



RSV

OO8 Base on Venus

CHAPTER ONE

The desert had not known such activity since the hordes of Gengis Khan had swept from there to the west seven hundred years before.

The Arkonide worker robots, together with the engineers and specialists that had come here from all the corners of the Earth, were busy constructing the huge industrial complex that Rhodan had envisioned as the nucleus of his future capital of the Third Power. This was the center of production of the space fleet, which alone could guarantee the safety of this remote region of the galaxy. The work progressed at a very satisfactory pace.

Time was in his favour, Rhodan tried to convince himself. Finally, the great powers of the world had come to accept the existence of his tiny but vitally important state; his victory over the Fantan people had earned him the gratitude of the other nations. Rhodan was confident he would be able to keep the dreaded insectlike Mind Snatchers at bay, at least for the time being.

But these two alien invaders had surely been just the avant garde of the many hostile races from outer

space who were bound to be attracted to this corner of the universe by the distress signals of the destroyed Arkonide cruiser on the moon. The little time that was left to mankind had to be used wisely in preparing themselves for the expected onslaught.

It would take them at least two to three years, thought Rhodan, who fervently hoped for such a breathing spell. Then they would no longer have to live in constant fear of an invasion threat.

Rhodan had been under constant pressure lately. Too many urgently pressing tasks needed his immediate attention. His thoughts were in one continuous uproar. He could almost sympathise with the amazement with which the alien Khrest regarded the feverish activity that had mushroomed around the shores of the Goshun salt lake.

It seemed hard to believe that so few men had accomplished so much in such a short time. But then, they had had the advantage of the accumulated scientific knowledge that the two Arkonide survivors were sharing with them.

"We shouldn't delay any longer!" urged Reginald Bell. We must have some secondary base-it's vitally important for us!"Perry Rhodan calmed his friend with a reassuring slap on the shoulder. "We are leaving in two hours."

"Great! What are your plans?"

"We'll first fly to the moon. We'll salvage whatever we can from the wrecked Arkonide cruiser. There are still quite a few things in it we can use. From there we will proceed straight to Venus."Rhodan stopped and pondered for a moment. "You are right, Reg. We need a secondary base more than anything else at the present"

Whatever precautions they might take on Earth, there was no absolutely safe place in the whole world should the invading aliens suddenly overpower them. It was too great a risk, for all mankind might be annihilated. Therefore, he must establish an outpost on Venus. Though this might not save Earth from total destruction, it would still guarantee the survival of a few members of the human race somewhere else in a safe spot. Thus, the holocaust would not be the end of the human species.

Khrest fully approved of Rhodan's plan. "I can't help but admire your drive and decisiveness, Rhodan. How lucky for our weary Arkonide forces to have found such a vital young ally. Whatever fate has in store for our galactic empire, we could not have wished for a better solution." Thora did not share Khrest's enthusiasm. She still kept vacillating between her intuitive distrust of the Earthlings and what her reasoning mind advised her to admit long term prejudices were difficult to uproot, even in the most brilliant being. She still considered man as far inferior to her own race, not worthy to be treated as an equal. Perry Rhodan was probably the only exception she was willing to make in this respect.

The Good Hope took off at dusk.

Rhodan was starting from his home planet with the comfortable knowledge that he had left everything behind in the most capable hands. He was accompanied by Tako Kakuta, the Japanese teleporter, who had passed command of the mutant corps temporarily over to Ras Tschubai, his African counterpart. Little Betty Toufry, whose amazing telepathic and telekinetic powers made her a valuable ally, would assist Ras in his continued search against possible M.S. intruders. And if worse should come to worst, it would be comparatively easy for the Good Hope to interrupt her mission and return home in practically no time.

Once again Rhodan's thoughts turned to the strange fate that had befallen Ernst Ellert. Fury and anger welled up in Rhodan whenever he was reminded of the loss of his most valuable mutant. He had possessed the unique gift of teletemporation, as Rhodan had characterised the ability that the more prosaic Bell had called "letting his mind take a walk anywhere along the time track." Ellert was apparently dead, and all hope had died with him. Sometimes it seemed to Rhodan as if Nature had followed the dictates of some mysterious law and tried to correct a horrible mistake she had made by eradicating the monster she had created. Ellert seemed to defy all laws of the universe; he was far more strange than the frightful Mind Snatchers, who had come wanting to destroy the Earth.

Rhodan moved his hand across his forehead as if trying to wipe away the thoughts that had preoccupied him during the automatically controlled moon flight of the Good Hope. Now they were preparing for the landing. The Good Hope had completed a partial orbit around the moon and was now approaching the scattered wreckage of the destroyed Arkonide cruiser, whose radioactivity had fallen to almost negligible levels and no longer constituted any danger to the crew.

Rhodan had visited the wreck several times since it had been exploded by several powerful H-bombs of terrestrial origin. He had come to search for any remains that could still be put to use. There had never been any unforeseen incidents. The moon was a dead world, as it had been since time immemorial.

Therefore, it caused quite a sensation when suddenly the shrill signal of the detector sounded out loud.

"Unidentified object at phi zero five, theta three three six!" announced Bell. "On the surface of the moon. No movement discernible."

Rhodan bent over the picture screen, searching for the coordinates given by Bell. The object was miserably small, nothing but a glittering fleck of light on the dull surface of the dead world of the moon.

Rhodan switched off the automatic pilot and began to guide the ship manually, while continuing their descent to the moon, now at reduced speed. He depressed a button of the intercom.

"Eric, we have spotted something down below. Contact it by shortwave radio and let me know if you get an answer! Bell will give you the coordinates."

A little while later the doctor came on over the telecom. "I can't get an answer from that thing down there."

"Keep trying. We are descending!" replied Rhodan.

The spacecraft executed a wide loop above the expanse of wreckage below, approaching it now from a different direction, while descending to an altitude of fifty miles. The board telescope should be able by now to enlarge the object sufficiently so that it could be identified.

Could this be a vehicle of the Mind Snatchers? Rhodan found this implausible. It would be contrary to the wiliness of the M.S. to leave something so conspicuous lying out in the open, where sooner or later a terrestrial spaceship might come to investigate.

Could it be a trap?

Rhodan turned to Thora. "Be ready to open fire!"

Thora walked over to the control panel whose buttons were connected with all the armament that the Good Hope carried on board. The ship now hovered vertically above the glittering object on the ground.

"Bell, what can you make out on the telescope?"

Bell had adjusted the telescope so that it projected an image on one of the picture screens. "For heaven's sake!," he groaned. "It's a rocket. Just like our Stardust!" "We are going to land now!" said Rhodan. "Wait!" yelled Bell. Rhodan stopped his hand in midair, as he was just about to pull a lever to execute the landing manoeuvre. All eyes turned to the microwave detector where the strange rocket appeared as a bright dash. Two tiny white specks had detached themselves from it and were travelling with amazing speed toward the center of the screen.

Bell's eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets. "But that can't be! They are shooting at us!"

A few hours earlier the following events had taken place. The Greyhound, a rocketship of the Stardust type, which had been built secretly at the Nevada Spaceport facilities as a last attempt to break the supremacy of the Third Power, had set out to the moon, where the Western Powers hoped to find material in the destroyed Arkonide cruiser. With this they intended to bridge the gap between their own lagging technology and the monopoly of the Arkonides' far advanced state of science enjoyed by Rhodan's new realm. The landing manoeuvre on the moon turned out to be the most difficult phase of the Greyhound's secretive mission. At first the spaceship had been guided by precise impulses sent from the ground station, and the automatically controlled flight had been uneventful. But now the Greyhound was above the landing site, which was on the other side of the moon. The craft was therefore cut off from the automatic guidance signals coming from Earth. It would take all the skill of the two pilots to carry out the landing for which they had been specially trained back on Earth. The two pilots, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Freyt and Lieutenant Conrad Derringhouse, formed the crew of the Greyhound, together with Captain Rod Nyssen, the gunner, and Major William Sheldon, in charge of the special duties connected with the salvage operations of the Arkonide material from the wrecked cruiser.

"Speed zero except for vertical descent," announced Derringhouse.

"Vertical speed thirty feet per second, constant," replied Lieutenant Colonel Freyt. "We are floating down like a feather?"

Freyt was a product of the same training school Perry Rhodan had attended a few years earlier. They

seemed almost like brothers. Tall, lean, serious, but with tiny crow's feet at the corners of their eyes that spoke of their tremendous sense of humour. Both pilots were wearing their space suits but had pushed back their helmets far enough to be able to converse directly without the help of microphones. Nyssen and Sheldon, though, had their head gear all ready like the rest of their outfit. They could have stepped out onto the surface of the moon at any moment.

"Altitude twelve thousand feet!" signalled Derringhouse. His face bore the impish expression of a schoolboy playing hookey.

"Keep on braking!" ordered Freyt.

A surge of slightly increased speed coursed through the craft. Seconds later the effect of the weak lunar gravitational pull was felt again.

"Vertical Speed eighteen feet per second. Distance, please!"

"Ten thousand feet, sir!"

Freyt was pleased. The landing manoeuvre was proceeding according to plan. If everything kept going as smoothly as until now, they could complete touchdown in another ten minutes and their mission would be accomplished.

Freyt was most eager to carry out his orders, although he did not approve of the motivation that had brought about this mission. Sometime back he had been part of the attacking forces that had kept up a constant barrage against the huge energy barrier surrounding the tiny desert base of the young Third Power. In the meantime, though, he had come to believe that no other power on Earth was entitled to help itself to the Arkonide treasures, particularly behind Rhodan's back. Despite his moral objections he had accepted the mission. After all, he was a military man, used to obeying orders. And besides, his instructions precluded any hostile action should he ever come face to face with Rhodan's forces on the moon. "Altitude!"

"Five thousand feet"

The surface of the moon looked like a shallow dish into which the Greyhound kept sinking lower and lower. Freyt and his crew had been worried about this optical illusion that would surprise the astronauts when landing on a relatively small celestial body.

The ground at the projected landing site appeared smooth and even but Freyt did not rely on mere visual observation. Derringhouse, who kept checking the distance from the moon's surface, was at the same time operating a device that could distinguish slight irregularities at ground zero, once they had come as close as three thousand feet. The Greyhound had been equipped, like the Stardust before her, with hydromechanical landing supports that could easily adjust for deviations ranging from nine to twenty feet. "What does it look like down below?" inquired Freyt.

"So far so good. Soil irregularities up to twelve feet; that's all."

"How far away are we?"

"Eighteen hundred feet, sir."

"Let me know when we reach one thousand feet. Then we'll brake once more." The two pilots closed their helmets. Conversation was possible now only via throat mike.

"One thousand feet, sir," came Derringhouse's announcement "Watch out! Brakes!" came Freyt's echo at once. A new jolt coursed through the Greyhound.

"Six hundred feet!" came Derringhouse's voice over the space helmet intercom. "Ground irregularities not exceeding three feet." The seconds moved at snail's pace. Derringhouse began to count. "TWO hundred feet ... one eighty feet ... one fifty feet ... one twenty feet..."

"Check for ground irregularities!" called Freyt.

"None over two feet, sir," answered Derringhouse, and continued counting. "Sixty ... thirty ..." One minute later he yelled triumphantly, "The landing supports are touching ground! We've made it! Support B and C at the same level, support A at minus two feet." "That's nothing. No need to-" And then it came, a hard jolt that shook the rocket.

"A is sinking! Correction, sir!" shouted Derringhouse.

Freyt slammed down on the regulator button. Another jolt, while the B and C landing supports were trying to adjust for the difference. And still one more concussion.

"A keeps sinking!" yelled the lieutenant "We are ... The ground is giving way... a big crack!" Dark crevices now became visible on the ground, giving way under the weight of the rocket. The cracks kept widening as the Greyhound sank in deeper and deeper.

"Look out!" barked Freyt. "Full Speed ahead now!"

Derringhouse jerked back into his seat. Freyt grabbed the lever and pulled it back. The Greyhound began to lean over at a steep angle, reacting to the thrust of the jets.

Derringhouse stared wide eyed at the screen. "Stop it!" he screamed.

Freyt released the lever.

"Watch out! We are toppling over!"

Landing support A snapped off abruptly, and the slender rocket crashed to the ground. A heavy piece of machinery tore loose from its wall clamps and shot like a giant bullet through the cabin floor and out through the craft's hull. The air from inside the cabin escaped through the hole with a hissing noise. Freyt heard someone cry out. He waited for the final explosion of the rocket, which he subconsciously feared was unavoidable.

A minute went by. Nothing happened. Freyt opened his eyes, which he had closed expecting death. He sat up, unable to still believe he had survived this disaster. Inside the cabin, utter confusion reigned. Broken instruments, crumpled walls, motionless bodies were all enveloped in a cloud of moon dust that had penetrated through the torn hull.

"Derringhouse!" Freyt called out anxiously. "Nyssen! Sheldon!"

Somebody was moaning.

"I am still in one piece," came Nyssen's half choked voice. "Where are you? Where are the others!"

"I don't know. Wait a second till I get myself untangled here." From beneath the wreckage, Nyssen's fishbowl shaped helmet emerged. "Just look at that mess!"

Freyt had managed in the meantime to extricate himself from the debris. "Nyssen, help me here, will you!"

Together they cleared away some of the shattered pieces of machinery that completely filled the back of the room.

Nyssen grasped the leg of a space suit. "Looks like our lieutenant."

They pulled him but apparently he had been thrown out of his chair by the impact, which had also rendered him unconscious. He was breathing heavily.

"Let's go on!" They pushed aside some more bits of wreckage. That's when they found Sheldon. At first they thought he had only fainted. But when they turned him around, they discovered a large tear in his space suit. It was torn from the right shoulder down to his left hip. Freyt straightened out. He looked pale. Nyssen mumbled, "Sorry, pal. What a shame to lose you, Sheldon!"

"Keep an eye on Derringhouse while I crawl out here through the passage to the airlock and inspect the rest of the ship," said Freyt.

When he returned Derringhouse had just regained consciousness.

"How do you feel? Can you move an right?" asked Nyssen. He helped his friend to stand up.

Derringhouse gingerly felt himself an over, flexing his arms and legs. "Nothing broken, it seems, just a few bumps."

"Well then, let's get on with the job. Work is the best cure. Feverishly they began to take stock of their situation, "Radio transmitter and receiver gone!"

"Reactor electronic disrupted!"

"Emergency power supply intact!"

And finally Nyssen's triumphant voice, "Armament undamaged!" Freyt found their food supply in good order. He also discovered an emergency store of oxygen, sufficient to fill one room of the Greyhound, if there was one left without cracks or holes in its walls.

The reactors did not respond, although they knew it would be possible to repair the damage. Still, it made no sense even to attempt this, since they were unable to raise the rocket to an upright position.

They climbed outside. The exterior wall was partially caved in, and torn in some places. The spot where landing support A was supposed to have found a firm foothold was nothing but a gaping hole whose rims were only a couple of inches thick.

Nyssen regarded the caved-in moon surface at this spot with obvious disgust while cursing softly to himself.

"We are equipped for a two week stay here on the moon," Freyt stated calmly. "Not before another twenty days will the people on Earth become alarmed and start rescue operations. We won't last that long. So let's-"

"Sir, over there!" exclaimed Derringhouse, pointing to the sky. Freyt shot around. With narrowed eyes he could make out a glimmering dot up in the dark firmament. The dot approached rapidly.

"The aliens!" cried Nyssen.

"Which aliens?"

"The Mind Snatchers! Those damned insects!"

Freyt hesitated a moment. Then he commanded, "Nyssen, man the guns. But don't shoot unless I give you the order! You, Conrad, stay here outside with me?" Nyssen climbed back into the Greyhound, while Freyt and Derringhouse did not take their eyes off the scintillating flash in the sky.

The object passed high above the wrecked rocket and returned in a wide loop. Now they were immediately overhead.

"They are descending," observed the lieutenant "What's their altitude, Nyssen?"

"If my instruments are still correct, about fifty miles."

"How many missiles can you dispatch at a time?"

"Two, sir."

"Go ahead, fire!"

The torpedo tubes of the fighter projectiles had settled at the same horizontal position as the whole Greyhound. The lunar ground trembled, and the wreck tilted slightly on its side as Nyssen let go. But despite the unfavourable initial direction, both missiles climbed up to the sky searching out their target.

"That's obvious!" Rhodan answered curtly, "Either they have gone crazy or they-" Out of the corner of his eye he had noticed Thora getting ready for action at the armament control panel. She seemed overeager. Rhodan spun around in midsentence.

"Thora!"

Thora hit a tumbler switch full force. Rhodan dived for her, but was too late. He grasped her roughly by her shoulders and flung her aside. With an angry cry she fell to the ground.

Rhodan flipped the switch back again.

"Reg! She used crystal field neutralization. The dot down there has disappeared."

Manoli's voice announced, "Ready for defence action!" The two missiles had come close to the Good Hope, which was now surrounded by a protective energy barrier that deflected the projectiles, changing their course. They shot harmlessly off in a wide arc, missing the spacecraft, then disappearing in the vastness of space.

Slowly Thora got to her feet again.

"Don't you ever again forget to wait for my orders to start shooting! I'll hold you responsible if anything has happened to those people down there."

"Responsible for what!" She seemed to mock him. "They attacked us, and I simply had to defend ourselves."

"You knew they couldn't effectively attack us with their missiles. You are always ready to make fun of our under-developed technology, and now you pretend to feel threatened by it."

"They destroyed my cruiser!"

"Only because you were unable to defend it properly. Your crew was drugged with inertia!" snapped Rhodan. "You knew perfectly well that our energy screen would protect us against any terrestrial weapons!"

Thora remained silent. Only the reddish glint flashing from behind her half closed eyelids revealed her emotions.

Rhodan turned away. His voice sounded weary as he announced, "We are landing."

"What's happening to the Greyhound?" Nyssen's shout startled Freyt and Derringhouse, who had intently followed the trajectory of their two missiles homing in on their target. The trio was prepared to see the explosion in the sky now at any moment. Turning their heads, they watched, the disaster that silently began to overtake their wrecked rocket ship. Big chunks detached themselves from the hull and fell slowly toward the ground, turning to dust before they had reached the lunar soil. They had hardly realized what was going on before their ship was halfway dissolved.

"Oh no," moaned Freyt. "We have attacked the wrong people!"

For the military men on Earth knew well the kind of weapons the Arkonides had brought with them. Freyt could therefore easily identify the process by which the Greyhound was being destroyed. By applying an electric field whose microstructure imitated exactly that of the crystal lattice in which the molecules of solid matter were arranged, the crystal could be dissolved and the molecules set free. What remained was a thin gas composed of the same components as the solid body previously had been.

Head thrown back, Derringhouse observed the work of dissolution. The walls of the Greyhound crumbled until nothing was left of them. The whole process lasted about four to five seconds. The reactor, the jets, and the tanks began to slide and landed on the ground.

It dawned on Freyt that once they had fallen to the lunar surface, none of the parts were any longer under attack. Freyt realized this with a tremendous sense of relief.

"Nyssen!" the lieutenant colonel called with a faint voice that the captain could barely perceive. "Come here!"

Just at that moment a dark, voluminous shadow covered the sunlit plain. The lieutenant swung around with a cry filled with fear and almost stumbled to the ground.

But this was only the gigantic Arkonide space sphere, about to touch down.

Nyssen stood there overtaken by a sense of wonder as he watched the landing manoeuvre. He had seen the sphere once before, about nine months ago when he and Freyt had carried out the bombing attack against the Arkonide research cruiser, whose wreckage was now strewn over the ground. But at that time the distance between the two and the space sphere had been considerably greater.

"What a monster!" exclaimed the astonished Freyt. He seemed to have recovered his composure. "Well! The only thing we can do now is to walk over to them and apologize for having attacked them by mistake!"

CHAPTER TWO

Rhodan saw the three men walk across the debris covered ground. The distance had shrunk to the point where they could already communicate via their space helmet intercom system.

"No foolishness now!" Rhodan ordered harshly. "Don't worry, Rhodan," came Freyt's reply with reassuring swiftness. "What harm can you expect from three stranded astronauts?" Rhodan recognized the voice. "Is that you, Michael Freyt? And who are the other two with you?"

"Captain Nyssen and Lieutenant Derringhouse."

"All right. You may board the ship."

Rhodan knew Nyssen, but he had never heard Derringhouse. He turned around. Thora had jumped up in excitement. "Freyt!" she cried. "The Earthling who destroyed my cruiser!"

Rhodan interrupted her. "He did not do it on his own. He was only carrying out orders. You can't blame him exclusively for that attack." Thora's eyes were spitting fire. "What do you plan to do with these people?"

"I'll take them aboard, Of course. what else do you suggest?"

"That's out of the question! I won't permit this! I am the commander of the cruiser!"

"Which no longer exists!" Rhodan reminded her. "The Good Hope is part of the cruiser. No difference whether it's the cruiser itself or its auxiliary vessel. I am commander of both! These two beasts can't come aboard!" Thora was so enraged that she had not the least doubt that her words would end the argument between her and Rhodan. But there was an aftermath to this contest of wills. All who witnessed it knew that a decisive battle had taken place.

"Reg!" Rhodan spoke calmly to his friend. "Open the air lock!"

Thora had already walked over to her chair. At the sound of Rhodan's command she spun around. "But I have just told-

"That you have to say is of no interest to me," snapped Rhodan.

Suddenly a painful groan came from Khrest, who had stayed in the background, resting on his couch.

"These three men will not step aboard my ship! Not under any circumstances!" shouted Thora in anger. "I believe to have made myself sufficiently clear on that point I absolutely forbid-

"You can't forbid anything here, Thora," Rhodan said gently. The rest of Thora's words ended in a softly mumbled protest that soon died down entirely. Her shoulders began to droop in a gesture of utter defeat. Gently, Rhodan seized her by the arm, leading her out of the cabin. Bell and Rhodan exchanged a swift glance of weary triumph.

A short while later the tall silhouette of Freyt came into view inside the doorway of the command center. He saluted. "You see before you a very remorseful man, sir," he told Rhodan. "I sincerely wish to apologize for the horrible blunder I committed."

"What blunder?"

"We mistook your craft for one of the invading Mind Snatchers' ships and tried to annihilate it."

"Why didn't you answer our calls?"

"We weren't even aware that you tried to contact us. Our rocket crash landed, and our communications system was destroyed."

"Why did you fly to the moon in the first place? What business have you here?"

Freyt contemplated the tip of his spaceboots.

"You can save your breath! I can imagine what brought you here!" thundered the infuriated Rhodan. "They sent you up here to ransack the wreckage, to see if you couldn't salvage some useful weapons for the NATO Command. That's it, Freyt!" Freyt still remained silent.

Nyssen pushed his way past Freyt and planted himself in front of Rhodan. "Major Rhodan," he began. "you were once one of us. You graduated from the air force officers' training corps, when I had already made captain. Unfortunately-"

"Don't beat around the bush!" Nyssen grinned. "You'll have to hear me out, whether you want it or not, the same as when you were nothing but a cadet. You know the regulations at the air force? We received orders to fly to the moon in order to rummage through the wrecked cruiser for anything that might be salvaged and come in useful for us. You should remember what would have happened to us if we had not obeyed at once." "Yes, but you could have warned me at least," replied Rhodan.

Nyssen became serious and intent. In a subdued voice that barely concealed his emotions, he said sharply, "Not everyone can desert his own country and start running his own show."

Dead silence fell over the big command center. Everyone waited with bated breath for Rhodan's reaction. Rhodan stood motionless like a statue. It was difficult to determine whether Nyssen's remark had really hit home. Finally he stepped forward and held out his hand to Nyssen. "Okay, Captain!" Rhodan smiled. "You have won!"

"How is she?"

"She is all right now," answered Khrest. "But if I were you I wouldn't try that again?" Rhodan tried to defend himself. "I had no choice; I had to act this way."

Khrest explained, "You can't imagine the enormous energies hidden in your brain. I believe I am the only one who experienced the shock in its full extent, the same way she did. It felt as if someone attempted to sweep out the inside of my cranium with an iron broom?" Khrest smiled as he continued. "You must have been absolutely furious at that moment, Perry! Just consider, though-our Arkonide brains might be better trained and more fully utilized than man's, but because of our general decay, our brains have become far less resistant than yours. You can push Thora to the brink of insanity with such brutal attacks. I am quite serious, Perry!"

"I fully realize that, Khrest. This was exactly the reason why I was so harsh. At that moment, at least, it seemed the only method to bring Thora back to her senses. But you can rest assured, my friend, I won't repeat this shock treatment. There are other ways to control Thora's behaviour." Rhodan turned and walked down the corridor toward the command center. Khrest's eyes followed him. Unconsciously the Arkonide scientist imitated the proud posture of the Earthling. He straightened up his tired, drooping shoulders and held his head up high. Immediately he became aware of his unconscious action, and he smiled gently to himself.

Rhodan took the time to ascend sufficiently high in the Good Hope to reestablish radio communication with Washington, D.C. He had a long talk with the people whom he suspected had sent Freyt and his two friends on that fateful mission to the moon. Nobody, of course, would admit having been the instigator of that plan. They expressed sincere regret for this unfortunate incident. But Rhodan wanted more than mere excuses; he demanded certain compensations. His demands caused some consternation down in Washington, but they willingly acceded to his request.

At once Rhodan brought his ship down again to the lunar surface. Then he summoned the crew of the Greyhound to appear in the command center.

"I have just spoken with Washington. They apologized and have agreed to make reparations for their act of piracy. These are my terms, gentlemen!" Rhodan let his glance wander from Freyt to Nyssen and then on to Derringhouse, before he continued, "I want you to join my crew!"

Freyt narrowed his eyes; Derringhouse lumped halfway out of his seat. Only Nyssen remained calm. He was the first to speak up. "I have already stated my point of view."

Rhodan shook his head. "I am not asking you to desert to my side. I need three good astronauts, and you three would fill the bill. You have happened on to the scene at the right moment. If you should decide to join me, then the Space Command would give you an honourable discharge. I'll give you twenty-four hours to make up your minds. Thank you, gentlemen!" Rhodan left the three space pilots. It took them exactly two hours to come to a decision. Their answer was "Yes."

The next four days were devoted to a thorough search of the wrecked Arkonide cruiser for anything worth salvaging.

The robot corps attached to the Good Hope cleared out the cruiser's interior cell, which had miraculously remained intact. There were more usable things than the Good Hope could transport in its storage compartments. Therefore, part of the recovered goods had to be stored on the moon for the time being. The robots erected a storage shed by using some of the metal sheeting of the cruiser's hull. Rhodan made an inventory of the salvaged machinery and instruments. They consisted largely of consumer goods the Arkonides had used for intergalactic barter. Rhodan realized with a great sense of relief that this treasure trove would solve forever the financial worries of the young Third Power. He knew he could rely on Homer G. Adams's financial skill to make the most advantageous use of the money they would obtain from the sale of these goods. Rhodan reserved for his own use a series of automatic ray guns, portable nuclear energy weapons, and finally a complete plant for the manufacturing of special robots.

There was an additional gain that resulted from the salvage mission, it concerned Thora.

Rhodan had his own cabin on board the spacious Good Hope, as did all the other members of his crew. Twice already Thora had visited Rhodan in his own quarters, but several months had gone by since her last call. No wonder, therefore, that Rhodan was startled to find Thora in his cabin that evening. She was sitting comfortably relaxed in an armchair, waiting for him.

It was evening, according to Earth time. Outside, the rock strewn lunar ground was still bathed in sunlight, just as it had been just four days ago when the Good Hope had set down next to the wrecked Greyhound.

Thora apparently had not come to discuss the incident with the three terrestrial space pilots. She greeted Rhodan with a friendly smile. "I believe the time has come for us to establish a better relationship."

Rhodan could not conceal his astonishment. "This is exactly what I have been thinking for the past year, Thora. I am so glad that you have come to share my own opinion. What brought about this change of heart?"

"Reason seems to have won out finally."

Rhodan was puzzled. He could not quite believe that she had suddenly come to her senses after having displayed so much stubborn prejudice ever since they had met.

"Great! But what will that mean practically in our relationship?"

"I'll promise," Thora began in a timid voice, "no longer to challenge your authority as commander of this ship or any other vessel we build in the future."

"Thank you, Thora," Rhodan replied slowly. He tried to speak with warmth but failed, since his astonishment out-weighed his feelings of gratitude. "On the other hand," he added after a while, "I depend on your judgment in many ways."

Thora smiled. "You don't need my advice, Perry! You know as much as any Arkonide astrocommander, including myself." She was paying him compliments, thought Rhodan. She must have something up her sleeve.

Thora resumed the conversation. "Your next flight will take you to the planet you call Venus; isn't that so?"

"Why, of course, Thora" Rhodan was still puzzled. "Every person on board the Good Hope had known the ultimate destination of their trip, even before they had left Earth.

"Will you be able to take along everything you salvaged from the wreck at once?"

"No. It will take us three trips."

"That's quite a while. Will it be safe for you to be absent from Earth that long?"

"Why not? Ras Tschubai is a most dependable fellow. If anything should go wrong, he'll contact me immediately." Thora seemed to be searching for something suitable to say. Then she gave up the attempt. She rose and extended her hand, imitating the ways of the Earthlings she had so despised. "I hope this will be the beginning of our voluntary collaboration. Not because we are forced by necessity to work together, as until now, but because we both want to cooperate for our common good."

Shortly before the Good Hope took off for Venus, Rhodan had a talk with Khrest. He hoped in this way to find out something about what had motivated Thora's unexpected remarks. But when Rhodan sat across from Khrest he did not know how to express what worried him. He was so preoccupied by his thoughts that despite the mental block that shielded his mind from being probed by others, Khrest could read it like an open book. Nevertheless, Khrest preferred to approach the subject in a roundabout manner.

"Is there any possibility of repairing the inner cell of the wrecked cruiser so that it could be used again?" Khrest asked.

"You mean as a spaceship?"

Khrest nodded.

Rhodan immediately shook his head. "Impossible, Khrest. Nothing remained intact of the drive mechanism. The only thing we salvaged that might eventually help us rebuild the interstellar craft is the manufacturing plant for the special robots."

"How long will it take with their help?"

Rhodan shrugged. "A few years, I guess."

"Don't you see, Perry?"

"That am I supposed to see?"

Khrest answered with a sly smile. "I know somebody who clung with all her pride to the hope of being able to return to her home planet, Arkon, without having to take recourse to the aid of the primitive Earthlings. The moment this person realized that all such hope was lost, then . . . well, you have witnessed yourself what happened!" Rhodan understood. You mean to say that all this time she was still clinging to

the chance that her cruiser could be restored to working order?"

"Yes. And now she had to relinquish this dream. It can't be very easy for her. She needs a great deal of sympathy now."

"She certainly knows where to get it. My door is always open for her!" Rhodan said firmly.

The flight to Venus was uneventful. It took not more than three hours, since the average speed of the Good Hope was about thirty-five million miles per hour.

The three American astronauts were totally overwhelmed by the miracles of Arkonide technology that permitted such undreamt of flight performance. Even Nyssen was overcome by the superiority of the aliens' scientific achievements. Freyt felt so small and insignificant opposite such limitless superiority that he began to ask himself how Rhodan had reacted to that shock when he had had to face it.

The yellow globe of Sol's second planet soon appeared on the Good Hope's screens. First a fuzzy picture that soon gave way to the cloud-shrouded image of the planet Venus. The yellow globe soon filled the whole video screen, and soon only a partial view of the planet was visible. The astronauts were able to discern the stormy activity of the Venusian atmosphere. The Venusian day is ten times longer than an Earth day, since Venus completes one revolution around its axis in two hundred and forty hours. Also the distance from the sun to its second planet is thirty percent less than that from the sun to its third satellite. These two facts cause a tremendous difference in temperature of the diurnal and nocturnal zones, despite the planet's protective atmosphere. This difference in day and night temperatures gives rise to terrible wind storms, against which our own Caribbean hurricanes seem like a mild breeze. The Good Hope, however, was not affected by these atmospheric disturbances. Although she offered a good target for the three hundred mile per hour winds, once she had dipped down into the Venusian atmosphere, the spaceship's stabilizing energies were strong enough to keep her on an unimpeded course. A few months earlier when Rhodan had first visited Venus, he had made a cartographic outline of the Venusian topography. He had arbitrarily selected some point through which he drew the lines of the artificial network covering the whole surface of Venus.

Rhodan planned to establish their base on the equatorial continent that stretched from sixteen degrees south to twenty-two degrees north, while its longitudinal borders ran from zero degrees to fifty-four degrees west. Its surface was equal that of South America. Its easternmost point Rhodan had named Cape Canine, since its outline closely resembled the head of a dog. The longitudinal line that touched the

most tip of the dog's pointed nose had become zero degree of Venusian longitude. Rhodan had so far left unnamed the continent itself, as well as the oceans that surrounded it. However, he had carefully studied the continent's topography and had decided to establish his base on the north coast near where a six mile wide river entered the ocean. The land was covered with dense jungle forests that reached up to the top of the highest mountains. It would not have been advisable to go further inland with their future base. Since urgent affairs on Earth had not permitted Rhodan's first expedition to stay sufficiently long on Venus, they had been unable to explore its plant and animal life thoroughly. All they had been able to find out in their limited time had led them to believe that this continent was inhabited by gigantic prehistoric life forms, not unlike the fauna and flora of Earth in its youth. The planet's favourable atmosphere had been the determining factor for having chosen Venus as the base where they could withdraw in case of danger on Earth and where they would also be able to carry on without interference the additional training the mutant corps needed. The atmosphere was sufficiently dense to lessen the heat from the sun to a point where the temperature was bearable for human life. The average midday temperatures on the equatorial continent ranged in the nineties, while the nights hovered around forty-five degrees. The everpresent cloud cover did not let any bright sunlight through, thus bathing the Venusian surface in a gloomy glow.

"Cape Canine!" announced Bell, who was sitting at the direction finders.

Rhodan was flying the Good Hope with manual control, now, ready at any moment to rectify its course should any mistakes crop up in the cartographic picture he had so hurriedly compiled during his first expedition. He dared not trust the automatic control with such delicate manoeuvres.

Rhodan compared the image on the video screen with his map of Venus. The river delta where he intended to land was still more than two thousand miles away.

"The Thousand Bend River!" Bell called out.

That was the name they had given to the wide river that wended its way down to the ocean in numberless serpentine loops.

From now on Bell made regular announcements, accompanied by descriptive remarks. He had an excellent memory for anything pertaining to maps and landscapes.

Freyt, Nyssen, and Derringhouse remained silent. They were awe stricken. Khrest and Thora sat next to each other on a couch, busily observing the picture screen. Tako Kakuta and Anne Sloane had come into the command center, watching the scenery of the strange planet below, whose surface kept steadily coming nearer. Rhodan waved a friendly hello to Anne, who had hardly left her cabin since they had

started from Earth.

Manoli was busy with his radio installation. He kept glancing at the picture screen. He seemed disgusted that there was no radio signal coming from Venus he could intercept. In case there should be any intelligent life on the planet below, they certainly had not yet evolved any wireless communication system.

"And down here," Bell continued, "is the-"

That was as far as he got. The craft received a sudden violent shock that jolted it off course, toward the south.

The alarm sirens began to howl.

We are being attacked! thought Rhodan, who reacted with the speed of lightning.

"Thora! Firing position!"

By her quick reaction Thora proved that she could, if necessary, overcome the inertia of her race. "Ready to open fire!" she shouted.

"Have you located anything yet on the direction finder, Bell?"

"Nothing so far."

"Use the outboard instruments! Try to find out where the disturbance came from!"

Rhodan quickly turned to Thora. "Be sure to wait until I give the order to open fire!"

She simply nodded.

Rhodan applied optimum thrust. The Good Hope pushed with all her might against the strange force that had thrown her off course. Rhodan glanced at the direction finder screen the same instant Bell reported, "Directional gravitational field, coming from three degrees east of due north!"

Rhodan had expected that much. Any lesser force could have been easily overcome by the Good Hope.

"Give me the exact location where the gravitational force beam is originating."

While Bell was feverishly making his calculations, Rhodan stated with grim satisfaction that his craft was managing to keep its position, by using a full counterthrust against the pull of the beam.

"Point of origin of the gravitational field beam, twenty-nine degrees eighteen minutes north, fifteen degrees forty-eight minutes east."

"Thora?"

"Ready!"

"Fire!"

Thora pushed down on a switch that released an instantaneous swarm of six gravitational rockets, which could be seen on the picture screen at once as bright streaks, streaming toward their target.

These gravitational torpedoes were capable of causing tremendous damage upon impact. Depending on the stability of the target they would either seriously damage it or tear it apart, by releasing a gravitational shock wave, because of the five dimensional character of the gravitational energy, any

protective shields that were applied against their force would have to be immensely complicated structures. Thora hoped that their opponent, whoever he might be, did not possess such energy barriers.

Thora's rockets rushed toward their destination. They attained speeds of Mach ten. It was just a question of a couple of minutes until the enemy would be hit and then cease to exist. Suddenly the unbelievable happened. Rhodan had been busy regulating the thrust of his nuclear engines, while Bell was occupied with the direction finder, trying to locate the enemy positions precisely. Thora was therefore the first to notice the amazing chain of events. The whole rocket formation, which so far had moved north in parallel trajectories, changed course abruptly and turned east. The formation soon disappeared over the rim of the observation screen.

Thora was thunderstruck, unable to call out right away.

When she finally alerted Rhodan, it was too late for him to see where the rockets had disappeared to.

He rushed back to his pilot's console to supply thrust with which the Good Hope could neutralize the still effective gravitational pull coming from the enemy camp in the north. Who could be strong enough to withstand an attack with Arkonide weapons? Rhodan wondered. The Mind Snatchers-the M.S.! This was Rhodan's first thought. But quickly he rejected this possibility, for the unknown enemy had not tried to destroy them, the way the M.S. would have done. The pull of the directional field of gravity was a mild force compared to the punishment such a powerful opponent could mete out, an opponent who had pushed aside the six Arkonide rockets as a man would shoo away that many flies with a wave of his hands. Despite the flood of thoughts that filled his mind, Rhodan kept busy steering the Good Hope down toward the ground, all the time pushing against the enemy's pulling beam. He expected another more effective and more dangerous attack from the enemy at any moment, but nothing happened. He tried to imagine the mentality of the opponent who was evidently concerned with seizing the Good Hope, which came as an invader in its territory; but this was an enemy who, on the other hand, did nothing when the invading ship evaded its gravitational pull. In the meantime, under the influence of the pulling beam, the Good Hope had reached the fortieth parallel of the planet's northern hemisphere. They had passed the coast-line of the northern continent whose southern border roughly followed the outline of the thirty-eighth parallel. "We are going to land here!" Rhodan informed his crew. "I hope to escape the unknown force beam. It will probably be easier for us to approach the enemy's positions on the ground. We have no other choice. The enemy is stronger than we are, at least as concerns the amount of energy he has at his disposal. Let's hope that he has not achieved a higher level of technological development than our Arkonide friends. I do not think that our unknown opponent can locate us once we have landed, for we can hide our ship in the jungle that seems to cover the northern hemisphere. As long as we move in or slightly above the jungle we will be invisible to the enemy from his position far to the north. But since we can't simply ignore the presence of the unknown enemy, we have no alternative but to approach his positions by creeping through this jungle." Reg was just about to express his opinion, when another unforeseen event took place-Dr. Manoli's receiver suddenly intercepted a radio communication! Manoli's receiver worked on the principle of hyperwaves; accordingly, the enemy's sender must be of the same type, which meant that they had reached a very high level of technological development. From the receiver emanated a series of distinct acoustical entities that resembled words but that no one, even

Khrest, could understand.

Rhodan instructed Manoli, "Answer them! Tell them we have come with peaceful intentions! But we protest any undue interference with our spaceship's course!" The doctor carried out Rhodan's orders. But he had hardly finished his transmission, when a new message came in. Like the previous one, this was totally incomprehensible for all aboard the Good Hope. Rhodan asked Manoli to move aside so that he himself could broadcast in the Arkonide language, which was the lingua franca of the universe. But the enemy's reply was again a mystery to them. It seemed as if they were constantly repeating the same phrases, over and over again. "Khrest!" Rhodan called to his friend, who all this time had been sitting quietly on his couch. "I am going to take out the tape. Will you feed it into the automatic translator and see what it can make of this unknown language."

Rhodan cut off the piece of tape from the recorder that automatically recorded any communication, and handed it to Khrest, who would have the message analysed and translated by the translating machine. In the meantime the messages from the unknown sender had ceased. Rhodan was uneasy, for this might mean renewed attacks from the enemy. There was the possibility that the enemy used the gravitational beam as a rather unusual method of orientation, some kind of a lighthouse beacon that guided the enemy's own returning ships. Perhaps he had realised by now that their messages had not been answered in the expected manner, that some hostile strangers were approaching! Rhodan tried to set the Good Hope down as fast as possible. The altitude diminished rapidly, and when they had descended to a height of a thousand feet they had escaped the influence of the opponent's gravitational pull entirely. Once again the craft was under Rhodan's control, and he could manoeuvre it whichever way was necessary. Bell had returned to his post to continue with his observations of the terrain below them. They had penetrated the thick cloud cover that had obscured their view, and now at an altitude of three miles their optical picture screens began to function. They could clearly see the hilly and sometime even mountainous landscape of the polar continent.

"Mountain ranges up to eighteen hundred feet above sea level," announced Bell.

Rhodan was pleased. "That will do for us. We can easily hide there our one hundred eighty foot high spaceship."

Bell began to compare the picture showing on the detection finder with those appearing on the optical screen. The Good Hope kept descending.

"Look, over there! That's our spot for landing!" Rhodan saw a gently ascending chain of hills that stretched in a northeasterly direction. About two-thirds up the mountainside yawned a craterlike depression. It was circular and about six hundred feet across at the rim. It was not possible to judge the crater's depth from the spaceship's present position. Rhodan manoeuvred the Good Hope to a point

three hundred feet directly above the middle of the crater, from where they had an excellent view of the whole structure. It extended to a depth of almost two hundred forty feet, with gently sloping walls, unlike the steep walls characteristic of volcanic craters. Rhodan noted this last point with some relief.

"Okay, I am setting her down now! This looks safe enough!"

The crater floor was overgrown with a dense thicket of low bushes and occasional trees. Carefully Rhodan lowered the huge spaceship down into the crater. Soon the turquoise coloured stop signal lit up on the control panel. The Good Hope had come to rest in its nest, where it was safely hidden from the enemy's view.

CHAPTER THREE

Khrest had completed his task at the robot translator. He stepped over to Rhodan to hand him the paper strip with the transcribed message. The translator identified it as an archaic form of Rim Galacto," reported Khrest. "Here is the translation."

Rhodan took the paper strip and read the Arkonide syllabic script "Transmit the code signal, as agreed!"

Bell peered over Rhodan's shoulder. He was just as fluent in the Arkonide language as Rhodan, Thora, or Khrest. "As agreed?" he repeated. "Who agreed what with whom?"

"Let that be our last worry, Reg!" said Rhodan. "I am much more puzzled by what he means by 'Archaic Rim Galacto'." He searched his memory bank for the information he had obtained during his hypno training sessions. Rim Galacto? Archaic Rim Galacto?

Khrest, too, was at a loss. Rhodan knew of the existence of Rim Galacto. It was a dialect of the official language spoken throughout the Arkonide Empire. This dialect was limited to the far outlying

areas at the rim of the galactic empire. This special version had developed during the past millennium. The attribute "archaic" seemed to indicate that there existed a still more ancient form of that language. But neither Rhodan nor Khrest could tell when and where and by whom it had been spoken once upon a time.

In any case the dialect was so old that any resemblance to modern Galacto had disappeared

"This doesn't tell us what we need to know," said Rhodan. "We will have to go right to the source where this message came from and find out on the spot" This transcription convinced Rhodan more than ever that the unknown foe could not possibly be the greatly feared Mind Snatchers, who might have constructed a secret hiding place on Venus. For the M.S. were known not to need a spoken or written language for communicating with each other. This thought was some comfort to Rhodan, even if he had no assurance that the strangers were not far more dangerous than the M.S.

He let his gaze wander around the cabin, resting for an instant on each member of his crew. "No sense wasting any time. Before the day is over, our scouting party must be well on their way to the enemy's lair."

"How do you evaluate the situation?"

Rhodan and the two Arkonides were sitting together in Rhodan's cabin. Reginald Bell, Tako Kakuta, and the three American astronauts had left the Good Hope half an hour earlier in order to make a cartographic survey of the area. "No evaluation is possible," countered Khrest, "as long as we lack any hints of who opposes us here."

"Did you consult the archives?"

Yes, but without result. The archives contain no information about this planet. It is not on the list of inhabitable planets we encountered on our galactic expeditions."

"This confirms my own thoughts," remarked Rhodan. "For if anything were recorded in the Arkonide archives I should have learned of it during my recent hypno schooling. I should have remembered for sure if I had learned anything in the first place of archaic Rim Galacto. Worse still, I don't have the faintest idea how this lingo might have come about." Khrest remained silent for a while, preoccupied with his thoughts. Then he spoke up. "A possible explanation might be that in the very first stages of our galactic

explorations, an Arkonide expedition reached those outposts and then shortly thereafter cut off communication with our home planet. They might have done so deliberately or they might have been overwhelmed by some catastrophe. This could perhaps explain the fact that our archives lack any data about this colony."

"That would mean that this colony must be at least fifteen thousand years old according to terrestrial time," Rhodan said.

"Correct. This is the date when our first efforts at colonization began. A few hundred years later our communications system had been perfected to such a degree that any newly established colony could never have been forgotten."

"Well, let's assume these people are Arkonides like you and Thora, but Arkonides who left their home planet fifteen thousand years ago and lost contact with the civilization of their race. They must have evolved a different life style in the meantime. You don't even speak the same language any more!"

"What do you mean, Perry!"

"Regardless of whether we are dealing here with members of your own race, Khrest, we must consider them our foes. And they will remain to be so until we have informed them of our intention. As soon as they have learned why we have come here, our unknown opponent will decide if they are for us or against us."

"Or they might remain neutral!"

"Neutral? Do you really believe anybody will be able to remain neutral in this sector of the universe in view of the events that seem inevitable in the near future?"

Rhodan fell silent for a few moments. Then he resumed the conversation. "We will have to stalk the opponent, cautiously approach his base as if he truly were our enemy. Otherwise they might detect us and wipe us out."

"As soon as we have reached their base we must attack. We will try to cause as little damage as

possible. But we are forced to attack if we want to get near enough to them to have a personal confrontation. I am convinced they won't welcome us at the gates and invite us in! Therefore, what's the use of debating any longer now who the opponents are, how they got here?" Khrest pondered awhile. "The dynamics of your logic frighten me my friend. Although my mind has many more years of training than yours, it would have taken me several hours to arrive at the same conclusion. However, there still exists the chance that we might have to shoot at our own kind."

Rhodan rose. He was about to answer, when Thora interjected, "Has it occurred to you that these colonizers have inhabited this planet for many thousands of years without leaving any apparent trace of their presence?"

"Yes, I have been puzzled by this. Even the smallest group of settlers would have to leave their imprint on the surface of this world. But what have we seen? Nothing but jungle, water, and volcanoes. Not the slightest trace of any civilization."

"Except for the small matter of a directional gravitational field and the apparently effortless manner with which our six combat rockets were deflected from their course!" Khrest remarked, not without a trace of unaccustomed sarcasm.

"All right, their base might be a marvel of technological accomplishment. But there is nothing else outside that base!"

"What conclusion do you draw from that?" asked Khrest. "None so far. We will have to wait until we get inside their base. Only experience can tell."

At 180 hours local time Bell and his group returned to the Good Hope. They brought back a relief map that the automatic cartographer had produced during their survey of the surrounding countryside.

Bell proudly presented the map to his friend Rhodan. "We have completely covered an area with a sixty mile diameter around the spaceship. It was no child's play, even with the Arkonide transport suits we were wearing. We hardly dared climb more than one hundred fifty feet above the treetops."

"I wonder if you didn't go up too high," Rhodan said, with worry in his voice. "Too high-one hundred fifty feet? The enemy base is at least three hundred miles from here. How could they possibly..."

"The Arkonide transport suit uses artificial gravity. Such a force can be detected over a distance of thousands of miles."

Bell was startled. "You are absolutely right. Why didn't I think of it! But let me tell you what else we found. That might calm your fears." Bell pointed to the map. "This area has direct access to the ocean. Not even six miles from here we have found a fjord that is still six hundred feet wide at this point."

"A fjord?"

"Yes. The water is salty but has no waves. Maybe it is a salt lake."

"Go on."

"The water is teeming with life. There are all kinds of fish and a seal-like creature. The rest of the animals are 'horrible to look at and unlike anything we have on Earth. A huge octopus that could hide a whole squadron behind its body; sea serpents with six feet; and something that lies on the surface of the water like a colourful carpet. Not until you touch it does it spring to life. Of course, we didn't do anything as foolish as that, but we threw a stone at the thing. Suddenly the beautiful carpet changed into a broad greyish clump that enveloped the stone and dragged it down into the deep water, where it disappeared." Rhodan laughed. "What else have you found besides these monsters that seem to have come straight out of a horror movie? Anything important to report?"

Bell was crestfallen. He had thoroughly enjoyed his own gory story. "The terrain is sloping toward north, rising gently but steadily. Far to the north we sighted a mountain range, with peaks up to thirty thousand feet. The interior of this continent is a vast array of mighty mountains, but the highest are in the area where the enemy has his base. We also noticed several ugly looking volcanoes.

"The landscape is rather uninteresting in all other directions. It remains at the same level in an easterly and western direction, only rarely dotted by a few hills. Toward south the land slopes down to the ocean. The air smells most unpleasantly of fire and sulphur, but it is breathable, without making you feel nauseated. And there are animals as tall as the Empire State Building."

Rhodan snickered sceptically. "Come off it, Reg!"

"They are huge, Perry! But they don't appear to be smart. Nyssen tested their reaction time. He'd hover directly in front of their big mouths and could easily get away before they'd even see him."

"There are also two little rivers that run southward. That's all we found. We marked anything worthwhile on this map." Rhodan nodded, pleased with what he heard from Bell. But then he insisted, "You wanted to explain why the unknown foe can't locate you, even if you were flying one hundred fifty feet above the treetops."

"They are sitting right in the middle of the mountains. Considering the large number of high elevations, the probability seems very great that their view will be obstructed by at least one of those high peaks."

Rhodan inspected his friend from head to toe. "It hasn't occurred to you that they would have placed their observation posts on the highest mountaintop, stupid?"

"Well ... but ... " stammered a very embarrassed Bell. "You bet your sweet bippy they saw you cavorting around," said Rhodan. "And may God have mercy on you if you gave away our position!"

For a few moments Bell was a pitiful sight. But then he rallied from his depression. "I think they'd have started shooting at us long since if they had sighted us. I am sure they did not see us!" Rhodan simply shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows? Maybe you were lucky!"

Shortly after 190 hours dusk fell, accompanied by heavy storms. (Rhodan had outfitted the most important chronometers on board the Good Hope with dials adjusted to Venus's daily rotation on its axis. A day had two hundred forty Venusian hours. Each Venusian hour was fifteen seconds shorter than one hour on Earth.) Rhodan had decided to keep the scouting party on board the Good Hope a while longer and to continue exploring their immediate vicinity. He wanted to find out which instruments and tools would be most suitable if they had to make their way through the Venusian jungle. But in addition, he preferred waiting until he was sure that Bell's reckless behaviour had not alerted the enemy as to their

presence. If indeed they had become aware of the Earthlings, the humans would no longer be able to use their Arkonide transport suits—at least not for flights above treetop level. Below on the jungle floor the suits were worthless anyhow. The dense jungle of the polar continent made any attempt at flight impossible. Rhodan set up a continuous guard system. At least one man who was familiar with the search instruments and safety installations of the Good Hope had to stay in the command center at all times. In case of emergency it was not sufficient that they could come running from all parts of the ship on hearing the alarm signal.

Rhodan ordered each guard to record on tape any observations or incidents, regardless of whether they had any bearing on the specific tasks of this expedition. Any observation, including natural phenomena or animal behaviour, assumed importance when it supplied additional information to the scouting party regarding the world around them.

Rhodan himself had the first guard duty, from 191 hours till 193 hours. He extinguished the light in the central command room. He was all alone. He raised an optical probe as far as the rim of the crater in order to get a thorough look at the surroundings.

The storm outside raged with unbelievable fury, coming from the east. With the help of an aerodynamic probe Rhodan measured the wind velocity, which close to the ground was two hundred and ten miles per hour, far less than it had been at higher altitudes.

Dusk had given way to total darkness at about 192 hours. Rhodan had to switch the optical probe over to infrared frequencies. This caused the pictures on the receiver screen no longer to appear in their true colours. Instead, everything was visible as white on a black background.

Half an hour later the storm had spent itself. On the picture screen Rhodan perceived the long, snakelike neck of a saurian type creature, rising above the leafy roof of the dense jungle. The tiny head swung at the end of the neck like a pendulum. Perhaps the animal was trying to find its bearings after the storm. Rhodan observed how long the creature needed to accomplish its task. Bell had been right—these animals were not well endowed with intelligence.

Rhodan flipped on the tape recorder to register his observations. "Dinosaurlike creature. Head about five to six yards above the roof of the jungle. Takes about ten minutes to orient itself, although environment is unobstructed."

That was a valuable bit of information. Such observations would save time when the scouting party encountered such a beast. No necessity to make a wide detour around it! They could probably crawl

right between the creature's legs, and it would not notice them. Suddenly Rhodan was startled by a noise coming from behind him. He whirled around, to see Thora enter the room, which was only faintly illuminated by the glow of the picture screen.

"You sure startled me, Thora!" Rhodan laughed nervously. "I have come to relieve you, Perry. It's almost time for my turn at guard duty." Rhodan glanced at his watch. He still had another twenty minutes to go. In silence both stood and watched the bright screen.

"You should have seen this area when the storm was raging," he remarked after a while. "It looked quite romantic."

She did not reply. A few minutes later she posed the strange question, "Do you like it!"

"What!"

"This world."

"I like any new world that I have a chance to see. I have been informed about most of them—quite thoroughly in many cases but only sketchily about several of these worlds. But I will not feel totally satisfied until I have been able to see all of them with my own eyes.

Rhodan remained silent for a few moments before he added; "Why do you ask? Don't you like this world?" She hesitated slightly, then said, "I don't know whether you can understand me. Being a member of my race makes me realize that there is really nothing new anywhere in this universe for us to see. Whatever we discover in one place we have already seen elsewhere in a similar or even identical form. You get tired of discovering these old 'new things.' Do you follow me, Perry? I wonder how long before one of our philosophers will get around to demanding that we abolish space flight, since it no longer contributes anything to the further intellectual development of our race." Rhodan pondered this. It did not seem absurd to him at all, considering the history of the Arkonides, who for many thousands of years had been busy exploring other worlds. Not too surprising if they could no longer find anything new.

"But your spaceships have never ventured to other galaxies. Or at least none of their attempts have been successful. Might such new adventures not infuse your tired people with a new zest for life?"

"You are talking like an Earthling," she answered, with a hint of sarcasm in her voice. "Young, curious, and a bit violent. Just think how much such an intergalactic expedition costs and compare that cost with the returns."

"Who has ever worried about the costs of a new, world shaking cause?" Rhodan said with irritation. "The development of Earth's space technology, until they finally built the moon rocket, was extremely expensive. All mankind could have lived in luxury if they had spent the money on themselves rather than for space research. But did such considerations prevent our progress in space flight? No! People in Asia, Africa, and Latin America kept dying by the millions from starvation or from diseases that could have been cured if there had been enough money for food and medication. Instead, we constructed the moon rocket! I wonder about the ethics of behaviour that permits millions to die for the sake of progress. In any case, men seem to be a bunch of hardheaded creatures more concerned with satisfying their curiosity and exploring the unknown than with regaining the idyllic conditions of a Garden of Eden for all mankind." "But who knows what humanity's fate would have been had we acted differently? Maybe we would no longer exist! We have gone through so many catastrophes that came close to extinguishing us." Rhodan had spoken with vehemence, but Thora understood that he did not mean to attack her. It was his pride in mankind that had caused him to flare up. Suddenly she felt a surge of envy rising in her. "I don't know if we ever, even at the height of our existence, were so full of energy!" Rhodan turned around and tried to peer into her face as best as darkness would permit. Her reddish eyes were glowing in the weak reflection of the bright picture screen. It did not appear that she was making fun of him and his kind. Her attitude of resignation caused him to worry and made him feel helpless.

He looked at his watch. It was time for him to go off duty. "I enjoyed talking with you," he said stiffly. "I hope we will find more opportunities for such dialogues in the future."

She did not reply but simply smiled at him as he turned to leave. As soon as he had closed the door behind him he felt sorry that he had not stayed longer with her. She had come earlier than necessary to relieve him. He could have remained awhile to keep her company. She was probably disappointed now. He was almost about to open the cabin door again but then changed his mind. What if she looked at him in her usual sarcastic manner? No! This would completely spoil the good feeling their conversation had aroused in him.

Slowly he walked back to his own quarters. He sat down and smoked a cigarette, lost in pleasant thoughts. Then he switched on his video screen, but since his set lacked an outside probe, all he could see were the dark walls of the crater that hid the Good Hope.

Rhodan did not know how long he had been asleep when he was awakened by the hum of the telecom.

Bell's round face appeared on the screen. "Wake up, Perry!" he shouted. "Wake up!" Still half asleep, Rhodan fumbled for the telecom switch. "What's the matter?" he rumbled. "I've seen something interesting here that-"

"Why don't you record it on tape and let me sleep!"

"No, Perry!" yelled Bell. "You've got to listen to me! The seals have climbed ashore and up the mountainside, where they have gathered for a meeting. That you must see!"

"The seals? what seals are you talking about? Since when do seals conduct meetings?"

But then Rhodan remembered Bell's report from the previous day. Suddenly he was wide awake. "Give me two minutes and I'll join you." Rhodan found Bell sitting open mouthed in front of the video screen. Bell motioned excitedly to Rhodan but did not say a word, as if he were afraid to scare the animals away by his voice.

Rhodan noticed that his friend was using the optical probe together with a sectional enlarger. Thus he had managed to bring the small plateau of the mountaintop so close that they were able to recognize the smallest details, although it was almost five miles away. The mountain was about fifteen hundred feet high. It was totally overgrown with low bushes, except for the plateau at the top.

Rhodan checked the time. It was a few minutes before 196 hours. Soon Bell's turn on guard duty would end. Then Rhodan concentrated his attention on the video screen. There were a number of strangely formed animals moving around on the plateau. They faintly resembled seals, but according to Bell's previous description they breathed through gills.

Originally Rhodan had planned to let the scouting party start only after sunrise. But the Venusian night proved to be too long for the impatient human complement of a crew that was hungering for action.

Therefore Rhodan had the members of the scouting party equipped with Arkonide transport suits, as well as weapons and rations to last them several months, well ahead of schedule.

The troop consisted of Rhodan, his friend Reginald Bell, Dr. Manoli, the three American astronauts, Tako Kakuta, and finally Anne Sloane, who had insisted in participating in the scouting mission.

Rhodan had just completed briefing his group, which was now ready to pass through the air lock, when suddenly Khrest's voice was heard over the ship's telecom system: "Stop! Wait! Sightings!" Rhodan asked his group to wait and rushed back to the command center, where he found Khrest sitting in front of a radar scope, on which a swarm of white light dots darted aimlessly back and forth.

"What is that, Khrest!"

"I am inclined to believe that these are robot spies. I don't know whether you remember that we had similar structures in the early stages of our history. They are simply either radio, optical, or microwave probes with a considerable range. These instruments here on the screens are most likely no larger than my head."

"Judging by their aimless movements they have not yet located us," stated Rhodan.

Khrest shrugged. "Don't be too sure. This may just be one of their tricks." Rhodan thought for awhile; then he decided. "We will leave as planned, despite these robot spies. But we will proceed on foot rather than fly. We will take along a robot to clear the way through the jungle."

Rhodan glanced at Thora. He wanted to find out if she was afraid. But she just smiled at him.

"I'll keep in constant touch with you," said Rhodan. "Don't take any risks with the safety of the Good Hope. If you should think that our protective force fields can no longer shield you from enemy attacks, you should lift off and make a getaway." "We will do our utmost to defeat our opponent, whoever he might be. But in case we fail, we will arrange for a meeting place where you can pick us up, or..." He hesitated briefly. There might be none of us left for you to pick up. That's a chance we have to take." Khrest looked serious. He was once again impressed by the Earthling's audacity. Thora had stopped smiling. Rhodan rushed off to rejoin his scouting party, which was waiting for him at the air lock. Rhodan instructed Bell to fetch a heavy robot ground leveller from the ship's storeroom. This robot would have to do its work in a semi-automatic fashion, since there was not enough time left to program it for full automation. That would mean that someone would have to guide the robot during his work performance. "We will keep on our suits," Rhodan declared after Bell had left on his errand. "But I will wring your necks if you fly above the treetops without my express permission!"

Bell steered his robot out through the air lock. The others followed one by one. They reached the upper rim of the crater at thirty minutes after 239 hours, which was just half an hour before the Venusian midnight.

Rhodan let his group march down the other side of the mountain toward the fjord.

The discuslike robot spies had disappeared from the radarscope, as Khrest informed them via radio.

The descent on foot turned out to be quite difficult. Fortunately, though, the mountain slope was free of any plant cover. Evidently nothing had been able to take root on the steep incline because of the fury of the frequent storms. At the head of their small procession the robot rumbled along. It had no ground levelling work to perform here, since there was no plant cover. The bulky robot had a hard time maintaining its foothold. It was followed by Rhodan, who led the rest of the scouting party. Tako Kakuta formed the rear guard.

The descent toward the ocean took more than an hour. A new Venusian day had begun in the meantime, but it was still as pitch dark as before.

During that time they had covered only a little more than a mile, as the crow flies, from the crater rim to the edge of the sea. Rhodan calculated that it would take them two hundred fifty hours if they continued toward the enemy's stronghold on foot. True, the descent had been especially difficult, but on the other side of the fjord they would not encounter any more favourable conditions, since the gently rising land was covered with dense vegetation. Rhodan decided to fly across the fjord, utilizing their Arkonide transport suits. The rising slope on the opposite side of the fjord made them undetectable as long as they flew close above the water.

The robot crossed the fjord in its own way. Splashing wildly it stomped down into the water, and soon the waves doused above its metal head. It was of such sturdy construction that it would be safe from any dangers that might lurk in the waters of the fjord.

The robot's impetuous advance caused quite a ruckus among the inhabitants of the waters. Rhodan noticed thin shapes flitting ahead of it through the air, probably some kind of flying fish. From the side there came the mourning cries of a creature that had never been beheld by any human eye. At some spots in the water the glow of coloured lights suddenly appeared. "These are the carpets," explained Bell. "The robot seems to have stimulated their appetites, and now they are trying to lure their prey."

The scouting party still stood on the shore. No need to hurry, since flying across would be much faster than the robot's slow progress through the water. Anne Sloane pushed her way close to Rhodan. "It's pretty scary here, don't you agree?" she asked, as if Rhodan were a teenage pal of hers. Rhodan gave a signal to his troop. "Let's go!" The first to disappear, naturally was, Tako Kakuta.

"Oh, to be a teleporter!" sighed Anne Sloane enviously.

Their flight proceeded with barely a sound, in contrast to the noisy protests of the citizens of the ocean who protested against the intruders. As Rhodan flew over one of the glowing carpets, the carpet seemed to rise toward him, then contracted, glowed more intensely, and finally condensed into a faintly shimmering ball that sank swiftly below the surface of the water. The creature must have realized that it had missed its aim and beaten a hasty retreat.

The crossing lasted less than two minutes. By constant shouts, Tako guided them to a place that was free of any vegetation. This would be a good bridgehead on which to gather their forces before their advance into the jungle. This spot was slightly off their course; consequently Bell activated the guiding beam that would let the robot emerge from the water at the desired place.

Fifteen minutes later the robot waded ashore. They hardly recognized it.

"Lights!" ordered Rhodan. "Get the robot cleaned up!" An impenetrable tangle of vines completely covered its hull. Bell made the robot stop and had Anne direct the beam of her manual searchlight on the confusion. Bell resolutely attacked the tangle, trying to pull it off the robot. He seized the plants with both hands.

Suddenly he cried out and pulled his right arm out of the tangle. Startled, he looked at the strange, oddly shaped creature that had sunk its teeth into his glove and now dangled from his hand. The animal resembled a rhesus monkey. Its eyes were covered with a keratinous film that must protect them against the salty sea water, but made them look lifeless, like white marbles. Instead of a hairy fur the animal had a covering of sleek scales. Its tail ended in a pair of short pointed prongs. Since the creature was violently thrashing about, especially with its tail, Bell ran the risk of injury despite his resistant transport suit.

"Throw the thing away!" shouted Rhodan.

"That's easier said than done!" snarled Bell. "I can't pry it loose from my glove." Bell tried to get hold of the tail and pull at it, but the monkey reacted by increasing the intensity of its bite. Its teeth sank even deeper into the thick leather of Bell's glove. Bell let go of the tail, but the monkey was now violently whipping him with the released tail, whose prongs managed to rip Bell's suit. All Bell's frantic manoeuvres remained without success until he hit on the idea of beating the monkey over its head with his clenched fist. One strong blow caused the animal to lose consciousness and finally to loosen its grip on his glove. Like a stone it plummeted to the ground. Bell picked up the motionless form and inspected it closely. Anne came wandering over to him.

"He isn't dead," Bell assured the girl. "Just unconscious. You see? He's coming to!" Hissing like a cat the monkey snapped at Bell's hand again. But he reacted in time and flung the creature back into the water. This experience caused Bell to proceed with greater caution while he cleaned the tangled plants from the robot.

At long last the job was complete. Bell shone the light into every crack to make sure nothing was hidden inside the robot's structure. Then he slapped the robot's domelike top playfully. "Next time I'd better carry you piggyback! Look at all the trouble you caused me!" Rhodan had a short final conversation with Khrest; then he gave the signal to start. The fight against the jungle had begun.

The robot—they had named it Tom in the meantime—exceeded their expectations. It flattened and rolled aside the underbrush like straw. At the same time it produced such a racket that all the bizarre looking creatures that might have alarmed the men behind Tom now fled deeper into the forest in panic. Prudently, it circumnavigated the larger trees. It was not only powerful, but it also possessed the ability to distinguish clearly between those obstacles it could assail and those it could not.

They were only a half hour underway before a stop had to be made because Bell's hand began to hurt him. Anne examined it and determined that the water monkey had bitten through his glove. After being

treated with an application of Arkonide medicine, it was only a few minutes before Bell was relieved of the pain. "I hope that this will serve as a warning to all of you," said Rhodan. We should get used to a simple rule-don't touch anything! As long as everything in this world is strange to us, consider all unknown gadgets and whatnots as too hot to handle." Then, protected by Tom's broad stern they continued onward. The small lane that he carved out for them was wide enough for two men abreast, with an overhead clearance of about eight feet Rhodan watched carefully above them, searching the foliage overhead with the spotlight, not certain what animals might be living there, but nothing was discovered. After a three hour trek they made a halt and set up a temporary camp. The men paired off, and for each group of two they erected one of the Arkonide inflatable tents that, when deflated and pack folded, could fit in the average pants pocket Anne was the only one with a private shelter.

The continuing darkness produced some uneasiness and confusion among the men. They stretched out to catch a few winks of sleep, but only a couple of hours passed before they were on their feet again. Rhodan had stood watch. He did not feel tired, and he took the opportunity to communicate with Thora. Through her he learned that the small robot spies had made a second appearance but that they had retreated with as little success as on the first occasion. No other enemy activity had been observed.

Nothing of an unusual nature occurred during the two hour rest period. Rhodan was glad they could do without any unpleasant incidents. As for his personal instinct for adventure, he was a bit disillusioned. A few minutes before the end of his watch, when he heard the rhythmic rumble of some saurian creature's passage in the vicinity, he considered it a poor substitute for a noteworthy experience.

They established thirty hour time periods, and during two of them they advanced about fifty miles. This was a remarkable accomplishment, considering that they were traversing impenetrable jungles and were burdened with the presence of a woman.

There were no untoward events.

Toward the end of the second thirty hour period, after Tom had quickly created a clearing for them and they had put up their tents, a new day appeared to be dawning above the forest canopy. Rhodan sent Tako into the treetops to determine how close they might be to their objective.

After a few minutes, Tako came back and reported, "Less than a hundred miles to the north, the real mountains begin. Even in the poor light and at this distance you can't mistake those towering walls of rock. It's going to be a rough job to climb up there." Meanwhile, with help from Derringhouse, Bell had fixed something to eat. They all ate somewhat wearily and then crept into their tents. Captain Nyssen had the first watch, but it passed uneventfully. The Venusian jungle creatures seemed to fear the alien intruders.

Several hours later, calamity struck in full measure.

Dr. Manoli had the watch. He sat in front of his tent, which he shared with Tako, and against Rhodan's instructions he had turned off the spotlight, to make it easier for him to observe his surroundings. The jungle's leafy canopy was no longer able to screen out the gathering brightness of the new day, which began to dispel even the deeper ground shadows around him. It was the seventy-first hour, by log time—actually the start of the second day of their Venus sojourn, if one were to reckon by Venusian days. He had become accustomed to the normally clamorous sounds of the jungle; but suddenly Manoli heard something that seemed to come from the immediate vicinity of the camp itself. Hurriedly, he put the light on again and listened.

Hearing a distinct scraping noise, he stood up and tried to determine where it was coming from. He panned the beam of the searchlight around the camp but could not uncover anything that looked suspicious.

Then he heard a piercing scream, so terrifying that he felt the goose flesh jump across his back. It was Anne's voice, and with three or four rapid bounds Manoli was at her tent. He ripped the entrance flap aside and shone his lamp into the interior. Anne was not to be seen, just the thing that thrashed about in her place was so horrifying and repulsive that he was momentarily frozen in his tracks. The thing had neither an end nor a beginning. As thick as a human thigh, it was a coiling mass of slime coated pale white flesh that had crawled up out of the ground. Except for a slightly perceptible series of circular depressions, the creature showed no evidence of an articulated structure or any sign of limbs. Manoli was certain that it had bored the hole out of which it now emerged. The other extremity of the thing was already beyond Anne's tent. The body continued to ooze up out of the hole, to gather in a sickening mass on the other side of the tent. This was the sucking noise that he had heard. Suddenly Rhodan was standing beside him; the scream had brought him out of his tent in a hurry. "what is it?"

Manoli did not need to explain. Speechlessly and with a trembling gesture he pointed at the pale white monstrosity.

Rhodan appeared to grasp the situation instantly. He turned his head. "Bell! The disintegrator!"

A shouted answer was heard from outside. Rhodan lifted his needle ray gun, aimed it at the quivering

white mass, and pressed the trigger. He did not take his finger off the trigger until a smoking, odorous incision had been cut straight through the creature's body. The result was astounding. The forward end appeared not to be concerned with what had happened to the rear portion. It crawled away and in a few moments had completely disappeared from the tent. Meanwhile, the second portion, with the singed front section, undulated uncertainly back and forth on the edge of the hole. Then it suddenly began to change. With a soft crackling sound, the burned crust fell off the end, and the exposed cross-section extended itself out into a headlike tip. Then the remnant animal set itself in motion again-out of the hole, through the tent, and away.

This exhibition had lasted only a few seconds, during which time Rhodan realized that this was no way to help Anne. He plunged out of the tent and yelled for Bell.

"Here!" came his answer.

"Some kind of giant worm has grabbed Anne and taken her off," explained Rhodan rapidly. "Apparently it's as hard to kill as an earthworm. We've got to run it down!" Together, they ran around Anne's tent and discovered the second worm segment crawling away. In the slimy trail of the first segment Bell drew in his breath sharply between his teeth at the sight of it; then he raised the disintegrator and started to carve out a tunnel in the Jungle along the worm's path. He knew what had to be done-they had to get past the second segment and overtake the first one. There or somewhere in between they would discover Anne. Rhodan had considered that he might send Tako ahead of them, but the goal was uncertain and the danger too great.

With a desperate fervour the two men rushed into the breach that had been made in the foliage, carved it out deeper ahead of them, stumbled over vines and creepers, fell several times with a moist slap against the body of the second worm, struggled against nausea, and got up again to run onward.

Rhodan was aware that they were not advancing very rapidly. With each passing minute they gained only about a yard on the worm, and from what he had seen so far, its stretched out length exceeded all expectations. Merely to reach the front end of the second worm segment took ten minutes. Bell turned around and permitted the destroying beam of the disintegrator to play over the scarlike body until it had dissolved into nothingness.

"Be more cautious with the other one," admonished Rhodan. "I don't know if worms have the ability to sense that they are in danger. If this one has, it might disappear into the ground with Anne." Bell nodded. Simultaneously he used the disintegrator to lengthen the jungle passage, through which they now pressed further into the forest. Rhodan beamed his flashlight ahead and discovered the tail end of the first worm disappearing into the brush at the end of the leafy tunnel.

They plunged in behind it. While they were busy overtaking the tail of the creature and pressing through the side branches beside it where Bell's short range disintegrator shots hadn't reached, they failed to notice in the excitement that the ground was starting a gradual upward incline. Even if they had noticed it they would not have attributed much importance to it. This first worm segment was even longer than the one they had destroyed. It took them almost a half hour to gain sight of the blind pointed head of the creature which also brought Anne into view. The worm had thrown a coil about her body, and with its forward section rising sharply upward, it held its victim up high. Apparently, Anne was unconscious. She hung limply in the coil of worm flesh, but it seemed that nothing more serious had happened to her so far.

While they were catching up with the worm and figuring out a way to free Anne from her terrifying predicament, they failed to notice that the jungle was opening up into a clearing only sparsely covered with underbrush.

"I'll go as close underneath her as possible," Rhodan said finally. "When you fire at the thing I'll be able to catch her." Bell nodded, completely depleted of words. He waited until Rhodan had established a favourable walking position along the continuously crawling worm; then he began to fan the white body with the uninterrupted beam of the disintegrator. Where he aimed, the worm dissolved into vapour. The thing seemed to become aware that it was in danger, and it turned to one side. Bell had to jump away to avoid having his legs sideswiped.

The creature stubbornly continued to move until Bell had disintegrated about seven-eighths of the body mass that he could see from where he stood. Then the movements and twitchings suddenly died. Its forward part toppled, but Anne was still clutched in the coil. For fear of hitting her, Bell did not dare to shoot at this part of the animal.

Rhodan executed two slices with his needle ray, which cut the rest of the worm into three parts; then he withdrew the girl from the clammy, cloying embrace of the coil. Carefully, he set her body on the ground in an area that appeared to be safe, and then he tried to bring her back to consciousness.

Neither of the men noted that a few yards ahead the ground opened up into a circular hole of considerable radius and depth. Neither one saw the bizarre, multiple limbed creature that shoved itself over the rim of the hole like a thin, glistening tree limb with many side branches and approached them with jerky movements.

Rhodan studied the trail of slime the worm had left on the ground. The body of the animal must have measured more than forty yards in length, he reflected. Considering that the beast had not completely

emerged from its hole before he and Bell took off in pursuit of its forward segment, what must its total length have been? Everything on Venus seemed to have been created too large—the worms, the lizards, the flying fish. Only where the process of evolution reached a certain state of intelligence did the giantism cease. The seals had proved that point, and perhaps also the little water monkey that had bitten Bell's hand. On the other hand, this giant worm had been relatively defenceless. Its only weapon seemed to be its repulsiveness. It had been able to throw a coil around Anne and carry her away, but not once had it made an attempt to defend itself against their attack.

Anne opened her eyes. She looked about her, at first confused, then with a sudden look of fear in her eyes. With a half-articulated cry, she recognized Rhodan and grasped his arm.

"Where are we? What happened?"

Gently but firmly, Rhodan forced her to lie back on the ground. "Don't get excited—it's all over now," he said. "That was that—" She put her hands over her face as memory returned. "Something grabbed me and took me away. It was so clammy and hideous! What was it?"

"A worm," replied Bell. "A plain old garden variety of earthworm—or should I say Venusian worm."

She regained her composure slowly. After a while she removed her hands from her face to look at Rhodan. "Where is it? Did you...?" Rhodan nodded. "Bell wiped it out. How do you feel?"

"All right, thank you—except for the scare. How far are we from camp?"

"About an hour away. When you feel better, we'll start back." This was agreeable to her. As she sat up, her glance happened to pass beyond Bell's squatting figure and then she saw it. "No!" she cried out, and as she sprang up she fell into Rhodan's arms. "What's the matter?"

"Look there!"

In a phlegmatic calm, Bell remained sitting on his heels, looking up at her. Only when she pointed close behind him did he make a move to turn.

"Don't move!" bellowed Rhodan. Bell froze.

Rhodan saw the cause of Anne's excitement. It looked like a long, thin branch with numerous smaller twigs. But one would not expect such a branch to lift up its twiglike arms, as it did now, and poke at Bell's suit. The entire creature must have been about six feet long and, raised up on its spidery twig legs, about three hands high. Rhodan drew his weapon and carefully cut the animal into two parts with a single shot. The twiglike legs buckled and with a weird rustling sound the creature collapsed to the ground.

Rhodan holstered his ray gun. "Okay-now you can get up," he told Bell.

Bell jumped up and turned around. "What was that it?"

"That thing there-the branch."

Bell bent over and was about to pick it up.

"Keep your cotton-picking fingers off of that thing!" Rhodan bellowed. "Man, don't you ever learn!" While they were concentrating their attention on the dead animal in an attempt to learn what sort of life form it was, Anne looked about the area. She discovered the second twig legger and screamed.

Rhodan took long enough to observe that the thing was crawling directly out of the hole; then he shot again with his ray gun. Apparently these branch creatures were more articulated in their structure than the worms. One shot, however, and the thing was killed on the spot.

Bell had now become alerted. He raised the barrel of his disintegrator and moved furtively to the place where the second creature had apparently come out of the ground.

"Careful!" Rhodan called to him.

Bell annihilated a patch of scrubby undergrowth and stood on the edge of the hole, which had escaped their attention until now. Rhodan heard him cry out in astonishment and quickly joined him. Speechless with a sort of shocked revulsion, Bell pointed downward into the pitlike orifice, which the dim light of dawn penetrated only weakly.

Rhodan turned the beam of his lamp into the hole, which was about nine feet wide. Its depth was difficult to calculate because a rustling, scrabbling mass of twig leggers nearly filled it. There must have been hundreds of them, and they seemed to be expecting something. Bell raised the disintegrator, but Rhodan held his arm.

"Look!" he said.

In addition to a busy confusion that seemed normal to the twig leggers, something else was stirring them up. The sea of wriggling limbs seemed to swell; then something white appeared in the blur of spidery legs and branchlike bodies and emerged—the tip ended head of a worm such as they had just destroyed.

It pursued its course resolutely, jerkily raising its thin head higher and higher out of the rustling confusion of the twig leggers, apparently intent upon reaching the very edge of the hole, where Bell and Rhodan were standing.

"All right," Rhodan ordered. "Fire!" The head of the worm weaved back and forth within a handbreadth of his feet.

Bell obliterated the worm and the entire contents of the hole with the ravaging beam of the disintegrator. It took him a minute, perhaps slightly longer and then the pit was completely empty. They could now see that the whole excavation was about five or six yards deep. At its bottom yawned two other dark holes of about the thickness of a man's thigh—ingress and egress for the worms, which appeared to have lived together with the twig leggers in a strange symbiosis. Anne shuddered and clung to Rhodan's arm. "Let's head back," he ordered. "In the future we'll know just how careful we have to be." Rhodan hung a portion of the first twig legger over the barrel of his ray gun and brought it back to the camp with him. Although the creature appeared to be dead, he didn't dare to touch it with his hands. At the campsite, Manoli and the others had overcome the rest of the worms that had crawled out of the hole. Rhodan gave the twig legger fragment to Manoli.

"Examine it as best you can," he said, "but avoid touching it."

Then he gave them all a briefing on what they had experienced during Anne's rescue. When Dr. Manoli completed his examination of what Rhodan had brought him, he explained, "The creature is composed almost entirely of a horny substance. It has a minimum of organs, and even they are of keratinous construction wherever the organic function is not involved."

He paused for a moment, poking through the dirt on the ground with a stick. "I've been cudgeling my brain over some things we've found here, and I've made a test of the slimy substance that was left behind by the worm. The stuff contains such a terrific complexity of proteins that it's impossible that they could be manufactured solely by the worm itself." My theory is this-in contrast to our own variety of earthworms, this Venusian worm creature is a typical carnivore or more precisely, it feeds on the insides of animal life forms. On the other hand, the twig leggers live off of that portion of their animal prey which contains any horny substances. Moreover, they are not themselves capable of catching such food. Opposed to this, the predator worm apparently has no teeth or chewing equipment with which to pierce the outer skin or shell of captured prey, and the outer covering is inedible to the worm anyway.

"So these two types of organisms have made a sort of biological covenant between them. The worm catches the prey; the twig leggers tear off the skin or shell and devour it. Then, more or less as a payment for services rendered, the worm gets to eat the innards. This is the strangest symbiosis I have ever come across.

Rhodan caught Bell staring very fixedly at Anne, who was puzzled by his rather pale faced expression. Bell finally shook his head and said, "I'm glad we got there in time-about thirty seconds to spare, I should say."

CHAPTER FIVE

On the rest of the trip toward the enemy base there were only two events of significance.

The first involved a call from the Good Hope. Khrest and Thora reported that the enemy had not been heard from but that the seal creatures had put in another appearance. In a forced march-apparently to reach the water in time-they had crossed over the mountain and climbed down into the crater.

"Do you know what they have done?" asked Khrest, amused.

"No."

"They've deposited a great pile of fish by one of the launch tubes apparently as an offering to the gods." Fortunately, Thora had observed their approach and had installed the thought analyzer in the tube. The analyzer had picked up the seal creatures' thoughts, and using data gathered by the ultrasound detector, the autotranslator was now able to reconstruct the larger part of the seal language. Khrest had removed the fish, in order not to disillusion the seals should they return. On the next occasion he was hopeful of being able to talk to them. The second event involved an encounter with a Venusian saurian monster, which they had so long anticipated—but this was not so amusing... Of the total distance of three hundred miles, by this time they had put about two hundred forty miles behind them. They had already traversed two mountain chains and had discovered behind the second one a long, narrow valley whose floor was covered with a thick jungle. Rhodan felt tempted to permit the use of the transport suits so that his group could fly over the fairly deep valley. But he finally decided that the sixty miles still separating the scouting party from the enemy did not offer a safe distance for their operation. With proper instruments, gravity waves were one of the most easily detected manifestations of energy. Within a certain proximity from the scanner site, even the laws of geometrical optics no longer applied. At close range a sensitive detector could recognize a source of gravitic energy even around corners.

Consequently they clambered down into the valley and prepared to slice their way through the jungle behind Tom's broad back. Anne Sloane was the first to sense that something was wrong ahead of them. She stopped suddenly so that Bell, who was walking behind her, bumped into her. Rhodan noted that something was going on behind him, and he also stopped. Only Tom flailed his way unerringly forward until Bell shouted a command that brought him to a halt. "Didn't you hear anything?" asked Anne, puzzled. Bell shook his head. "No—nothing. Did you?" Anne nodded energetically. She was about to speak, but a loud rumbling sound interrupted. The ground trembled at the same time, and this time everybody noticed it.

Rhodan recalled the rumbling he had heard at the first camp. "A dinosaur!"

"What's it doing?" asked Bell. "What's making all that thunder?"

"It's walking!" Bell listened. After a protracted moment, the rumbling was heard again. He laughed. "Walking, eh? With a half minute between his steps?"

Rhodan nodded gravely. "It could happen—if the thing is as big as I think it is." He motioned to Tako. "Tako, go aloft and see if you can make him out" Tako disappeared. A few seconds later he was back. "He is coming from the east," he reported. "If he keeps his present course he'll bypass us about two hundred yards to the north."

"Then go back upstairs and watch to see that he doesn't change his direction." They waited. There was no point in continuing onward just now because they were headed north and would probably succeed only in getting under the dinosaur's feet. As the moments passed the rumbling increased to the intensity of a small earthquake. Rhodan tried to peer through the leaves in the hope of at least seeing the giant creature's neck, but the jungle thicket that was capable of offering protection against Venusian hurricanes was also capable of cutting off his view. The next monster tread occurred with such force that even Rhodan was shaken. In the next instant, Tako was beside him.

"He's changed his direction—coming right on top of us!"

"How far away?"

"Another two steps and he'll be here!" Everybody heard this. Rhodan looked at them—"No time to get out of the way, but we can defend ourselves!" Bell got the picture. He fetched the expedition's two disintegrators on the double, gave one to Rhodan, and made ready with the other. "Aim straight up!" Rhodan ordered. "If he falls, let's make sure his body disintegrates before he hits the ground!" Bell nodded agreement.

Rhodan turned his head to shout over his shoulder. "Remain close together!"

From the distance a loud roaring was heard as if from a waterfall. The colossal dinosaur was shoving the jungle aside with his tremendous body. Then, suddenly, it became dark. A deep shadow appeared to fall upon the forest, and a few seconds later, not five yards away from Rhodan, a monolithic, granite gray pillar of flesh thundered into the thicket with an ear shattering blast of sound. Rhodan noted the scaly, dirty skin, then tuned his attention upward to the thing that moved above him. He perceived the situation at a glance and shouted in alarm.

"Look out! He's passing right over us!" This the creature actually did. At the next interval of his stride the other pillarlike leg crashed down through the jungle on the other side of them to Bell's left, and simultaneously the mighty animal jerkily dragged its low hanging body completely over the trembling

group of tiny humans. During this experience it seemed as if a complete darkness was upon the world. Four or five yards above them the foul smelling belly of the dinosaur was suspended, but the stink was the least of their worries. The question was, would the hind legs pass them by as harmlessly as the front ones?

Rhodan lowered his disintegrator. "Look out for the tail!" he shouted to Bell. "He can wipe us out with a single blow!"

Barrroom!—the first hind leg. The gargantuan body mass shoved itself forward by a mighty stride, and the light of day was seen from the north. Bell closed his eyes and turned his head, waiting. Barrroom!—the second hind leg, "Thank God!" groaned Bell; but then he opened his eyes to watch for the tail.

Rhodan stared upward and attempted to figure out where the animal's tail would contact the ground. He was still calculating, when something colossal swept close over his head, followed by a wail of wind. "He's turning to the right!" yelled Bell. Rhodan cocked his head to the side and saw the shadow of the several yards thick tail swish to the east. In the same moment the titanic animal took its next stride. Rhodan swung the barrel of the disintegrator and waited. If it required a thirty second interval between the creature's steps, how long would it take for the tail to pass? Nothing else happened. The great, columnar legs of the dinosaur thundered away at the same rhythmic pace, but the feared disaster from the tail did not occur. It seemed to Rhodan that the animal had again swerved from its course and that it was now walking in the direction in which it had originally been moving. This would explain why they failed to see any more of the tail.

A few more minutes passed in tense, alert readiness; then tight arms and shoulders relaxed, and they began to believe that the danger was behind them.

Bell relinquished his grip on the disintegrator and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He was able to grin again. "Footprints seven yards apart," he said. "Any shorter than that and we'd have been clobbered!" They arrived at the conclusion that the dinosaur, including body and tail, must have been over six hundred feet long. According to Take's information, Rhodan judged its height, including the long neck and head, to be over two hundred feet. Even by Venusian standards it must have been a monster; but in any case it far outclassed any saurian life form that had ever existed on Earth. Toward noon of the third Venusian day since leaving the Good Hope, they arrived in the region they suspected of harbouring the enemy base. This terrain was a complete contrast to what they had seen during the first two-thirds of their march. They were at an altitude of about eighteen thousand feet above sea level, and although the Venusian atmospheric density was appreciably higher than Earth's their breathing began to be difficult. The ringing in their ears due to high atmospheric pressure, which they had experienced in the lowlands, was now replaced by a ringing in their ears due to low atmospheric pressure. They had left the jungle behind them, having passed the timberline at about sixteen thousand feet, and the mountain locked plateau where they now stood exhibited very little flora—pale, sparse grass, stunted bushes, and a few

gnarled and twisted trees that hunched along the ground instead of lifting their branches to the sky. The last stretch upward to the plateau had unnerved them. Many times they would have given up, but when it no longer helped to think of the enemy that they must ferret out and subdue, then Rhodan was always there at his self-appointed task, driving them with his will alone. They had reached the southern rim of the plateau in the early glow of dawn. They had then pressed northward along the western extremity of the lofty plain, always under cover of projecting cliffs or travelling in rocky recesses or declivities, and now they found themselves at the northern wall of the lofty enclosure.

Mountains towered above them, more tremendous than any they had seen thus far. Rhodan was convinced that the enemy would have established his equipment on the highest pinnacle in order to have as wide an effective range as possible. But even with the best of telescopes Rhodan could see nothing from his position below the mountaintop. If there were any installations up there they were either built into the cliffs or excellently camouflaged. Here, then, at the northern extremity of the plateau, Rhodan ordered a campsite set up to serve as the springboard for all further operations.

On the afternoon of this day they investigated the environs of the camp in two separate groups. Tako Kakuta with Captain Nyssen and Lieutenant Colonel Freyt even climbed more than three thousand feet higher into the mountains, but the only thing they found was a dead animal that looked like a fox.

Only Anne Sloane and Lieutenant Derringhouse had remained behind in the camp. Anne serviced the small scanner detector device, which compensated for its inferior evaluation in the eyes of the Arkonides by being sensitive to multiple forms of energy. It could locate electromagnetic transmitters as well as gravitational wave sources, but in the first few hours of its operation at the new campsite it did not pick up a thing.

The enemy was silent.

Rhodan continued to feel uneasy. As long as he didn't know where the enemy sat, it was quite possible that their new camp lay before him on a silver platter. While they strained their eyes in search of these hostile beings, the latter were probably sitting somewhere among their lofty crags permitting themselves to be amused by the futile temerity of these bumpkin invaders, before becoming bored and deciding to attack. It was a small consolation to him that every consideration had been given to all conceivable dangers and directions of attack; the main fact was that none of this was a guarantee against the possibility that there was a chink somewhere in their armour, through which the enemy could see.

In the second thirty hour period after the camp had been established, they launched the search in earnest.

This time Tako and the two Americans took the direction in which Bell, Rhodan, and Manoli had searched the last time, and the latter three climbed up the mountain in Tako's previous tracks. The first part of the climb over the first comparatively mild slopes of the forty thousand foot Peak was made comfortably and without encountering unusual difficulties—but also without making any discoveries. They detoured around a wide, rock strewn slope and finally climbed up a steep incline of the wall behind it. The spot where Tako had turned about on the previous day was still two hundred yards above them. It took them an hour to conquer this particular stretch. The place where Tako had found the fox creature yielded nothing new, and there were no signs of any visitation since. They were about to turn back, but before they started to climb down Rhodan cast his glance once more above him and suddenly tensed.

"Hey! Look at that!"

Everybody stared upward, and it was some time before they discerned what he was pointing at. The upper part of the mountain wall seemed to lie back a bit more to the north than the lower part. An actual break was nowhere to be seen, and the homogeneous gray granite of the escarpment offered no contrast for them to estimate the setback distance between the two surfaces. But in any case there seemed to be some sort of a plateau up there that had been invisible to them until now.

Rhodan continued climbing. The escarpment began to be more challenging. Utilizing a sort of rock chimney formation as a channel for footholds and body bracing, they managed to shove themselves another hundred yards or so toward their goal; however, the remaining hundred and fifty feet that now separated them from the clearly distinguishable precipice edge seemed to be insurmountable.

It was an accident of circumstance that came to their aid, and they could thank a certain intermittent occurrence for the fact that they were not made the victims of a powerful mechanical action but moments before. As lead man in the file of climbers, Rhodan was the first to sense a vibration in the rock wall above the chimney. Something of a threatening nature seemed to be approaching from an undetermined direction, and he braced himself firmly and drew the needle ray gun with his free right hand.

Suddenly he heard a hollow sound like the blast of a mighty exhaust through a tube, and as he turned his head he saw close behind him that the air was shimmering under vibration and dust swirled out from between two boulders. The phenomenon was at first unexplainable. The air seemed to be hotter than its surroundings and was being emitted under terrible pressure through the opening between the rocks. Moreover, Rhodan now noted that an arrangement of flatter rocks above the chimney they had just traversed was apparently acting as a deflection shield, driving the exhausted hot air down the chimney.

Observing the two outlet boulders, he could see with what powerful force the hot air was propelled

down the chimney. Had they still been down in that channel, they could not have survived such an infernal hurricane.

The phenomenon lasted for about two minutes. Then the exhaust roar became weaker, the shimmering of the air lessened, and finally the noise died entirely. Under the clouded sky the gray wall of the precipice loomed as peacefully in the diffused light as it had before.

During those two minutes, no one had spoken a word. But now Rhodan pointed to the two boulders and shouted, "Maybe we can find a better way over there—one on. And hang on tight if that blast comes again!" With Rhodan this time bringing up the rear, they all fingered and toed their way across. Bell was the first to arrive at the opening between the boulders. For a moment he peered inside suspiciously; then he took a step forward and disappeared. Manoli followed him, and then Rhodan. They discovered that the two boulders were nothing more than the outlet of an exhaust tunnel of about five foot width that led upward at a comparatively gentle angle. The walls of the tube were strangely smooth, so that the upward climb was difficult in spite of the reasonable grade.

Rhodan egged them on anxiously, admonishing them to hurry. He was certain that the smoothness of the tube was a result of the hot air blast, such as they had just witnessed. Apparently they came at regular intervals or at least frequently within certain time periods, thus enabling the heated air streams to leave the same fluid dynamic traces as might a constant stream of water.

Gradually the steepness of the channel lessened. Apparently the upper end of the tube ended on the plateau. However, this hope was not completely fulfilled. It ended in front of a low frontal wall that exhibited a ragged dark hole in its middle, but the wall itself was only about seven feet high. With a hefty swing, Rhodan hoisted himself over it.

Here was a sort of platform, an open area of one hundred thousand square feet extent, enclosed at the back by a horse shoe shaped cliff wall. At first glance, the unusual smoothness of the rock floor irritated Rhodan's eyes, but at second glance he discovered in the steep back wall a row of dark openings set fairly close to the floor of the platform. He knelt down and examined the ground. The others had joined him by now. Noting nothing unusual other than the smoothness of the rock floor, he stood up and nodded toward the openings in the wall. "Let's take a look at those," he said. A strange uneasiness came over them as they moved gingerly toward the wall. The holes were ragged and jagged. The men held their weapons on open safeties, ready to fire, because there was something suspicious about the brooding calm of the place. At close range and in spite of their jagged outward appearance, the openings turned out to be fairly circular in shape, with a diameter of about three and a half feet. Their center points were at about the height of a man above the platform floor. The distance between the holes averaged about twenty-five feet.

Rhodan stopped within a few steps of the wall and lifted his hand. Bell stood to his left. Manoli at the right Rhodan strained to penetrate the darkness of the hole in front of him, but without success.

Bell, who stood in front of a second opening, said in a low voice, "I can see something!"

Rhodan joined him, and when he peered into the second aperture he began to make out a gray, shadowy outline. He couldn't quite determine what it was. He motioned for Bell and Manoli to stay where they were; then he moved further forward. He approached the opening to within three yards, never removing his gaze from the gray shadow they had discovered. It took the shape of a cylinder that extended out of the darkness to the edge of the hole. When he recognized what it was, panic struck him for a moment. Never in his life had he seen a disintegrator of this tremendous size nor one that pointed so precisely at his gut. With a wild leap, he jumped forward, and as he fell to the ground he yelled at Bell and Manoli.

"Hit the deck!"

A few minutes prior to this, inside the mountain, the following developments had occurred.

The robotic scanner and coordinate locator had made an observation and reported to Command Central: "Three entities are entering the landing plateau through the exhaust tube. They are..." An exact description followed—or more precisely, this was the accompanying text for a video strip the scanner locator station had started transmitting to Command Central from the moment Rhodan had appeared over the edge of the plateau from the tube. In the Command Central, as it developed, there seemed to be some dissatisfaction with this report. A request was made for special details concerning the kind of clothing the strangers were wearing. The automated observation post proceeded with a special structural scanning analysis and submitted the results.

A short time later it received the order "Continue scanning! Standard report model!" And it busied itself complying.

Meanwhile the commanding entity had set other communications in operation and advised the Sector F fire control station, "Alert standby, condition three! Program for controlled fire. Shoot only on order from the commander!"

For the commander had determined from the scanner data that with such entities as the three who had appeared, it wasn't just a matter of indiscriminate firing. Moreover, this whole matter was perplexing. It cost the commander a strenuous mental effort to arrive at the conclusion that nothing definite could be concluded from the mere advent of the strangers or from their mere appearance or type of clothing. After all the years the commander had spent in this fortress, peaceful and undisturbed, he experienced a kind of impatience with the realization that he had to wait a while longer before his curiosity, or what passed for curiosity, could be satisfied. So it was that everything remained quiet for the moment. The commander observed the electro optical report of the scanning station and waited. . . After Rhodan had lain on his belly for five minutes without anything happening, he began to chide himself over his original alarm. Whoever had installed these disintegrators had undoubtedly made the installation at the same time that the rock floor of the plateau had been glazed. Rhodan had no idea how long it would take the process of normal weathering to reduce the floor glaze to chips and blemishes, but certainly it would have to take at least a thousand years. It was improbable that the disintegrator muzzles, which were equally exposed, should have been able to withstand the weathering action better than the floor glazing. He had rolled against the cliff wall in his dive for cover. In getting to his feet he held himself to one side and slowly slid along to the mouth of the aperture. Inch by inch he brought his head to the edge of the hole and finally looked inside. The muzzle of the disintegrator was so close to him that he could have reached out and touched it with his hand. It had a diameter of slightly under two feet. Between its barrel and the wall of the aperture there was enough room to slip through.

Without taking too long to weigh the risks, Rhodan swung up and hunched into the opening. For a breathless moment he poised with his entire body exposed to the awful muzzle; then he forced himself into the hole next to the barrel. He slid along the astonishingly smooth metallic plastic and almost fell to the uneven floor of a cave for which the aperture more or less served as a window.

He waited for any possible reaction, but none came. Then he stepped to the window hole and called to Bell and Manoli, telling them to follow him. As a precaution he motioned them not to come directly in front of the disintegrator.

Rhodan's reckless entrance into the cave was by no means overlooked by the commander. The uninterrupted report coming in from the robot scanner detector plunged him into a new perplexity. It was difficult to imagine that anyone of this stranger's appearance and type of clothing would be foolhardy enough to climb right over the muzzle of a disintegrator. The commander was forced to admit that the actions of this intruder did not coincide with his expectations. But he still lacked important information, without which he was not in a position to reach a final decision regarding the three strangers. . . They were not equipped for searching a cave, since they had not brought along a flashlight. The dim light of day that came through the gun ports penetrated the inner gloom for only a few yards. Behind the second and fifth apertures stood disintegrators. The other four ports seemed to serve no other purpose than to admit light. Rhodan examined the disintegrator that he had climbed over. It was constructed on the same principle as that of the smaller installation on board the Good Hope, but Rhodan knew that this was no definite clue to the racial origin of its builders.

Meanwhile, Manoli and Bell inspected the walls of the cave and took a look at the second disintegrator.

At the first disintegrator, Rhodan noticed that it had no operating controls. Moreover, he was amazed to see that the weapon was a fixed installation that could fire in only one direction. Of course, this disadvantage was compensated for by the fact that the neutralizing crystal field would be fan shaped at any desired spread angle. Two disintegrators of this type, spaced as they were here, would easily have the range and coverage to sweep the plateau clean of any opponent.

Nevertheless, Rhodan was gravely disturbed by the absence of any control mechanisms. The box at the back end of the heavy weapon he found to contain merely the generator for powering the crystal field.

Manoli and Bell joined him.

"Well, isn't that a letdown for you?" said Bell. "What do you mean?"

"This cave. We expected a gigantic fortress, and what do we find? A lousy hole in the mountain!"

Rhodan smiled. "Have you located the gravitation generator?"

"What?" Then it came to Bell, and he slapped a hand to his forehead. "Say, that's right! Where is the generator?" Rhodan continued to smile. "The people who made this cave were probably counting on your kind of reaction," he said. "The cave is so constructed that it would lead one to believe that there is nothing else here, unless that person possessed our own level of experience and training. If in addition the intruder knew nothing about disintegrators it would probably be disappointed and leave. Now then—here's something else..." He revealed to them the absence of operating controls. "The conclusion is that the disintegrator is remote controlled—but from where? Certainly not from some corner of this cave. And I'll show you something else." He passed his hand over the mirror smooth surface of the disintegrator barrel. "Granted, metallic plastic is a durable material—it can last a century without corroding. But if we consider that these disintegrators have probably been here as long as that glazed platform outside, it will give some idea of what these barrels would look like by now, if it weren't for the fact that they have been carefully maintained and polished." Bell had already got the impact of this, but Manoli's mouth gaped open in surprise. "Then you mean that there must be people around here who come in regularly to maintain these weapons and polish their barrels?" he said.

"Something like that."

"But where are they?"

Rhodan shrugged. "I'm not clairvoyant. But besides all that, there is still a more important question. Since these disintegrators are so well preserved, they can obviously be put to use. But nobody fired at us. If we can assume that the beings who have built this stronghold utilize human logic, then it might be expected that they could desist from hostilities and perhaps seek to communicate with with us. So—where are they?"

The Commander waited...

"There's no going on from here," Rhodan decided after they had spent an hour inspecting the cave walls without success. "We'll have to get Tako and Anne Sloane up here. Anne could try to locate an exit mechanism and find a way to operate it, if there is one here within her range of perception. If that doesn't work, well simply have to send Tako into the mountain." Manoli wore a dubious expression "In other words, a kamikaze mission."

Rhodan shook his head. "Don't be silly Tako's teleportation faculty obeys physical laws. He can never rematerialize inside alien matter—he has a sort of emergency brake for such cases. If there is no hollow space inside the mountain, he will automatically return to the place he took off from."

"What I had in mind was his solo confrontation of the enemy," Manoli corrected himself.

"They haven't done anything to us—why should they do anything to him?" Manoli shrugged.

Bell had another suggestion. "Why don't we try using our own disintegrators? We could dissolve enough of the wall to maybe locate a hole that will allow us to go further." Rhodan confessed that he had already thought about this. "It's dangerous," he said. "They might think we're attacking, and they'd retaliate. Obviously their weapons far outclass our vest pocket pea shooters."

"Well, if they're so advanced they ought to be intelligent enough to see that we're just trying to knock on the door." Rhodan considered this.

"Well?"

Rhodan nodded. Bell lifted his small disintegrator, pointed it at the rear wall of the cave, and pressed the trigger.

Then they experienced their second surprise, which more than matched the discovery of the cave and the two giant disintegrators—the rock wall remained undisturbed! "Damn!" Bell lowered his weapon and ran to the wall to inspect it. "It didn't even raise a blister!" His anger and disappointment struck a funny bone in Rhodan, who had to laugh. Manoli was not any less astonished than Bell. Since he had not yet been subjected to Arkonide hypno training, he had been under the fixed impression that nothing in creation could stand up to a disintegrator.

After his first burst of anger, Bell remembered his schooling. "So that's what they've got!" he grumbled. "Crystal field intensification. Where do they get their power?" Rhodan shrugged not answering. What he had just witnessed was an advanced technique, possible against the portable weapon they were carrying, whereby the crystal structure of the matter under attack could utilize the energy to strengthen itself. But for a wall of this size—considering that it must have been protected at the moment to a depth of at least a half a yard—the energy necessary to counteract the effect of a portable disintegrator would have required a sustained output of about ten million kilowatts. That was an impressive delivery, especially considering that the wall of the cave was a very small part of the entire fortress. Their opponent—and Rhodan began to doubt that it really was an opponent—must have at his disposal an almost inexhaustible power reserve...

The robot scanner immediately observed Bell's attempt to break through the wall. Since by its own logic this could be interpreted as a hostile act, or at least an unfriendly one, it pulsed a rapid sequence of high amplitude signals to the commander to warn him of the danger. However, as Bell had surmised, the commander possessed a sufficient faculty for decision to realize that the strangers were only seeking an entrance to the stronghold. He did not issue an order to fire but instead fell to wondering how the strangers had suspected the existence of inner chambers. At first, after he had continued to observe them for awhile, he had almost been convinced that they were primitive enough to turn around eventually and leave the cave. However, when he saw that they did not do this and that they tried to use a disintegrator to get through the rock wall, he finally realized that these beings did not belong to any of the traditional categories he knew. In view of such a circumstance, then, he had no alternative but to continue to wait and observe... The camp was notified, and orders were issued. After having returned with his own group, Tako took command. He ordered the tents to be taken down and packed, and he attended to the division of gear for transport. This time, Tako had a more difficult assignment. The rugged rock face of the mighty escarpment was not an environment that its wide beam was suited for. It had to be rerigged

with an auxiliary device for heavy duty work, and its cargo carrying capacity was proportionately reduced to enable him to have a chance of making the formidable climb. Cable winches and pulley gear were taken along, which Tom could power to lift himself over cliffs if the occasion called for it. When they reached the rock chimney that served as an exhaust deflection channel by the enemy fortress, all the portable gear had to be carried up by hand. Tom waited patiently below until Tako and the three Americans had rigged the winch gear for it so that it could hoist itself up.

In spite of the obstacles, the transportation problem was overcome. Five hours after Rhodan had sent his order to the camp, all tents and equipment lay on the edge of the plateau, while Tako and all able bodied hands guided Tom in its efforts to tow itself over the low frontal wall above the exhaust tube.

Tom's entrance on the scene presented the commander of the fort with a new puzzle. Naturally, the robot scanner had spotted Tom from the first moment that it started across the lower plateau. But a detailed examination became possible only now as the ponderous machine was hoisted up onto the platform. There were discrepancies here in the levels of comparative development Tom was out of harmony with what the scanner had observed in the strangers—with the possible exception of their clothing. The strangers gave an impression of rashness and even primitive foolhardiness by their lack of respect for the superior technology that faced them, in the form of the giant disintegrators. Their clothing and especially the path clearing robot machine, could not by any means represent their own handwork. Where, therefore, were the beings who had produced the clothing and the robot, the beings who had been reported by the sea people?

The commander began to understand that these questions could only be answered by locating the spaceship—the one he had tried to pull down to the plateau with a traction beam because it was the kind of ship that his instructions had forbidden him to shoot down. But the ship had known how to escape his clutches and make a landing elsewhere not in a location he would have preferred, but rather in some quite excellent hiding place. The information obtained from the primitive sea people had been too general for him to give more than an approximate target area to his robot spies. As a result, the ship still remained undiscovered, and the commander's curiosity remained unsatisfied.

Outside the fortress, however, some action was at last getting underway. The Earthlings stood together in front of the horse shoe shaped back wall of the plateau. They were within two yards of the gun port of the western disintegrator. The evening was approaching, and Rhodan gazed skyward with a critical eye. The cloud cover hung low above them, perhaps two or three hundred yards over their head. He would have preferred to have located a safer shelter than the cave with its six windows.

"Well, shall we give it a try?" he asked Anne.

Anne nodded in agreement. She closed her eyes and started her mental search. For a while she did not receive any impression, but the longer she concentrated the clearer became her presentiment of what lay before her within the mountain. Naturally, this was not actual vision, but rather a probing and sensing, a scanning faculty incomprehensible to normal humans and linked with her gift of telekinesis.

Anne probed the corridor directly behind the cave wall, which led into the interior of the mountain. She presumed that where the passage had its origin behind the wall there must be a door of some kind, and she searched for the locking mechanism. She could discover nothing, and after a ten minute search she was too exhausted to continue.

She rested awhile and then began anew. This time she found a further passage that started from the inside of the wall about ten yards away from the first one. Here she made a new search, which ended as fruitlessly as the first. After that she found a third and a fourth passage. These were nothing in the structure of the partition wall to indicate that there were actually any doors at all, and there seemed no means of making an opening.

She pressed her mental sensitivities forward into the passages as far as she could. Her probing capacity could reach about thirty yards inward, but beyond that her impressions became muddled, the end result being that she could discover nothing. Thirty yards back the corridors were the same as they were at their beginnings. There were no intersections. There was nothing recognisable to Anne that might be a clue to the purpose or method of entry.

The entire probing operation lasted about an hour and a half. After this, Anne was so depleted that she had to be put to rest in a tent erected inside the cave. Rhodan listened closely to her, but she only murmured, "Nothing." Then she fell fast asleep.

The commander was not informed of Anne's search. The attempt of a person like this to penetrate the fortress with the bizarre faculty of telekinesis lay beyond the ability of the autoscanner to perceive. Therefore, the commander wondered at the strange inactivity of the strangers. In view of their blustering activity in the beginning, he had expected more from them than this.

When Anne woke up, it was near the end of another day. She had been so exhausted that she had slept almost twenty hours.

Rhodan had utilized the time, although not quite in the way he had anticipated. All the expedition's gear had been brought into the cave, and after that the gun ports had been closed with tarpaulins. There was little hope that these could withstand the storm blasts for more than a quarter of an hour, but to win that much time from such storms as Venus had to offer was quite an accomplishment. When Anne was fully awake she reported to Rhodan what she had been able to find out about the passageways. She seemed to be discouraged and crestfallen. "You've lost a lot of precious time, haven't you?" she asked. "And because of me." Rhodan denied this. "You are so valuable to us, Anne, that we had to let you sleep a whole day."

"I thank you for that. Are you going to send Tako inside?"

Rhodan nodded.

"Is he willing to go?"

"Yes—immediately. He's just been waiting until he could learn what information you picked up." He went out of the tent and found Tako waiting by the cave wall. When Rhodan related Anne's observations to him, Tako indicated that he was ready. "You have to be back here in no less than one hour," Rhodan admonished. "If you are gone longer than that we'll have to assume that something has happened to you." Laughter broke across Tako's wide face. "And then what will you do?" The question did not seem to embarrass Rhodan. "We'll think of something," he said. "You can count on that."

"Good! Okay, then, I'll see you in less than an hour." In the next instant, he had disappeared. Rhodan stared gravely at the blank spot where he had been. He was certain that they could find some way to come to Tako's aid in the event that something should happen to him. However, at the moment he had no idea of what it might be. Tako himself experienced a certain fear at this moment that caused him to shudder. He sensed a jolt as his initial teleport jump was diverted to prevent his materialization inside solid rock. A second later he came to rest. He stretched out his arm and groped at something that seemed to be like smooth, cool granite. It was completely dark here, and he knew that it would probably remain so. Also, in the complete absence of light, the eye had no means of adjusting itself to darkness. He would have to tap his way along until he could build up enough nerve to use his flashlight.

He stood there motionlessly for awhile and strained his ears, listening. But there was no more sound than there was light. It was the dead stillness of a tomb—hopefully not his own. He became aware of a strange odour that seemed to permeate the interior of the mountain. He tried to analyze what it was, but had to conclude finally that he had never sensed anything quite like it in his life. He reached out to his right and again encountered resistance. Behind and before him was nothing; therefore, he stood in a corridor. He listened again, and as no sound reached his ears he turned on the light. He adjusted it so that it projected only a dim cone of light that was sufficient for him to orient himself, but still weak enough not to be easily detected from the distance. In the pale illumination he could discover neither a termination to the passage nor anything else of an unusual nature, so he began to walk deeper into the mountain. The longer he continued without anything happening to him, the more his original anxiety lessened, and after he had walked along for about ten minutes he began to chide himself for having had the jitters.

On the other hand, Tako's intrusion was something that the autoscanner could react to. It transmitted the discovery to the commander in such a high amplitude chain of pulses as to rattle the equipment. The commander regarded the entrance of a single man as something that could hardly be considered dangerous. But here at last he recognised an opportunity to learn something of the strangers' intentions and their origin. And above all, here was his chance to find out about the other beings from whom these had obtained their equipment. He feared that such revelations might not be very gratifying. Perhaps it would turn out that the strangers had taken prisoner the two beings in whom he was chiefly interested and had forced them to relinquish their equipment to them. After a quick reestimate of the available facts his assumptions seemed to him to be quite valid, and so he prepared to take stronger measures against Tako than he would have if he had completely understood the matter.

He issued an order to the security troops to capture the intruder, and they moved at once to obey...

After twenty minutes of groping his way along the passage, Tako began to wonder what its purpose might be. The walls were smooth, not of natural granite, as he had thought at first, but coated with a metallic plastic that was without indentation or blemish. There were no doors, no wall mounted conduits or other devices—nothing! Meanwhile he had dared to narrow his flashlight beam to full strength for a long throw down the passage, but as far as it could reach there was nothing to be seen. He began to reason that if he wondered long enough he must come upon another frontal wall such as the one he had left behind him, and that if he were to teleport himself to its other side he would find himself out in the open on the other side of the mountain. Now what purpose could a corridor have, if it merely ran through the middle of a mountain, he asked himself.

He concentrated once more on the walls to his right and to his left, thinking that perhaps he might not have examined them sufficiently, but each wall remained smooth and seamless as before.

Inasmuch as the security police had received their instructions directly from the commander, they were well informed. For example, they knew that the intruder was apparently a natural teleporter. So it would not be enough merely to capture him; simultaneously it would be necessary to render him effectively unconscious so that he would not be able to put his strange talent to use. They also knew that he was using a source of illumination with which to light his way through the passage. Thus it would not be possible to take up a suitable position in the corridor and quietly wait for him. It was necessary to select the proper side passage and then strike at the right moment.

Last, it was also known that the intruder was armed. According to what the autoscanner had been able to determine about the type of weapon he carried, it was apparently of an advanced nature and therefore dangerous. Although the police had been created to offer their lives, if necessary, to maintain the security of the fortress, they had enough respect for their self-preservation to stay out of the path of a disintegrator.

The ten police troops posted themselves in groups of five, each of them in a side passage that intersected with the corridor through which Tako was moving. . . Tako was about to turn around and go back. He thought it would serve no purpose merely to follow a mile long passageway like this. He would have preferred to have Perry Rhodan with him. Maybe Perry could have come up with an idea of how to attack these walls. He came to a stop and looked around. Before him and behind him the monotonous shaft extended—behind him about three thousand feet, and before him. . . heaven only knew how far! He was concentrating on the cave from which he had started, intending to teleport himself there, but just then he heard a noise nearby. He turned around and stared, wide eyed, at the large opening that had appeared in the wall. Strange beings of a kind he had never seen before came into the beam of his flashlight toward him.

Perhaps he could have saved himself if he hadn't been caught between two simultaneous impulses. He didn't know whether to annihilate these beings with his disintegrator or to teleport himself out of the situation, and before he could make the decision something struck him painfully in the back, immediately paralysing him and causing him to sink into an abyss of unconsciousness. Instructions came promptly from the commander. "Transfer prisoner to Sector A, Level 14, Corridor 2, Room 331."

Two of the police picked up the unconscious body. The group aligned itself in formation—this time all ten in the same direction—and proceeded to carry out the order. At present they were in Sector F and on Level 21, close to the central converging point of all sectors in the circular installation. About fifty yards distant from the passage in which Tako was captured, they came to an elevator. It worked on the principle of reverse gravity, and the platform, which moved up or down in a synthetic attraction field, was large enough to accommodate all ten of the police together with their captive. The trip downward to Level 14 lasted only a few seconds. The police turned to the right with their burden, and in the moment that they reached Room 331 in Corridor 2 and the door rolled to one side, they received the order "Prepare prisoner for interrogation!"

It became evident that the fortress had a functioning lighting system but that it was used only for special occasions such as this. Suddenly a full bank of brilliant lamps came on, suffusing the interrogation room with a pleasant, milk white light. The police laid Tako down on a piece of furniture that might have resembled a bed if it hadn't bristled with a row of strange instruments. A helmet was placed on Tako's head, and a red coded wire lead from the helmet was attached to one of the instruments. Then the commander received the announcement "Orders completed!"

Whereupon he answered, "return to your posts!"

What Tako revealed under hypnotic questioning was a bigger surprise for the commander than he had expected. It became necessary for him to revise his idea of how the strangers had come in contact with the two beings from whom they had obtained their equipment, and this he did immediately. Of course, a thing he had to consider was that the strangers in the cave had no way of knowing about his change of opinion; yet from Tako the commander learned that they considered the fortress to be a hostile installation. So it would be a mistake merely to swing wide the doors without taking some precautions.

Therefore, he made a few preparations, and then he proceeded to establish a definite contact with the strangers.

An hour passed, and Tako had not yet returned. Rhodan became uneasy. Meanwhile the signal code from the Good Hope had been received and answered. Everything seemed to be in order on board the ship. Even before they had reached the high plateau country, Rhodan and Khrest had agreed to replace the hourly radio voice contacts with a simple signal. A microsecond burst of coded data pulses was considerably more difficult to intercept and point coordinate than an extended conversation.

For similar reasons Tako was not supplied with a radio transceiver. Only Anne Sloane had been able to follow him for awhile with her mental probing faculty; but for the past fifty minutes he had remained out of her range.

Rhodan was beginning to recognize that his only alternative was to summon the Good Hope for help, regardless of the risk. If it could get this far without being shot down, its stronger weaponry might be able to overcome the resistance of the walls and clear a way into the interior of the mountain. The decision was a hard one, and he experienced several minutes of internal conflict to justify it. Finally he sat down at the transceiver and prepared to give a full report to Khrest and Thora and to transmit his request for help.

At that moment, Bell rushed into his tent. "The wall!" he cried out "It's opened up!" Rhodan came out from behind the transceiver gear and rushed out ahead of Bell. One of the others had a flashlight beam directed at one part of the wall, and within the circle of light a dark aperture gaped before them.

Rhodan did not hesitate. "Get ready to move in!" he bellowed. "Lamps, weapons, communication gear! On the double!"

He had no way of knowing how the wall had opened. Perhaps Tako had found an opening mechanism to the door; but in that case it would be hard to explain why he had not come back at the time agreed upon. Whatever the reason, he wasn't going to dally. Even if the hole was a trap, his seven man team with their complement of weapons could have some chance against the enemy. Within a few minutes they were all ready to start. The storm was just blowing its first squalls across the plateau as they pushed into the interior of the mountain, with Rhodan in the lead. Anne Sloane walked close behind Rhodan, since he had commissioned her to keep her "feelers" out and try to sense the presence of anything that could be dangerous to them. Manoli followed with the three American astronauts, and Reginald Bell was the rear guard.

They moved along the passage about thirty yards, with Rhodan shining the beam of his flashlight from an extended arm position so as not to offer a direct target. Then, suddenly and without any announcement, a milky, shadowless light emerged from the walls and illuminated the corridor. Rhodan came to an abrupt halt; but other than the light no further surprises occurred. Perhaps, he thought, they had accidentally stepped on some sort of electrical contact.

Anne whispered suddenly, "There's a side passage behind the wall here—also behind the other wall!" "Empty?"

She nodded.

Rhodan knew there was nothing he could do about the concealed passages. There was no more evidence of any opening mechanism here than there had been back at the cave. They'd simply have to keep on going until they found a branch corridor with a more accessible opening than those that Anne had sensed. From here on, Anne continued to detect the presence of hidden lateral passages at regular intervals. From her continued observations Rhodan gradually constructed a mental picture of the plan of the installation. At first, Anne had sensed that the side passages led away on each side in a fairly straight line, but as they progressed she began to describe an increasing curvature. Rhodan no longer doubted that the fortress was built in a circular design. There would then be straight corridors like this, acting as a sort of spoke of a wheel running to a central hub, and circular cross-passages would join each other in a

radial pattern at regular intervals, but with sharper curvature as they approached the center.

Behind the walls the radial and transverse passages probably enclosed rooms that Rhodan would have given a lot to look into. But the walls continued to reveal no sign of a door, and a short blast with the disintegrator proved that the crystal field stabilization was as effective here as it had been at the cave.

They had progressed in this manner for about a half hour, over an approximate distance of one or two miles, when Anne came to such a sudden stop that those behind her collided with her.

"Wait!" she whispered sharply.

Rhodan turned around.

"The side passage here isn't empty. There are some people standing in it!"

"People?"

Anne closed her eyes to concentrate. Her probing faculty reached out to the figures that stood on the other side of the wall and sought to determine their shape and size. They seemed strange, but no doubt remained that these unknown beings were to a large extent similar to humans. However, they did not move. They were as motionless as cadavers, causing a cold shudder to run down the girl's spine. She reported her findings to Rhodan.

"They are humanlike," she maintained, "but they stand there motionless as mummies!"

Rhodan decided to ignore the mysterious beings. He ordered the party to continue onward.

The commander made careful note that the group of strangers had stopped precisely at the transverse passage where he had stationed his first police unit. Was this coincidence? The autoscanner was not able to determine in what manner the strangers had become aware of the police troops. So it must have been coincidence, nothing more.

He opened an elevator door that lay in the strangers' path; then he ordered the police to go through the wall and close off the passage through which the strangers had come.

The door was about nine feet high and at least ten feet wide. Beyond it was a square room without a ceiling. Rhodan ducked his head in and immediately sensed the considerable tug at the back of his neck that the idling gravity field produced inside the shaft.

A gravity elevator.

On the walls of the lift cage there was no indication how it could be operated. Rhodan motioned to his people and instructed them to jump onto the lift platform all at once. For awhile it seemed as though the lift were not going to move. Then, however, it moved downward with such sudden swiftness that they thought someone had pulled the floor out from under them.

The trip lasted only a few seconds. Judging by the movement of the front wall of the shaft, Rhodan estimated that during that time they must have dropped over three hundred feet. No doors were spotted on the way down, but when the lift suddenly stopped a door opened up before them. Here was another passage that looked no different than the one they had left. There wasn't anything at all that—"Behind us!" Bell rasped tensely. This time there was no need for Anne's telepathic vision. The strange beings were clearly in evidence. They stood to the left in the corridor, some sixty feet or so from the elevator, and they were motionless. Without doubt they looked like humans; yet they also seemed somehow like the spawn of hell. Their faces were discoloured and pockmarked with scars, they wore no clothes, and their bodies glistened in nakedness except for the dark areas of deterioration that marked their skins. Bell had instantly released the safety on his weapon and waited. The aliens still did not move. Rhodan separated himself from his group and went toward them. They permitted him to approach to within about thirty feet before they moved; then they lifted their arms, and Rhodan realized that they had weapons in their hands. They held the muzzles pointed directly at him.

He stared at them a moment, shrugged, and turned around.

"So we move in the other direction," he said. "Apparently that's where they want us to go." In the other direction the corridor was empty.

"Who knows what kind of trap they're driving us into?" asked Bell in stubborn anger. "What do you suggest?" Rhodan asked him. "Shoot it out with them at this close range? We haven't so much as a hat for cover." "How about the elevator?"

Rhodan whirled about. The lift had disappeared, and the door had closed. The wall was again as smooth as all other walls in this place. "Damn!"

They marched to the right, and the aliens set themselves in motion, bringing up the rear of the procession. Rhodan, of course, was not happy with the situation. The passage extended ahead like a gun bore as far as he could see; nowhere was there a trace of anything that could be used for cover. If these weird beings wanted to lure his troops into a trap, that might not be as bad as having an open fight and risking the lives of his people. Passive prisoners sometimes ended up as live ones.

Apparently the fortress was swarming with aliens. If the Earthlings tried to make a stand to defend themselves at any given spot, the walls could open up and spew out a horde of reinforcements, he reasoned.

Anne began to drag her feet in weariness. The continuing tension had tired her out. Rhodan took care to support her and conserve her energies so that if he needed her help she would be able to give it.

Rhodan's somewhat reluctant pace won time for the commander to augment further his knowledge from Tako Kakuta's thought content. He learned that Tako's brain held fluent knowledge of two different languages as well as fragmentary knowledge of others. He attempted a combination of the two available complete languages in order to trace them back to some common philological root, but it didn't work. And this surprised him. There was only one thing to do. He transmitted the new language knowledge to two of the police officers and sent them to meet the strangers.

"Halt!" ordered Rhodan as he saw the two new figures appear in the corridor before him.

The two officers approached with upraised hands. Rhodan waited for them in front of his group with

his weapon ready. He noticed that these two had clear skins and that in contrast to the police unit farther down the passage behind him, they wore clothing. Also, there was no sign of pockmarks on their faces. He tried to read something from their facial expressions, but he saw nothing more than a fixed sort of smiling friendliness that was actually inscrutable, and he could draw no conclusion as to their actual intentions. The two were beardless. Their foreheads were slightly higher than the average Earthman's, but aside from this characteristic they might have been taken for Europeans, Americans, or Australians. They came to a stop within several yards of Rhodan. One of them spoke to him in a sharp sounding, rather sing-song language. Then he became silent and obviously waited for Rhodan's reply. Rhodan hadn't understood it but it seemed to sound like a strictly phonetic delivery of something like Japanese or Korean. But he didn't know either of those languages, and besides, it would be too incredible that anyone in this fortress should just happen to speak Japanese or Korean. When he simply remained silent for a while, the other alien began to speak. This one said, "The commander requests your presence. He wishes you to know that you are welcome guests here. There is nothing to fear." Although his English was fluent and without an accent, his voice sounded a bit flat and the words were delivered in a strange sort of monotone.

Rhodan remained mystified for only a fraction of a second. While others in his party commented in surprise, he quickly perceived what had happened either they had captured Tako or he was willingly cooperating with them, and they had drawn from his mind the two languages that he spoke.

Rhodan weighed these factors in some desperation. There still wasn't any good reason to believe that the fortress commander was not playing games. In support of some sort of deception, the invitation would of course be politely worded. If he were setting a trap for them, naturally it would save him a lot of trouble if they all simply accepted his nice sounding proposition and went along with the officers. In spite of this, Rhodan answered, "We are very much obliged to your commander. Will you kindly lead us to him."

The English speaking officer made an about-face and started walking with his companion back in the direction he had come from. Rhodan and his group followed.

Rhodan turned his head slightly to his people and spoke rapidly in low tones. "Everybody on their toes now. I don't know if they're going to try to get cute with us or play it straight." He heard a mutter of grim assent from the men, and Bell added, "We should have asked them about Tako."

"Not the time for it now," Rhodan retorted swiftly.

The diffused light of the passageway made it difficult to judge distances. Up until now the passage had seemed to be capable of running along straight without end, but only a few minutes after the meeting with the alien officers, the outlines of new objects began to take shape before them. A few moments later the

passage opened into a chamber of unusual dimensions.

At first glance the place seemed to form a rectangle that stretched at least five hundred yards to the right and left, with an approximate width of two hundred yards, but they finally determined that the whole area was actually a colossal access way surrounding a circular building that stood in its center, as though this were a civic square before some sort of government structure.

The two aliens walked across the "square," and the a Earthmen followed them. Rhodan noted with some astonishment that the gigantic chamber must have measured about a hundred and sixty feet in height and that in its surrounding walls there were galleries at even intervals in which the corridors of the fortress terminated at their respective levels. They were obviously approaching the stronghold's inner sanctum, and Rhodan wondered what they would find in the interior of the circular building. The building seemed not only to be as lofty as the chamber but to extend even through its ceiling. Its wall was as smooth and devoid of seams as all other walls in the fortress, but when they reached it the wall parted before them and gave them a full view of a tremendous room that was illuminated considerably more brightly than other areas they had seen thus far.

In spite of its size, the room seemed to occupy only a fractional part of the entire building. When Rhodan stepped through the wide opening, he recognized at first glance what the rest of the building consisted of and what its purpose was.

The rear wall of the room—about a hundred feet wide and fifty feet high—was a single gigantic control panel quite similar to the smaller panel in the control room of the Good Hope. A kind of control console projected out about eight feet from it, and to the right and left of this were a number of suspended platforms, obviously designed for carrying operators easily upward to any desired location on the titanic panel. Rhodan was convinced on the spot that this control room must be a part of the greatest positronic robot brain that had ever been constructed anywhere in the galaxy.

The two aliens stopped when they reached the middle of the room. They waited until Rhodan and the others arrived beside them; then one of them pointed at the giant control panel and Spoke with great formality.

"This is the commander. He is happy to see you."

What followed were days of uninterrupted revelation of the astounding technical wonders hidden within the mountain. Although Bell and Rhodan were somewhat prepared for such surprises by virtue of their Arkonide training, they were nevertheless jolted over the fact that all this was to be found on Venus, of all places. The crowning revelation of all, as Rhodan had immediately suspected in spite of his incredulity, was given to them by the commander himself who was as hungry for knowledge as they were. The stronghold had been built long ago by the race to which Khrest and Thora belonged—in short, by the Arkonides. After Rhodan had repeated his discovery to Khrest and Thora, they blasted off immediately in the Good Hope and landed unharmed on the plateau before the cave. For Rhodan it was practically a major event to see Khrest become genuinely bewildered, for the first time since he had known him. To Khrest it was completely incredible that a chapter of the Arkonide colonial history should have escaped the central Arkon register, however insignificant or remotely separated by time. Rhodan's rather tongue in cheek reminder that even the most sophisticated computer ever created was capable of pulling a booboo once in a while went over like a lead balloon with Khrest, because it smacked too much of the Earthly human brand of thinking, with which he could never associate his vaunted race. For Khrest, the so called commander was the greatest positronic robot brain he had ever seen outside of the central brain on Arkon. It placed at his disposal its entire historical file, into which he plunged with the utmost zeal. The data were retrieved in the form of oral reports in a language that the Good Hope's robot translator had earlier defined as archaic Rim Galacto, and also in the form of video strips or pulse patterns whose contents were transmitted by methods similar to those used in hypno training. Inadvertently, Khrest performed a time saving service for Rhodan and Bell, inasmuch as he restricted himself to take stock of the vast historical data, which freed Rhodan and Bell to concentrate on exploring the physical aspects of their surroundings. Armed with further information that Khrest obtained, they investigated the mighty fortress level by level, sector by sector, and passage by passage, compiling a complete inventory of everything. It required only a rough survey of several hours, actually, to arrive at the conclusion that enough usable equipment and material were available here to bridge the Third Power over all remaining difficulties of its young existence.

After Tako Kakuta had recovered from the rigors of his hypnotic questioning he was set free and, like the rest of the scouting party, assigned a room on level 10. The others passed their time as they pleased in the long corridors and great rooms of the fortress. After receiving the necessary instructions, they found that the glass smooth walls and their hidden doors presented no further obstacle to them. Although their activity was reduced to a rather blundering and childlike groping about in this technological wonder-world they were at least relieved to find that the commander had withdrawn his pockmarked naked police troops, so that they wouldn't be startled by running into them anywhere. The police force consisted of nothing else than robots that had withstood the ravages of time since the fortress had been built. The stronghold did not harbour a single living being. It consisted of the commander—a giant positronic computer brain—and his army of automatons, nothing more. The self-perpetuating robotic maintenance section had provided that everything withstood the millennia without significant damage. Of course, the commander had not considered the synthetic skin coverings of his robots to be of such importance as to have them continuously refurbished, and this was why their organic plastic flesh appeared discoloured and had developed small holes, or pockmarks, as the Earthmen called them. The robot officers were an exception, owing to their considerably more complex functions. Finally one day Khrest emerged from the learning and research chambers. He was tired; yet his eyes gleamed triumphantly, and he announced that he was ready to brief all members of the scouting party on what he had gleaned from the stronghold's computer memory banks. This method of communicating the information was necessary since none of the terrestrials, outside of Bell and Rhodan, was at present capable of receiving the more direct input of Arkonide hypno impulses from the positronic machine. They were brought together in the main room, where the giant brain's control panel occupied one wall.

Everyone was present except Thora. Since the first day when the Good Hope had landed outside on the plateau, Thora had seldom been seen. Rhodan was fairly certain what she was seeking, and since he had meanwhile become more familiar with the technical data of the fortress than she, he felt sorry for her and her foolish hope. Khrest delivered his report in English; he had learned it perfectly now, and no one could catch him in the slightest language error. "This base," he began, "is by your time reckoning about ten thousand years old. According to the galactic history of the Arkonide Empire, it stems from the period of the First Colonization."

"Originally the colonial fleet that landed here had another goal in mind. They had interrupted their flight to examine the third planet, since it appeared to be a more desirable harbour than the world their star charts had originally indicated as being suitable for a new colony. But when they visited the third planet—your own Earth—and found it to be inhabited, they decided to land first on Venus and prepare a supply base from which to organize the settlement of Earth. From this decision evolved the present fortress in which we now find ourselves." "The Arkonides—the record speaks of some two hundred thousand of them—settled a continent on Earth that, according to my knowledge, no longer exists today. Ten thousand years ago, that continent consisted of the fragment of a great isthmus that once connected the land masses of Africa, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere." "Unfortunately, the colonial empire thus established was of short duration. The causes of the natural catastrophe that destroyed it and brought general calamity to the entire planet are details that you can familiarize yourselves with later; the point is that only about five percent of the Arkonides escaped the catastrophe and were able to return here to Venus."

"At that time the Venus base possessed at least half a fleet of space worthy vessels—space worthy in the sense that the ships were capable of jumping almost any interstellar distance with an almost negligible expenditure of time. The colonists . . . Ah, but wait a moment! At this point perhaps I should insert an explanation of something else." "The colonization flights were never very democratic operations—they couldn't be. During the early years of the founding and rise of empire, our young colonies had to have firm guidance. It became a standing principle with us that such guidance would always be achieved best through a ruling structure of the aristocracy. So it was that an aristocratic Royal Council decided that the colonial survivors should set out in the remaining ships to reach their original goal, since for centuries to come Earth would be unsuitable for another attempt at colonization, due to the cataclysm that had changed it. The decision was carried out, as naturally there could be no debate against the decrees of the Royal Colonial Council, and the major number of the colonists departed from Venus in the ships of the remaining fleet. A small number remained behind because there was no room for them on the ships. Some two thousand of them had to stay here. They led a somewhat lonely but certainly not uncomfortable life. Apparently the Council had done this on a selective basis, leaving behind those who were the most sluggish intellectually. This judgement was substantiated by the fact that the castaways made no attempt to utilize the ample materials and equipment that lay at their disposal, for the purpose of building more spaceships. They simply remained where they were. About eight thousand years ago, the last of them died out."

"The colonization of this sector of the galaxy seems to have been ill fated from its inception. The survivor fleet that set out from Venus was never heard from again. We are certain that they never reached their goal, but of course, no one knows what happened to them. Arkon has never picked up any trace of them, and also this Venusian positronic brain—the so-called commander—has nothing to offer in

this regard."

"Being self sufficient, this present base continued operating automatically. Its robotic maintenance facilities were capable of keeping all equipment in a perfectly functioning condition. It has survived the millennia, and the only way it ever betrayed its presence here was the hot air exhaust from its reactors, on a ten hour cycle, through a cleverly camouflaged deflection channel outside the mountain."

"The positronic brain continued to operate in accordance with the final instructions that had been given to it by the last Arkonide commander. By means of the continuously active robot scanner and coordinate locator equipment, it kept in contact with the developing Venusian intelligences—that is, with the sea people, or seal creatures."

"Also, the brain was instructed either to force all spaceships to land or to destroy them, but Arkonide ships were an exception. This was based on the assumption that any Arkonide ships flying to this planet and having something to do with the colonization of this sector would be able to respond with the local zone's code signal to the brain's IFF transmissions—a query that we failed to understand when we approached. But though we did not reply properly, the commander—the positronic brain—was able to recognise that our ship was the kind that it was not permitted to shoot down. It attempted to draw us to the plateau with the traction beam, but" —he made a slight bow in Rhodan's direction- "our commander succeeded, by virtue of his fast reaction, in circumventing the gravitic forces and landing us in a place where the brain was not able to find us. So it got in touch with the seal creatures and sought to determine our location by means of their information. This attempt also failed, because the sea people were not intelligent enough to furnish the kind of coordinate data that the brain could evaluate."

"So It was that the brain waited patiently and a few days later was able to determine that the 'strangers,' as it had designated the raiding team, were coming to it of their own volition. The brain started registering some very astonishing details; these intruders were actually aliens to its way of thinking, but their equipment was largely of Arkonide origin. The brain concluded that you people had succeeded in overpowering an Arkonide ship and in capturing and robbing its crew. This analysis, however, still lacked certain elements of probability, so it continued to watch and study your approach. A few hours later, Tako teleported himself right into its hands, and the brain saw its opportunity. Tako was captured and subjected to questioning under hypnosis. The rest you know." Khrest leaned back in his seat and waited until its structure adjusted itself to his form. His listeners were silent. For the members of a race whose written history went back only about five thousand years, it made an impression on them to hear a member of a much older race speak of a multithousand year epoch out of the history of a branch of his people as though it were merely a trifling detail.

Rhodan was less impressed with the report, per se, but he was left pensive and almost in awe of the fact that here—out of the preserved ancient records of an extraterrestrial race of intelligences—the first actual proof of the existence of the fabled empire of Atlantis had emerged. Nothing else could be concluded from the report of a colonial empire settling on a fragmentary land bridge between Africa,

Europe, and the Western Hemisphere. A smile touched Rhodan's lips as he realized that the Arkonides, who just one year ago had been forced by circumstance to land on the moon, were not only a priceless boon to present Earth technology but also the same in an equal degree for the fields of history, because with their own actual records they were able now to clarify one of the dimmest areas of human history so that no questions remained. He noted that Khrest had again risen to his feet, and it broke his train of thoughts.

"The brain," Khrest began once more, "has thus been waiting here for eight thousand years. That in itself is relatively unimportant; but our brain here"—he jerked his thumb over his shoulder—"had an objective to accomplish. It has waited for a new commander—a human director whose mental makeup would be such that it could lock its mental impulses into complete rapport with him and thus only obey his commands. As it now appears, the brain has actually found this new commander. He paused to observe the effect of his words on the others. His listeners looked at each other in bewilderment. Khrest's slow, laconic smile seemed to indicate that he had a big surprise in store—but who could it be? It was no more than reasonable to believe that an Arkonide positronic brain would choose as its new master a person who most resembled its original creators in the mental and psychological sense—in other words, Khrest, or perhaps Thora. Khrest smirked at them. "I know what you're thinking, but you deceive yourselves—or maybe not. Through Tako, and much more through my own information, mental data on every member of this expedition are known to the brain. The future commander of this base cannot be mentally distinguished from an Arkonide, although he happens to be an Earthman: Perry Rhodan!" It took Rhodan a few seconds to recover from this surprise. Not that he underestimated his own qualifications, but he was taken back by the consequences inferred by the brain's decision, and he was wondering if Khrest might have fibbed a little to the positronic monster. He then realized however, that no one could pull the wool over the eyes of a cosmic scale computer like this, so he finally squared up to an acceptance of the honour. For a while he feared that Khrest might take a dim view of the brain's expressed preference, but apparently Khrest, as a true scientist, was above being envious when it came to more or less political issues. So it was that Rhodan became the commander, or supreme sovereign, of a great stronghold that concentrated in its small area more power and energy than all the factories and research centers of the Earth combined. With the tremendous facilities of this Venusian base, entire solar systems could be annihilated, and any alien enemy could be repelled—that is, provided he didn't invade with a massive fleet. There was one thing however, that the base did not possess...

Thora had not wanted to accept the reality of it. After her personal contact with the positronic brain during the first hours of their arrival, she had obtained a complete rundown on the detailed location of every nook and cranny of the fortress, and then she had set out on her search. A few hours after Rhodan's assumption of the post of commander, and after his brainwave patterns had been programmed into the positronic entity so that it could respond only to his commands, he ran into Thora. He and Bell had been investigating some storage rooms in the highest level of the installation. They had switched on only a portion of the light banks, and Thora emerged out of the darkness like an ethereal materialization. She was unusually pale, and as both men perceived the pride that restricted her emotions, she presented a picture of tragedy. As she came up to him, Rhodan gently placed his hand on her shoulder. She did not withdraw from his touch.

"You're on the wrong trail," he said gravely, knowing full well what troubled her. Thora appeared to sense that he had perceived her objective. "I know," she answered faintly.

"Why don't you try to look at the facts?" he asked her. "You know that when the colonists decided to continue on in search of their original goal, after the Atlantis cataclysm, they took all the ships with them that were available. This stronghold is a marvellous grab bag to serve my purposes; but there's nothing here that could help you, if you're thinking of traversing the unthinkable distances between here and your own home planet of Arkon." He paused and waited for her great eyes to turn to his. Then he smiled and continued, "For the time being, you have to consider yourself as Earthbound, more or less. I will do everything possible to make your sojourn as pleasant as I can, and I'll also do everything in my power to speed you on your way home. But even the swiftest way still represents a matter of a few years yet. Meanwhile, you'll just have to live with us savages!"

"Oh! Will you please be silent!" she exclaimed in an unexpected burst of vehemence. "Do you propose to be the only being in the universe who has never made a mistake?"