

## CHAPTER ONE

“...FOR THE TIME BEING I shall not even remotely consider giving up our position. I shall not resign myself to handing over to the NATO countries the knowledge acquired on our moon expedition.”

The tall man with the lean face pushed down hard on the STOP button of his tape recorder. Both reels stopped abruptly.

Major Perry Rhodan, test pilot of the U.S. Space Force, commander of the first manned moon landing expedition, looked around in deep thought. The control panel centre of the *Stardust* was as narrow and crowded as befitted a spaceship of her size.

The steel lids of both hatches, hermetically sealed during the space flight, were now wide-open. Through the thick quartz panes the vast yellow brown expanses of the Gobi Desert were visible. Only to the right of the moon rocket, which had landed here like an airplane, could some sparse vegetation be seen. This was the thin green strip growing on the banks of a small river known as Morin-gol. Just a few miles farther to the north, the river flowed in the big Goshun salt lake, whose southern shore formed part of the Chinese Mongolian border.

To the south of the *Stardust* lay the infamous central Gobi. Apart from a few small settlements nestled around the rare waterholes, and the military installations of the Asiatic Federation, there existed hardly a trace of human life in these desolate parts.

The grim realization flashed through Perry Rhodan's mind that this desolation had been altered quite suddenly and radically.

Through narrowed eyes he gazed through the quartz window toward the east. Beyond the riverbed where the tiny settlement of Dahoba could barely be seen, quite a few things had changed. The military air base, formerly nothing but a miserable training camp, seemed to have turned overnight into a major airport.

The concentration of military forces was enormous. The massed troops of the outstanding Asiatic elite units evoked the impression that they were getting ready for an invasion.

Rhodan's eye wandered over to the tent close to the moon rocket. The comforting thought of absolute security became nothing but an illusion as soon as Rhodan examined it more closely. Once the tent had been part of the equipment of an Asiatic transport commando, which had arrived only one week earlier. Rhodan's lips widened into an amused smirk when he punched the START button of his recording machine.

When he began to speak again, his voice sounded somehow easier and more confident.

“I am making this tape recording to safeguard against any unforeseen eventualities. I repeat: This is Perry Rhodan speaking, commanding officer of the U.S. spaceship *Stardust*, test pilot working with the Space Exploration Department of Nevada Spaceport. It is extremely important to me to record our recent experiences with the utmost accuracy.”

“Just one week ago Captain Reginald Bell returned from his daring special assignment. I could hardly believe my eyes, but he really accomplished the apparently impossible when he brought back with him the specialist for blood diseases who had so urgently been requested by our own ship’s physician, Dr. Eric Manoli. The blood specialist is none other than the renowned Australian Dr. Frank M. Haggard, an outstanding research scientist, who gave the world the anti-leukaemia serum. If there is anyone on this planet who might succeed in saving the life of the alien Arkonide, Khrest, whom we have brought back to Earth with us from our recent moon trip, Dr. Haggard is that person. Thanks to him we are now in possession of a portable lab equipped with all the special instruments needed for a thorough examination and an exact diagnosis. Together with the *Stardust*’s own medical facilities there now exists some well founded hope that we will be able to cure Khrest. We have two great physicians and medications of all kinds, in addition to the necessary expert knowledge. I am no longer so pessimistic as I was yesterday and during the past week. I am positive that the final outbreak of a totally destructive atomic war has been prevented, thanks to the inconceivably powerful means of the aliens. On the other side of our protective screen lies the debris of heavy atomic rockets. They did not explode! Thora, the beautiful woman commander of the gigantic spaceship, has intervened from her base on the moon. Since the nuclear weapons of all terrestrial powers are based on fission or fusion reactions, all that was necessary was for her to bind the free neutrons, rendering impossible any nuclear process that depends on neutrons. Our situation is not too bad; at least it is no worse than it was shortly after my desperate landing in the Gobi Desert. I firmly believe I have acted right toward humanity, as well as my own conscience, by refusing to surrender the technical scientific potential of an infinitely superior intelligent alien race to one single group of humans. Nothing, though, could ever shatter my belief in all mankind! Nothing will ever shake my conviction that the future of the human race must be based on a union of all those creatures who are known as *Homo sapiens*. It seems as if a time of trial has begun for all citizens of Terra. There is still a great deal of ignorance, mistrust, hatred and envy. The leaders who rule the various governments will be feverishly endeavouring to win for themselves and their countries’ selfish interests the overpowering treasures of the Arkonides’ knowledge. But this is definitely not compatible with a mutual improvement of the fate of the entire human population.

“If my grand plan is to have a chance of success, then Khrest’s full recovery is an absolute necessity. I want to win him over to become the friend and teacher of the entire human race. Therefore, I fervently hope that Dr. Haggard will prove once more his expert medical knowledge and skill in healing our alien guest.”

Rhodan turned off the tape recorder, quickly and somewhat abruptly, but not without good reason. He was not one of those men who are inclined to put down their thoughts and views in a more or less accomplished manner on tape, while being exposed to an intense bombardment by powerful weapons of all kinds.

His face, which had looked so relaxed just now, suddenly became drawn and intense. His hand slid to his holster quite instinctively, and at the same time he jumped to take cover. At once his cool, reasoning mind became aware of the absurdity of his unconscious reaction.

Rhodan stood up straight again while muttering an angry curse. What nonsense to attempt to find cover under such questionable circumstances. Either the defence screen of pure energy supplied by the Arkonides was working effectively or the massed military might of a gigantic army would shortly destroy them.

Rhodan swung his short weapon back over his shoulder. Leaving the rocket through the big air lock situated in the now completely emptied storeroom just behind their tiny cabin, he bounded down the ramp. At the same time a voice came over his intercom. In rather loud and unmelodious tones he heard a

sarcastic statement:

“How dare you interrupt my well deserved sleep? Okay, are you still standing on your own two feet, or have they gotten you already?”

“Radio silence, please!” replied Rhodan, “I’ll be right there.”

He switched off his small wrist radio while speculating with a furrowed brow how far the Asiatic radio surveillance had succeeded in perfecting their efficiency.

The faraway thunder intensified to a mighty roar. Rhodan looked up toward the almost imperceptibly vibrating energy screen. The energy bell reached its highest point at almost 6,000 feet. This time, though, the enemy seemed to have decided to attack them in a different way.

Rhodan’s mouth became a pencil thin line. His day old beard looked dark and rough on his tanned skin. A few hurried paces brought him to the entrance of the big tent.

Captain Reginald Bell no longer wore the uniform of the space force. It would have proved more than a hindrance in his daring trip to the “civilized” world.

“End of the world, late summer, seventh decade, twentieth century,” he uttered in a throaty voice. “And I thought they had finally given up! Or have they found something in the meantime that will penetrate our protective screen?”

A silent threat was expressed in Rhodan’s glance toward the enemy’s distant positions. But soon he relaxed and silently offered a cigarette to his friend. A few soothing puffs later, he could even joke, “They mean so well, don’t they? They have the best intentions...”

His last words were drowned by the deafening explosions of detonating missiles. The normally invisible wall composed of lines of inconceivable energy began to light up in the blinding fire of exploding charges.

Rhodan started up again, “No more conventional artillery! If I am not completely mistaken, there must be some clever brains among the chiefs of staff of the Asiatic armies. They seem to have understood that normal gears are more than senseless with the range of an antigravity field. So what do smart men resort to, when they can no longer set up big cannons with their enormously strong recoil in such zero gravity conditions? They will use rocket missiles, of course! Or...?”

Reginald Bell nodded in affirmation. A deep drag on his cigarette made it glow brightly. It was obvious that the *Stardust*, standing right in the center of the protective energy bell, had become the target of at least 1,000 rocket batteries. Judging by the hits, the Asiatics must be using at least 4,000 automatic rocket projectors of varying caliber.

The roar became unbearable. Reg had to scream to make himself understood. “But they have no atomic charges,” he shouted into Rhodan’s ear. “Thora has promised to intervene immediately. The antineutron screen extends over the whole Earth.”

Rhodan was aware that Reg was yelling at the top of his lungs, but he could understand nothing of what Bell said. It was only a few moments until the hefty man with the massive shoulders realized the futility of his effort. Reg’s mouth closed tight, and its broad face began to twitch.

The tremendous shockwaves released by the fast exploding projectiles were stopped by the energy

screen. The men were safe inside, but the huge dome of pure energy seemed to vibrate like a resonance chamber.

High intensity barrage! registered Rhodan, glancing once again around the enemy's encircling battle positions. The soldiers of the Asiatic elite troops were entrenched in a wide ring that afforded them excellent cover. There were their rocket launchers and ammunition depots, all firmly embedded in cement.

Nothing was visible, not even the smallest object, that had not been fastened tight to the ground with the greatest of care. Perry Rhodan knew that the soldiers were wearing special harnesses that anchored them securely to these stationary objects. The Asiatic High Command had brought in men who had been involved before in manned space-flight. Others had gone through quick conditioning courses that prepared them for the effects of zero gravity.

Thus the element of surprises was lost. Although the marvellous defensive weapon of the Arkonides, the gravity neutralizer, was still as effective as before, it had, nevertheless, lost its practical importance,

Perry Rhodan realized that despite the far superior arms and equipment they had at their disposal thanks to the Arkonide supertechnology, they still must not underestimate the massed potential of an excellently trained army.

The constant barrage of heaviest rocket batteries could not fail to affect them inside the energy bell, even if the enemy did not succeed in penetrating the protective screen.

The nervous strain of unremitting innumerable detonations awakened the slumbering fear psychosis in their unconscious minds. And these fears, churned up to the surface of their awareness, threatened to shatter their inner powers of resistance.

Suddenly Dr. Eric Manoli, physician on board the *Stardust* and fellow conqueror of the moon, suddenly came charging through the tent's entrance and disappeared lightning fast through the moon rocket's opened air lock.

Rhodan needed but an instant to grasp the reason for the slender man's wild rushing about.

Instinctively both Rhodan and Reg began running. But Rhodan knew well that all their movements were observed by the enemy's optical position finders. Although the energy dome was impenetrable to material objects, it still let light-waves pass through, and everything within the invisible protective wall could be seen plainly from the outside. It could only aggravate their position if they were observed rushing madly toward the *Stardust* shortly after the onset of the bombardment.

For heaven's sake thought Rhodan, alarmed. Don't let's display our vulnerable spots to them!

Rhodan and Reg met Dr. Manoli inside the big storage compartment of the ship. He was wearing the huge, special ear protectors they had worn during the initial launching of their spaceship on their trip to the moon. How helpful they had proved in shutting out the noises of the blast-off!

Manoli was smiling. His lips were moving while his hand pointed toward the plugs of the connecting cables.

As soon as Rhodan slipped the heavy earphones over his head, the infernal roar dimmed to a distant murmur. Quickly he adjusted his throat mike and plugged it into the walkie-talkie on his chest.

“It was about time,” Manoli’s voice said calmly over the tiny speakers within the ear protectors. “I only wonder that it took them so long to get around to using such an intensive barrage. Seems that the gentlemen over there must have consulted some professors of the psychology department.”

Dr. Manoli managed a faint smile, but his twitching lips belied his pretended composure.

“Thanks a lot for this splendid suggestion,” replied Rhodan. “I should have thought of it right away myself.”

“Why don’t you let him get credit for something once in a while?” came Reg’s voice. “How about a brainstorm on your part now?”

“The only message I am getting here is a feeling of miserable fear,” retorted Rhodan dryly. “Fear caused by this energy screen, whose structure is unknown to me and whose potential and limitations are an unknown equation as far as I am concerned. But of one thing I am sure—they will try to wear down our forces of resistance by this uninterrupted heavy bombardment. Since their nuclear warheads have been rendered ineffective, they are now using simple chemical explosives. If that should not work, the next step will be harmless gases. Finally, if all else has failed, they might call in the experts on bacteriological warfare. There are quite a few possibilities that may not have occurred to our good Khrest. After all, man is a tremendously ingenious creature, and by becoming the Third Power and challenging them we have created a situation that has aroused and united all the scientific minds of the world.”

“Sure, we have forced them to join forces,” interjected Manoli. “Their super weapons have become useless. No longer are atomic reactions possible. Nothing can be done there without free neutrons, and Thora has eliminated those.”

Rhodan cast a devastating glance at Reg, who turned pale. His tongue flicked across his lips. ‘What’s the matter?’ he inquired throatily. Ever since he had come back under Rhodan’s immediate command, he had lost his boyish exuberance. His initial boundless joy over the overwhelming defensive weapons of the Arkonides had evaporated just as fast as it had generated during his trip to Australia.

Rhodan did not answer. He hurried over to the tent and handed the protecting earphones to Dr. Frank Haggard, the blood specialist from Down Under, who had just made his appearance, looking most distraught. The tall, heavy-set man understood at once. He vanished without a word into the interior of the huge inflatable structure made of tough artificial material.

They followed slowly. The first class soundproofing of the tent helped even further to deaden the enervating explosions of the bombardment. The threat of being worn down by noise was thus removed.

They walked past the brightly humming barrel shaped reactor, which had supplied the energy for the force ever since they had landed here. Once again Perry Rhodan tried to penetrate the shielding plates with his imagination in order to comprehend its function. Rhodan was a nuclear physicist and an astronaut. Although he grasped every detail of the nucleo-chemical engines of the *Stardust*, here he seemed to face an insurmountable wall. All his earthly scientific schooling came to naught when faced with the alien’s superior technology. All he knew was that the energies of a small sun were set free in the “Hot” part of the Arkonide reactor. This was probably based on an incredibly complicated process of fusion of the carbon cycle, which was as far removed from the fission reaction known and used by Earth’s scientists as is Stone Age axe from a rocket machine gun.

Khrest had made the assertion that this apparatus, which stood no higher than six feet, was capable of supplying the entire industry of the world with electric current. Rhodan felt dizzy simply trying to figure out the immense, potential. He gave up, as he had done before, trying to comprehend the superhuman achievements of the Arkonide race. For the time being he could do nothing but accept the fact that the reactor did work.

Heavy cables, as thick as a man's arm, led upward to the strange looking spherical antenna that radiated the huge dome of energy. The dome had a diameter of almost two and a half miles at its base and was a mile and a quarter high at its apex.

Six weeks had gone by since they had found the gigantic space sphere on the moon during the first manned lunar expedition. About six weeks should be entirely sufficient to let the great minds of Earth arrive at rather dangerous conclusions. By now they probably had seen through Rhodan's fairy tales about discovering the remains of an alien culture on the Earth's natural satellite. They were no fools! These men of the military and scientific commands of the mighty power blocs were smart thinkers. And if they all banded together in the face of common danger, the situation would begin to turn critical for the crew of the *Stardust* and its guests.

Perry Rhodan became aware of the questioning glances of his men, who kept observing him. Dr. Haggard's shadow was invisible on the curtain that divided the back part of the room. Quite obviously he had given a set of protective earphones to the alien who was resting there.

Rhodan's face assumed an impervious expression. For the past few days he had been walking about with hunched shoulders, which made his lean, tall body seem to shrink somehow. Reg was observing him with increasing alarm. Once their commander started losing his cool, everything threatened to go to pieces. Even he, Reginald Bell, was not the right man to lead to its proper conclusion the plan that had been initiated. He was far too impulsive for such a task.

Dr. Eric Manoli, physician on board the *Stardust*, would have been entirely unsuited to carrying on the daring enterprise. His qualifications were purely medical and scientific; he was completely lacking the ability to give uncompromising orders.

Captain Clark G. Fletcher had disappeared without a trace a week earlier. Rhodan was certain that Fletch, the fourth man of the *Stardust*'s original team, must have encountered great difficulties—and possibly foul play. It was even quite probable that he was no longer alive. How utterly wrong had been his decision to permit Fletch to return home! It simply could not end well!

Rhodan's mouth formed a firm thin line. Since he had not plugged his walkie-talkie in again, this was a hint for Reg not to question him any further. Instead, Reg's hand grasped, with an unconscious move, the silvery rod that he knew to conceal undreamt of powers.

It was the so-called psychoradiator of the Arkonides, a weapon that could block the conscious will of other people and force them to execute acts contrary to their own conviction.

This instrument was relatively harmless, though. It did not leave any damaging psychological aftereffects; neither did it put any undue strain on the target's mind. Unfortunately for Rhodan's men, the psychoradiator had already lost its initial element of surprise. The "other side" had recognized that the instrument's range was limited to about a mile and a quarter.

Thus the Third Power, as the *Stardust*'s crew had lately come to be known, had been forced into a defensive position.

Rhodan walked past Dr. Haggard's special mobile laboratory, which had arrived barely a week ago. Reg shrugged his shoulders in answer to Rhodan's ironic glance. Reg was certain that he could not have brought the doctor through enemy territory under the present circumstances. But what did it matter now, as long as *she had* managed to bring Dr. Haggard here and, more important, perhaps, had brought along the means to cure Khrest?

Absentmindedly Perry Rhodan's right hand slid over to his left shoulder. It should have encountered the military insignia of his handsome uniform of the U.S. Space Force. But in a flash he remembered that he himself had detached them. There was no longer a Major Rhodan, particularly since he had been officially deprived of his military rank via radio communication. Rhodan had become World Enemy Number One.

Carefully he drew aside the curtain. Dr. Manoli approached him. Quickly he plugged in the cables to establish communication between them.

"Don't worry any more than necessary," Dr. Manoli said calmly over the ear protectors' speakers. "He is feverish, of course. We were all prepared for this, that a biologically divergent alien being would not respond in the same manner to our medications as we would. His blood count is not unfavourable. The abnormal increase of his white blood cells went down soon after the first injection of Dr. Haggard's antileukaemia serum. The disease has at least been arrested. The swelling of his glands and the subcutaneous bleeding are subsiding. But we can't explain the strange site effects. They never occur in human patients. But in the meantime we have learned a great deal about Khrest's organism.

"His metabolism is similar to ours. He also breathes oxygen, and his lungs let this life sustaining gas diffuse into his bloodstream. Both Dr. Haggard and myself," continued Dr. Manoli, "are agreed on this point. We administered the serum only after the most careful examinations. He will get his second injection within the hour."

"Despite the considerable side effects?"

"Despite them," nodded Dr. Manoli briefly. His face grew stern. "We can't avoid risks completely. Haggard is an outstanding specialist but not a magician. These side effects are well within our ability to control. Just pray that Khrest's organism does not suddenly collapse. Yet his circulatory system seems unusually stable. Perhaps this is due to the one organ in his body that we don't have, unfortunately. We have located a fabulously constructed pressure regulator above his heart, Our diagnostic instruments have analyzed it to become effective with the first signs of impending circulatory collapse by balancing and eliminating any constrictions of blood vessels or closing of capillaries. What a surprising body-hardly to be expected in a member of such a degenerated race. We are dealing here with supremely intelligent minds that are unable to make the necessary effort to transform their brilliant knowledge into practical deeds because they lack willpower. That seems to be at the root of their trouble, Commander Rhodan."

"Forget that bit about 'Commander'!"

"For me you will always remain the commander. The way it looks now, we have well founded hopes that Khrest will recover one hundred percent."

Rhodan looked at the incredibly young appearing face of the patient, whose forehead was bathed in fine pearls of sweat. Khrest was not a child of this planet; still he was capable of perspiring. A good sign, according to Dr. Manoli.

Rhodan turned away. The high intensity barrage kept on incessantly. Strong concussions caused the ground to shake. It was as if the enemy exploded their heaviest charges in the air just at the outer limits of the protective energy bell.

“I don’t like it,” whispered Reg. “They must be planning something. It almost seems as if these fire tricks are nothing but an attempt at diversion.”

“If only we could ask Khrest if the energy screen will withstand these constant impacts indefinitely,” said Rhodan. “Eric, could you rouse Khrest out of this semi-conscious state for just a few moments?”

“Absolutely impossible,” said the physician. “This would be the greatest mistake we could make.”

“You are quite right there,” confirmed Rhodan. Then he began to smile softly.

Reg felt a shiver run down his spine. He was well acquainted with Rhodan’s infamous gentleness, which usually ended suddenly in hard, ruthless action.

“If Khrest fails to recover, we are in for hell,” stated the commander with apparent composure. “A hell worse than Hades, my dear friends! I have landed the *Stardust* here in the Gobi Desert against all orders. I have refused to surrender Khrest. I have kept emphasizing that none of the power groups of this world could obtain his superior scientific technological knowledge for its own purposes. We have suppressed an imminent atomic war, and we have made fun of the mighty armies with the help of the aliens’ superior defensive weapons. They won’t forget this so easily. The great power blocs of this planet have united against us. Up there on the moon, the alien woman commander of a gigantic space battleship is waiting for us to cure Khrest. These aliens left their distant worlds only for the purpose of searching for a planet, somewhere within the regions of our galactic position, that is supposed to possess the secret of biological cell regeneration. That would mean eternal life for Khrest. They want to preserve forever the brain of this genius.

“Thora, the female commanding officer, has also remained mentally active, like many of the women of her race. But she despises mankind because of our primitive level of development. Unless we succeed in restoring the health of this member of her race, we shall suddenly overnight confront the elite divisions of an outraged mankind, helpless and all alone. Then it will be curtains for our Third Power. Well, have I made myself clear?”

“Perfectly clear,” replied Reginald Bell. “Crystal clear, my friend! In the event Thora withdraws, we will first pass through the cross-examinations of the Secret Service. This will be followed by an international court of justice.”

“I can’t see any criminal act in this, not even a mistake,” said Dr. Manoli with calm. “It can never be wrong to act in the interest of all mankind. And this is exactly what we are doing. Haven’t we accomplished *arapprochement* overnight of the ideologically differing governments by a mere demonstration of our superior might. Is that nothing?”

“We managed to do that only thanks to Thora’s superior power!” corrected Rhodan. “If Khrest should die, she will abandon us. Even if she can’t start back to her home planet without our assistance, this will hardly disturb her. Fatalism is a characteristic of her race, after all. She will spin around herself a cocoon of an enormous field of energy, and she will reject as a matter of principle the idea of entering into relations with mankind. We have simply got to do something!”

“What?” The question came back sharply. Reg had reached that “certain point” of inner excitement.



“We ought to try to convince her that man is a tremendously ingenious creature,” Rhodan said. “It won’t be long until the enemy power possess nuclear weapons that can no longer be rendered harmless by an antineutron field.”

Dr. Manoli turned pale.

Rhodan concluded without a trace of emotion, “Our secret research attempted to develop a ‘cold’ nuclear fusion process. If they should succeed, they no longer need worry about the antineutron field. Then I would not care to remain under this energy dome!” He squinted upward to where, far above the tent, the invisible energy screen formed a protective vaulted roof, against which the enemy’s missiles were exploding like so many firecrackers. But that could change, and very quickly at that.

“Let’s open our communication channel to Thora,” said Rhodan with deliberation. “I urgently want to talk to her in my capacity as a representative of mankind who has to make a few demands in their favour.”

“Demands,” grinned Reg. “Did you say demands? She’d jump right out of the screen to scratch out my eyes. We are nothing but semi-intelligent monkeys, from her exalted point of view. According to her code she cannot get in touch with us or establish any mutually meaningful relationship. The affair with Khrest was a compromise she could barely tolerate.

Rhodan pulled over a small stool that had once been part of the equipment of an Asiatic transport commando. “If she has any drive for survival at all, she will listen and agree to my demands. Let’s go; get the connection ready. You are our communications expert, after all.”

Reg shrugged helplessly. Mumbling a curse under his breath, he disappeared behind the curtain. The peculiar videophone of the Arkonides had been set up near Khrest’s couch. In any case, the roomy tent offered better accommodations for Khrest than did the tiny cabin of the *Stardust*.

“Do you intend to force her?” inquired Dr. Manoli worriedly.

“You guessed right,” Rhodan replied slowly. “I have the impression that she is depending on Khrest far more than we imagine. I have noticed quite unmistakably that he is the one who gives the orders. I am no longer willing to play along with her with all that nonsense! Where will all this lead to if we have to beg her for help with every new incident? The moon is too far away for my taste under such circumstances. In case of emergency we shall lose decisive minutes and seconds, I need much more effective equipment here, with some offensive arms included. Please, no more questions now. If the things I suspect, way back in some secret corner of my mind, should happen, then Thora will snap to it. She underestimates the human race enormously. She simply can’t believe we are capable of anything, which I consider a grave mistake on her part.”

“I don’t follow you,” said Eric Manoli.

“You ought to think about it.” Rhodan smiled sarcastically. “What do you do as a physician when a patient complains about some terrible pain? Do you give him constant morphine injections, or do you try to find the cause of his discomfort and treat the disease itself, rather than its symptoms?”

“Why, get to the root of the evil, of course.”

“There you are,” grinned Rhodan joylessly. “You got the point, The secret services of the great power

blocs will also search for the root, which in this case is hidden on the moon. Or do you really think they still believe our fairy tales?"

Reg motioned to them. His bitter grimace could only mean that communication with the moon had been established.

Rhodan rose slowly and walked over to the curtained off partition. He stepped in front of the oval screen of the Arkonide videophone.

The aliens' vessel was on the far side of the Moon, the side normally out of sight from Earth. Contact therefore could never have been established by radio. When Khrest had been asked about this, he had only answered briefly that the faster than light radio technique of the Arkonides had long ago overcome such difficulties.

For an Earth engineer it was rather hard to accept such explanations. Mountains of further questions arose that, of course, were of more interest to the expert than to the layman.

On the screen appeared Thora's face—a three dimensions colour picture of unique expressiveness. Thora was beautiful, breathtakingly beautiful, and yet of a startling impersonality in her self-imposed lack of warmth. Rhodan stared in fascination at her white blonde hair which formed a vivid contrast to her reddish golden eyes. Nevertheless, she was not an albino; this was just a characteristic of the Arkonide race,

Though Rhodan had been willing to address her just a moment ago with moderate words and to excuse her attitude by considering her upbringing, when he saw her expression he suddenly changed tactics.

"Just forget to explain to me that the time for our daily report has not yet come," he said sharply in place of a greeting. "Just listen closely and remember that I am no longer a pawn on your chessboard. If you are unable to remove the slight damages in the engines of your super spaceship in order to get it ready to start again, then you must consider yourself also incapable of impressing a human scientist and special soldier with your foolish behaviour. The men of my race have more willpower and daring in their little fingers than your drowsy crew in all their decadent, hollow heads. And if your answer is simply to break off contact now, I shall switch off the energy screen at once. Did you want to say something?"

She stared at him speechlessly. Never before had anyone dared to speak to her, the commanding officer, in such a manner. But she did not break off communication.

Rhodan continued, "And now, will you pay close attention to what I have to say to you, madam! I..."

Reg became convinced that his former commander had gone crazy. He had assumed an attitude as if he were the chief of the powerful empire of the stars that Khrest once had referred to as the "Great Imperium." Rhodan seemed to overlook the fact that the planet Earth was nothing but a tiny speck within the Milky Way, just like a grain of sand in the Gobi Desert. Perhaps even less.

Reg was certain that this could come to no good end.

## CHAPTER TWO

PARTNERSHIP and defence union mean neither more nor less than a genuine relationship of trust between the concerned parties.

When a worldwide union creates a special secret defence organization, the headquarters of such a group must be in a central position within easy reach of all concerned nations.

That is why the IIA, the International Intelligence Agency, had chosen the island of Greenland as a geographically favourable spot. The gigantic center of the NATO Defence had been built deep under the ground.

Allan D. Mercant was the all powerful chief of the IIA, responsible only to the Defence Union. The short, slender, unobtrusive looking man with the tanned, boyish face below a high domed forehead was a very peaceful person as far as the animal kingdom was concerned.

Allan D. Mercant could easily have passed for the president of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He would have seemed in the right place if one could have observed him roaming the dense Canadian forests, his eyes shining and his camera poised to shoot.

Mercant was not at all in favour of hunting with a shot-gun. This conflicted with his principles. His professional activities were therefore all the more astonishing. Malicious tongues had occasionally asserted that the well-being of one little animal mattered more to him than the life of any of his numerous secret agents. This was of course far removed from the truth, and Mercant was inclined to brush off such sarcastic remarks with a mild wave of his hand, while his eyes sparkled with amused irony.

At this exact moment, he was standing in front of a gigantic video screen. The light symbol in the upper right corner indicated that the TV camera was in faraway Asia.

This was certainly strange but would have seemed much more exciting less than a month ago. In any case, just now even the presence of Eastern officers and secret service men was no longer overwhelming.

Four weeks earlier it would have been unthinkable to permit access to the Greenland HQ of International Defence to any representative of the Asiatic Federation or even to one of the Eastern Bloc.

The crowning effect of all the incredible changes had been the personal invitations sent out by Mercant himself.

Thus it had happened that two Delta bombers of the Asiatic Federation and the Eastern Bloc had landed this very morning at the huge airport of the headquarters. The visitors had been welcomed by Allan D. Mercant in person.

Nevertheless, this unpretentious looking man had been cautious enough to transport the strangers in a sealed train, which roared along one of the unfathomable underground tunnels deep down in Greenland's icy mainland. The strangers did not know exactly where they were. They were moving around now in a big, comfortably heated, well lit hall that gave no hint of being almost two miles below ice and rocky

ground.

This was Mercant's center. This was the focal point of all lines of the Western Defence within the framework of a mighty defence union.

Volcanoes seemed to be roaring in the big, built-in concealed loudspeakers. The sound recording technique of the Chinese TV crews was excellent—perhaps too much so.

The viewing target was brought close by their excellent long focus lenses, and the eyes of the viewers were tortured by the constant bright lightning flashes across the screen.

The spectacle had already lasted for fifteen minutes. Conversation had become impossible among the men. They were watching in fascination. Suddenly Allan D. Mercant switched off the set, abruptly bringing back the attention of the spellbound observers.

Silence. Mercant moved his hand across his mirror-like bald head. He seemed so obviously harmless that Marshal Petronskij could not help but feel ill at ease and alarmed. The Chief of the Eastern Air and Space Defence looked helplessly over at the man with the expressionless face.

Ivan Martinowitsch Kosselow, Chief of the Secret Service of the Eastern Bloc, had not batted an eyelid during the TV demonstration. He seemed to think it was to his advantage to keep up his usual masklike face. Kosselow had fought many a battle in silence with Mercant, battles never known to the general public.

Two additional men seemed rather remarkable: Marshal Lao Lin-to, Commander in Chief of the Asiatic Federation Air and Space Forces, as well as the tall, raw-boned Southern Chinese Mao-tsen, who was known to be the Chief of the Asiatic Federation Secret Service.

Thus, the most important and influential personalities of the three major power groups of the world were assembled in the central bunker of HQ-IIA. It was amazing—really more than amazing.

The men looked at each other. The adjutants and minor experts remained quietly and discreetly in the background. This was the place where only the big bosses spoke.

Politely Mercant asked the gentlemen to enter the adjoining conference room. The last guards vanished. The room was hermetically sealed against the outside world.

Mercant's slight cough sounded like a revelation or perhaps, rather, a warning. Heads turned, fingers began to play with pens and pencils, wide awake brains became even more alert. What did Mercant want?

He spoke in the manner of a deeply caring physician whose psychological schooling has trained him to conceal the fact that he must operate. "I admire the tenacity of the Ochre army," he began charmingly.

"Gentlemen, despite all the efforts of the Asiatic Federation a brief study of the screen makes it quite clear that we are dealing here with a far superior opponent. The events of the past weeks prove, merely by the frightening collection of facts, that neither the NATO states nor those of the East are involved here. I specifically want to have this point made clear. In addition I want you to confirm that you no longer regard the spaceship *Stardust* as a provoking base of the West within your own domain. These misunderstandings could easily have led to worldwide destruction in an atomic war. May I reassure you once more that the scientists of the Western powers do not have at their disposal any of the means and

instruments that could produce such amazing effects and surprises. The *Stardust* has landed in the central Gobi Desert expressly against our wish. Mister “Mao-tsen, what is your opinion of this situation?”

The tall Chinese turned glumly toward him. Irony smouldered in his dark eyes. “What is that supposed to mean, Mercant?” rang out his deep voice. “I have come here to put an end to all these hide and seek games. I regret having to state that we have lost precious days and hours because of our mutual distrust. My sole concern is to find out how, when and where your Major Rhodan was able to lay his hands on these things. I have learned from a reliable source that these events are closely linked with the first landing on the moon.”

“With the second landing, to be correct!” came an icy cold rejoinder.

Mercant’s smiling face froze, as he recognized the unmistakable voice of the Chief of Eastern Defence. Marshal Petronskij managed a sombre grin.

“I beg your pardon?” whispered Mercant.

“With the second landing of a manned spaceship,” repeated Kosselow with studied impassiveness. “I have been authorized to inform you herewith. Our manned rocketship started three months before your *Stardust*. Since it is not our policy to publicize failures, the inexplicable crash of our Spaceship was never made known to the world.”

“May we have more details about this affair?” interjected General Pounder, Chief of the U.S. Space Explorations Command. His face was pale and perturbed as he turned toward Mercant. How could the Western Secret Service have remained in ignorance about such a vital bit of news?

“Gladly.” Kosselow nodded obligingly. “What we need now is to make a clean sweep and to be absolutely truthful with each other. Our rocket crashed on the surface of the moon. Total loss, no news, no indications whatsoever. We have learned that your *Stardust* encountered similar difficulties, with the only difference that your crew managed to survive and even to return after their disastrous mission was completed. We have thoroughly examined the data you supplied us. We can therefore conclude that your rocket was thrown off-course shortly before trying to land by some disruption of its remote control steering system. This is exactly what happened to our vessel.

“This strange duplication of circumstances motivates us to ask for your cooperation. We are firmly convinced at this point that there is some mystery going on up there on our planet’s satellite. It appears that your Major Rhodan countered this challenge more successfully than did our own people. At least, he was fortunate enough to survive this catastrophe. Whatever happened after their crash landing is beyond our comprehension. The only thing that matters here for us is this—both the Eastern and Western ships ran into dangerous complications as a result of spontaneous interferences with their remote control guidance systems. It is out of the question to hold any rival power groups responsible for this. These are the plain facts.”

Allan D. Mercant nodded in affirmation. “Gentlemen, I have kept you fully informed of all explanations and information we have received from our Major Rhodan. Our former special test pilot stated flatly that on the moon he discovered the remains of a highly intelligent alien race from another system. This accounts also for the infinitely superior arms and instruments brought back on the *Stardust*. Despite our express orders the *Stardust* was brought down to Earth within the Gobi Desert. Ever since then he has refused any contact but has identified himself as the so-called Third Power. What he means by that is of secondary interest for the time being. But we are vitally interested in the plain facts that immediately confront us—especially the impenetrable energy screen that baffles our experts. We have

just witnessed with our own eyes the senselessness of attacking it with conventional weapons.”

“Let’s get better ones!” hissed the Chinese bitterly. “Why don’t you do something to straighten things out after the catastrophic treason of your special test pilot? We are all agreed that Perry Rhodan has become the world’s greatest enemy. Unless we manage to remove the mysterious field of energy and to render harmless the men of the *Stardust* we—”

“Might even be forced by these circumstances to come to an agreement and cooperate with each other!” interrupted Mercant sarcastically.

Kosselow cleared his throat, then continued thoughtfully. “We are of the opinion that preventing an atomic war with the help of Rhodan’s powerful weapons should not be looked upon as an ignominious deed,” declared Marshal Petronskij. “Quite the contrary, gentlemen. It was you who pushed certain red buttons in wild panic. But your ballistic nuclear rocket did not explode, thanks to Rhodan and his secret defence arms. We owe it to Major Rhodan that we are assembled here today in a peaceful exchange of views. That is the other side of the coin. A very positive result out of a critical situation, and we should not forget it.”

“No one is overlooking this aspect,” remarked Mercant with professional seriousness. “On the other hand I’d like to remind you that the emergency buttons would never have been pushed if Rhodan had not landed on the territory of the Asiatic Federation. We have indicated in many communiques that this landing did not occur with our consent. Quite the contrary. Yet Peking has preferred to believe that we are involved in establishing a Western base in the central Gobi in order to provoke you. We ought to look at these problems in their proper perspective. All that matters now is to decide the manner in which this agreement should be reached.”

“Something should be done,” began Mao-tsen slowly. “We absolutely refuse to tolerate the presence of the so-called Third Power in the territories of the Asiatic Federation. Rhodan’s actions are criminal according to our international laws. He is resisting and openly defying an internationally recognized government.”

“Please, do consider Rhodan’s point of view too,” growled General Pounder. “I want to be frank with you. So permit me to state here that I consider it a distinct advantage for world peace if we are kept in check by a neutral power. Need I remind you how terribly tense and dangerous the political situation had grown? Rhodan’s landing in the Gobi Desert was not the decisive factor in our pushing of panic buttons. Rhodan was probably nothing more than the spark that ignited the explosive tensions that had been building up for decades during the Cold War.”

The Eastern Chief of Defence seemed to grow nervous. Dryly he replied, “General Pounder, you still appear to treat Rhodan like the spoiled problem child within the frame of your space travel program. May I point out to you that we, too, are unable to accept a new power that suddenly makes its entry into the constellation of the world’s power groups. Quite apart from the legal situation, which has grown untenable by now, it is out of the question that we should be degraded to a position where we receive orders. Who can guarantee that Rhodan won’t develop into a dictator ruling the whole world? Right now he is still small, practically immobilized, imprisoned by this mysterious protective shell. The time has come to employ the scientific and industrial might of all the great powers against Rhodan. First of all we should find out who is behind him. We doubt the validity of the information coming from the IIA!”

Allan D. Mercant rose, his face displaying displeasure. “I have asked you to come here to the headquarters of the IIA in order to familiarize you with the latest data available to my organization. All known facts were fed into the biggest and best computer brain on Earth. We were not concerned with

determining whether it is advisable that humans be in possession of a superhuman technology. We wanted to know if Rhodan plans to play the role of a peaceful supervisor over-mankind's future development or if he is inclined to turn into an imperialistic ruler with the help of infinitely superior instruments."

"The latter, of course!" Kosselow replied quickly. "What else could motivate him in his actions?"

"Please, be patient!" said Mercant with icy politeness. "As much as I personally welcome the opportunity of this meeting, on the other hand I detest the unlawful practices of a man who started out as a major in the space force and ends up returning to this globe as a dictator. So far it is still undecided whether Rhodan has done a favour for a nightmare haunted mankind.

"One thing, though, is certain-he has prevented a total atomic war. In this regard I must agree with General Pounder. All nuclear reactions have been rendered impossible. We have arrived at a temporary alliance, in which I can see the hopeful beginning signs of a future coalition between the great powers. All united, we are now confronting one man. These are the only important facts we need consider here. For weeks we have pondered the events that undoubtedly happened on the moon. You are familiar with Rhodan's allegations. You must have listened in to the radio communication between the U.S. Department of Space and Major Rhodan. According to that, Rhodan maintains his assertions that he has discovered on the moon the abandoned heritage of a far superior alien race. He claims to have appropriated these remains in the interests of all humanity. Therefore, he refuses to hand over these discoveries to any government of this world. This is tantamount to desertion and high treason. But cause and effect are not the same thing. Our usual standards of jurisdiction are no longer applicable in this case, particularly since Rhodan has renounced both his rank and his citizenship. He has no nationality, calls himself a citizen of the world and does not recognize the authority of our planet's courts of law."

"A legally untenable situation!" snapped Kosselow angrily.

"Indeed," confirmed Mercant. "Even more than that. The situation is utterly confusing. But let's wait with any decision until we can proceed effectively against Rhodan. For the time being we are limited to talk, which is not very productive in such circumstances. Let's rather get busy with the facts, for facts speak louder than words."

Mercant sat down. He motioned briefly with his left hand. A huge screen lit up, on which the launching of the manned moon rocket was projected.

The kinescope report of the ship could be seen, followed by the crew's preparations for the touchdown on the moon, filmed by the lunar expedition's own cameras. This was interspersed with the pictures taken by the manned satellite space station *Freedom I*. Rhodan's last radio message could be heard, then the shrill whistling of the automatic warning system and the high chirping of the call for help, "QQRXQ." The robot automatic steering system of the *Stardust* registered the failure of the earthbound remote control steering signals. The last shots showed that the rocket was hurtling out of control toward the lunar surface. Finally the ship disappeared beyond the curvature of the moon.

Mercant indicated by raising his hand that the film projection was to be stopped.

"Gentlemen, you have just seen the preparations and the sudden plunge toward the moon's surface," he said. "So far everything was clear. We believed it an accident. Others spoke of sabotage. The only thing we are certain of is that the *Stardust* suddenly no longer responded to our remote control impulses, although her receivers were functioning perfectly, as has been proved by the return of the ship. These are the unassailable final results of our electronic computer. Will you listen now to the technicians' report of translated symbols of the final data. They prove without doubt that Perry Rhodan is not acting alone. We

are dealing with an unknown and horrifying force. Therefore, it seems utterly senseless right now to present hair splitting arguments of who is right or wrong. What matters is solely in whose hands the power rests. If it is in Rhodan's, then we have no alternative but to remember with a resigned smile the old saying 'might makes right.' Do you agree?"

Kosselow expressed his approval by a short resolute nod. But the representatives of the Asiatic Federation protested loudly.

Mercant shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "Mr. Ktao-tsen, we are willing to accept your protests, but it is not in our power to undertake the necessary steps against Rhodan's invasion of your territory. You have tried it with your best elite troops and your latest arms. With what result, if I may ask? You are burning up millions of dollars by bombarding the indestructible wall of energy, without making as much as a dent in it. Rhodan does not even lift a finger. That means according to the laws of logic that he knows himself to be invulnerable. Give up, gentlemen, and be satisfied with hermetically sealing off this area. I will prove to you that the true danger is hidden up there on the moon. Rhodan plays nothing but a subordinate role here in this game with big stakes."

With these words Mercant had expressed in an indirect manner what seemed to be the inevitable truth. He continued firmly, "In order to attack the evil at its roots we will be forced to go where the danger is, namely, to land on the moon and to attack it there. Listen first to this short report of our E brain."

Turning to the technicians, Mercant said, "Proceed!"

The loudspeakers began, "It is to be assumed that the data regarding start and emergency landing of the moon rocket are known. The return to Earth was executed with the assistance of electronic remote control system. Reentry into our atmosphere was accomplished successfully and according to plan. First indications of the preceding events lie in Major Rhodan's landing against orders in the central Gobi Desert. Our records of the *Stardust's* construction and equipment show that the crew would have been absolutely incapable of using superior weapons and instruments before take-off. Yet after the touchdown in the Gobi Desert such installations were definitely aboard the *Stardust*. Therefore, it is concluded with utmost certainty that the commander of the *Stardust* must have discovered on the moon the non-terrestrial products of a non-terrestrial industry."

"Very clever!" muttered Ltiao-tsen caustically. "We already know that. Is that all?"

The monotonous sounds of the loudspeaker started up again, while the landing area with the moon rocket appeared on the screen.

"According to the confused statements of the test pilot Clark G. Fletcher, captain of the space force, we can conclude that the crew was forced by Major Rhodan to submit to the forbidden landing. Captain Fletcher was arrested and taken into custody by the Australian Security Service. Due to some careless procedures during a cross-examination, Captain Fletcher unfortunately suffered a fatal stroke. Judging by the tape recordings and medical records of the proceedings it appears that Captain Fletcher's memory bank was put out of commission by means of a parapsychic hypnotic bloc. Nevertheless, it is certain that at least Fletcher was made to obey his commander by force. The officials responsible for Fletcher's death are being prosecuted."

"How clever!" mumbled the Chinese with bitter sarcasm.



The report concluded with a detailed account of the various aspects of the investigation and its results. The attitude and behaviour of the other two crew members, Dr. Eric Manoli and Captain Reginald Bell, were reconstructed. These were based on the sparse reports of far Eastern and Western secret service agents.

The statement was concluded with these words: "The mysterious disappearance of Dr. Frank Haggard, specialist for blood dyscrasia, must be looked upon as a significant coincidence. And evaluation of Rhodan's actions, while considering about 11 million probabilities, provides also the explanation for Dr. Haggard's continued absence. With a probability factor of ninety-nine percent it is stated that Major Rhodan must have brought back to Earth with him an alien being suffering from a serious blood disorder. An examination of all steps undertaken by Dr. Haggard immediately preceding his disappearance led to the inevitable conclusion that this disease must be leukaemia. It is known which medications and special diagnostic instruments he has taken along. One hundred percent certainty!"

This time Mercant waited in vain for some biting remark of the Asiatic Federation Defence Chief. Mao-tsen sat rigidly in his chair, not uttering a sound.

"No, no, no!" breathed Kosselow heavily. That was the only sound in the room.

Mercant glanced at General Pounder, who seemed to be lost in deepest thought.

The report came to an end: "Rhodan's explanation of having found on the moon the ownerless heritage of a non-human race, and having appropriated and used these remains in a manner well-known by now, must be rejected as completely untrue! Careful checking of the scientific technical potential useful effects leads to the conclusion that it is entirely impossible for a human mind to comprehend the functioning of totally unknown machines and weapons within the span of a few days. The working mechanism of the so-called energy screen necessitates such specialized knowledge as is not at the disposal of our engineers. Even considering all facts, we calculate with one hundred percent certainty that even a highly qualified research team would have needed three to four years merely to understand the workings of the energy screen's mechanics. But another three to four years would have been required for them to learn how to master the correct procedures of working the apparatus. The intelligence quotients of our pilots are a matter of record. Even in intense collaboration they would never have been able to understand the instruments or to make them function. A careful calculation of sixty-four million possibilities results in the inescapable conclusion that Perry Rhodan, contrary to his statements, must have discovered on the moon alien creatures of surpassing intelligence. We cannot determine Rhodan's final goals, since we lack the necessary data. Therefore, it seems advisable to attack the base of the unknown aliens on the moon or, lacking suitable means of aggression, to try to enter into diplomatic relations with the strangers."

With these words ended the report of the translated symbols of the mightiest E brain on Earth.

For the next two hours Mercant was kept busy answering the innumerable questions thrown at him by those present. Detailed calculations were requested and promptly supplied by the computer. The gigantic robot developed a crystal clear logic.

Finally Kosselow came to the heart of the matter. "We assume these final results to be correct. The E brain recommends that we attack the unknown danger on the moon by suitable means. But do you have such means at your disposal? Needless to mention here that our atomic weapons have been put out of commission. We can't even penetrate the screen around the *Stardust*. How about it, Mr. Mercant?"

The frail man looked around in a deliberate fashion. Then he inquired without his usual smile, "How

far are you with your spaceships, Kosselow?”

“Our rocket has been ready to start for the past eight days. A crew of six men and a payload of ninety-two tons.”

General Pounder let out his breath noisily. That was a new blow. Six men and ninety-two tons! The Eastern Bloc was still one step ahead.

“Marshal Lao Lin-to?”

“We are ready to launch our spaceship,” declared the Commander in Chief of the Asiatic Federation Space Force, “with a crew of four men, payload of fifty-eight tons. The source of error leading to an explosion of our first moon-craft has been removed.”

Mercant coughed dryly before he stated, “Our vessel will be ready to take off tomorrow too. The second manned Western moon rocket will be known as the *Stardust II*. The team will consist of four astronauts as before, with a payload of sixty-four tons. Please arrange for an immediate meeting of the parties concerned and their rocket experts. All these spaceships must leave Earth at the same moment, and calculations must be made to adjust for any differences in thrust, to enable the rockets to reach a certain orbit around the moon simultaneously. Will you be able to manage this?”

“What is all that nonsense supposed to accomplish?” interjected Kosselow roughly. “How and with what do you plan to attack? In case there really exists a base of alien intelligences up there our pilots will get the surprise of their lives. What do you intend to do?”

Mercant replied very softly, “First of all we must see to it that our ships will be guided manually. We will supply you with the appropriate radar equipment. The unknown base must be within a narrowly confined area on the far side of the lunar south pole. You will get shortly our exact coordinates. We know precisely where our ship started its emergency touchdown. The strangers have to be in that vicinity, a fact that was also confirmed by the calculations of the computer. We have been quite busy these last few days, obtaining a maximum amount of data. Are you willing to cooperate with the West?”

Another two hours passed before this problem was settled and put down in a written agreement spelling out the details of this special coalition. Afterward Mercant triumphantly played his last hand.

“You want to know how? Pay attention, please!”

This time an officer of the defence ministry switched on the video screen. A tiny island appeared on it, apparently uninhabited. The chaos started with an incandescent ball of gases. Unearthly mumblings emanated from the loudspeakers. A pillar of unchained primordial forces racing toward the clear blue sky. Tidal waves, horrendous heat, all hell let loose.

“The latest experiment of the Western scientists,” declared Mercant matter of factly. “A 100 megaton fusion bomb. About three months ago we put into practice for the first time the theoretically known principle of ‘cold’ fission process. That means we no longer depend on an initial fission process. This ‘catalyst bomb’ uses only mesonic atoms. A chemically induced ignition of only 3,865 degrees Celsius is sufficient to begin the nuclear reaction. Free neutrons have thus become entirely superfluous. The new catalyst bomb will be ready for transport within two weeks and then become available for military use. Please advise your governments that each of your moon rockets will be equipped with one of these bombs. For the time being we do not want to employ this super bomb against Perry Rhodan’s base in the Gobi Desert. If we destroy his cover on the moon, he will automatically have to surrender. Are there

any more questions?”

Yes, indeed, there were still a number of questions, all pointing in the last analysis to one fact never before had the great powers been as frank and sincere with each other as now.

A tall blond man with firm features and polite gestures kept close observation of the reactions of the almost almighty chief of the secret service. As soon as the meeting had come to an end, he requested to be relieved of his assignment as special observer and liaison officer with the International Intelligence Agency and to be sent instead to China.

Allan D. Mercant gave his consent. When the tall man left the room he could feel on the back of his neck the enigmatic glance of his boss. The rumour was that Allan D. Mercant possessed a brain with quite special properties. In any case he complied with the justified desire of his best special agent. If only he had not smiled so strangely! The heavy delta bombers of the guests roared along the runway; then HQ-IIA returned to its normal routine. Allan D. Mercant was satisfied, as far as such a feeling could arise within the framework of recent events.

However, he was supposed to have a parapsychic brain! And that fact had been overlooked by almost all the recent visitors to the headquarters. Only one man bore this in mind, and the thought became the source of everlasting disquietude for him.

“The dice are rolling now,” whispered Mercant.

### CHAPTER THREE

A FEW WEEKS LATER, at exactly two o'clock in the morning, the slenderly built officer with the rank insignia of a lieutenant general lowered his hand with a sudden jerking motion.

Almost instantaneously all hell broke loose. The mightiest guns and rocket batteries opened fire from 6,000 fiery mouths.

There had never been such a tremendous barrage in all the history of mankind's endless wars. At least, never had 1,500 batteries of mostly heavy caliber been directed against a single target about the size of a garden.

The blockade was still in effect. It had been augmented during the past four weeks by new divisions. The area within the energy screen had been cordoned off by five concentric rings of troops.

Some seconds after the opening of the sudden bombardment 6,000 guns of varying calibers continuously hit the protective bell. The target area was sixty feet above the ground and extended for 2,500 square yards.

Only there, nowhere else, were the exploding charges of the projectiles directed in a last attempt to pierce the wall of energy that had withstood all previous attacks.

The headquarters of the general in command were on a small hill, barely eight miles from the perimeter of Rhodan's domain. The gun emplacements lay farther to the north. The heaviest batteries had been positioned about eighteen miles behind the target area. Conventional guns had been put into action, after it had become obvious that the tiny forces of the enclosed enemy had become powerless.

Nothing could be noticed of the zero gravity conditions. Therefore, Lieutenant General Tai-tiang had ordered a new offensive.

His staff officers looked in fascination across to the target area of the energy screen. Among his staff there were several observers, in addition to the military experts. The force of impact of all the simultaneously exploding charges must amount to millions of tons. The spontaneously arising yet never ceasing waves of pressure would have sufficed to flatten a small mountain.

They kept up their observation for fifteen minutes without uttering a word. At this distance the target area looked like a white hot glowing spot the size of a palm from which constant flashes of lightning seemed to emanate.

The energy dome, which was invisible under normal circumstances, was aglow in a greenish shimmer that gradually changed to violet at the place of impact. Nothing else was to be seen. The radiant dome stood like a shining beacon in the reddish glow of the nocturnal sky.

"The strongest fortresses in the world would fall under this barrage," snarled Tai-tiang. "What kind of machines do they have over there? How can they resist this barrage so effortlessly, as if they dealt with glass marbles thrown against a steel wall? How do they manage this?"

The slender hipped Chinese turned his head abruptly. His eyes were burning. Tai-Tiang was quite aware that he was about to let another billion of his precious national treasury go up in smoke by shooting at this mysterious obstacle.

"Our most venerable scientists hide themselves behind a perplexed silence," grumbled the general. "Very well! And your colleagues from the far West probably have no comment either."

American and European teams of observers had arrived fourteen days ago. The delegation of the Eastern Bloc had witnessed the catastrophe of the Asiatic army right from the beginning. Their freely given good advice had become less frequent. Now the Western advisors were regarded rather ironically.

A leading nuclear scientist from the United States tried to shout out the horrible roar of the distant guns. He barely managed to make himself understood.

"Sir, we have never pretended toward you or your government that we are in possession of miraculous powers or the philosopher's stone. We have encountered here an unscalable wall. Our scientific knowledge and the experiences of our technicians are failing us in the face of most mysterious forces. Therefore, I would suggest most urgently that you request again the help of the psychological and medical teams. If anything can be done here, then it must be accomplished by wearing down the surrounded enemy's nervous resistance."

"This is exactly what we are trying to do here," explained the commanding officer. "Why else would we have brought all these batteries here with such effort? We had to use the entire transport fleet of the

Asiatic Federation Air Force to guarantee the necessary supply of ammunition. I simply can't understand why you can't come up with sensible calculations. Somehow it must be possible to destroy this structure! Even at the expense of another 1,500 batteries. We could find a way to secure them, just say the word!"

The discussions grew more and more violent, while a veritable inferno was unleashed just eight miles away.

"I would lose my mind over there," said a heavyset civilian. His eyes probed the tall figure in the semidarkness of the observation bunker.

The tall man stepped closer. His steps seemed to drag a little despite the unobtrusive elasticity of his gait. A narrow, restrained face became visible as he entered the weak cone of light coming from the dimmed lamps.

He did not speak. He lifted his field glasses to his eyes and peered toward the west. Then he glanced at his watch.

The bright flame of a cigarette lighter flickered in the darkness close to him. Lieutenant Peter Kosnow, special agent of the Eastern Secret Defence Service, was smoking nervously with quick puffs.

He was torn by violent emotions. It was not easy for him to stand here in this gathering of the highest ranking officers. Under normal circumstances Kosnow would not have given a damn about these military brass. His extraordinary powers of proxy had so far enabled him to get along well enough with them. Particularly since they had frequently been obliged to take orders from him, the low-ranking lieutenant of the secret service. This relationship had not been changed, at least not outwardly. As long as one could not read what went on behind Kosnow's forehead, he was still considered to be the representative of a powerful organization.

Yet he was convinced that any close observer must sense his inner unrest. As a result, he felt insecure and dissatisfied with himself. He was fighting to keep himself under control, while anxiously trying to avoid becoming suspect.

He ground out his half smoked cigarette. The bright glow died down. Only the narrow face of his companion was discernible in the reflected light from the video screen.

Kosnow began to feel doubts about his new won friend. He did not think for a moment that Captain Albrecht Klein, special agent of the International Intelligence Agency, would commit some stupidity. Even so, Kosnow regarded the daring of his blond colleague from "the other side" as sheer insanity.

Kosnow cleared his throat. The noisy argument between the officers and the scientists formed a welcome protective backdrop for their own discussion.

Albrecht Klein, who just three weeks ago had been personally advanced by Allan D. Mercant to the position of captain of the IIA, slowly let his field glasses sink. He observed the disputing men for a while; then an ironical smile played about his lips.

"What's the matter, friend? You look like a zombi."

Kosnow muttered a rough curse.

"The transport commando landed six hours ago in Siberia. By now your lovely moonship must have

aboard it the Western power bomb. I don't like the whole thing."

Klein's mumbling stopped. He looked even more closely at the face of his Eastern comrade, who kept staring at the plainly visible energy dome.

"They are magnificent, aren't they?" he whispered into his friend's ear. "If only they had done the slightest wrong that could be considered an infraction of human rights, I would be both your and their most bitter enemy. But this way, I simply can't feel any animosity toward them. And this is what makes me sick. Can you understand that, my friend?"

Klein laughed shortly. "Who do you think you are talking to! Not only do I know that Rhodan has prevented an atomic war that had already started, but I also know that Rhodan has no intention whatsoever of favouring one of the parties. I am deadly afraid that things might change again tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. The terrible fear and mistrust of each other has disappeared from mankind, because a new opponent has arrived on the scene. They feel a common threat; therefore, they cooperate with each other. That is quite an accomplishment! We could not have wished for a better, faster and more peaceful way of attaining peace on this planet. As long as Rhodan exists as the Third Power we will be one united power. The longer he remains, the stronger will his incredible strength impress itself on mankind's awareness and the closer will our ties become. If only this state of affairs could reign for a few years or decades, then we would remain one united nation of this Earth. That's why I can't follow the argument that Rhodan must be destroyed at all costs. If he is defeated, the Cold War will start all over again. Let's be honest about it!"

"A clear and absolutely logical conclusion." Kosnow grinned joylessly. "There is only one flaw in your argument—we do not know in what direction Rhodan will develop as time goes on. He is only a human being, even if you are so completely enchanted by him."

"I am the only person to have spoken to him after his return to Earth. I am also the only human being, apart from Rhodan and his men, who has laid eyes on the alien Khrest. In the meantime our big bosses have also come to believe that there seems to be a nonhuman intelligence in Rhodan's party inside the energy bell. Quite remarkable powers of deduction, particularly since they have never seen Khrest. I am convinced that Rhodan is our man for the whole Earth. You ought to make a decision, Peter! Just think of the two of us! We are a living example of what the future might have in store for all men. But barely two months ago we reached instinctively for our weapons when we met for the first time."

"Routine. A conditioned reflex," corrected Kosnow.

"If you insist. But that is even worse if one has to look at it that way. Now I firmly believe it is our duty to, do something for our fellow human beings. This latest rocket war, which was thwarted in the last moment by Rhodan's intervention, has given me the final push. Horrible when I think back how far things had gone already! We lived in constant fear of the next day. We must see to it that such a catastrophe cannot be repeated. One dud was more than enough for me. That's all I want to say on this point. Now to the immediate problem at hand.

"I have informed you about the outcome of the big conference in Greenland. The news about the catalyst bomb is kept a strict secret. No one here has any idea about it. Even Lieutenant General Tai-tiang is already too unimportant to be informed of this new kind of nuclear weapon. He simply carries out orders of the highest chiefs, who carefully planned this bombardment. As soon as the bombs fall on the moon, they will attack Rhodan here on his base. First the Chinese will evacuate the entire province; then a remote controlled Western bomber will appear and lay its egg. I don't like the way things are going.

Captain Klein glanced again at his watch. His dark cover-all could hardly be distinguished against the unlit background of the bunker. Kosnow was silent. His strong teeth gnawed nervously at his lower lip. He was still hesitating.

“My mission will begin in eight minutes,” Klein said. “You will be with me. Make up your mind by then. Here we can talk to each other without being disturbed.”

Klein’s tall figure disappeared in the darkness. A few seconds later he saluted several of the uniformed officers of the three secret services.

The representative of Asiatic Federation Defence was Major Butaan, the Eastern secret service’s man was Colonel Kalingin and that of the IIA was Lieutenant Colonel Cretcher.

They had collaborated in preparing a mission to be carried out by a special commando of Eastern and Western special agents.

Peter Kosnow joined the group standing in the dim light. There was quick motioning, then a few loudly spoken words.

Lieutenant General Tai-tiang approached the waiting men. His salute was cordial, but his coal black eyes remained cold. “We will proceed as planned. Try to carry out the plan worked out by the defence services of our combined forces. If you should be successful you may rest assured of our gratitude. When will you enter the blockade zone?”

“At 3 o’clock sharp, sir,” replied Captain Klein. “We want to request urgently that you will once gain inform the commanding officers of the concerned units about this exact time. We want to avoid being shot down by our own people by mistake.”

The Chinese general briefly raised his eyebrows. Then he smiled. Apparently he had been startled momentarily by the term “our own people.”

“You can rely on us. There will be no errors on our part. Your plane is waiting for you, gentlemen.”

“It is getting late, sir,” urged Lieutenant Colonel Cretcher. “Our people must return before daybreak.”

“We should at least have established contact before sunrise,” added Colonel Kalingin. “If Rhodan reacts according to our plans, you may cease fire by 8 o’clock.”

“Let’s hope so!” muttered Tai-Hang. “Be careful and see to it that you don’t infect my own soldiers. What exactly are we dealing with here?”

“This is a discovery by Western research scientists, sir,” answered Cretcher. “Would you excuse us please now!”

Klein and Kosnow followed the defence officers downstairs. One room of the bunker had been arranged as the center of command of the secret services. A physician gave the men an injection with a high pressure syringe that made the medication enter directly into their bloodstream.

“Do you feel anything?” asked the doctor after a few moments. “Dizziness, loss of balance or heat sensation?”

“Nothing whatsoever, Doctor,” replied Klein. “Let’s hope this stuff really works. I wouldn’t want to swell up like a balloon or maybe shrink like a wrinkled apple and scare my fellow human beings after my return.”

“You’d never get that far, if you should be infected,” stated a radio bacteriologist with a horrifying matter of fact tone. “The artificially cultivated causative agents are perfectly viable and capable of reproducing under the local conditions. All you need to do is to open the valve of the pressurised cylinder very slightly. You will hear a certain hissing sound. Watch for it and remember that you must avoid squirting the plasma into your own faces—it wouldn’t be advisable even if you are protected by this shot of antibodies. This culture is a highly concentrated solution of the most dangerous microbes. This is all I am permitted to tell you about it.”

“Will this cause everything within the energy dome to become contaminated?” inquired Kosnow anxiously.

“What else did you think?” said Colonel Kalingin. “If you succeed in introducing this radio biological weapon inside the energy bell, all life will become extinct there within a few hours. Then our work here will be completed, Even Dr. Haggard does not know of any antidote against it.”

Captain Klein’s throat suddenly felt raw as he took the small steel bottle, no larger than a hand. It looked like a miniature oxygen cylinder. But instead of life sustaining oxygen it contained the most hellish brew ever devised in a secret laboratory of biological warfare.

Colonel Cretcher sensed his agent’s reaction of utter disgust. He explained in a soothing manner, “Klein, you are being sent on this mission by the recognized representatives of all mankind. Perry Rhodan seems to place some confidence in you. Three weeks ago he permitted you to enter his energy screen fortress for a short interview. Try to get another one. Pretend to have slipped through the lines against the will of our chief of the troops, because you want to negotiate with Rhodan on behalf of a revolutionary resistance group: You have one important point in your favour—he knows you already. As soon as you are inside the energy dome, open the valves of the pressurized bottles unobtrusively. Even if you manage to release only one charge into the air, it should do the trick. Just think up a good excuse to make Rhodan believe in your mission. That’s all.”

Klein swallowed hard. His eyes burned in his pale face. “Yes, sir,” he said with some effort. “Sir, I have carried out many an unpleasant orders, but this one has them all beat. A really dirty job.”

“A special agent’s job has never been noted for its lack of ruthlessness,” snorted Kalingin. “How dare you even raise such objections! We are not used to this kind of behaviour from our own people.”

Colonel Cretcher’s face expressed disapproval, while Peter Kosnow stared ahead blankly.

“That’s it!” hissed Major Butaan. This was all he said, but it was enough to make Klein understand that he had acquired a dangerous opponent in the Malayan.

The American radio biologist stated calmly, “Captain Klein, I fully appreciate your qualms of conscience. But rest assured, we did not bring here our most devilish weapons. These bacteria will cause swift infection and swelling of the tissues. But if one can administer the antidote within eight hours, there will be complete recovery. We are in possession of these remedies. It will be up to Perry Rhodan, therefore, to act according to our instructions, given over the radio and over the loudspeakers, and to leave the blockaded zone within these eight hours. This seems a rather humane procedure as far as I am



concerned.”

Klein did not reply. It would have made no sense to do so and could have endangered his position. The Asiatic Federation major was observing him with eyes full of distrust.

Before both men left, Butaan added with emphasis, “Our representative, Lieutenant Li Tschai-tung of the Asiatic Federation Secret Service, is waiting for you in the aircraft. It matters greatly to us to have him participate in a significant manner in this enterprise. Do we see eye to eye there, Captain Klein?”

The blond giant looked down on the slightly built Malaysian. “Why, of course, sir!” he countered politely. “I can’t see any reason why Li Tschai-tung should not take part in our action.”

Klein thought back to the ruthless manner in which his orders had been given to him. He had lived long enough in Asia to learn that commanders were not plagued by great sensitivity—especially in the Secret Service of the Asiatic Federation.

“In case of emergency you will have to sacrifice your own life!” he had been told. Klein could still feel the bitter taste in his mouth.

A few minutes later the men left. When they emerged from the underground bunker they were greeted by the infernal rumble of the guns. Farther to the north the sky, lit up by unceasing gun flashes, looked like a bloodred ribbon made of flaming gases.

Outside the bunker they found the helicopter waiting with its pilot Lieutenant Li Tschai-tung. He, too, had received his last protective injections. The plan was to fly to the energy bell and land at a safe distance from the target area. There they were supposed to establish radio communication with Perry Rhodan.

The mighty machinery of the defence services had thus finally been set in motion. Nothing had been overlooked in the planning; no one had made any mistake. Yet nobody had the slightest inkling how well the three men of the team got along. No one suspected that they shared the common interest of preserving peace for the world’s population.

These were the three men that took off into the bullet ridden night sky—an American of German descent, a Russian and a Chinese.

As they approached their destination, Li Tschai-tung asked with a slight chuckle, “Is everything okay? I hope you realize that we are risking our skins.”

Kosnow grinned simply in reply. Then he turned to Klein with a strange tone of voice. “Let’s be frank with each other, brother! How did things go with your mighty boss? Why were you so perturbed by his peculiar smile when he gave you permission for this special task? Didn’t the idea of smuggling the bacteria into Rhodan’s base originate in your own mind?”

Klein nodded affirmatively. His face had turned pale. There was deep worry glowing in his eyes as he said slowly, “Allan D. Mercant is a fabulous man, but you never know what is going on in his mind. Even the best psychologists can’t figure him out. His actions are unpredictable. There is a rumour that he might be a mutant with unusual-mental powers . . .”

“Not so unusual in this day and age of the atomic bomb.” “Certainly. But Mercant is too old for his parents to have suffered damage to their genes. He was born before the first atomic bomb. there must be

other causes for his special gifts. Natural mutants have been known to occur throughout the ages.”

“What has this to do with your uneasiness? He let you go, didn’t he?”

“He surely did!” confirmed Klein. “He even provided the biological weapon. But I could not help feeling when I took my leave from him that he was, could, read my mind, that he had seen through to the deepest depths of my most innermost thoughts. He behaved like a father who is up to his little son’s tricks but pretends ignorance. A queasy feeling, I must admit.”

The men grew silent.

Kosnow stubbed out his cigarette. With clear, logical precision he presented his ideas. “There are two possibilities. In case he knew what you intended to do, then he does not object if you warn Rhodan. This would mean that Mercant approves of Rhodan’s actions. Perhaps he realizes that this way Rhodan is guaranteeing worldwide peace. It would be surprising after all if a man of Mercant’s caliber did not arrive at these conclusions. On the other hand, if he did not see through you, then you were simply imagining things. Turn to the left here, Li! Signal our ground troops with a light flare; otherwise, they’ll send a high explosive charge into our backside.”

This was the beginning of a strange mission, where three men felt deep inside that their commanding officers were totally in the wrong.

Captain Klein toyed with the small pressurized bottle. Before the helicopter set down he said seriously, “Just think that we produced this stuff in order to contaminate you with it in case of war. Great, isn’t it?”

“Don’t melt your snowball,” jeered Kosnow. “We have similar tricks up our sleeves. I, too, have come to believe that it is high time to get rid of this nonsense once and for all. Nevertheless, we will have to discuss sometime our ideological differences.”

“Let sleeping dogs lie!”

“Okay. First things first. I’m very anxious to meet Perry Rhodan!”

## CHAPTER FOUR

THEY HAD TAKEN refuge behind the thick padding of their ear protectors. as if the exclusion of excessively strong sound-waves could somehow provide a panacea against the attackers’ superior firepower.

Groaning, with panic in their eyes, they had put on these helmets a few seconds after the onset of the renewed attack. Then they had plugged in their walkie-talkies.

Perry Rhodan was convinced that the situation had become untenable. Events seemed to take on the aspect of catastrophe.

In a sudden rage Reginald Bell had attempted to influence the encircling troops with his psychoradiator. It turned out to be ineffective, since even the nearest soldiers had dug in beyond the silvery rod's range.

The gravity neutralizer, too, had become useless. There was simply nothing left to degravitize.

One hour after the start of the barrage the vibrations of the ground became unbearable. The reactor of the Arkonides began to glow in a bluish light. At the same time the energy dome changed colour.

Rhodan guessed that the violent ground concussions had impaired the workings of the apparatus. With narrowed eyes he observed the incredible fireworks toward the right. He had given up by now trying to comprehend cause and effect here. This was more than a human brain was capable of understanding. He dared not think how long the protective dome could withstand the intense bombardment. The mysteriously glowing dome might not be anything to be worried about. Perhaps it was only the result of the increased output of the reactor.

On the other hand, this bluish glittering might indicate the approach of the catastrophic end. Ever since all projectiles had begun hitting the energy wall at precisely the same point, a tremendous shift of forces had resulted. Rhodan wondered with growing alarm whether such excessive stresses had been foreseen and compensated for. The Chinese had met the dome's challenge in a clever way, there was no doubt about that!

An hour passed. The incessant bombardment had turned the energy screen into a vibrating bell. Had there not been the fabulous noise absorbing ear protectors aboard the *Stardust*, at least Dr. Manoli, the least stable of the team, would have gone insane. This was more than his constitution could bear.

Bell and Rhodan faced the situation with a grim smile. They knew that unless help from the outside intervened, they were faced with an imminent crisis.

Rhodan was convinced that the final breakdown of the protective screen was inevitable within a short time. He stood motionless in front of the barrel shaped reactor and observed the nervewracking light phenomena. He could not perceive the increasingly noisier workings of the machine, since they were drowned out by the infernal uproar created by the impact of the exploding missiles.

The pitiful fluorescent tubes of the tent had been shattered long since. The hard desert ground seemed to absorb the vibrations and transmit them immediately in earthquake strength shockwaves. As far as this effect of the intense barrage was concerned, there was not much protection afforded to the *Stardust's* crew by the surrounding radiant dome.

In order to have at least some light within the tent they had fastened a few battery lamps to the highly elastic bracing supports. Especially the sick bay had been provided with excellent lighting. Khrest, the alien being from the far depths of the galaxy, seemed to be approaching a crisis.

At the beginning of the heavy shelling Dr. Haggard had been startled out of his drugged sleep. Until then Dr. Manoli had watched over the patient.

Khrest's incredible circulatory system had apparently successfully overcome the strain of the second injection. Lab tests proved clearly that all symptoms of leukaemia had disappeared. The haematology

report was negative. Yet the stranger remained unconscious.

Cautiously Rhodan retreated from the reactor as if he feared that any moment might bring a holocaust from the suddenly bursting apparatus, whose workings mystified him.

Reginald Bell sat in front of the videoscreen of the *Stardust's* radar equipment. They had removed it from the moon rocket and taken care to install it to withstand vibrations as much as possible.

This radar equipment was of a highly specialized nature, particularly well constructed to function despite the greatest acceleration and the mightiest jolts. The crash landing on the moon had failed to knock it out of commission, and the present heavy barrage did not seem to affect it.

On the radar screen could be seen with high magnification the positions of the enemy.

The infrared position finder showed excellent three-dimensional pictures of the gun embankments on the other side of the river. The automatic warning system functioned perfectly; still the attached robot brain could not manage to calculate the fluctuating position of the enemy.

No human being was visible within the six mile zone around the energy screen; no sign of life, no activity whatsoever that could have been pinpointed by the position finder or attacked with the help of the Arkonide arms.

Perry Rhodan, still wearing the uniform of the space force, hesitantly stepped closer. Once again his eyes fastened on the shining fluorescent screen. Bell's broad face was half-hidden under the enormous protective earpads. Only his eyes, clear as water, peeped out from close to the edge of the thick bulge. The throat mike around his neck had once again become the exclusive means of communication for the friends.

Rhodan established the contact with imperceptibly trembling hands. Right away he could hear the fast breathing of Bell.

"Only a few more hours and the reactor will be finished," he said quietly. "Are you aware of that?"

Bell turned his head. "And ... ?"

Rhodan's lips formed a thin line. With a significant glance he looked at his watch. "We shouldn't expect miracles even from the products of a far superior technology. Clear thinking people with coolly reasoning brains can figure out that any mechanism might eventually fail." He laughed briefly in resignation, "that's exactly what is going to happen here. Unless there is still something else!"

Bell searched along the western perimeter of the encircling enemy positions. The delicate infrared radar equipment let them see even the glowing cigarettes of the Asiatic soldiers. On the screen a three-dimensional ring of widely dispersed flickering dots became visible. It was strange.

Bell did not fail to register Rhodan's short laugh correctly. Bell's pale face lost even more of its colour, while his eyes were questioning.

"Unless there is still something else," repeated the commander, lost in thoughts. "They'll keep up this bombardment for hours. They are hoping for a collapse of our energy screen, but they are certain that our nerves won't hold out much longer. The only person who could understand the functioning of the reactor and who could regulate it again is Khrest. But he is deeply unconscious. This state might continue

without endangering his health, but it certainly endangers all our lives! It will probably cost our lives! In case the reactor quits, whether it dies down quietly or explodes violently, we are lost. We are close to capitulating, do you understand?"

Bell kept staring at his radar screen. A new shockwave from the desert ground made the hanging lamps sway wildly. The shadows on the walls of the tent assumed horrifying distorted shapes. Beyond the partition both physicians seemed to jerk violently under the impact.

Bell looked up briefly from his screen and glanced toward the Sickbay. Khrest's shadow was etched sharply on the dividing wall. Still motionless, he was resting on his couch. Several of the medical robot instruments of the Arkonides had been rendered unserviceable. They had obviously not been designed for extreme conditions. Now the physicians were forced to carry out the intermittent examinations of blood pressure, heartbeat and respiration personally. This was a demanding job, made especially difficult while dealing with an unknown organism.

"Yes, I do understand," Bell answered. "Khrest must wake up. I see no other way out." He grinned with a sly grimace. "Or call Thora. Your latest appeal to reason had no effect on her, though! Maybe it will finally sink in that things are getting serious here."

"The same thought has occurred to me, too," Rhodan replied slowly. His hand grasped the plug, and a fixed smile played around his lips.

"There is something still the matter, my friend! That fabulous Arkonide sender gave out just a couple of minutes ago. We are cut off. Would you like to try to repair it?"

Reginald Bell froze. The pallor of his face revealed all—he realized that their wonderful experiment was just about to fail miserably. But he caught himself quickly. Without a trace of panic he remarked, "That was to be expected. They unload tens of thousands of tons of explosives on our energy bell. In all likelihood they are also trying to detonate subterranean charges outside our area. They must intend to drive us insane with these artificially induced earthquakes. Okay, the set no longer functions. When will Thora notice it?"

"At her next daily communication. It's due at 8A.M. If we fail to reply to her call, she will act."

Bell swallowed hard and painfully. The lean face of his former commanding officer had changed into a rigid mask.

"What do you mean by that?" inquired Bell hastily.

"What?" Rhodan turned the volume down on his loudspeaker. Bell's strong voice had blasted painfully against his eardrums.

"Despite the fact that we were upgraded by the scientist Khrest to class D of the intelligent galactic life forms, she still refuses to deal with us on an equal basis. In case we don't reply to her routine check, and as soon as her robot direction finders ascertain that our energy bell is under constant bombardment, she might assume that something has happened to all of us, particularly to Khrest. Then she will abandon all restraint and act exclusively as the commander of a space battleship. She had already been very close to teaching a most painful lesson to mankind. Okay, we'll soon know. How about it—do you want to tackle that repair job of the Arkonide sender?"

Rhodan's hand touched the plug of his walkie-talkie. His gray eyes were alight with a cold gleam. Bell

could not help feel that Rhodan was just about to make a decision.

“I’d rather sit down on a red hot stove without the benefit of asbestos trousers.” He squeezed out the words with determination. “What in hell do I understand about that thing! I couldn’t even repair the smallest loose connection. I can’t even open the metal casing. Our cutting tools won’t even make a dent in it. I’ve tried everything I could think of. But this set has neither screws, clamps nor terminals. It looks as if it were cast out of one solid piece. Of course, it must be possible to get inside that mechanism somehow. Only don’t expect me to do it. I just don’t know how.”

“You are absolutely certain of that?”

Rhodan stated with deliberate slowness, “You realize, don’t you, that I shall never expose the human race to the wrath of a woman spaceship commander?”

Bell did not reply. He knew the answer.

“Well, then we are agreed on that.”

“You ought to try to search for some way of informing her,” Bell blurted out, quite alarmed. “If we surrender, then we should at least see to it that Khrest will first be rescued by her.”

“That’s exactly what I plan to do,” declared Rhodan briefly. “If Khrest has not regained consciousness by 8 A.M. I shall get in touch with her via the main U.S. broadcast station at Nevada Fields. Our own sender is too weak to get through to her. If Allan D. Mercant is smart he will cooperate at once. He should realize that neither he nor others can claim Khrest for themselves. Thora can set free the Arkonide scientist Khrest at any moment she chooses. I’d rather not imagine what our fate would be afterward.”

“Please, try it,” whispered Bell with agitation. “For God’s sake, will you try it! There is no telling what she might do otherwise.”

Rhodan switched off. Bell’s desperate voice ceased abruptly.

Shortly after 3 A.M. rhodan cautiously pushed aside the room divider curtains.

He saw Khrest’s lean face, his high domed forehead bathed in perspiration. He was stretched out motionless on his couch.

Dr. Haggard turned around.

Rhodan quickly established contact via his walkie-talkie. “How is our patient, Doctor? Please, be frank with me. We have come to the end. The reactor has begun to change colour in an ominous way. Our radio communication has been interrupted. How is he?”

Haggard obviously belonged to that race of men who do not know the meaning of the word “nervousness.” He did not display the slightest excitement. “Some mysterious side effects could have been predicted,” he declared calmly. “Khrest reacted favourably to the injections. The serum has done its work; his leukaemia has been cured. His circulatory system is absolutely stable, and his heartbeat and pulse rate are normal. His blood count shows no abnormalities of any kind. But I have no idea why he is not coming to.”

“He must regain consciousness, he simply must!” urged Rhodan. “By 8 o’clock he must be sufficiently

awake to give us some vitally needed information. Unless I answer Thora's daily call, we are in for a major catastrophe.

"Why doesn't she come here with one of her auxiliary vessels?" the physician demanded angrily. "It should be child's play for her to help us in this desperate situation. I find her attitude rather incomprehensible. She entrusts to your care this dangerously ill man and permits him to be taken back to Earth with you. Yet she refuses to do the least thing to help his recovery. That is sheer insanity. If she is so anxious for him to get well again, you'd think she would do everything in her power to make sure of it."

"You fail to recognize the mentality of these people, Doctor," countered Rhodan. His face grew dark. "Thora is under the influence of a strong code of honour and racial prejudice. Her conditioning cannot be reversed within a few short weeks. In her opinion we are a very backward race. She neither desires nor is she permitted to take up relations with us. But if she ever does so, it may come in the form of a very painful lesson that might turn into horrible punishment if mankind ever dared to offend her exaggerated self-image as a member of the ruling galactic nation. Please try to understand her attitude from a purely psychological point of view."

"She ought to replace her education and arrogance with some logic," insisted Haggard. "If I found myself in a critical situation I would grasp at any straw."

"This is exactly what she did, when she entrusted Khrest to our care. She has foiled an atomic war and has created a volcano in the Sahara desert. The only reason for these actions was to ensure a safe stay on Earth for Khrest."

"Then she did not intervene out of concern for humanity's survival?"

"Not exclusively. We should not expect any miracles or heroic and benevolent deeds from her. Whatever we receive from the Arkonides in the form of knowledge and material goods will have to be paid for eventually. Thora has already committed acts that conflict with her own convictions. She has placed her confidence in us and done something forbidden by her honour code. Of course, she acted in an emergency. Her spaceship is unable to start. Her degenerate crew is incapable of repairing the damage. They simply neglected to take along any spare parts because of criminal frivolity. This race is at the end of its existence. Khrest, the last outstanding mind, is severely ill. Should he die or be harmed by any human being, Thora will regard our world and its inhabitants as sublevel forms of intelligent life. In her cold rage mostly fostered by her terribly offended self-confidence, she will start thinking about this human species. She will look upon us in the manner of a scientist who contemplates the fate of a beautiful but expendable guinea pig. She will deliberate on our future in a cold, logical, essentially prejudiced manner, which from our point of view appears to be unjust. I will not let it get to that point, Doctor! I have started this enterprise motivated by the desire to unite mankind in order to see it grow strong and happy. I shall not risk humanity's survival by insulting a representative of a superpowerful alien race. Did I make myself clear, Dr. Haggard?"

Rhodan's eyes seemed to consist of broken pieces of ice. Suddenly Haggard became aware of the suggestive power radiating from the icy stare of this tall, lean man.

"What are your plans, Major?"

"Don't call me that. I have been stripped of my rank and dishonourably expelled from the space force. I shall try to save whatever is salvageable. If Khrest is not conscious by 8 o'clock, to help us reestablish radio communication, then I shall surrender. At least I know that lever that switches off the Arkonide

reactor. That's at least something, isn't it!"

He let out a bitter laugh. Haggard looked at him thoughtfully. Rhodan continued with emphasis, "Doctor Haggard, Thora has excellent televisors. If the radio communication will not work, then she will have us at once under visual observation with these superior instruments. If the intense barrage should still continue, she would consider us to be in danger, or perhaps even dead. Then the world would experience the most horrible fate. I shall see to it that the bombardment ceases at 8 o'clock sharp. That is our last chance to forestall any rash acts by this impulsive woman. Only in the greatest of emergencies will she send a rescue craft down to our planet. By setting up this situation, I still risk that she will make some mistake, despite the cease fire.

My plan is a compromise situation. It would be infinitely preferable if you could rouse Khrest before 8 o'clock. Our sender can be only slightly damaged. He will manage to reestablish contact with Thora. Try all that is humanly possible, Doctor. My second alternative is sheer desperation. I am convinced that Chinese will abruptly stop the bombardment after my radio appeal to them. But can we be as sure of Thora's reactions?"

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders. Haggard averted his glance. He could not bear to look into Rhodan's strangely glittering eyes.

"What do you want me to do?" stammered the physician.

"Not much. Since you diagnosed Khrest's circulatory system as unusually stable, just inject some stimulating drugs. You brought them along for such an eventuality, didn't you? Wake him up!"

Haggard hesitated. "I might risk everything this way. Do you realize that?"

"You won't risk any more than you already have. If he could withstand the antileukaemia serum, then his organism will also manage to deal with stimulants. Activate his body. It must be possible to awaken him from this deep leaden sleep."

"I'll give him a shot of the same strength that can be tolerated by the average human being without harm," stated Dr. Haggard resolutely. "But not any stronger, not even a microgram more!"

"That will do fine," consented Rhodan. Suddenly his face became distorted. His hand whipped down to his holster and jerked out his gun while he spun his body with lightning speed.

All ready for action, he stopped dead in his tracks, staring at a can of beans that had hit him hard between his shoulder blades. Up front, hardly visible in the feeble glow of the radar screens, stood Bell, waving and shouting excitedly.

Rhodan vaulted over Khrest's couch. A few wide jumps brought him close to Bell. The plugs slid into place as if by themselves. The wild roar of the engine became painfully audible in Rhodan's earphones.

"You seem to have protective padding on your back, too!" shouted the heavyset man. "That was the third can, my friend." His index finger stabbed wildly towards the radar screen. "Three small bodies, close to the ground, at a speed of eighteen to twenty miles per hour. Probably three people. Now they're clearly visible. I am going out of my mind. There are really three men with rotor flying engines!"

There was no doubt any longer. These were three persons, flying just above ground level, tiny rotor blades attached to their backs. They flew in precise formation straight toward the protective energy



screen.

Reg started up again, "Looks as if they want to run head on into the energy wall. Odd, isn't it?" His excitement had given way to utter amazement.

Rhodan had walked over to the Arkonide reactor. Pushing a small lever sufficed, as Khrest had explained some weeks ago, to change the structure of the energy screen, so as to render it permeable for ultrashort radio waves. It had previously permitted passage of Rhodan's own broadcasts, which presented an insolvable mystery for the trained mind of a human engineer. He could not explain it, though he had witnessed it with his own eyes.

Rhodan jumped back to the instruments. The big receiver of the *Stardust* was working now. A red bulb began to glow. The acoustical whistling signal was inaudible. The roaring detonations drowned out everything pitilessly.

They switched their portable F speakers over to the powerful receiver. A soft whisper came over the earphones: "Captain Albrecht Klein calling Major Perry Rhodan. Don't shoot! I am coming with two colleagues. You have met me before as Lieutenant Klein, from International Defence. I am broadcasting with minimal strength. Please come to the border of your enclosure. I must talk to you. We are waiting. Don't shoot. No danger."

Rhodan adjusted his instrument so that only Bell remained in contact with him. Without waiting for Rhodan's comment, Bell stated blandly, "Klein? Must have been promoted. Isn't that the guy that you let through the screen so carelessly? He saw Khrest then, didn't he? I don't like him."

"But I do. I'll take one of the trucks. You watch from here. When you hear from me the password 'Armageddon,' open the screen for exactly three seconds right in front of where I am standing, for just about an area of six by nine feet. I have already prepared for the structural change."

"You're crazy! If they use that moment to chase a remote controlled rocket right through the gap, that would mean curtains for all of us. Klein might carry such a gadget hidden on his body. I know these tricks, my dear friend. After all, I remember my days with the intelligence service. I will not open."

His gaze was clear, his eyes hard. But after having looked at Rhodan's masklike face for a few moments, he lowered his head. "Okay. Password 'Armageddon,' I'll wait for your signal."

Rhodan left, his heavy machine pistol, with the most dangerous microrak missiles, swinging over his shoulder. But far more dangerous was the silvery rod in his hand. The Arkonide psychoradiator was surprisingly effective at short range.

Rhodan was not willing to run any risks.

While outside, the gas turbine of the Chinese truck began running, Captain Reginald Bell stood still rooted to the ground, staring at the spot where Rhodan had just been. He still could feel the bright flicker in his commander's steely eyes.

Bell had been absolutely convinced he would foil Rhodan's project. Then he had nodded in agreement, without hesitation. He turned to his instrument panel. He was still pale and shaking. He firmly closed his eyelids, as if to shut out some picture.

The imaginary vision remained. Rhodan's burning glance seemed to have etched itself on his retina.

Abruptly he opened his eyes.

Reginald Bell was a man with a strong character who could be a daredevil with well defined ambitions. He was a special pilot not giving to feelings of anxiety. But now he was experiencing fear.

He muttered a curse, then started to observe Rhodan, who was racing over the stone strewn desert landscape. Only a few sparse plants could grow there, since the area was too remote from the river with its life giving water.

Rhodan drove straight toward the point where the three bodies had touched ground. Bell kept him on course with several short corrections via walkie-talkie. He did so with a monotonous voice while his emotions were raging inside. How was it possible for Rhodan to have caused him to change his mind so quickly? How ... ?

He was still pondering that question, when Rhodan suddenly stopped his car. He was close to the energy wall, and the time was 3:22A.M.

The psychoradiator jerked upward in Rhodan's firm hand. Far over to the other's side there were the blinding fireworks of innumerable explosions, almost as bright as day. Only the three bodies in their dark overalls were discernible. They cowered close to the ground.

Rhodan's hand jerked upward. This signalled, "Get up," to the men on the other side of the energy wall.

## CHAPTER FIVE

"ARMAGEDDON!" Bell received Rhodan's command over their two way radio and quickly carried out the manipulations to alter the structure of the energy wall according to Rhodan's instructions. Three bodies started to move with lightning speed.

Captain Albrecht Klein had never before run so fast. A few giant leaps brought him through the gap within the weakly glowing energy dome.

Against the background of the fiery thunderstorm of the incessant missile barrage Rhodan's tall figure had appeared so incredibly threatening, enigmatic and radiating an almost mystical influence, that Peter Kosnow instinctively grasped his hand weapon.

The silvery rod's bright glimmer had instantaneously rendered Kosnow incapable of action. He could still hear ringing in his ears the command that he had to obey unconditionally, even against his will.

"Stay where you are; don't move, don't act."

That had been all. Perry Rhodan had changed considerably. He was not the same man as a few short weeks ago when he had landed on Earth. Deep lines of worry and pain furrowed his face. His twitching lips indicated clearly that he seemed to have come to the end of the rope. His nervous resistance was giving out.

Klein looked around, stunned by the inferno of noise and vibration. He could never have imagined what the effect of the furious torrent of gunfire would be.

The Chinese defence officer, Li Tschai-tung, too, had been robbed of his willpower. The Arkonide psychoradiator had lost none of its effectiveness.

Albrecht Klein alone remained unaffected. He was in full possession of his conscious will and reasoning faculties. Instead he saw himself confronted by the threatening barrel of an automatic weapon, one of the new type Rak guns.

Cautiously Klein had raised his arms above his head, an unreal gesture inside the raging hell around him. Seconds later he realized that any discussion he had planned to have with Rhodan would have to wait until later. It was out of the question even to hear oneself think under these circumstances.

Klein then drove the car. Once inside the tent, he received from Rhodan a helmet connected to the intercommunication system. Then he could begin giving out some news.

Outside the energy dome the missiles kept up the steady rain of fire. Inside Lieutenant General Li Tai-tiang's commando bunker, many eyes attempted in vain to follow the events in the radiant dome.

Three high ranking secret service officers were calculating the odds that their agents would successfully complete their mission. If they managed to spray the contents of even one of the pressurized bottles, the downfall of the Third Power would be guaranteed.

Within the tent Captain Klein absorbed everything attentively. He missed neither the dangerously glowing reactor nor the fleeting shadows of the two physicians scurrying behind the dividing curtain.

Then he became aware of Rhodan's gaze on him, which he returned uneasily. He swallowed hard and audibly before he managed to say, "Many thanks, sir. Before we go any further, will you be so kind and examine the contents of the inside pockets of our overalls. You will find there on every one of us a steel bottle the size of a hand and as thick as a salami. We have been officially ordered to release their liquid contents once we get inside your compound."

Bell whirled around, his broad face contorted, his index finger playing with his Rak gun's trigger.

Rhodan remained in his rigid posture. Only his eyes had changed. They seemed to dissect Klein.

"Inside our breast pockets," urged Klein. "Won't you check, please? We have no time to lose. If our chiefs should have the slightest inkling we are standing here so peacefully in front of you, we need not even bother to return."

Rhodan remained silent, but Bell began to act. Neither Kosnow nor Li put up any resistance as the dangerous containers changed hands. Klein stared quietly at the small cylinders. He was startled by Rhodan's deep voice.

"Okay, Klein. That was that. What is inside these bottles?"

“A radio bacteriological weapon that would have finished all of you off within a few hours. This was my idea.”

Klein was amazed at Rhodan’s continued calm. Perry was now lowering his automatic gun.

“Your idea?” Bell asked coldly. “And now you want to play the big hero! What are you really up to? By the way, Klein, I would not have admitted you to our dome.”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” interjected Rhodan dryly. “Captain, did you develop this plan with the bacteriological warfare because this would enable you to get in touch with me without suspicion? I might possibly have hatched out a similar strategy myself, in your position.”

Klein’s respect grew tremendously. The strangeness of the situation seemed to become even more unreal, as he took in the alien instruments and gadgets inside the tent. Klein was glad that Kosnow’s rather impulsive mind had temporarily been put out of action.

“You guessed right, sir. We even received orders to come up with some fictitious data to make you believe in some nonexistent resistance group. But more about that later. In any case you must realize with absolute certainty that it would have been child’s play for me to release some of the bottle’s contents. Nobody could have heard the material escape during the noise of the bombardment. What do you think of that?”

Rhodan’s masklike face relaxed. From beneath the thick rimmed helmet a furrowed brow became partially visible. Slowly came the rejoinder, “Klein, if you had made one careless movement, you’d no longer be alive. I have a portable radioscope detector, which revealed at once the bottles under your overalls. You can rest assured that you would never have managed even to reach the opening valve with your little finger. Do you get me?”

Klein grinned in embarrassment. “Good,” he snorted. “You knew about it all along. But I did not. Will you believe me that we did not intend for a single moment to blow that infernal stuff into your dome? I came here only to discuss things with you undisturbed.”

“It is after 4A.M. now. When you return they will ask you what you were doing here such a long time. Is that logical?”

“Absolutely. I can invent some plausible excuse. About the fictitious underground movement that supposedly wants to give you support in reaching your goals.”

“And what do you really want?” asked Rhodan slowly. His eyes were burning.

Klein felt his calmness return. He could appreciate the human greatness of this man who was standing practically singlehanded against the massed forces of the world. “I am impressed by the integrity of your goals,” he declared shortly. “We have already discussed this point once before. I see no justification for wanting to remove you as the Third Power. The outbreak, of the atomic war, which you foiled just in the nick of time, convinced me 100 percent of your honesty. You effected the unity of mankind. You made a dream come true that so far had seemed unattainable. I personally have always been convinced that only a threat coming from outside our planet would bring about an amalgamation of all nations. Ideological differences among the world’s governments have become unimportant now. You are instead the focal point of the threat. Even religious differences have been removed overnight. People have started to think rationally, but they will stop doing so the moment you cease to exist. Can you believe me that I have

experienced so much more as an officer of the IIA than an ordinary human being? Working for the secret service was a dirty job. We—that means Kosnow, Li and I—have arrived at the conclusion that you must continue to survive as the Third Power. These are our motivations in a nutshell.”

Rhodan did not stop to think for long. Klein’s intentions appeared to be quite clear; yet he overlooked one significant fact: The end of the Third Power he admired and found desirable was rapidly approaching.

Rhodan looked worriedly toward the sickbay. In a few short hours his daily report to Thora was due—and Khrest was still in his inexplicable cataleptic state.

“You must do something,” urged Klein. “I have learned from a reliable source that three spaceships blasted off from Earth several hours ago. I don’t know the exact time and place, but I do know their destination. These rocket ships were launched to the moon in order to attack your lunar base with a new kind of ‘cold’ atom bomb. You simply must do something.”

Reginald Bell’s fists were closed tightly around the narrow back of his chair. Rhodan’s mouth was twisted in a wry smile, his eyes full of doubt. “Three moonrockets?” Rhodan’s voice sounded sceptical. “Do you realize what you are saying? No atomic engine is able to start now on Earth—you can take my word for it.”

“That’s right, not from Earth. But beyond the outer limit of the antineutron belt. Secret experiments and measurements in the upper atmosphere were conducted, which show that the Arkonides’ strange antineutron field extends only to a height of about seventy miles.”

With a deep groan Klein sat down on a stool. His knees were trembling. “So you had no idea about that planned lunar attack? The Western Bloc, the East and the Asiatic Federation have each launched one spaceship. The first and second stages are powered with chemical fuel. As soon as they reached an altitude of seventy miles the nuclear chemical aggregates began to take over. You made a serious mistake, Major Rhodan! This is why I have come here. Forget all the questioning to find out the why and wherefore of my actions. The only thing that matters now is to safeguard the existence of your moon base!”

Bell moistened his lips. His face had turned ashen. Even Rhodan grasped the back of a chair in front of him, as if searching for some kind of support.

“Tell us everything, please,” he urged roughly. “What has happened? But report everything in detail, will you!”

Indeed, Klein did not spare them any of the details. He started with the conference in Greenland, then proceeded to a description of the Catalyst H bomb and its workings, which were easily comprehended by Rhodan.

Thus had come about the very thing he had always feared.

Klein finished his report by relating the tremendous job that had been accomplished by the mightiest electronic brain on Earth. As he fell silent, they became aware again of the dull pounding of the nonstop barrage. The Arkonide reactor was shining brightly in a light blue hue. It looked frightening. Rhodan racked his brain in desperation, trying to picture what malfunctions might be taking place inside the machine. Only Khrest Could supply the answer, provided it was not too late for even that. What good would it do to know the why and how if the point of no return had already been reached! Rhodan was

convinced of the imminent breakdown of the reactor.

Before Rhodan began to reply to Klein's account, he directed the psychoradiator toward the two other visitors. Kosnow and Li awoke instantly. A few brief explanations sufficed to bring them up to date.

"Abstain from any questions and complaints," they heard him say in their helmets' loudspeaker system. "Captain Klein has supplied me with all the necessary information. Okay, let's be quick about it."

He pointed toward the reactor. "Look at this! This bluish glow is not normal. I'm afraid that we have reached the end of our tether."

Klein shook his head in protest. His eyes, full of disbelief, were firmly fixed on the tall man near him. Rhodan continued with a bitter smile, "The Arkonides' transmitter is out of order, quite likely because of the strong ground tremors. Thus it has become impossible for us to reestablish the disrupted radio communication with the moon. Unless Khrest is awake by 8 tomorrow morning, I'll be forced to ask for an armistice. You can't begin to imagine what horrible fate lies in store for mankind if any evil should befall our sick visitor. Please hold back all your questions. Things are too complicated to be explained thoroughly in a few moments."

"But what about the three nuclear bombers of the power blocs!" groaned Kosnow. "Can they still be rendered harmless? And what will happen to their crews if your people on the moon base should answer this threat to their survival by a counterattack?"

"Let's hope that things will be handled as humanely as possible," declared Rhodan. "The woman commander of the moon base, though, is the one who will have to decide how to deal with the potential aggressors from earth."

"And if they should drop their bombs?" inquired Li Tschai-tung excitedly. "What chances will your garrison on the moon base have? Will they be able to defend themselves properly?"

Rhodan tried hard not to give any indication of the storm raging in him. He had an overwhelming desire to be left alone as soon as possible. These three men must not find too much about the situation. He particularly wanted to spare them the devastating effect that truth would now have on their belief in their own mission.

"Your assumption is right, that a cold nuclear fusion can not be stopped by an antineutron field. But they certainly have other means on the moon to render ineffective these three rockets with their deadly cargo. Don't worry about that. But before you leave, Klein, I have a request to make."

Captain Klein stood up. His face seemed gray and worn. He was aware that something was amiss. Bell could not hide his excitement.

Rhodan glanced at his watch. "Will you listen for my radio call at 8 A.M. sharp? I'll try to do my best to repair the sender by then. If I don't succeed, I see no alternative but to give up in order to prevent a catastrophe. If it is within your power, try to arrange for a cease fire. Send negotiators for a truce, gain time. But most urgently, see to it that this constant bombardment is stopped at once. Do you think you can manage that?"

Rhodan's eyes seemed to burn in their sockets. The Chinese interjected in too casual a manner, "Sir, you don't know my people! Before General Tai-tiang will stop the shooting you will have to remove the

energy barrier around your encampment. If you simply request a truce, he will not go along with you. His suspicions will be aroused, and he will assume that this is nothing but a manoeuvre to win time to carry out some necessary repairs. There are some excellent psychologists in our command bunkers. Don't underestimate them. We can proceed only step by step, as you surely must know."

Klein nodded in agreement.

Rhodan lowered his head. "Okay, then wait for my radio call. If it doesn't arrive by 8 at your base, that will mean that we could manage things successfully. But if I should call you, will you then act as quickly as possible?"

"This reactor will keep on working for months on end," stammered Klein with hopeful zest. "Why do you want to throw in the towel so fast? This barrage is bound to cease sometime soon. They are already experiencing a lot of difficulties with fresh supplies from the rear. Six thousand guns need an incredible amount of ammunition. Try to hold out another day!"

"You don't fully understand what is going on here," Rhodan informed him. "If it were up to us, we would simply carry on until the machine failed. But there is another potential danger that I must avoid at all costs. If the commander of the moon base calls for the daily report without getting a reply from us, and if in addition to that she notices we are under constant fire, she will lose her temper. Then God have mercy on us down here on Earth! Do you understand now why I can't risk this?"

They understood. Rhodan accompanied the three men back to the protective screen perimeter. Before taking leave and having the protective earpad helmets returned to him, Rhodan said warmly, "Thank you, Klein. You meant well. I'm sorry to have to disappoint you in your high expectations. But some miracle might still happen. In that case, please act instantly and call Nevada Fields for an immediate cease fire. Have General Pounder affirm this by a broadcast. But to be on the safe side, will you also inform Allan D. Mercant that no finger must be laid on the alien Khrest. Otherwise, the debacle will be unavoidable. He must not be detained by anyone, do you understand?"

The circuits of the screen's structure were switched, and within an interval of three seconds the men had left the energy dome. As soon as they had reached the outside, Rhodan raced back to the tent.

"Those guys will get into trouble," he was informed by Reginald Bell. "They forgot their cylinders with the bacterial cultures."

We have taken that into consideration. They will declare that they have discharged their poisonous cargo into our atmosphere within the dome. If we stay healthy despite that, they will be free of blame. After all, we might have means to fend off such bacteriological warfare. The Third Power is capable of everything. Let them believe that!"

The sarcastic grin with which Rhodan concluded his words caused Reginald Bell to break out in loud curses. He looked up at his commander in anguish.

Come along now," Perry said.

Once Rhodan and Bell had arrived inside the temporary sickbay, both medics were tuned in to their intercom system. Dr. Manoli and Dr. Haggard looked exhausted. Both had reached the limit of nervous endurance.

"It is 4:55 now," stated Rhodan. He glanced slowly around the room. Khrest was resting motionless

on his cot.

“Klein did not know exactly when the three moon rockets started. But it is safe to assume that there will be atomic fireworks on the moon today and without the slightest risk for the people down here on Earth. The moon is too far away for that.

“What is your opinion about the whole deal? You seem to have some idea,” Reginald Bell’s hands were tense as they grasped Rhodan’s arms. “Spill it! What’s going to happen?”

“Thora will ignore the threat from the three moon rockets in her morbid arrogance. She will assume she is able to counteract any nuclear reaction with the help of a normal protective screen and the antineutron field. Even if I could restore communication with her immediately and warn her, she would choose to disregard it. That means that the destruction of the space sphere is only a matter of time now.”

You are imagining the impossible,” stammered Bell. “That’s out of the question! That giant ship is indestructible.”

“Only under the proper circumstances is it invulnerable. If they had a terrestrial crew on board instead of their apathetic Arkonides, I would not be worried at all. But they will neglect to take the most elementary precautions. I am very pessimistic. A catalyst H bomb will develop an energy output of 10 megatons of TNT. I would not care to be at the center of the ball of gas resulting from such a nuclear reaction. A terrible sun will rise over the space sphere unless something is done by its crew in time. Dr. Haggard ... !”

The physician responded with a startled movement. Then he slowly lifted his head. His eyes locked with Rhodan’s steely, dominating glance. The doctor’s posture stiffened as if in anticipated protest.

“Dr. Haggard, will you now try to rouse Khrest from his strange sleep? Eric, you will assist your colleague. It is senseless to wait any longer. You must risk everything now.”

Haggard felt like resisting, but the longer he gazed into those burning eyes the weaker grew his will to resist.

“As you wish, Major!” he replied in a monotonous voice.

Rhodan turned away. It was 5 o’clock sharp. Outside the shooting continued with undiminished intensity.

Far beyond the protective energy bell the three men were welcomed back by officers of the defence.

Captain Klein made his report. “... and we arrived at the conclusion that Rhodan seemed to believe in our explanations. The three pressurized containers remained behind inside the cordoned-off area. Kosnow and I managed to open the valves, but Li had no chance to do so. We assume though that two charges should be enough to achieve the desired effect.”

A helicopter transported the men to the disinfection center. This caused intense agony for Klein. What would happen if the physicians should think it necessary to keep them in quarantine for some time! ...

At about the same time the commanding officer aboard the Western Bloc’s moon rocket sent a last



message back to Earth. His rocket had been racing through the black night sky for the last fifteen hours as the spearhead of a small armada, sent by the three blocs to attack the threatening moon base. four men manned each of the three giant rockets that carried their death dealing cargoes of the catalyst H bombs.

## CHAPTER SIX

THEY SAT in silent apathy on their provisional seating arrangements in the big tent. They gave the appearance, at least, that the incessant bombardment outside no longer mattered.

The sun had risen two hours earlier. The brilliant sunlight had extinguished the will-o'-the-wisps of the innumerable explosions that had irritated their eyes in the dark of the night. Still the roaring thunder remained. The energy dome was swaying in a strange rhythm that could lead any moment to a final collapse of the protective Structure.

Since 5 A.M. the two physicians had endeavoured to awaken the alien patient from his morbid slumber. Partial successes had been accomplished, when Khrest began to breathe faster and slight twitchings were observed on his eyelids. But soon these weak symptoms of hope had been dissipated.

Finally, toward 7 o'clock, Dr. Frank Haggard had resorted to the most efficacious modern psychostimulator. This drug directly affected the waking center in man's brain. In addition, it caused a very strong increase of circulatory reactions and nervous reflexes. Psycho-Stimulin was the last means that the desperate medics had at their disposal.

Mankind had united surprisingly fast in face of the common threat from outside their home planet. They knew, though that the world's safety would not be endangered by the bomb carrying moon rockets. In case of a launching failure none of the catalyst H bombs would ever have been able to explode.

But there had been no accidents. All three spaceships had roared off into their element, after the *Stardust II* had proved that it was possible to pass through the antineutron zone.

*Freedom I*, the manned space station of the West, had taken over the remote control steering of both the Western Bloc's rocket and that of the Asiatic Federation. The Eastern Bloc ship was directed by the excellently equipped satellite of the Eastern powers.

Twelve men, astronaut soldiers of the three mighty power blocs of the world, had received their orders on how to carry out their mission. Now First Lieutenant Freyt from the leading *Stardust II* reported, "Started braking acceleration. Engines working satisfactory. All well aboard ship. Keep your fingers crossed."

Three bombardiers were calculating when they would release their bombs. "In approximately three hours," estimated Captain Nyssen aloud on board the *Stardust II*. Then he was hit by the powerful grip

of the G forces.

Khrest reacted to the drug like a man to a cup of coffee. Thus Haggard had decided to give him a second injection, five minutes after the first, but this time intravenously.

It was 7:48. Perry Rhodan glanced once again at the patient before he reached slowly for the portable radio transmitter. At this very moment the Arkonide sat bolt upright, as if an inner power had shot a sudden surge of energy through his body.

Rhodan stopped in midmotion. A man's groan became audible in the earphones. It was Dr. Haggard, who had followed his patient's incredible reaction in speechless confusion. Never before had Khrest's constitution manifested so clearly that the patient had not been born on this planet.

What Dr. Manoli had predicted now came true. Either Khrest would sink into an everdeepening slumber from which he would never awake or he would wake up in a reflex action to an instant state of full awareness and clear thinking.

Khrest was now fully awake—there was no doubt about it. His first action was a painful grimace. His narrow, emaciated hand then moved to his temples.

Rhodan grasped the meaning of this gesture before any of his friends. With a quick movement he pulled the sound-proof helmet, with its built in communication system, over the alien's head. The instrument had already been switched on.

"Khrest, can you hear me? Do you understand me?" Rhodan's voice was so shrill that Bell could hardly recognise it as his friend's. It was shrieking and gave evidence of a tremendous nervous tension.

Rhodan, however, knew that he did not have any time to spare for long winded explanations. If Khrest had regained full awareness, they must begin to act at once.

"I... I am listening," Khrest's voice came feebly over the Speakers. "This noise... what is—!"

"Later," Rhodan interrupted. "You'll get all necessary explanations. We have finally managed to rouse you from your deep, extended sleep. You are cured, Khrest! You are no longer suffering from leukaemia. But now we are forced to act immediately. We have been under heavy bombardment for many hours. The reactor is glowing in a light blue hue. I am afraid of an imminent failure. In addition to that, the transmitter is no longer functioning because of the tremendous, prolonged ground tremors. We ..."

No One could have foreseen the effect of these words on Khrest. What under similar circumstances would have been most harmful disclosures for any human being were nothing but the best therapy for the biologically divergent organism of the alien.

Khrest sat up abruptly. Suddenly his dim eyes grew alert and bright; but his face became painfully contorted. He had completely grasped the situation just a few seconds after awaking from a deathlike trance.

The two medics were horrified. Manoli, who had been prepared to assist in any arising emergency, soon realized that his fears had been unfounded. Totally exhausted, he laid down his hypodermic syringe,

which he had held ready for a booster shot, all the while shaking his head in utter disbelief. Haggard, on the other hand, observed silently and with the utmost concentration.

Switch off the reactor at once!” commanded Khrest, loud and strong. ”Danger of overheating. Turn it off!”

Rhodan regained his composure. He could react calmly and instantaneously, even under stress. He understood the fear expressed in the alien’s eyes.

“That would mean the end for us, Khrest,” he declared briefly. “It is 7:55. Thora will call us in five minutes. The reactor will hold out till then. If Thora intervenes right away, everything will be all right. All we need to do now is repair the transmitter. Can you do this?”

“In five minutes,” stammered the alien. He was looking around for the instrument, which was next to his cot. “What is the matter with it? It can’t possibly fail. Have you switched on ‘automatic repair’?”

Rhodan’s face changed colour. Reginald Bell muttered a strong comment. Khrest’s breathing became laboured. His heart seemed to be under increasing stress, and he was gasping for air.

“What about that switch for ‘automatic repair’?” Rhodan groaned, his hands closed into tight fists. “I don’t know anything about it. Which switch?”

“The robot microautomatic,” returned Khrest. “It automatically repairs any damage occurring at the connections. Storage batteries or any other part of the set are indestructible, provided that the vacuum inside the instrument remains intact.”

Rhodan moved quickly over to the cube shaped apparatus. It had no visible connection to any source of current. Only the antenna, with its fluorescent terminal knob, indicated that this was a transmitter.

The oval shaped, concave screen remained empty. While Bell stared at the stranger full of tortured feelings of self-recrimination, Rhodan pushed the instrument closer to the alien’s reach. He did not waste any unnecessary comments.

“Proceed with the switchover, quickly!” he urged Bell. “We had no idea that this has an automatic repair system. We have three minutes left.”

The alien scientist reacted immediately. He had again comprehended the situation. He did not need any explanations. The switchover to automatic repair was simplicity itself. Rhodan closed his eyes to hide his amazement. A green light symbol appeared on the screen.

“Repair is proceeding,” panted Khrest. “We must wait now. Show me the reactor. It must be turned off.”

Bell moved the dividing curtain aside. Khrest’s reddish eyes widened in horror at the spectacle that presented itself.

Approximately half an hour of your time, but not more than that!” he stated. ”The instrument has been working with an overload for several hours, which necessitated an increased nuclear reaction output. The thermal transformers are operating at maximum values. How was this possible?”

Rhodan began to give brief explanations. Khrest’s comments were more complicated. Rhodan

grasped the gist of his explanation, but that was all. Rarely had he felt as helpless as at this moment.

The green light subsided at 7:59. Rhodan turned on the set with trembling hands. Flickering light patterns raced across the screen. Static noises became audible. Then suddenly sound and picture came on with such clarity that Dr. Haggard was reminded of the similar spontaneous awakening of the Arkonide scientist. The robot automatic had worked perfectly. probably the damage was nothing but a loose connection because of the constant ground tremors.

Khrest and Rhodan were standing in front of the scintillating screen. The set was a miracle of a superior technology.

Commander Perry Rhodan had thought of every eventuality except for what took place shortly thereafter. The brief report he intended to give became superfluous, since the shrill voice of the highly excited woman made any rational comment impossible.

Thora, the woman commander of the gigantic spaceship on the moon, was beside herself, her beautiful face glowing with fury.

“... ask you what has happened,” came hissing like a whip from the invisible loudspeaker system.

Rhodan comprehended with lightning speed that she must have been talking for quite some time already. This meant that she must have been trying to establish communication before the repair of the sender had been completed.

“Listen to me, Thora! For heaven’s sake will you just listen to me!” he yelled in reply, trying to shout her. “The reactor has turned blue. The field is going to collapse unless you immediately—!”

“Where is Khrest?” she interrupted, still screaming at the top of her lungs. “I have been overgenerous with you. I have come to the end of my patience. Don’t bother to explain, Major Rhodan! If anything untoward should happen to Khrest I’ll abandon you ruthlessly and attack you with all means at my disposal. I’ll simply annihilate you!”

Rhodan stepped aside. He could hardly control his emotions. Bell’s face seemed frozen in an icy grin. Both friends listened to the conversation that ensued between the two Arkonides. Although they could not understand anything, they were still able to see that Thora’s excitement subsided.

Thora calmed down, but before Rhodan managed to speak to her again she cut the communication. Rhodan pressed down on the red switch but in vain.

He turned around, his face flushed with anger. “Your people react in a most peculiar fashion!” he remarked bitingly. His hands were jerking convulsively. “May I ask what further actions the scion of the Almighty Dynasty of the Arkonides is contemplating?”

Khrest smiled faintly. He was resting quietly on his couch. “She has already left the moon base in one of our biggest auxiliary vessels,” came the startling reply. “She called us a few minutes before the agreed upon time, after the robot instruments had registered the heavy bombardment. She is deeply worried. Major Rhodan, you should try to understand our position. Unless she intervenes at once with the superstrength machines of the auxiliary vessel, we are all lost. Therefore, it would be to your own advantage to refrain from provoking punitive measures against mankind, which you represent. Avoid at all costs that I should fall into the hands of any terrestrial power group. That was the condition under which she agreed to come to your aid. Thora will arrive here in ten minutes.”

*“In ten minutes!”* was Rhodan’s amazed rejoinder. “In ten minutes from the moon to Earth, including the difficult landing manoeuvre?”

Khrest was breathing normally again. The two medics were administering various drugs and checking all vital signs constantly.

“Incredible,” muttered Dr. Haggard. “He is over the hump. If I only could have foreseen such a fantastic response, I would have injected the Psycho-Stimulin much sooner. How do you feel, Khrest?”

“That’s a very important question. But it will have to wait. Mine is more urgent right now!” interjected Rhodan with icy tones. Khrest seemed to be slightly startled. He focused his attention on the tall man and kept him under a continued critical scrutiny.

“Have you explained to Thora that three new type nuclear bomber spaceships are on their way to the moon? Of course not! You did not give me a chance to inform you about the impending danger to your base on the moon. And this wild woman up there preferred to interrupt the connection before I could even warn you. Perhaps you can’t even consider the possibility that humans could think of some way to get around the antineutron field, which anyhow is limited in its effectiveness. Unless Thora acts at once, your beautiful space sphere will be atomized in the center of a white hot ball formed by three heavy H bombs. And don’t say these reactions cannot take place! They certainly will! My fellow scientists in the Western Bloc have developed a process of cold fusion on the catalytic basis of mesons. These three bombs won’t give a damn about Thora’s antineutron field. Khrest, I have never been more serious than now! Get in touch with Thora immediately and make sure that she proceeds with the necessary countermeasures without delay.”

Khrest had turned ashen. “Cold fusion?” he echoed faintly. “We will locate the three Earth ships in time and render their deadly cargo harmless. Our cruiser’s robot automatic brain will carry out all defensive measures even without Thora’s assistance.”

“Of course, Khrest!” Rhodan’s compliment had a trace of sarcasm in it. “The question is, though, whether the robot brain has been properly programmed. Your cruiser’s positronic brain has been instructed to deal with primitive creatures, isn’t that so? Therefore, it is forced to ignore any defensive measures because of its purely mechanical logic, which would not have been the case if the positronic memory bank had been correctly programmed. The brain is bound to underestimate the danger, since it is unable to think on an individual basis. Not a single one of its calculations will take into account catalytic superbombs with a yield of 300 million tons of TNT. The robot brain *must* act wrong! It has been adjusted to the values of our first lunar landing expedition and will accordingly disrupt the remote steering control signals, erect a normal antineutron field and in addition to that perhaps construct a protective energy screen. But you can’t expect anything more from the automatic brain, since its built in mechanical logic will not allow it to undertake any steps beyond the bare exigencies. Why shoot sparrows with a big cannon if a buckshot gun will do just as well! Do you get the analogy? Khrest, do call Thora this instant! She absolutely must turn back. The three spaceships might drop their bombs any moment now. You can’t afford to wait any longer! Please, get in touch with her and don’t delay!”

The Arkonide was lying motionless on his cot. Only his eyes seemed to be alive. Something began to stir in them—disbelief. This was more than even this most tolerant representative of an incredibly superior technology could comprehend. How could the weapons of a race that had reached only intelligence level D be so effective?

“Wait a minute, please,” he whispered. “I am still feeling quite weak. Besides, I cannot reach Thora

just now. Our transmitter here can establish communication only with our research cruiser on the lunar base.”

“Then won’t you at least try to get in touch with one of the members of the crew!” Rhodan demanded in desperation. “Khrest, you don’t seem to understand how serious things are! Your human enemies are going to attack you with all they have at their disposal. Do something now!”

“Nothing can be done. It is hopeless,” came the alien’s dejected reply. “Don’t you realize that our crew will be lying in front of their simulator screens, admiring some new masterwork? Nobody will pay the slightest attention to any incoming signal.”

Rhodan gasped, completely shocked. He barely refrained from making some choice comments. This alien race had reached the bitter end, there was no doubt about it.

Slowly, he went toward the exit of the tent. His gaze searched the blue morning sky above the Gobi Desert. Some monstrosity should soon be making its appearance up there, according to Khrest. Rhodan could well imagine what the Arkonides meant by an “auxiliary vessel.” Twenty or more terrestrial rockets would easily find accommodation inside.

An infernal roar arose. Rhodan closed his eyes and moaned softly. An alien power began to unfold a display of its superstrength.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS SENSELESS to attempt to take cover. The narrow observation slits of the reinforced concrete bunkers were changed into organ pipes, emitting hellish howls.

Compared with this inferno, a hurricane would seem like a mild breeze. In the last moment Thora had given up her intention of destroying the cordon of troops encircling the energy dome. Nevertheless, it was necessary from her point of view to teach a lesson to these primitive creatures.

Khrest, of course, could understand Thora’s motivation. But it was almost incomprehensible for Rhodan why she had to unleash this horrendous storm. As a representative of a galactic empire, she had been deeply humiliated by the constant bombardment of the energy wall she had erected around the *Stardust I*. Her emotions were identical with those experienced by the old time colonial officers of the planet Earth, who considered any revolt of the underdeveloped dark skinned colonial population a blasphemy directed toward the white skinned ruling class.

The mighty space sphere was hovering close to the vaulted dome of the energy bell. It was beyond Rhodan’s imagination how Thora had caused this hurricane’s fury. But then, what could poor Earthlings grasp of the intricate workings of such a superior alien civilization and its machinery!

The enormous waves of pressure swept outward. The fire of the innumerable batteries died down so fast that it was hard to see how it ever could have constituted a threat to the besieged inside the dome. The men of the Asiatic elite divisions could barely manage to cling desperately to any hold inside their excellent trenches until the additional effect of null gravity made itself felt.

The sudden release from the gravitational pull of mother Earth robbed men and any nonalive matter of its foothold on the ground. More than 150,000 soldiers rose, whirling like dead autumn leaves out of the trenches, toward the open desert.

Heavy guns and stacks of ammunition presented a much larger target area. They were seized by the howling waves of pressure and tom loose like toys.

That was the only weapon used by Thora. Most probably she considered it rather primitive. Besides, it was a rather humane weapon, as Rhodan had reluctantly to admit.

The nonstop barrage of gunfire had been silenced abruptly. There was simply nothing left on the ground still capable of shooting.

Only the strong ground bunkers could withstand this inferno. Any other structures or objects that had not been fastened down tightly were pulled up in the air and then gently deposited outside the powered antigravity field, where the raging hurricane, too, had spent its strength. Thus, safe zone. They could still see the energy dome, but their gun emplacements had all disappeared.

The moment Captain Klein felt firm ground under his feet again and began to overcome his nausea, he observed the collapse of the energy screen. A roaring structure descended slowly into the formerly cordoned off area. Occasionally one of the bunkers opened fire with small arms, but the bullets fell far short.

From then on Klein no longer bothered looking at his watch. The critical moment had come and gone. Now it had become quite superfluous for Rhodan to ask for a truce.

Klein assisted the Chinese commander in chief to push aside the shattered remnants of a small card table. Only then could Lieutenant General Tai-tiang free himself and stand up again.

Outside, the sun was shining brightly. The organ-like roaring had completely died down. But inside the Concrete bunkers there reigned total chaos. Men picked themselves up off the floor, some cursing, others too shocked to utter a sound. Several Scientists looked about in a puzzled but inquisitive manner. Never before had Klein been able to observe so easily the full range of human emotions on either pale or flushed faces.

Colonel Donald Cretcher, liaison officer of the Western Defence, came tramping up from the depths of the Command bunker, bleeding profusely from his forehead. A brief glance around the room was all he needed to assess the situation. A few words by Cretcher accomplished what Klein had hoped for so fervently.

“Sir, under these circumstances we deem it advisable to cease fire immediately. It is absolutely senseless to remount our attack.”

“Who?” stammered Tai-tiang. “The batteries ... ?”

“Have been torn loose from their positions. Panic all along the line. A little while before this unknown

spaceship landed near the *Stardust I*, I received an important message from our headquarters in Greenland. We—that means my colleagues and myself—have arrived at the conclusion that we should bide our time now, rather than act.”

Major Butaan, former officer of the Asiatic Federation Secret Service, did not waste any unnecessary remarks. He barked roughly, “Cease fire at once! I’ll be responsible for everything.”

This made Tai-tiang finally realize that he had lost. There was no protesting the orders given by Major Butaan.

General Tai-tiang staggered across the room to the wall. In a daze he perceived through the observation windows the horrifying spectacle outside. There was the energy dome again, but bigger and mightier than before.

The first reports arrived from the various commando posts via radio. The cordon around the *Stardust I* no longer existed. The military detachments were in the process of complete dissolution.

Klein rubbed his sweating palms dry on his trousers. He and Kosnow exchanged a brief glance. The faint grin of the Eastern Defence officer told everything. Rhodan had won ... at least for the time being!

She arrived displaying the grandiose power of the “Great Empire” and with the insulting arrogance of a goddess.

Rhodan’s stature seemed to shrink next to hers. His remarks became futile, and his arguments were simply ignored. Her reply consisted of a momentary frown, full of exasperation.

At this point the commander apparently resigned himself and with a very odd smile followed her figure, which soon disappeared through the exit door of the tent.

Reginald Bell could not comprehend what was happening to him. Full of fury and indignation, he was struggling helplessly in the steely grip of a robot soldier that had just emerged from the huge auxiliary vessel. And that robot was only one of a small troop of automated humanoid war machines.

The so-called auxiliary vessel had turned out to be something far different from the normal human concept of a small space nodule to be used in case of emergency. It was a gigantic Structure with a diameter of almost 200 feet, with mighty engines and power stations.

It represented an exact duplicate in miniature of the original Arkonide research cruiser that the *Stardust I* crew had encountered on the moon. Yet this “auxiliary vessel” surpassed any earthly spaceship in dimensions and, of course, in equipment.

From the distance the Arkonide robots were similar to a teeming stream of ants. Closely following each other, they left the gaping air lock in the lower part of the space sphere.

Rhodan could distinguish several varying models of the automatons. The robot soldiers had two pairs of many jointed arms. Two of these limbs apparently served exclusively as weapons. Rhodan had no doubt that any of these machines was the equivalent of a full company of human soldiers. Still, this was a difficult notion to accept. To realize the full extent of the robot soldiers’ efficiency, one had to see them in action. A demonstration was indispensable for the human brain before it was willing to admit the



unquestioned superiority of a nonhuman technology.

A sharp command caused Bell to cease struggling. As soon as he complied with the order the steely claws of the machine relaxed their hold on him.

A monotonous tinny voice issued from the invisible loudspeaker inside the robot. "You are requested to remain calm and stop any resistance. You are not to leave this spot!"

Reginald staggered over toward Rhodan. In the meantime the upper polar dome of the spaceship began to light up and construct an energy screen, glowing in a deep violet hue. This convinced Rhodan that the *Stardust's* crew need no longer fear any danger from their terrestrial enemies.

Beyond the energy screen's perimeter there reigned absolute silence. With growing alarm Rhodan kept wondering what the fate of the Asiatic divisions might have been. A slight moan came from Bell's direction. Rhodan's face relaxed as he turned toward him.

"Don't melt your ice, friend!" he said emphatically. "Keep it cool." With narrowed eyes he peered over toward the tent where Thora was probably being brought up to date about Khrest's state of health.

"Our most revered lady friend is just about to commit the biggest blunder in her life. Well, let her! Unless I'm greatly mistaken she'll be a bundle of raw nerves about ten hours from now; just like any other woman who has been hurt to the quick. Don't say another word. Leave everything to me. We'll wait here till she comes out of the tent again. That's all there is to it."

"I don't understand a darn thing you're saying, I assure you," replied Bell gruffly.

"She will be reduced to a nervous wreck," Rhodan continued with emphasis. "And she will be forced to pass on to us some of her superior knowledge, if she ever wants to see her home planet again. She will have no other alternative, in case the big research cruiser has really been totally destroyed. She is very near sighted. She is generally inclined to underestimate her opponents. She is going to be taught a bitter lesson, and that at the hands of people that She, in her incredible arrogance, regards as primitive and inferior."

A glimmer of understanding began to dawn in Bell's eyes. Now he realized the reasons behind Rhodan's Strange behaviour.

"I'm beginning to see the light," he said slowly. "You are convinced that the three moon rockets will score a hit, aren't you?"

"It looks like it," murmured Rhodan. "But don't let's discuss this any further now. She will be back here in a moment. Khrest has a much better grasp of the situation, particularly a more objective one."

Soon after, when the tall slender woman came running out of the tent, she found both men sitting quietly on the ground. Breathing heavily and shivering because of the the insufficient warmth that this planet's weak sun was generating for one of her race, she stopped near them.

Rhodan looked up with studied equanimity and an enigmatic expression in his eyes. She was panting with great effort, he chest heaving. The first signs of uneasiness were showing in her exquisite face, which was of an unearthly beauty.

"Hello. How are you?" inquired Rhodan in deliberately calm tones. "May I thank you most sincerely

for your help. Khrest will be able to leave with you. He is cured. His last traces of weakness should soon disappear with plenty of rest and the proper diet. There is nothing to hold you here any longer. You can depart any time it suits you.”

Thora’s whole body seemed to stiffen. She looked down at the man sitting so relaxed on the ground, her face displaying a mixture of fear, perplexity and indignation. Her voice came shrilly, rapidly firing away at him, full of accusation. “Why was I not informed at once about the impending attack? I have—”

“You have behaved like a hysterical schoolgirl,” Perry interrupted. His eyes were aflame. “You broke off radio communication with us before I had a chance to make my report to you and to explain the reasons for our temporary radio silence. I can give you only one good piece of advice—get back to your moon base as fast as you can, and let’s hope they leave you enough time to reach your research space cruiser. Have your instruments located the three foreign intruders? Well, don’t stand there like a deaf mute. Did you get any word from your position finder?”

She nodded an affirmation. The pallor of her face intensified. Her hands started to tremble.

Rhodan got to his feet. “And what countermeasures have you taken?”

Thora did not answer his question but instead began to stammer, “Come along with us—please, do come along to our moon base! When were the rockets launched? What kind of armament do they have on board? Khrest mentioned something about a—”

“Meson catalytic bomb,” Rhodan finished for her. “A fusion weapon that will not react to your antineutron screen. Have you at least made provisions for any eventualities and taken care of the necessary defensive programming instructions to your robot brain? Any commander of a terrestrial spaceship would have made sure of that.”

Thora did not waste a second. She did not even bother to give any explanations, which told Rhodan clearly that she must have neglected to take any precautionary measures whatsoever.

She was running as fast as she could, and Bell and Rhodan stayed with her. A thought crossed Rhodan’s mind while he tried to keep up with her fast pace. He was struck by the similarity of their current situation and the Bible story of David and Goliath. Haughtiness on the one hand and lack of foresight on the other could lead to the destruction of the supergiant space sphere by the feeble but alert young opponent. This was particularly true since the deep apathy of the alien crew would, judging by previous experiences, prevent them from taking quick action against any threatening danger.

The gravity elevator deposited them directly in the control center of the auxiliary vessel. Thora had travelled to Earth in it all alone. She explained nervously that this was a fully automated vehicle that could be directed by any living being capable of individual thinking.

Rhodan looked around and began to feel dizzy. The complicated instrument panel of the *Stardust* seemed, in comparison with these fantastic installations, like a primitive native’s log canoe compared with an aircraft carrier of the U.S. Navy.

There were no launching preparations with long-drawnout procedures. The leap into space occurred as abruptly, as matter of factly and without any noticeable transition, as if an experienced driver had simply started his car. Never before had anything made Rhodan realize so sharply the gaping abyss between the Arkonide level of knowledge and that of Earth.

Thora directed the spaceship's drive by a few slight manipulations that seemed simplicity itself. Innumerable robot instruments began to function at a simple touch of a lever. Rhodan was suddenly startled by the roar of the power unit that had started up. Lights were flickering across screens, and panels glowed in soft illumination. Rhodan was all set to experience the well-known unpleasant effects of sudden high acceleration, but nothing happened. The sphere simply lifted off the ground in vertical drive at tremendous speed.

The ground fell back beneath them. Before Rhodan relaxed his tense posture, the better to withstand the anticipated effects of high G pressures, he could already see the curvature of the Earth. The Pacific Ocean became visible, and then the outline of the West Coast lay beneath them like a design on a giant globe.

The shrill howling and whistling of tortured air masses subsided. In a few moments they had left behind them the last traces of the Earth's atmosphere. Space opened up ahead of them.

Rhodan turned around. Reginald Bell was crouching with an air of total consternation in one of the high backed chairs, which apparently could not even be folded over to form a horizontal couch. Perry judged accordingly that there was no problem connected with the effects of sudden acceleration as far as the Arkonides were concerned. He estimated that the ship must have been accelerating in excess of 1,000 G's. Nevertheless, he could not feel the slightest discomfort.

"How on Earth do they manage that?" wheezed Bell with trembling lips. "For heaven's sake, how is this possible? We are racing straight into the moon. Thora ... !"

The last word came like a scream. Rhodan whirled around. The moon's globe was fully visible on the front side screen. Seconds later only partial sections of its surface could he contained on the picture screen.

The thunder from the unbelievably powerful engines grew to an unbearable ear splitting level. White hot streams of fire leaped from the nozzle openings of the equatorial bulge. They shot out in the opposite direction from the drive. The Arkonides no longer needed to counteract their forward speed by turning the main engines around! Rhodan just could not believe his eyes. He was fighting with his rebelling mind against emotions coming from the unconscious. His reasoning told him that such things were impossible and beyond imagination.

He was taken with leisurely, meandering thoughts that could not be forced to focus on one firm viewpoint. Rhodan became a creature torn by divergent feelings.

He was torn out of his reveries when Thora called out sharply. Her hand jerked upward. On one of the other picture screens three glimmering dots became visible.

"The moon rockets!" said Bell. "They are now just above the lunar south pole!"

They were coasting in free fall. The automatic steering impulses had ceased as soon as the remote control stations on the manned satellites had initiated the first circular orbit of the *Stardust II*.

This had still caused a most fearful shock to Major Rhodan on his approach to the moon with the *Stardust I*. But First Lieutenant Freyt, Commanding Officer of the *Stardust II*, did not experience the slightest alarm when the remote control steering was abruptly discontinued.

The three rocketships remained exactly in their prescribed orbits. Nothing else happened that Freyt

could interpret as defensive measures emanating from the alien moon base.

Captain Rod Nyssen took over the command after they had twice circled the moon from pole to pole. The ship's sighting mechanism was functioning with great precision. The automatic steering brains of the three rocket bombers constantly received new impulses via the commando unit of the *Stardust II*.

Nyssen waited until the light signal changed to red. A spherical structure appeared on the radar screen. Lieutenant Rickert, who was in charge of the optical direction finder, announced that the identification of their goal was established beyond a doubt. Lightning fast calculations of the computer stated the true dimensions of their target.

First Lieutenant Freyt proceeded to the last step of this desperate enterprise. "Commander of *Stardust II* to escort vessels: target sighted, location fixed. Attention all bombardiers, watch for orders when to release bombs. Captain Nyssen, all clear."

Captain Nyssen was calmness itself. He counted aloud the last seconds. The automatic steering mechanisms built into the nuclear warheads were clicking away in the store-rooms of the rocketships. Final corrections were made.

"... three ... two ... one ... fire!" came Nyssen's order over the radiophone.

A fire spewing missile left each of the rocketships. They were visible as bright flares for just a fraction of a second on the screens of the outside TV cameras; then they disappeared from sight as they zeroed in on their target like homing pigeons to their roost.

The automatic steering systems of the rocketships began to reverse the ships' direction almost immediately, and the roaring engines pulled them off-course at extremely high speeds.

All the lieutenant had in mind at this moment was to make a fast getaway. The detonations would be terrible. The ship raced off in a steep angle. Far below them, more than 500 miles away, the swivel mounted steering jets of the Rak missiles were already moving. Their aim had been automatically locked in tight absolutely immovable.

A nuclear explosion in a vacuum must of necessity have an effect quite different from that within a dense atmosphere.

One of the main destructive effects, namely, the horrendous waves of pressure caused by the highly compressed, glowing hot air masses, would naturally not occur on the airless moon.

Since they lacked any experimental data about the radius of atomic effects in a vacuum, they had decided to detonate the heaviest H bombs upon impact on the target. Their aim was directly under ground zero, where the nuclear processes of the three missiles were scheduled to take place simultaneously.

Whatever was in the target's bull's-eye must therefore be enveloped by the inner gas ball of the three merging explosions and become not only pulverized by them but also vaporized by the ensuing temperature, comparable to that of a white hot sun.

Radioactive radiations had been considered as negligible, at least in this particular case. The effect of the pressure wave must decrease much faster in airless space than in a dense atmosphere. Practically, it would be limited to the area over which the gases could be expanded.

Thus, nobody had counted on the creation of an artificial sun. The white bluish ball appeared first like a pinpoint of intensely bright light, which expanded with incredible speed to a gigantic, fantastically brilliant formation.

Nothing like the infamous mushroom cloud developed. Instead, the south polar region of the moon was transformed into a boiling, evaporating crater, from which giant masses of rock were hurled skyward.

The steadily growing ball of energy, or primeval forces set free, could be observed even from the space stations circling the Earth. The white hot glowing gas formation had become so enormous that it stretched beyond the still recognizable horizon of the moon.

The Arkonide auxiliary vessel was rushing into the outer fringes of this awesome explosion. When it was over Rhodan could no longer remember what he had felt or thought during the few seconds their ship had penetrated and raced through this blazing hell.

He knew only that all of the space sphere's high capacity reactors had been switched over to the energy screens by their unbelievably fast functioning positronic control.

The vessel had been thrown off-course and hurled far out into space. Only there had the automatic control managed to stabilize it again.

Ten minutes had passed since the attack. The Arkonide sphere, as if motionless, stood in empty space. Thora was strangely quiet. With lifeless eyes she gazed at the picture screens that showed in all clarity the extent of the catastrophe. Somewhere in the center of this boiling witch's cauldron must have been the Arkonide research cruiser.

Rhodan waited a few minutes before he asked softly, "You are blaming yourself now, aren't you? Don't, please— it is senseless. Why don't you learn from my own race? I can't believe that your ship can have withstood this onslaught. But in any case you will have to wait until the reaction has died down."

For Rhodan, the utterly clear thinking man, devoid of any illusions, the Arkonide cruiser's destruction was an accepted fact. He was too much of a realist to cry over spilt atoms. It was not worthwhile for him even to waste any thought about things that could no longer be changed. He warned Thora, "Thora, don't think of retribution! Abandon your plans for reprisal. May I suggest that we land at once in the Gobi Desert? You can choose between undignified, caveman type vengeance or the exigencies of logical deliberation. Make your choice. Neither you nor Khrest would be helped in any way should you decide on a punitive action. And besides, I assure you, you would encounter serious difficulties from my side."

She looked down at the weapon in his hand. A bitter expression played around her full lips.

"I simply underestimated you, that's all," she replied in a monotonous voice. "Do you really believe that a Commander of the Great Imperium would go to pieces over a destroyed spaceship? Such things happen to us quite frequently. So what do you suggest?"

Rhodan knew then that he had finally won. The panicky actions of a frightened mankind had accomplished something that, although he did not agree with these actions in principle, he had considered in his innermost thoughts to be the basis for attaining a position of cosmic power.

Both Arkonides, Thora and Khrest, were definitely stranded now in this corner of the galaxy. There

was no way back for them. With this in mind Rhodan declared thoughtfully, “Why don’t you land first? I shall try to have the Third Power declared a sovereign state, fully recognized by all the nations of the world. Just leave that all to me.”

She was a defeated person, crushed and helpless. Rhodan knew it. A short hour later the space sphere touched ground again on the stony expanses of the Gobi Desert.

Far out in space, still at a great distance from their home planet, twelve men breathed easier. They were the crews of the three returning rocketships.

“I wish we were as far advanced as that!” whispered First Lieutenant Freyt, throwing a last glance at the video screens. “Did you see that racing comet? If only we were at their stage of progress—with ships like that the whole galaxy would be ours!”

# THE END

## Table of Contents

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

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