burst fuses. Lehmann shrank back when he saw the lever melt and assume a distorted shape due to the tremendous heat. The stench of burned rubber and melting metal filled his nostrils. There was a smell of ozone in the air. Li stood rooted to the spot. Hastily he tried to confer with Lehmann, who did not pay any attention to him. He was still preoccupied trying to solve the riddle of the mysteriously moving lever. He could not arrive at an explanation. Then it dawned on him that only immediate flight could save him. He was so terrified that he forgot the five seconds that still remained, which would have given him all the time he needed for an orderly retreat. The heavy lead door would not budge. Fifteen seconds had passed. The catastrophe was imminent. Sixteen seconds. Now it was too late to open the way into another dimension. The two M.S. understood that no way out existed but to abandon the human bodies on the spot unless they wished to perish together with them. Without the necessary preparation they withdrew and forced their way into a world that is exclusively reserved for disembodied intellects. They left behind the lifeless, rigid bodies of the two men who were awaiting the return of their original spirits. That would happen only at the twenty-first second ... and that would be too late! John Marshall gave the arranged signal to Tako Kakuta, waiting in the background. The Japanese dematerialized and disappeared. He connected himself to the matterless stream of the fleeing M.S. and let himself be carried toward an unknown destination. The pursuit was much simpler than he had imagined. Seventeen seconds. Anne Sloane concentrated on the white hot lever and tried to apply all her reserves to push it back to point zero. But she failed. A few drops of the molten metal had dripped down and congealed. Her strength was not enough to overcome this obstacle. She could not understand why. She knew that she was capable of lifting weights of several tons by the sheer power of her mind. But now she had to capitulate before that ridiculous lever. The strain had been too much for her. She was now completely exhausted. Eighteen seconds. "Ellert ... the lever! I can't move it!" Nineteen seconds. One more second to eternity! Ellert did not hesitate. He leaped over to the panel and pushed with all his force against the deformed lever. A hissing sound could he heard; then with a sudden jolt the powerful pressure wrenched loose the molten metal drops that had glued the lever in the twentieth notch. Smoothly the lever slid back to point zero. At the same time the current found a more direct path than the wide leap across the interrupted wires. A bluish white flash jumped from the machine and disappeared in Ellert's body. The teletemporarian collapsed. His burned arm gave off a terrible stench. But the catastrophe had been averted. Before the twentieth second had come, the lever rested on zero. In the twenty-first second, Lehmann and Li began to stir. Life returned to their bodies. At first they looked in consternation at everything around them, especially Li, who had never before in all his life been inside such a scientific research laboratory. He recognised John Marshall and Anne Sloane. Then he saw the lifeless form of Ellert sprawled on the floor near him. He had no idea what was going on in this room. It was a different story with the professor. Although he could not figure out how he had come so suddenly from his chess hoard to this switchboard, he naturally recognized the familiar surroundings of his usual place of work. He remembered the experiment he had been so long preparing. And finally he noticed Marshall. "What has happened?" he asked

quietly. "I can't remember..." Later, Professor," interrupted John. "A lot has happened, and you will understand everything. But right now there are more urgent matters. Is there still any danger here, Lehmann? The metal bar inside the lead chamber was exposed to the most intense radiation for nineteen seconds. Will that cause a chain reaction?" Lehmann stared at Marshall. "Nineteen seconds? On notch twenty? Who ordered that?" "Never mind that, just answer my question-now, Professor!" Lehmann shook his head. "The limit of stabilization lies at about twenty seconds." "Okay. Then we have time to look after Ellert. Miss Sloane, get a doctor, quick!" Dr. Fleeps seemed to have a sixth sense, for hardly had Anne pushed back the outside bolt on the heavy lead door, using again her telekinetic powers, than the specialist for space medicine stormed into the reactor room. "I was told that our instruments recorded unusual fluctuations in the electric current here..." "One of our men was careless and was electrocuted," explained John Marshall. Ellert had remained motionless on the floor. He was stretched out, a limp, lifeless corpse. Now it was possible to see that his arm had been totally burned up to his elbow. Nothing but a stump remained. Still, this injury could not be fatal, unless the electric shock...Dr. Fleeps bent over Ellert and began to examine him. In the meantime John Marshall explained everything that had occurred to the perplexed professor. Li listened with amazement. This was beyond all plausibility, as far as he was concerned. Anne waited next to Dr. Fleeps. She felt responsible for what had happened to Ellert. If she hadn't failed in her efforts, all would have been different. She was at a loss why her telekinetic energy had not been sufficient to move the lever. Had the excitement proved to be too much of a distraction for her? Dr. Fleeps straightened out. "That's odd," he mumbled. "That man is alive." John Marshall, turned around slowly. Anne Sloane asked, "He is alive? Thank heavens! What should there be so odd about that!" "Ten thousand volts!" he marvelled. He gazed at the motionless body of Ellert. "Strange that he could survive that." Dr. Fleeps shook his head. "You did not quite understand me. He is alive, but only from a biological point of view. But at the same time he is also a dead man, biologically." All stared at the doctor. No one spoke. The temperature gauge of the lead chamber had slowly returned to normal. "How can a human being be alive and dead at the same time!" asked Professor Lehmann, whose scientific curiosity had been aroused. "That would be a paradox." "You are right according to the laws of logic," admitted the physician. It was plainly to be seen how confused he was and how he tried in vain to hide it "But where does logic come into all these strange phenomena we have been witnessing lately? Can these alien invaders be reconciled with our concepts of logic and reality? Haven't these strange creatures come to us from a universe where our scientific laws have no application? I am therefore not at all surprised to see in this man a living dead person." "What makes you think so!" Dr. Fleeps pointed to the floor where Ellert was lying without movement. "He is no longer breathing; no pulse, no heartbeat no circulation; How long since this accident happened!" John looked at his watch. "About ten minutes ago." "A certain drop in body temperature should already have taken place. But I can't detect a trace of it I wouldn't be surprised if his temperature remains at around ninety-seven degrees Fahrenheit." "But how can that be!" "Sorry. I can't explain this myself. I can just register a fact, that's all. Ellert is neither dead nor alive. It is as if his soul had left his body." John Marshall looked at Anne. There was no one here besides themselves and Li who knew of Ellert's special abilities. Perhaps the teletemporarian had executed a leap through time in order to save his life. Who could know the truth? Only then when he came back again..." I think Perry Rhodan should be the judge of all this. Let him make any decisions that need to be done," interjected Anne Sloane. "I will inform him at once of what has occurred here." Professor Lehmann took his eyes off Ellert. "And what happened-what happened to the M.S. that had fled from our bodies?" "We might find out soon," answered John Marshall, and left the reactor room in the company of Li and Anne Sloane. Only Dr. Fleeps and a very perplexed Professor

Lehmann stayed behind. CHAPTER FIVE Tako Kakuta felt himself swept up by a giant whirlpool that dragged him down with irresistible force. For the first time he became consciously aware of the current in which he was travelling. Normally this state lasted but a fraction of a second, during which his dematerialized body was transported from one place to another. He neither saw nor heard anything, but he could feel with every particle of his body. Maybe he was travelling through darkness that did not permit him to see. But before he had time to figure out this strange phenomenon, he had materialized again. As far as he could guess, just five seconds had elapsed. It was still dark around him, but now his body had taken on shape again. Gradually the darkness began to lift, and he saw a faint glow coming from the surrounding walls. He had the impression of being in a big hall. It was quite cool. Something on the floor near his feet began to stir. Now his eyes had become adjusted to the dim light and he recognised the other on the hard, rocky ground. It took several more seconds before the realization dawned on him of what these shapes were. The sudden insight made him wince in fear. There they were stretched out in long rows, the bodies of the Mind Snatchers, immobilized in a cataleptic state, serving as a prison for the human spirits while the invaders' minds had taken over their human frames. Two of the rigid shapes started to move. These must be the ones that belonged to the two M.S. that shortly before had dwelt in Professor Lehmann's and Li's bodies. Tako knew he could not waste another second. He dematerialized again and stood almost immediately on a wide, stony plain. In the distance loomed the white peaks of the Himalaya Mountains. He estimated the direction and distance of his jump. The hall where the M.S. bodies were lying was three miles to the south. He could make out a mountain there, not too high but rather massive. That hall he had been in was a natural cave. Of course; that was to be expected! Tako Kakuta manipulated the bracelet around his left wrist. Seconds later he could hear Perry Rhodan's voice. "We guessed correctly, Tako. Tibet! Where exactly are you? I am six miles above the Himalayas." "I don't know for sure. Couldn't you get a fix on me?" "Just a moment. Reg is at the direction finder. It will take a couple of seconds for us to locate you. Have you found the M.S. base?" "Everything went in perfect order, according to plan, the way Ellert predicted. By the way, why didn't Ellert accompany me?" Brief silence. Then Rhodan said, "An unfortunate incident occurred we had not foreseen. Ellert was electrocuted. His body is on its way to the Gobi Desert base." Tako was unable to reply. He just waited until finally Rhodan continued. "Who knows, something else might have happened to him, and he wasn't dead after all. We aren't sure yet... Here we are, Reg has located you. We are one hundred twenty miles to the east from where you are. We'll join you shortly." Tako walked over to a large rock and sat down. The sun was setting in the west, and soon darkness would fall. He did not know Rhodan's plans, but warding off the invasion had become a worldwide enterprise where one factor encroached upon the other until no one knew any longer what his role was in the overall picture. Only one man had the total overview of the strategy. That man was Perry Rhodan. Silently the huge space sphere landed on the plateau. The antigrav beam seized Tako and lifted him up before he had a chance to teleport himself from the interior of the ship. Good naturedly, he tolerated Bell's transporting him in such a conservative method into the center where Rhodan was already waiting for him. Thanks for your efforts, Tako, now we have found the enemy's base here on Earth. Now it is up to us to put him out of action completely. Thora has promised to assist us in that unconditionally. She is deathly afraid of the Mind Snatchers, which I fully understand. Khrest is with her at the battle station. I have taken over the command for navigation and general coordination of all efforts. Where is the cave, Tako?" The Japanese pointed to the screen. "Over there, that low mountain. Inside, about sixty feet below the surface." "A natural cave in the Himalayas," said Rhodan with a bitter smile. "That's like them, just what I thought they would do." The Good Hope lifted off vertically without any apparent effort and slid over to the hill Tako had pointed out. The spacecraft hovered above it while Perry Rhodan

gave some orders to Thora. Then he turned to Take and ~Bell, who had remained standing just inside the door. "The attack will take place in thirty seconds. Thora is going to evaporate that part of the mountain directly above the cave. Let's hope that we can find an entrance to the cave; otherwise, we risk burning the bodies of the M.S. I am very interested in catching some of them alive." Tako seemed sceptical. "Is that advisable? Wouldn't they take over our own bodies at once?" "Don't worry," Rhodan reassured him. "I shall apply the psychoradiator." The psychoradiator was one of the harmless weapons of the Arkonides. whoever used it was capable of imposing his own will on the target personality. Even posthypnotic commands could be given, and they had to be obeyed unconditionally. Rhodan hoped that the psychoradiator would have the usual effect even if applied to the insect type aliens. Suddenly a strong wind sprang up over the flat mountain peak. Cold air masses rushed in from all sides into the heated airspace above it. The whole mountain top began to evaporate. The rocks turned into invisible gases that rose up. So tremendous was the effect of the energy rays that the transition of matter from solid to gaseous state followed almost immediately without first passing through the liquid phase. At a depth of sixty feet a dark opening became visible. "The entrance!" shouted Rhodan, and stopped the attack. The space sphere descended and touched the ground. Seconds later the airlock opened and Perry, Reg, Khrest, and Thora rushed out into the open. Tako was already waiting for them outside. He had preferred to use the much more convenient teleportation. "I've already been inside again," he announced. "The opening here leads into the cave, just a few feet from here. Hurry! Two of the nasty creatures are moving. They look horrid!" Perry Rhodan hurried ahead of the others, the silvery rod of the psychoradiator glistening in his hand. He had to bend over on entering the low passageway leading to the cave. The others followed at a slower pace, especially Reg, who had a lot of trouble avoiding constant collision of his broad shoulders with the rocky walls of the narrow path. Khrest and Thora kept in the background. Unexpectedly the narrow passage widened into a wide hall. Perry's eyes had to accommodate to the darkness. The walls sent out a slight phosphorescence. A draft came from a corner; there must be another exit to the cave. Reg kept close behind Rhodan. The illuminating rod in his hand lit up, throwing a bright light across the whole extent of the underground cave. The first thing they noticed was the long row of lifeless bodies resting on the ground. They were slightly taller than human beings but looked quite different. They closely resembled insects. A cry of horror rent the stillness. Reg had screamed involuntarily. His hand that held the light trembled. Even Rhodan had trouble overcoming his feelings of shock and fright, although he had been mentally prepared to face the Mind Snatchers in person, their appearance exceeded his worst expectations. Six feet away stood the two extraterrestrial monsters who had come to Earth to subjugate the human race. No, even worse than that? For they would not hesitate to destroy the whole planet. They simply did not tolerate any other races; that was all. An unbridled drive to destroy was at the root of all their actions. The two monsters resembled gigantically distorted wasps but differed from these insects in many respects. They did have the typical wasp waist, as well as six limbs. Two of these limbs served as legs on which they were standing upright. Their multifaceted insect eyes glistened maliciously. Two shiny antennae played excitedly above their pointed heads. Their thoraxes looked hard and sturdy. Perry Rhodan wasted no time. He directed the beam of his psychoradiator against the two monsters and ordered them to make an about-face. Although he had counted on this manoeuvre's success, he could not help feeling relieved when the two M.S. carried out his instructions without the slightest sign of resistance. Therefore, he concluded, their brain structure had to resemble that of man. This similarity would in the final analysis become the decisive factor that would permit the human race to win out over their enemies, the Mind Snatchers. "Walk up to the surface and do whatever you are told by Tako Kakuta!" Rhodan continued. Then he added to the Japanese, "Wait up there with them until I can join you." As Tako led his two

charges past Bell, the hefty engineer, not normally given to fear, began to shudder and tremble involuntarily. Reg felt as if Death in person had brushed against him. "We have never come as close as that to them," remarked Khrest in a feeble attempt to justify his own race's lack of success in dealing with the menace of the M.S. "We never believed it would be possible to make use of the psychoradiator in our fight against them." "I was absolutely convinced that the psychoradiator would be effective against the M.S., although I had no concrete basis for my belief," said Rhodan, at the same time pointing out one of the important differences between the mentality of his own race and that of the Arkonide scientist. Being able to convert a mere belief into a scientific fact demanded a type of energy that the Arkonides had lost as their race had grown older and more decadent. Thora's face plainly showed her feelings of deep repulsion as she stared at the immobile row of lifeless bodies. The energy gun in her hand was poised as if ready for action. "No, Thora, not yet. Hold it!" he warned her. "There is too much at stake here. If we should destroy these twenty-two insect bodies here, we would condemn twenty-two dematerialized human personalities to be in limbo forever. For they cannot return to their own human frames unless they have been vacated by the M.S. usurpers, which is of course out of the question, once the M.S. have lost their own bodies. We can destroy these insect bodies only after their minds have taken up abode in them again. Then, naturally, we must act quickly." "Twenty-two human beings?" replied Thora with deliberate slowness. "Aren't they worth a victory over our common enemy?" "I would not hesitate to sacrifice them, if necessary," Rhodan admitted in a sombre voice. "But that isn't the point. At all costs, we must avoid twenty-two M.S. in disguise wreaking havoc here on Earth. Do you understand what I mean? Someone will have to remain here in this cave to watch for the moment the M.S. minds return. As soon as the bodies start moving they must be destroyed." A sudden insight seemed to come over Thora. The disgust in her eyes disappeared and in its place came something new. Perry Rhodan had observed the same change in her once before. Now her eyes expressed appreciation and even respect. Respect ... for whom? wondered Rhodan. For himself or perhaps for mankind? That would mean tremendous progress, worth far more than a battle victory against the invaders. But perhaps his eyes were deceived by the dim light inside the underground cave. Nevertheless, couldn't there have occurred a change in Thora's attitude toward Earthlings? Learning to recognize one's own shortcomings is usually achieved only by the intelligent. And there was certainly no lack of intelligence in the brilliant Thora! "Who is going to stay behind?" she asked. Rhodan smiled. "I guess Reg would be ideal man for that job-" Before Rhodan could finish his sentence he was interrupted by a scream. A very frightened Reg was now pointing to one of the reclining shapes on the ground before them. The monstrous creature began to stir and to sit up halfway, flaring with vacant eyes into the bright light of Bell's lamp. Perry Rhodan lightly touched Thora's arm. "If you feel like it, you can kill the thing. Just remember that these Mind Snatchers are the mortal foes of your nation. Unless we check their advance they will swarm over the Arkonide empire like a horde of locusts, devouring and annihilating everything in their path. They will bring about the end of the Arkonide rule in the universe. Don't be frightened of killing this beast. Just a few moments ago that was all you could think about" The beautiful alien female raised her weapon, still hesitating, and aimed at the giant wasp whose black eyes still gazed into the blinding circle of light. The mere sight of the insect filled Thora with such fear and trepidation that she quickly overcame her misgivings of killing another living being while face to face with it." She pulled the trigger. A violet ray shot out and hit the insect's abdomen. The violent pain jerked the M.S. out of his initial lethargic state. But it was too late; it could no longer react. It could not even send a message of warning to the oval shaped spaceship that was cruising beyond the Earth's atmosphere. A burning hole showed on the insect's body and a line of fire travelled up to its thorax. The giant wasp collapsed. Thora lowered her weapon. "It was horrible!" she

exclaimed, handing the gun to Rhodan. "I could never do that again." "But it will have to be done another twenty-one times," replied Rhodan, taking the ray gun and passing it to his friend Reg, who was obviously reluctant to accept it. "Reg, you know what to do, don't you?" "I won't stay here all alone," protested Bell. "Tako can keep you company," suggested Rhodan. "He won't be any help," grumbled Reg. "As soon as things get too hot, he'll just take off with one of his famous jumps and leave me here to face the mess." But then Bell accepted the ray gun from Rhodan's hands and looked grimly along the line of the reposing insect bodies. "Our task is not yet completed," said Rhodan before he turned to leave. "There are still another twenty-one invaders busy out there in the disguise of influential men in high posts. Their aim is to bring chaos and destruction to our world. We must track them down and then force them to flee back into their own bodies here. Fortunately we know who they are. So this won't present too much of a problem for us. I imagine, Reg, that we will pick you up tonight or sometime tomorrow morning. In the meantime I have to inform Mercant and our mutant corps and tell them how to proceed. Have fun here, Reg. Tako will help you while the time away!" Bell was so stunned at the prospect before him that he did not immediately vent his feelings. By the time he managed to utter a strong, one syllable comment, his friend had long since disappeared. The same instant that Ellert touched the ill fated lever of the electro panel a strange event took place. The strangest part was that he experienced everything while fully conscious and never lost his awareness for a single moment. Unbearable pain raced through his body, then faded quickly. The space around him fell away into a bottomless abyss that knew neither beginnings nor end. Colourful reflections whirled about him, sometimes enveloping him from close by, then receding again into the distance. Undefinable sounds, abstract and devoid of harmony, thronged into his ears, or whatever served him now as auditory receptacles. These impressions came and went again in a rhythmical succession, as if he had entered the interior of a pulsating universe. There was nothing above him; there was nothing below him. He was floating in the void. At one time a sun with rotating planets whizzed by somewhere in the distance, far, far away. Galaxies were slowly rotating like spinning tops, and then they too disappeared somewhere deep into space. Eternity seemed to shrink into nothing. With a speed that was beyond comprehension, Ellert was racing through the stream of time, over which he had lost any control. He was hurled into an infinity devoid of any matter. The present time remained behind the way Earth would recede from a radar beam rushing out into space. Nothing could impede his plunge into the future. And then, all of a sudden, he felt ground under his feet again. So sudden was this materialization, so unexpected, that he collapsed and lost consciousness. How long he had been lying there, he could never have told later on. But on awakening he became aware of his body. Had he returned to the present time, or had he overtaken his own body some time in the future? He dismissed the question the same instant he had posed it. Millions of years must have elapsed, for he had witnessed the growth and death of entire universe islands. He could never live that long. But he did possess a body! He felt the silky fur and grew frightened. When finally he managed to open his eyes, his wildest fears were confirmed. His mind, which had been flung into a far distant future, had found a new abode, but it was not the body of a human being that sheltered him now. The monster was four-legged and had only a very limited intelligence, which left ample space for Ellert's mind inside the huge skull. A soft fur covered the monster's body. Could this be a bear? Ellert wondered. But he soon realised his mistake. For inside him was suddenly a voice..."I am Gorx," said the toneless voice. "who are you?" Ellert was startled, but he managed to think back. I am Ellert. Why aren't you surprised?" "Why should I be surprised that you came? We often get visitors from the universe." "Where am I?" "Our world is called Gorx," came the information. "And what do you call your sun?" "Gorx." Ellert was puzzled. He could not understand. "Why is everything here called Gorx?" "Everything is called Gorx because everything is Gorx." The explanation seemed sheer insanity to Ellert. How could he ever

learn where fate had brought him? Or was this what the planet Earth would be like millions of years in the future? He dismissed this question too before he even tried it. He knew that the shock of his physical death had flung him not only through time but also through space. Ellert made a concerted effort and left his host's body. Way down below him he saw a heavy, furry creature crawl clumsily over the rocky ground. He could discern dark entrances to caves over there at the vertical rock walls. Here he would not be able to find any answers to his questions. Not here! Once again the world disappeared from underneath him and gave way to infinity. Ellert whirled anew through the time stream, but this time in the opposite direction—he travelled back in time. When he could once again stop in his fall, he was floating again in the void. How could he ever find his way back to the present time? There was no point where he could find his bearings and get a fix on time. He was like a tiny drop of water in an ocean, a drop that was supposed to touch land at a certain spot of one of the six continents, at a certain predetermined point in time that was measured by seconds. The inevitable realization dawned on Ellert—he could never return to his own time and space. He had become the prisoner of an eternity whose master he had believed himself to be. No longer did the question matter where he was. He was confronted by the more horrible uncertainty of when he was...There was no answer to that question. Unless eternity itself could supply the solution. And thus Ellert, the prisoner of eternity, began his quest for the present time, a search that would last for millions of years...

CHAPTER SIX

The worker robots had completed their task. The tunnel penetrated the stony ground of the Gobi Desert to a depth of one hundred feet. Steel hard enamelled walls would ensure protection against the ravages of erosion for all time. Neither could any ground water seep through these walls into the shaft. At the bottom of the tunnel, Rhodan had the robots construct a rectangular room that contained oxygen supplies, all kinds of information, instructions, and energy reservoirs. An automatic installation would set everything in motion the moment it was needed. In the middle of the twelve by twelve foot chamber stood a couch. Attached to it was a very complicated alarm system, which would be activated the very instant the human being inside the room took his first breath. This human being was Ernst Ellert. They had placed him under the electronic instruments. Metal clasps enclosed his left wrist and both ankles. A helmet had been put on his head. Close to his mouth they had suspended a mirror connected to selenium cells. The faintest exhalation would be sufficient to set the whole installation in motion. The mausoleum had been constructed by Rhodan for Ellert. The building was unlike anything ever built for any mortal. But Rhodan intuitively knew that Ellert was no mere mortal. Rhodan carried the deep conviction that someday he would meet up again with the teletemporarian. But it might also be possible that Ellert would find his way back by himself. Then he should be able to find his own body in a perfect state, unravaged by the damages that time normally would inflict on the human body. The three physicians—Dr. Fleeps, Dr. Manoli, and Dr. Haggard—were of the same opinion: Ellert's body would never decompose, despite the fact that it had stopped all metabolic functions. Yet his body temperature never fell below ninety-seven degrees Fahrenheit. Rhodan glanced for the last time at the quietly reposing Ellert; then he gave the order to seal the burial chamber. Ten minutes later liquid concrete was poured into the shaft, which soon was filled with a solid core. Nothing in the world would ever disturb the rest of this body—nothing except the harmless looking apparatus under the ceiling of the burial chamber, waiting there to be put into action. If ever Ellert should awaken inside the tomb he would be able to set himself free within half an hour. But what would he find? A world revolving close to a red sun into which it threatened to fall at any moment? Or a planet that had been swept clean of any life by an invasion from space? There might never be an answer to these questions. Who could predict? Lost in deep thought, Rhodan watched as the robots placed a pyramid shaped cone above the spot that led down into the burial chamber. In the distance the mighty sphere of the Good Hope shimmered in the bright desert...All

throughout his return flight to Gobi City, as Reginald Bell had privately named the Third Power's Gobi Desert base, his mood was dark and depressed. He had taken twenty-one lives during the past twenty-four hours. As he kept reassuring himself, these had not been human lives, but still he had deprived some beings of their life. Had he been justified to kill? He had had ample time to discuss this question with Tako, but they had not arrived at a satisfactory solution. No doubt, they had acted in self-defence. For unless they had immediately destroyed the M.S. upon their reentry in-to their own insect bodies, the creatures would have given the alarm to their oval shaped command ship circling far above the Earth. Or else they might have taken possession of both his and Tako's brains. No, Rhodan was right. Leniency was out of place here; it was far too dangerous. The invaders had chosen to take a calculated risk when they attacked Earth. They had lost and must therefore accept punishment. This still need not mean that they would give up the fight. The oval shaped spaceship had been a worry to Reginald Bell. So far it had not been possible to pinpoint its location. Either the distance from Earth was too great or the enemy craft had hidden out somewhere. But where? This was the question Bell asked of his friend Perry Rhodan after rejoining the desert base. Rhodan pondered awhile before he replied, "There seem to be no more Mind Snatchers here on Earth, as far as we know. Their spacecraft might be hiding out, and I have an inkling where that might be. I placed the two prisoners into a hypnotrance. Manoli and Haggard examined them. According to their report they discovered astonishing anatomical differences between theirs and the human body. The M.S. do not possess a language the way we do. They are telepaths. A great part of their brain consists of a complicated organic transmitter and receiver structure. We fear that they are capable of communicating over distances that amount to light-years." "Have you been able to talk to them-" "I mean, to establish some telepathic rapport?" "Yes, thanks to Marshall I have been able to communicate with the." "Well, and what did you find out?" "Unfortunately not too much. They are very stubborn, and I had to apply the hypnoradiator to make them 'talk,' if you'll pardon this human expression. Still, they could not divulge any more than they themselves knew. They did want to destroy our planet. Yes, you heard me right-destroy it completely. They had no political or economical interest in our world. They were not driven by any imperialistic motives to take over our Earth. They imply came to annihilate us, for they cannot tolerate anyone besides themselves. Therefore, we need not have any qualms if we fight back just as mercilessly. It is a question of survival-them or us!" "Anything else?" "I had them get in touch with their commander of the oval craft-while they were under strict guard, of course. I had them report about their unsuccessful invasion attempt. Marshall tuned in to their telepathic conversation. He could understand everything. Their commander ordered the two prisoners to set themselves free at once. When they informed him that they could not obey his orders because of their hypnotic trance, he instructed them to commit suicide. I countermanded this order immediately to prevent them from destroying themselves. This way, at least I still managed to find out that their oval shaped spaceship has landed somewhere on the moon, where it intends to remain. The M.S. plan to wait there for the arrival of reinforcements. In my opinion it is senseless to start searching for them on the moon. If they are cautious and avoid exposing themselves to attack, we will never succeed in ferreting them out. But we must forever remain on guard and never relax our precautions against their threat although I believe that for the time being there is no imminent danger of invasion." "This is probably nothing but the lull before the storm," warned Bell. He was obviously not satisfied with the out-come of the battle. The enemy had not been totally defeated. "Someday they will try to get even with us." "By then our defensive weapons will have been perfected and we will have evolved better tactics still. Don't worry, Reg. Ellert has shown us the right way to deal with them. The main thing we have to remember is, whenever we encounter a Mind Snatcher in his natural body, we must not hesitate an instant before we destroy it." This remark evidently upset Bell. He

inquired anxiously, "And how about our two prisoners here? Who is supposed to execute them?" Rhodan smiled grimly. "I only temporarily prevented the two M.S. from carrying out their commander's order to commit suicide. As soon as I had completed my cross-examination of both prisoners I released them from my hypnotic influence." "So?" "They finally obeyed their commander's orders, without hesitation. You know, it's most interesting how they resemble wasps in this respect. They too have horrible poisonous stingers." Only the most urgent circumstances could bring Allan D. Mercant to leave his underground fortress under the Greenland ice cap. Even then he would do so only very reluctantly-particularly since these sorties were brought about by unpleasant events. This time, though, Mercant had a feeling as if he were going on vacation. He clambered into his small, fast service plane and ordered the pilot to fly to New York. The sensation of freedom stayed with Mercant as he walked up Fifth Avenue. Suddenly he stopped and looked across the street to a twenty-two story building. Between the seventh and ninth floors he observed the giant letters G.C.C. This then must be where the General Cosmic Company had its offices! Mercant felt a bit disappointed. He had expected that Rhodan would have bought up at least the whole skyscraper. But maybe, Mercant thought, his own lack of experience in business matters did not permit him to make a proper judgment of what course Rhodan should have taken in this respect. As Mercant was riding up in the elevator, his happy feeling gave way to a queasy sensation in his stomach. He realized once again that he had to carry all the responsibility on his own shoulders. Deep inside he knew that he was on Rhodan's side, shared his goals and principles. But his own position with the government forced him to pay a professional visit to the offices of the G.C.C. He was unhappy to have to obey the call of duty, which forced him to spy on his friends. He almost changed his mind about his official mission when Miss Lawrence, the receptionist, welcomed him with a friendly smile that spoke of her pleasure at his unexpected visit. But then Mercant remembered that the success of his action depended solely on him. If things did not go according to plan or if they went too much against his grain, he would simply tell Homer G. Adams the plain truth. Or better still, he would tell it directly to Perry Rhodan himself. The short, slight manager of the mighty concern received Mercant with extreme politeness. No one could have guessed by looking at him that not too long ago he had been released from a prison in England, where he had spent fourteen years for embezzling large sums of money. The two men shook hands and sat down in comfortable leather chairs. Mercant accepted a cigar from Adams, although he really could not stand their stench. Homer leaned back, contentedly puffing away. "And to what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit, Mr. Mercant? Did the Chief send you?" He was getting at three things simultaneously, thought Mercant, admiring Adams's skill. First he had asked the reason for this visit. At the same time he had expressed his consternation that Mercant had failed to inform him about his intended call. And to top it off, the catch question, whether Rhodan knew about this meeting. It was obvious that Rhodan would have let Adams know about such a conference if he had any idea about it. Mercant felt he would have to proceed very cautiously not to fall into some trap. "No, Rhodan knows nothing about this visit," Mercant replied truthfully. "I come on behalf of my own government to obtain certain information." Much better in any case to place his cards on the table. After all, there was no longer a state of war between the government of the Western Bloc and Perry Rhodan. "It is concerning the construction of our common space fleet." Homer fingered his rimless glasses, which gave him a very old fashioned appearance. "The space fleet? Hasn't that topic been sufficiently discussed by our experts? To be honest with you, Mr. Mercant, I don't understand too much of what it's all about. I am interested only in the financial aspect of the whole project." "I haven't come here to bother you with the technical details about the hypothetical propulsion." Mercant smiled patiently. "I am not at all interested in that. Besides, I don't understand any more about it than you do. As you probably know, my government made a first contribution of eighteen billion dollars. How much did you receive from

the other governments?"Homer raised his eyebrows. "The total sum amounts to seventy billion dollars," he said as if he were speaking of seventy cents. "So much? We did not count on such a huge sum." "Neither did I," Homer admitted frankly. "in any case, the project is already in full swing. New factories and production complexes are rising all over the world. Our most capable men are working day and night—that means the people from the Western, Eastern, and Asiatic blocs. For the first time in human history the inhabitants of this planet are collaborating on a common task. We have learned from the successfully averted invasion of the insect race how important such a collaboration has become for mankind. Anyone who secretly pursued any egotistic nationalistic goals would be committing a crime against humanity." Mercant could not help but feel that Homer had his own private reasons for making such a long speech. But he did not give himself away by revealing how he felt. He simply nodded his head in agreement. "You are so right, Mr. Adams. But I can hardly believe that anybody could harbour such a thought nowadays. "I wouldn't be so sure, Mr. Mercant," interrupted Adams. "Just a few days ago they caught a Western spy in one of the Chinese industrial concerns. I cannot believe that this guy was carrying on there out of his own free will."Mercant folded his hands in a nervous gesture. He shook his head. "If you deal with such a huge organization as that of the Western Defence, it takes a long time before they can call back all their agents. Most of our people are working on their own most of the time. Quite often we don't even know where they are at the moment—" "But wouldn't it be wiser to avoid such incidents totally in the interests of world cooperation?" Homer interrupted rather rudely. "It doesn't take much—just some such stupid thing could disrupt the newly established unity among the nations of this world. Anyhow, it will be many years before the last trace of distrust has disappeared. I know, Mercant, that you are on our side; but you should get rid of the last ties that bind you to a cause that forces you to actions running contrary to your own convictions. Do you get what I mean?"Mercant raised his hands in a little gesture of regret. "I certainly understand you, Adams. I have already discussed this previously with Rhodan. He is of the opinion, though, that I should remain working for the Western Powers. After all, we can't know who would take my place once I leave my position. This way seems to be the lesser evil." "You have a point there," admitted Homer. "But let's go on with our talk. We are sending orders all over the world from our scientific center. Parts of our future space fleet are already being manufactured in several large industrial concerns. Mankind is already constructing the most advanced weapons bit by bit, without realizing what all the single parts will become once they are properly assembled. So far they seem like incomprehensible fragments, which do not reveal what the end product might be. And it is the same way with our spaceships. In another six months we will have reached the point where we can assemble ten faster than light space cruisers within a few days from all the individual segments that different factories have turned out independently from each other, without knowing what all was for. You see what undreamt of potential can be put into reality by mankind once they forget their differences. Of course, the world does not have any idea about all this, and it might be wise to keep this information to yourself for the time being."Adams watched Mercant's reaction to what he just had said. Homer's foxy eyes sparkled amusingly behind his thick glasses. He seemed to be aware of the dilemma into which his words had plunged Allan D. Mercant. To make matters even worse, Adams seemed to enjoy thoroughly the secret pleasure that this knowledge afforded him."In addition to all that, we are supplying all the tool machines unknown to man," he continued with apparent unconcern, thus giving Mercant all the information he had believed he could obtain only with the greatest of difficulties. "These tool machines have been built in other parts of the world under our supervision, according to plans supplied by us. We also give them all kinds of materials that Rhodan has brought down to Earth from the moon. As you probably know, only the exterior of the Arkonide research craft, stranded on the moon, was destroyed when bombed by hostile

terrestrial military forces. The interior with its huge storerooms remained mainly undamaged, with all the technical secrets of the Arkonide supertechnology intact" Once again Mercant nodded his head vigorously to express his agreement with what Adams was telling him. The little financial wizard had just put his finger right on the spot. There were incredible treasures hidden up there in the remains of the wrecked Arkonide spaceship. But the Western Bloc did not possess a single spacecraft suitable to get at this treasure trove, Or perhaps...?There had been feverish activity of late at Nevada Spaceport; Mercant was well informed about this. But for the first time Mercant's men had been refused admission to the assembly halls inside the industrial plant. Something was going on there that the world should not know about.All of a sudden it seemed to Mercant that his eyes had been opened. Everything fell into place. He compared his mission to obtain information that appeared so harmless on the surface with what he just had learned from Adams. Then it became clear to him that the government of the Western Bloc was not strictly living up to its agreements with Perry Rhodan. Mercant was furious. His anger was based on his innate honesty. But before he could speak up, the manager of the G.C.C. continued, "What else were you supposed to find out from me, Mercant?" An embarrassed smile came over the boyish face of the Chief of the Western Defence. "We were only interested in the bit about the cruiser on the moon. All the other questions were intended as diversionary tactics." "Thanks," countered Adams. "I knew that all along. Why do they want to find out all this?" "I wouldn't have the faintest idea," Mercant said frankly. "I just noticed the possibility of certain coincidences, but I am not yet quite sure. But you may rest assured that I will inform Rhodan without fail if I have the slightest proof for a certain suspicion that just has occurred to me. By the way, many thanks for your sincerity and frankness. Believe me, my superiors will learn only whatever I think they should about this conversation." "You can always count on me, Mercant," replied Adams, and rose to see his caller to the door. Then Homer returned to his seat and stared for a few seconds at the telecom that would permit instant communication with Rhodan in his desert base or anywhere else he might be. But then Adams shook his head. Rhodan had more important things to do than being bothered with suspicions. For the time being it would be sufficient if Adams kept an eye on this affair. General Pounder walked leisurely across the Nevada Spaceport testing grounds in company of Lieutenant Colonel Maurice. They were approaching one of the many giant halls that lay row on row under the burning midday sun. This was the place where a few years ago the Stardust I had been built, the ship had taken Rhodan and his crew on the first successful flight to the moon; and here too had been constructed the moon rocket that sometime later was sent up to the moon to destroy the stranded Arkonide cruiser, whereby both attacker and attacked perished. The huge hangar like hall had no windows, in contrast to the neighbouring sheds, which reminded one of hothouses, with entire walls and roofs made of glass. This building seemed hermetically sealed from the outside world, while its neighbours let in freely the plentiful sunshine. The general pounded the small entrance door with his mighty fists. A tiny crack opened, and a face became visible that examined the general from head to toe, as if he had never seen him before. "What do you want?" inquired the man inside the door. "I am General Pounder," answered the general. "I want to get in!" "I'm afraid that's not possible. Against regulations." "Whose?" "General Pounder's orders, sir."Lieutenant Maurice burst out laughing, while Pounder's face grew as red as a beet. The door opened a bit more and a young man in uniform became visible. He saluted smartly as if wanting to apologize for his logical but militarily correct behaviour."I must examine your passes," he added, strictly according to the prescribed rules and regulations." Pounder looked at Maurice, who at once stopped laughing. "You see, Maurice, that's the way our soldiers should be trained. I hope you did not forget your identity card. Otherwise, I can't take you inside with me."Fortunately both officers had their papers with them. The young guard examined them thoroughly, before he opened the door sufficiently

to permit the two to enter the shed. Once inside General Pounder and Lieutenant Colonel Maurice had to close their eyes. The light was blinding. There were no partitions whatsoever in the immense hall, which stretched for more than six hundred feet in length and up to a height of more than one hundred fifty feet. A maze of scaffolding and cranes made easily accessible every corner of the huge building. Little trains moved along shiny rails toward a tunnel, disappearing in its depth, not to be seen again. A feverish activity reigned inside the shed, and the din of the machines was deafening. Lieutenant Colonel Maurice clapped his hands over his ears to protect them from the sudden onslaught of unbearable noise. "I can't hear myself think," he shouted to the general. "What did you say?" "I was only saying that it's too noisy in here for talking to each other." General Pounder shook his head and pointed to his ears. "I can't understand a word you are saying!" he roared. Lieutenant Colonel Maurice threw his hands up in despair. Then he laughed. He knew it made no sense even to attempt to explain that the noise was too great here in this shed. Workers were rushing past them, never giving them so much as a glance. Highly polished metal parts glided past on low trains, disappearing in the small work sheds that ringed the free space in the center of the huge hall. This was where the engineers had their offices. General Pounder stopped suddenly. He had taken his assistant along today for the first time inside the heavily guarded work shed, which was controlled day and night by a cordon of soldiers. Lieutenant Colonel Maurice stepped aside for a moment to let pass a worker and then looked up. He was thunderstruck! For there, right in the middle of the hall, resting on a flat ramp that slanted slightly upward, he saw a long silvery torpedo. Round portholes extended along the center line and a small crane was just depositing a cylindrical tank inside the loading hatch of the storeroom. The noise of the riveters' guns drowned out Maurice's curse. There in front of him, barely fifty feet away, lay the exact replica of the Stardust I, which once had carried Perry Rhodan and his men to their first landing on the moon. And no one in the outside world had any idea of the existence of this new space rocket... Three months went by before Perry Rhodan felt certain that the Mind Snatchers would not risk another invasion, for the time being, at least. During these three months he had almost managed to forget them, since the whole world was under the spell of the General Cosmic Company. Everywhere on Earth mighty industrial complexes had sprung up, where production was started under the direction of the technicians and planners. Homer G. Adams sat in his offices in New York like a giant spider in its web. The walls were covered with maps, dotted with tiny flags with incomprehensible letters and signs. Homer spent all his time in front of the telecom. Occasionally he got some sleep. The power of the concern he had built up grew from day to day. The day when a certain Benjamin Wilder could proclaim that the world was his, because he had financed it, seemed close at hand, Benjamin Wilder was the power behind G.C.C., and hardly anyone knew that Benjamin Wilder was just another alias for Perry Rhodan. Khrest failed to understand this phenomenon of practically runaway development. It was alien to his way of thinking. He had underestimated the dynamics of human nature, although he believed humans to be the most capable race the Arkonides had ever encountered in the universe. Silently he walked alongside Rhodan as they left their living quarters shortly before sunset in order to get some fresh air. Reginald joined them. Instinctively the three went in the direction of that three sided pyramid under which the body of a man was waiting to be awakened to life again. They were still at quite some distance from the mausoleum that housed Ernst Ellert's lifeless form, when they recognized a tall, slender figure standing in front of the structure. Perry Rhodan could not hide his surprise as he called out to his friends, "It's Thora! What is she doing out here?" The trio approached the un-Earthly beautiful Arkonide woman, who stood there looking at them intently. Her eyes met Rhodan's, and for the first time he failed to detect her usual derision and scorn. On the contrary, there was a hesitant question in her expression. A wave of strange emotions flowed from

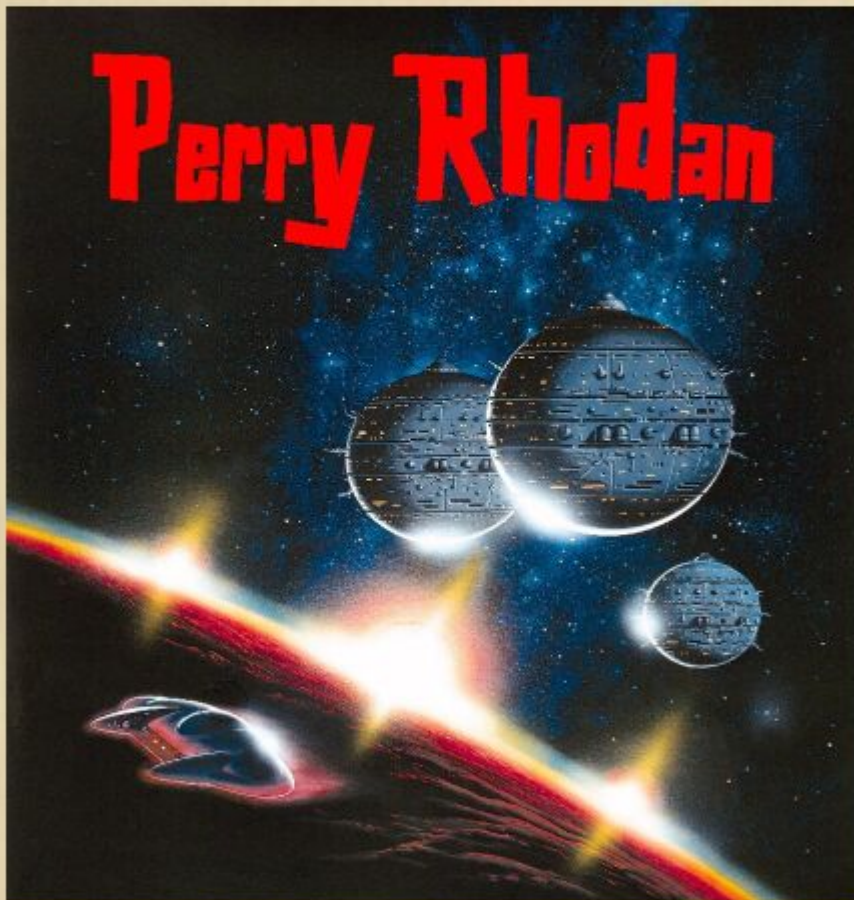
her lovely features, but they revealed nothing negative. She was the first to break the silence after the three men had come close to where she waited for them. "It is strange that we meet out here, but maybe it is not just by accident. Don't you sometimes have the impression that Ellert is still somehow among us, even if our senses cannot perceive him?" Rhodan was amazed; it was more than mysterious that she should have experienced the same feeling he did. Once, Bell had remarked that Ellert's mind might have lost its ability to return to his body and that his spirit might now be wandering about aimlessly in the present time. However, Rhodan and Khrest were of the opinion that Ellert's mind, if it still possessed a consciousness of its own, was no longer residing in the present. When Ellert was attempting to escape from physical death, the electro shock had driven his mind into another dimension, from where there was no way back. Whether this dimension meant the past, the present, or the future was impossible for them to guess. But if it had really been in the present time, then Ellert should have been able to establish some communication with them, somehow using the mutants as his mouthpiece. "He is still living in our emotions, Thora," Rhodan replied calmly. "Someday in the future we might catch up with him, if he hasn't travelled too far ahead of us on the time stream. By the way; why should you be so interested in Ellert's fate? He was nothing but an Earthling." She tried to hide her embarrassment. "Truly intelligent races have the privilege of admitting that they have made mistakes. The Arkonides are intelligent. Therefore, I am acting according to my intellectual level when I admit having underestimated the inhabitants of this planet. But this does not mean, on the other hand, that I consider them our equals." "No one would ask you to do that—at least, not yet," Rhodan said with sincerity. "We have won a great deal already if you have been able to revise your former hostile attitude. It is a fact that we have overcome a common enemy through our concerted efforts. That has created a link between us, Thora!" Khrest stepped closer to Thora. He gazed into her golden eyes, and a gentle smile lit up his ascetic features. "Thank you, Thora, for these words! They are like a golden bridge over which someday in the far future the only path will lead that will bring about the survival of the realm of our galactic empire. It is possible that Rhodan, too, will have to walk across that bridge in the future." "I wouldn't mind joining you, if that bridge is made of gold," said Bell without a trace of pathos. "The only question is whether I will live that long." "There is no reason why we could not continue our research project with the Good Hope," replied Khrest. "We no longer have the big space cruiser with which we started our expedition to find the planet of eternal life, but the Good Hope is big enough to take us there, even if it is not powerful enough to carry us back to our home planet." There was a long pause. Then Rhodan shook his head. "There are more urgent tasks at hand right now, I am sorry to say. We must first train our mutants, and I want to establish a base on Venus for that purpose. In a few days I will fly to Venus and prepare the first camp for our mutant school. As far as we have been able to tell from our observations of the planet, there is no intelligent life on Venus. Later on, when peace and order have been firmly established here on this globe, we will have plenty of time to start the search for the planet of eternal life. But to be honest with you, I sincerely doubt that our efforts will meet with success." "We will find that planet!" shouted Thora. "It does exist!" There was an almost fanatical fire of enthusiasm burning in her eyes. "We were told so by some expeditions that have returned from there. But they guard the secret so jealously that it will mean bitter battles once we reach the planet that will give us immortality." Rhodan smiled. "I'll believe it when I see it!" Bell joined the conversation. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could finally get rid of having to be afraid of our own funerals? Look at all the survivor benefits I could collect from all my friends!" No one laughed at Bell's suggestion, and he turned away, a bit insulted at his friends' lack of appreciation for his peculiar brand of humour. He contemplated the pyramid tomb, which the rays of the setting sun had turned into a luminous golden hue. Perry stepped over to Khrest and Thora and held out his hand to her. "Are

we going to be friends from now on?" he inquired, a bit unsure of himself. For an instant the customary arrogance flitted across her face, but then she shook Rhodan's hand. "I both admire and fear you, Perry Rhodan. But you will understand that such feelings do not engender any true friendship. I also realize that we depend on you and that we must cooperate with each other. Should that be the basis of a genuine friendship? Besides, Khrest forces me to be cooperative. You see, I accept your hand here only because I must do so. Are you satisfied with that?" "Yes, for the time being," said Rhodan. "Sometime in the future you will give me your hand, but then you will do it for different reasons. Till that time comes, I will have to be satisfied with what I have here. Yes, I am quite happy. May I thank you for it, Thora?" For a moment their eyes fused and their hands joined, making them as one. It might have been quite a solemn moment if Bell had not chosen to sigh deeply and interrupt with his blessing: "Amen." The most solemn of all words deprived the pact between the man and the woman of any solemnity. Maybe because this word had been uttered by Bell. The sun sank below the horizon, and suddenly the monument lost its luminous glow. It was as if an invisible flame had been extinguished inside the metal of which the pyramid had been constructed. The first star came up in the sky. Without knowing why, Perry Rhodan saw in this some inner connection that promised an optimistic prognosis for the farthest future... The End



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