

Perry Rhodan 058 Attack From The Unseen 1/ ACTION ON RENO 25 TROUBLE on Trebola 2? Quite the contrary. The 2nd planet of the star Trebola, located 4000 light-years from Earth, was a peaceful world. A beautiful world. It was no Terra but it suited its inhabitants well intelligent and non-aggressive as they were. And spider-like. Humans found difficulty in distinguishing one spiderian from another. Fortunately, it worked to the same degree the other way around: the inhabitants of Trebola 2 could rarely tell one human being from another. So it had been no problem for Ralf Marten to pose as a descendant of the Arkonides. Ralf Marten: mutant. Tall, slender, dark-haired. Eyes clear blue and oval enough to suggest almonds—the heritage of his Japanese mother. A man with the power of teleoptical projection, when Marten concentrated hard enough, he could project his consciousness into another individual's brain. In effect, see through another person's eyes. It was partly because of his astounding faculty that he now found himself a cosmic agent in the service of Perry Rhodan, guardian of the Solar Empire, stationed on this arachnid world unthinkable trillions of miles from the planet of his birth. As on all inhabited worlds in the Arkon Imperium, Arkon's interests were protected by an Arkonide Administrator and Trebola 2 was no exception. It had been no problem for Marten to pass as a descendant of Arkonides among the spiderians but, even more important, his pose had convinced the planet's chief Arkonide. His story was that his ancestors had been stranded here in the past and had changed appearance slightly over the centuries. Life on Trebola 2, at least that which stemmed from interstellar traffic, was concentrated on the outskirts of the spaceport. Here Marten operated a small travel agency, arranging pleasure trips and flights to all parts of the planet for sightseers and tourists. In this manner he kept in contact with intelligences from other worlds and often learned of developments which could be of great importance to Perry Rhodan and the Earth. Closing his office, he strolled along the street toward the main avenue which led to his small apartment. From the outside his quarters were typical of those intended for humanoid inhabitants of Trebola 2. But there were certain definite differences inside which would have greatly intrigued certain people—had they known of them. Ralf Marten slowed his pace and looked cautiously to all sides. He feared discovery any day now for the interstellar empire of the Regent of Arkon knew that Earth, thought destroyed for more than 50 years, still existed. True, the Regent was a mighty positronic brain, but that only made it all the more dangerous. Relieved, Marten then entered the apartment building and took the elevator to the 10th floor. He stopped before the door to his rooms and inserted his thumb into the small, round opening near the lock. He had only a few seconds to wait till the electronic lock registered his fingerprint and his brainwave pattern. Then, humming gently, the door opened and Marten stepped in, shutting it behind him. He whistled to himself as he went into the kitchen and programmed the robot stove to prepare his supper. He used the time until his food was ready to tend to some rather mysterious business. Standing in the corner was an inconspicuous metal box measuring a yard in length and foot and a half in width and breadth. Marten opened the lid with the aid of a pair of complicated keys he wore on a chain around his neck. Should someone having no business doing so attempt to open the box, a built-in bomb would go off, destroying the box and killing the intruder. As the lid came open, the device inside automatically switched on its receiver and transmitter. It was, of course, no ordinary radio—which would be of little use over a distance of 4000 light-years. Instead, the box contained a hypercom unit especially constructed for use by cosmic agents. Its signals crossed unimaginable distances in fractions of seconds. The impulses hurtled through hyperspace from Trebola 2 to the Earth. They were coded and no one who had not tuned in with the proper decoding device could have understood them. "Agent Marten calling Terra. Go ahead, Terra. Agent Marten calling..." The call beamed out until it was answered by a confirming signal from Earth. Then the transmitter shut off automatically. Marten would then know that there were no new instructions and

that the receiving station on Earth knew that Agent Marten was still alive. A red light lit up. Marten forgot his kitchen robot and adjusted the receiver. There was a message for him. A few seconds later, a masculine voice resounded through the room. Marten gave an involuntary start for it had been a long time since he had heard a Terran's voice. "Headquarters calling Agent Marten. Your instructions from Terrania are as follows: you will board the ship of Springer clan leader Logarop, which will land tomorrow. Your present quarters are to be destroyed, as per Plan XXB. Please confirm. Over." Marten replied: "Agent Marten to Headquarters. Instructions understood. Over & out." The humming died away. The lid closed and Marten stood up and went slowly into the kitchen. The food was done but he hardly tasted it. Naturally, there was nothing on Trebola to hold him there but every change leaves open the question of whether or not the future will be better than the present. He had grown accustomed to Trebola and was familiar with his duties. What lay before him now was highly uncertain. But orders were orders. Tomorrow he would leave his apartment, as though nothing had ever happened, but an hour later gaseous acids would destroy all his traces in his former quarters. Should anyone in the days or months ahead get the idea of forcing his way into the deserted apartment, he would find nothing to indicate Marten had ever even been there. The rooms would simply be empty. Marten retired early that evening. He had no desire to pay a final visit to the Administrator. His mission on Trebola 2 was finished. . . . 5 other agents of the Solar Imperium had experiences similar to Ralf Marten's that day. The headquarters in Terrania, capital city of the planet Earth, called for them to return. The order came directly from Perry Rhodan himself. No explanation was given. Terrania, vast metropolis of more than 14 million inhabitants, lay in the area that had been known as the Gobi Desert little more than a half-century before. Today, nothing remained to remind one that here sand and gravel had once been all there was to see. Giant skyscrapers, vast green parks and an enormous spaceport marked the shape of a city from which the destiny of an entire solar system was ruled. One man was responsible for it all. Perry Rhodan. It was he, too, who had ordered the return of 6 cosmic agents and had made the necessary arrangements. The operation required several days, since not every agent could get away from his previous assignment as easily as Ralf Marten. A week after the order for return had been issued, the only agent missing was John Marshall, the nominal leader of the Mutant Corps and a superior telepath. John Marshall, the dark-haired Australian with the narrow, impassive face, had received the life-prolonging cell-renewal on the artificial planet Wanderer, along with Perry Rhodan and other personalities of the former New Power. Although he was now about 100 years old, John Marshall looked like a well-preserved 40. His mission had taken him to Reno 25. Reno 25 was the 25th planet of a solar system consisting of 3 nearby stars and some 60 planets orbiting all 3. The stars themselves, the middle point of this rather unusual system, revolved around the system's centre of gravity, an empty point in space. 7 of the system's planets were inhabited by intelligent beings but Reno 25 was the main world. About 10,000 light-years removed from the Earth, Reno 25 was an important trading centre for the Arkonide Imperium and a base for its battlefleet, as well as a base for the Galactic Traders. There was no wonder, then, that it was here, of all places, that John Marshall had been posted for sending on to Earth all important information he might pick up. For his duties he made use of a transmitter similar to Ralf Marten's; at least before he followed the new orders and returned to Earth. In order to pose as a Luraner, Marshall had had to make use of the Terran plastic surgeons' art. The Luraners were a thoroughly humanoid race and were known as a somewhat independent branch of the Galactic Traders-or Springers, as the Traders were also known. They were called Springers because they lived mostly in their huge cylindrical spaceships and, in a certain sense, 'sprang' from star to star to carry on business and trade. Marshall called himself Probat and was considered the business partner of a very influential Luraner. Everyone knew the Luraner's name but no one had

ever seen him-for the simple reason he existed only in Marshall's imagination. As the unseen partner evidently was very rich, his perpetual absence played little role. 'Probat's' office lay in the immediate vicinity of the spaceport. In one of the spaceport's private hangars stood a discus-shaped spacecraft some 90 feet in diameter. It was a Gazelle, a scouting ship capable of springs through hyperspace of up to 500 light-years. Reno 25 was a peaceful world for there were no more wars in the Arkonide Imperium. And so the inhabitants and the Arkonide Administrator stationed there must have been all the more surprised when 3 huge space ships-each 900 feet long, their cylindrical shape identifying them as Springer vessels-suddenly appeared that day and landed on the spaceport field. Hardly had the ships touched down when something extremely unusual happened: the hatches opened and several companies of well-equipped fighter robots streamed out. The Administrator's own troops, immediately alerted, were quickly thrown back and the robots occupied the city. Then it was learned that those responsible were highly organized pirates who lived from the surplus of rich worlds, turning up without warning here or there to loot unsuspecting planets. At the time of the attack, Marshall had been in his office and had no time to send the sensational news on to Earth via the hypercom. Before he knew what was happening, 2 warrior robots had forced their way into his apartment, which was just above his office, and started to demolish the furniture. Unfortunately, they came too close to the camouflaged hypercom device. Only the office on the building's first floor remained. The rest of the structure and the 2 robots had been blasted into rubble. Marshall was cut off from Terra but he could be thankful that he had come out of the accident alive. His first thought was to get to his Gazelle and leave this suddenly very inhospitable solar system but that proved to be more difficult than he had first thought. The pirates had sealed off the spaceport hermetically, preventing anyone from leaving Reno 25. Marshall sat tight, knowing nothing of the silent command that had been ceaselessly streaking through hyperspace for hours, seeking his receiver. He waited patiently for a chance to reach his spaceship. Once on board he was sure he could take off and easily break through the blockade around Reno 25. Theory is one thing but practice another. The pirates occupied the Administrator's palace and thus the hypercom station. The connection to Arkon was broken off almost at the same moment a jamming transmitter was put into operation, which prevented even the ships stranded at the spaceport from sending calls for help. The pirates allowed themselves time to plunder the defenceless planet. Unfortunately for them, it was that same jamming transmitter that sealed their doom. About 8 days after the successful attack, the Robot Brain on Arkon attempted to reach the Administrator of Reno 25 by hypercom-something that happened perhaps once every 10 years. There was no answer. The Regent reacted with unusual speed and sent a huge battleship to Reno to investigate. Marshall still remained in his small office amidst the rubble. Luckily for him, no further robot attacks had followed the first one and he had been left in peace. He felt safe enough but an increasing anxiety was threatening to make his continued presence on Reno 25 unbearable to him. Then came the battleship! Even before the pirates had a chance to organize a defence, the huge spacesphere of the Regent landed on the field. A division of the strongest fighter robots issued from the hatches and was set to their duty. The somewhat smaller robots belonging to the pirates attacked automatically, immediately revealing what had been happening on Reno 25. Now Marshall could see for himself how much methods of government had changed over the past decades. The Robot Brain of Arkon tolerated disobedience no longer. Without endangering the life of a single person, the battle-machines of the Regent restored order. They destroyed the pirates' robots in concentrated attacks and took prisoner all the pirates they could find. The 3 cylindrical ships were then melted in the crossfire of energy beams. Marshall saw it all without budging from his spot. There was no danger of any kind for him since he could prove himself an inhabitant of Reno 25 at any time. 5 hours after the landing of the spacesphere, order reigned once more on Reno 25

and reconstruction was already underway. A company of battle-robots remained behind while the rest boarded the ship and returned to Arkon. Marshall had only one wish: to leave Reno 25 as fast as he could. What else could he do here, now that he no longer had any means of contacting headquarters? His ship stood over in the hangar and leaving the planet was no longer prohibited. What was he waiting for? Since all his belongings had been destroyed, he walked past the sentry-robots on watch-duty with empty hands. He identified himself as Probat and reached the hangar where his Gazelle stood, intact, and ready to go, without hindrance. Everything else was child's play. Having given the worker robots the necessary instructions, he climbed through the Gazelle's hatch and made his way to the small control cabin. Meanwhile, the roof of the hangar slid to one side, giving free access to the open sky. Marshall flew the small ship straight up, accelerating immediately to maximum speed. The molecules of the air itself burned in the heat of friction and a glowing trail marked the passage of the Gazelle as it shot out of the atmosphere in seconds and hurtled toward SPEOL-the speed of light and transition through hyperspace. Marshall activated the structural compensator. It was more of a reflex action than anything else but it saved him a good deal of trouble. In that same moment, the Administrator of Reno 25 was receiving explicit directions from Arkon for the investigation of a certain businessman named Probat, as justifiable suspicion existed that this person... The investigation was made and initially ended at the hangar. Then the inquiry was extended into space, where it ended again, this time at the point where the suspect's ship had vanished without a trace and had crossed over into another dimension without leaving behind any clues. Marshall of course knew nothing of the investigation. He had enough to do in re-charting his course to Earth after every hytrans. The range of the Gazelle was limited to 500 light-years and Earth was 10,000 light-years away. Each transition required only a tenth of a second to accomplish but the computer programming and calculating necessary beforehand took up to half an hour. Marshall was able to cut down the preparation time with later jumps but close to 3 days had passed before he reached the Solar System and landed on the spaceport field at Terrania. He arrived just in time to take part in the last briefing session. Rhodan looked up as Marshall entered the small room in which the officers and Mutant Corps members had assembled. "You finally made it? I'd almost given you up for lost, John. My order to leave your planet went out more than 10 days ago." "I was held up," the telepath smiled and gave a, brief account of the events on Reno 25. Rhodan appeared to be interested in only one part of it: the Regent's swift and sure reaction. "A few things have changed in the Arkonides' realm," he decided. "So we'll have to expect an opponent who is in every way our equal and not at all decadent. The Regent has learned how to accomplish its goals. I don't think things are going to be very easy for us." "Oh yeah?" came an emphatic chirping voice from the background. "That pile of positronic tin cans will shake like Jell-O when we give it our conditions." "If that's the case," replied Ralf Marten roguishly, "perhaps the Robot Brain would tremble all the more if it didn't see you. Once it caught sight of you, the only shaking it would do would be with laughter." The previous speaker with the chirping voice drew himself to his full height, measuring then about a yard. He crouched on his hind legs, supported by a broad beaver-tail. The upper body and head were that of, a huge mouse. "Me? Stay in the background?" demanded Pucky, becoming quite shrill. "I'm a telepath, telekineticist, teleporter, hypno..." "Anything else?" inquired Rhodan pleasantly. Pucky wanted to answer but shook his head with sorrowful gravity and sat down. He seemed to regret being such a deficient mutant. Rhodan restrained a grin and continued, more to Marshall than anyone else. "As you know, we deceived the galaxy and the Regent of Arkon in particular into believing that the Earth was destroyed 56 years ago. We did this to gain time. Today we are strong enough to lay our conditions before the Regent, even though it has also increased in strength over the years. The Regent's discovery of our existence was thanks to Talamon the Moulder, who recognized me when I picked up Fellmer Lloyd a few weeks ago.

The Regent was informed immediately and since that minute has been continually broadcasting a call to me. It wants me to get in touch with it. Our robot-psychologists have determined that the Regent must be in trouble of some sort, otherwise it would have reacted differently. So, we will respond to the Regent's call and announce ourselves. That's how the situation stands now, Marshall." "And they're leaving me behind again," growled an annoyed voice in the rear. All eyes turned to look at the speaker. He was not a big man but rather a stocky one with; red hair and a broad face that at the moment seemed anything but jovial. Reginald Bell, Rhodan's second-in-command and best friend, was obviously unhappy with his role. "But Reggie," said Rhodan reprovingly, "you carry a heavy responsibility here on Earth. I can't spare you here. With the project we have before us, I need to feel certain while I'm away that things on Earth are being taken care of the way I'd want Do you think that's not important?" Bell forced a smile but he was still unhappy. "I'll see that you get a Nobel Prize for being the best peacemaker, Perry. Alright, I'm not angry..." "Just jealous!" Pucky interrupted, showing his incisor tooth in pleasure and wiggling his long ears. "You'd be green with envy if you could see me go into action, Reggie! The entire galaxy will tremble and pale when it learns that the mighty Pucky is back..." "A pale galaxy should be an impressive sight," Rhodan admitted but made a warning gesture toward the mouse-beaver. "And now let's have some order or well still be here tomorrow. I'm going to announce the names of those taking part in the operation: the spearhead this time will be the Mutant Corps, represented by telepath John Marshall, the telekineticist Tama Yokida, the seer and telepath Fellmer Lloyd, teleporter Ras Tschubai, teleoptician Ralf Marten-and Pucky. With them, will be the officers and crew of the Drusus. Men, you probably aren't familiar with the Drusus yet. It's a spacesphere of the Titan class, measuring 4800 feet in diameter and carrying a crew of 2000. Aboard are 40 guppies, each auxiliary spacer having a diameter of 180 feet. The Drusus has a hytrans range of 30,000 light-years and all other data match the Titan. Finally, the Drusus was built on the Earth: it isn't stellar booty of any sort. I think we will impress the Regent considerably with it." "Hm," murmured Bell but otherwise remained quiet. Rhodan continued, undisturbed by the slight interruption. "I've had this super battleship designed and built exclusively for the purpose of demonstration. Nevertheless, it is equipped with our best and most effective weaponry-and that includes the tele-transmitters. Liftoff is set for tomorrow morning and I'll issue the final instructions on board. Any questions?" Ras Tschubai, the powerful Afroterranian, raised his hand. "I have one sir. Does the Robot Brain on Arkon know we're coming to visit it?" "Of course not," Rhodan smiled. "Tomorrow we'll make a short spring through hyperspace-the structocomp will be in operation, of course-and then contact the Regent. It can then get a fix on our location as it likes, without endangering us. Its logic will tell it we would never transmit a hypercom message from the Earth." No further questions were asked. Each of the men present knew that Rhodan would tell them all they needed to know in his own good time. "Alright then, till tomorrow," said Rhodan, closing the conference and leaving the room. Bell followed as he still had some questions. The mutants watched the 2 men leave. To them remained but one more night on Earth. 2/ RED ALERT The structure-sensors of the Arkonides were positioned everywhere in the Imperium and up to 30,000 light-years beyond its frontiers. The purpose, of the sensors was to detect and register every transition made by every spaceship within their range. Thus was the Regent at the centre of the empire informed of all movement in and out of hyperspace and from the data could draw its conclusions. The first transition of the Drusus took place under cover of the structural compensator. The jump was rendered thereby 'silent', leaving no trace. No one in the depths of the galaxy learned that a huge ship left normal space somewhere and reentered in an entirely different location. No one learned the position of the planet Terra. But everyone knew, hours later, that the ship did exist and who its commander was. The stars materialized and appeared on the vidscreens

aboard the Drusus. Lt.-Col. Baldur Sikermann, first officer of the spacesphere and a thickset, swarthy individual, sighed in relief. He sat next to Rhodan at the controls and tried to keep from showing that this flight was his first serious mission. "Specified position has been reached, sir," Sikermann announced. "Distance from the Earth, precisely 300 light-years, 90° towards the galactic centre. Present speed is 98% SPEOL." "Thank you, Sikermann, The course and speed will be maintained." Rhodan nodded encouragingly to the first officer, stood up and left the semicircular control central with purposeful strides. Each step, he knew, brought him closer to the moment of decision-and it would be a tough one. Someone was waiting for him at the door of the communications centre. His slender figure was slightly stooped, betraying the man's age. His snow-white hair gleamed in the light from the ceiling lamps and his 2 golden-red eyes revealed that he was an albino. All pure Arkonides were albinos and Khrest was no exception. "The Regent's call has not stopped yet, Perry," said Khrest, smiling a bit timorously. "We've let the Robot Brain wait a long time." "It's got plenty of time," Rhodan smiled back. "So we have to make it look like we do too." Together with his friend, Rhodan entered the spacious com centre, in which the hypercom had been installed. Although there were various ways of protecting a hypercom signal from being tracked to its source, Rhodan had decided it would be better not to contact Arkon from the Earth. No one could know what discoveries the awakening Arkonides might have made over the years and, in any event, Khrest had advised Rhodan to transmit his message to the Regent only after he was well away from the Earth and into deep space. Lt. David Stern, a dark-haired and medium-sized Israeli, saluted rigidly as he saw the Chief and his Arkonide ally come in. "Com centre-everything in order, sir!" "Thank you, Stern," Rhodan answered and pointed to the massive hypercom machinery. "What's our friend up to now?" Stern switched on the power. "The Regent is still calling, sir. The text of its message has been altered in the meantime. The meaning hasn't changed but it seems to me more personal now. Would you want to hear it, sir'?" "It would be a good idea, Stern. Turn on the video unit, too, in case the Regent is broadcasting any pictures." Endless minutes ticked by before the oval screen glowed into life. Then the familiar picture of the Arkonide Regent appeared-a huge steel dome resting on its flat bottom. Movable antennae and dials interrupted its otherwise smooth surface. Quietly and emotionlessly, the message of the largest positronicon in the galaxy emanated from the loudspeaker: "Perry Rhodan of Terra! I know that you are still alive! Why do you not answer my call and make contact with me? I assure you that we will not speak of the past. Only the future is important, Perry Rhodan. Your future and my future! Please answer!" "The Robot Brain has been sending that every 2 minutes," said David Stern, "probably for some days now. Should I shut the machine down?" "Keep the receiver on, Stern," Rhodan told him. "And turn on the transmitter, too." The great moment had come. Khrest stood somewhat off to the side and attempted to control his emotions. He was an Arkonide and had once belonged to the ruling class. Now a robot brain built by the Arkonides themselves was the ruler-and it ruled, it could be argued, rather well. Rhodan waited until a green light signifying readiness lit up and the Robot Brain paused. Then, with a quiet and steady voice, he spoke. "Perry Rhodan, planet Terra, speaking. I have received your message, Regent. We Terrans are ready to make contact with you. I request a confirmation." The hitherto regularly repeated hypercom message from the Regent did not return. The massive steel form on the vidscreen seemed to be enveloped by harsh light, then the image became clearer and brighter. For his part, Rhodan had not activated his camera, so no one could see him. "You are a long way from Arkon, Rhodan," said the Regent, its mechanical voice lacking in either surprise or joy. "I shall be awaiting your arrival." Rhodan smiled coldly as he answered. "I'm not that ready to surrender myself to you, Regent. I have certain conditions to set first. Will you hear them?" "I will, Rhodan." Rhodan was still smiling. "Khrest of the Zoltral clan has suggested

the 3rd planet of the star Mirsal. According to the catalogue, that is a primitive world. I will land there and wait for you or your representative." "I can never leave Arkon, Rhodan." "Very well then, send a representative. I would suggest Talamon the Mounder, since I know him. It was he, of course, who discovered me first." "No, Rhodan. Come to Arkon. I have-" Rhodan interrupted the Regent: "We meet on Mirsal 3 or not at all, Regent. Send Talamon. Agreed?" "Why Mirsal?" "It could be another star as well as this one, but-why not Mirsal?" The robot Brain was silent for a few seconds. Rhodan knew that the giant robot could calculate more in that short time than a human mind could in 10 years. "Yes," said the Regent suddenly, "I am in agreement on Mirsal. However, I must set a condition of my own: each of us may appear only with a single ship-and that ship must have been built on our respective home planets. Mine on Arkon, yours on Terra." Rhodan's smile widened. "Agreed, Regent. There will be only 2 ships rendezvousing on Mirsal 3, then. And will you send Talamon?" "I will send Talamon as my representative." "When?" asked Rhodan, throwing a quick glance at Khrest. The Arkonide stood a bit to the side and his face was completely devoid of expression. "In 10 of your hours, Rhodan. End of communication." The Regent's signoff was rather abrupt but what could one expect from a robot brain? That it excuse itself politely with the meaningless phrases that mankind so frequently uses? I agree-end of communication! And that was all. David Stern shut off the hypercom unit, following the unspoken command inherent in Rhodan's gesture to him. Out in the corridor, the Terran turned to the Arkonide. "What now?" he asked. Khrest shrugged almost imperceptibly and ventured: "One thing is certain, Perry: the Regent is in a jam, if I may use one of Mr. Bell's favourite expressions. Do you believe it would have agreed so readily to your conditions otherwise?" "No," Rhodan admitted. "I don't believe that at all. But what can the trouble be? Everything seems to be in perfect order throughout the Imperium and none of our cosmic agents have reported difficulties." "Perhaps the trouble is something that no one but the robot Brain is aware of," Khrest suggested calmly. Rhodan looked at Khrest in surprise. It was something that had not occurred to him. "Yes," he said thoughtfully, "perhaps you're right." Then he went on down the corridor. The Drusus hurtled on towards the centre of the galaxy at nearly the speed of light. Even at that speed, 30,000 years would elapse before it arrived. No one had that much time. Not even Perry Rhodan. . . . The Drusus slid into the vast unknown of hyperspace 6 times, emerging each time at a different point in space. The transitions were made in different directions, always under the protection of the structural compensator, and covered unimaginable distances. Finally, the 7th and last spring was made without the compensator or caution, bringing the Drusus directly into the solar system of the star Mirsal. If someone had observed the spring and the following materialization, he would have come to the astounding conclusion that the planet Terra was to be found somewhere on the other side of the galaxy. An understandable error. The star Mirsal looked exactly like Sol, Earth's sun. Mirsal lay 14,480 light-years from Terra, about halfway between S61 and Arkon in terms of distance. However, Mirsal was some ways off what would have been a direct route between the 2. The star was orbited by 5 planets; according to the Arkonide star catalogue, only the 3rd was inhabited. The manlike race there had developed a certain level of primitive culture but was still far from space travel. The natives were, however, well aware of occasional visits from outer space. 7 hours before the time agreed upon with the Regent, the Drusus materialized and sped on towards Mirsal 3 at SPEOL. The crew had hurried to their battle-stations and stood ready to open fire at any second upon any possible attacker. Rhodan had assembled the mutants around him in the control central. The rows of vidscreens depicted every cubic inch of the space surrounding the ship and Lt.-Col. Sikermann sat unmoving at the control panel. The air seemed almost to rustle. "Structure-sensor activated, sir," reported David Stern from the com centre. Sikermann acknowledged with thanks. Outside the ship there was only empty space. Other than the Drusus

there was not a single spaceship. Or at least no spaceship powered by atomic reactors-and ships powered by different means were not to be found in the Imperium. "I wonder if the Regent will attack us?" Fellmer Lloyd ventured in the background. "This would be the perfect opportunity for it..." "No, Lloyd," said John Marshall, shaking his head. Rhodan did not respond so Marshall went on: "Why should the Regent attack us? I'm convinced that our robot-psychologists are right: the Regent of Arkon is in a dilemma and wants us to get it out. Almost as if we were kind of a police force. Like we were once." "But I don't want to be a policeman," squeaked the mouse-beaver Pucky from the couch, where he sat with crossed legs. "I'm a respectable mouse." "And policemen?" inquired Marshall reproachfully. "They aren't respectable?" Seeing Rhodan's admonishing expression, Pucky seemed to shrink an inch or two. Had he gone too far? "Yes, of course they're respectable," he twittered, lowering his eyes in shame. "But Reggie told me they're humans-in fact, that was part of the job requirement. You have to be human to be a policeman. At every opportunity he would tell me that policemen are human, too. But I'm not human, so I can never be a policeman." Pucky's mouse-beaver logic was impeccable and Marshall gave up. They spoke little while the seconds ticked by and melted into minutes. Finally, an hour had passed. Nothing. "The Regent said 10 hours," said Rhodan by way of lessening the tension. He paced the control central. 'We still have 2 hours to go if the Regent intends to be punctual. I'm curious to see what Talamon's expression will be when he spots our Drusus." "That gorilla let the Regent know we were still alive," growled Fellmer Lloyd, who himself was indirectly responsible for the event. "I'd like to give him a punch in the nose for it." "Then you'd better grow some," called Pucky, who found it difficult to restrain his sharp tongue in such situations. "Good old Talamon weighs more than half a ton. If a flea punched you, you'd never notice, and Talamon, would never notice you." Lloyd regarded the mouse-beaver attentively. "If you're trying to imply that I'm a flea..." "Even a flea was put on Earth for a reason!" Pucky, replied quickly in a mollifying tone, elaborating: "Bell said even Adam had 'em. And without them, there would have been no famous story of Jason and the Golden Fleas." It was in Lloyd's mind to inform the confused mouse-beaver that his incredible erudition was only exceeded by his abysmal ignorance but Marshall, espering his thoughts, interrupted: "Oh, let Pucky be. You can't win with him and we've more important fish to fly. Right, Pucky? Flying fish!" "Right!" declared Pucky, oblivious to the fact that his broad tail was being mercilessly pulled. Convinced he had triumphed over the human, the mouse-beaver lay down, curled into a ball and seconds later was in slumber land. Snoring, as he would have been quite capable of putting it, like a mouse on fire... The 2nd hour passed without event but then began the 3rd and most decisive phase of waiting. 60 seconds seemed like drops in an ocean of eternity. The indicators of the hypersensor stood against their scales as motionlessly as though frozen in position. The hypercom receiver was silent. Still a half-hour. 10 minutes. One... The quaking of the space-time-continuum could only be detected by the sensitive hypersensor equipment. Everything remained outwardly quiet and calm as a gigantic form suddenly materialized not 2 LISEKS from the Drusus and became visible on the viewscreens. The messenger from the Regent of Arkon. Rhodan let out a low laugh of relief when he recognized the other ship. It was a spherical spacebattler of the Titan class-hence also of the Drusus class. So the Arkonides had not been able to develop anything new during the past decades. Which was not without its inferences as to their situation. The Regent had wanted to make an impression on Rhodan but had sent him a type of ship that was already being built on Earth. Naturally, however, Arkon couldn't know that. Well, the Regent wouldn't remain in such ignorance for long. After all, Talamon had eyes. "Slow your course for a landing on Mirsal 3." The antigravity fields braked their speed and within a half-hour the Drusus landed within less than half a mile from the Arkon giant. Both ships had come down: onto a broad, high plateau. Unseen by the men of the other spaceship, the

crew of the Drusus was in battle readiness. A single word and the energy cannons would concentrate their firepower, on the enemy. Their defence screen could be activated with one slice of a switch. But Rhodan did not expect a surprise attack. He observed the other ship. He could plainly make out the name of the Arkonide envoy vessel: Arc-Koor. "Stern!" he called into the intercom. "Set up radio contact and switch it into Control Central. Make it a direct video hookup." Tensely he looked to his left at the squarish viewscreen near the navigation console. The grid microphone served simultaneously as a loudspeaker for the telecom circuit. The videoscreen brightened slowly; a face became visible. Rhodan recognized it again immediately, even though 56 years had passed since he had been face to face with the Mounder, Talamon-discounting that brief second on Volat when Talamon had recognized him. "Perry Rhodan-I'm glad you're still alive." Rhodan nodded and replied somewhat sarcastically: "And your joy was so tremendous Talamon, that you just couldn't keep it to yourself. You had nothing more urgent to do than to report it to the Regent." "Now you have to understand what happened," said Talamon, attempting to defend himself. "I was taken completely by surprise and I was afraid of complications. In the Empire there is peace, Rhodan. I didn't know..." "...Whether or not I would disturb that peace, is that it? Well, relax Talamon. Nobody's happier about your peace than I am. As far as I'm concerned, Terra and Arkon will never come into conflict. That's why I'm grateful to you that you made the decision for me and advised the Regent that I was still alive. Now the 2 of us are met again-you as representative of Arkon and I as representative of the Solar Empire." "What's the Solar Empire?" "Terra and its colonized planets," replied Rhodan with equanimity. "Tell me about Arkon-or would it be better for us to wait till we're together?" "The atmosphere is breathable," agreed Talamon eagerly. "Let's meet each other halfway between the 2 ships. I'll bring along some of my officers as witnesses and also the personal representative of the Regent. "You are not the representative?" "Well, yes, but only the human one. The Regent preferred to also send a robot representative so that it could get a direct report on the progress of our discussions." "That's agreeable. I'll also bring a few of my men with me. But I believe we can have mutual trust in each other. How goes it with you financially, Talamon?" It was a pointed question. Talamon had Rhodan to thank for the biggest business deal of his life and probably even today he was still living off the fortune he had made from it. For that he was in the Terranian's debt. "Things are pretty good for me, Rhodan. And if you'd like to know, I still haven't forgotten that I have you to thank for my prosperity. You may remember, about 60 years back, that I didn't take part in the action of the Springers and the Aras against Terra." "Very well," smiled Rhodan. "In 10 minutes we'll see each other in person." The communication ended. Rhodan issued final instructions and signalled to the 6 mutants and Khrest. "We will not carry any weapons with us but the Drusus remains on standby alert. Sikermann, you take the command here and remain in contact with me on the wrist radio. That way you'll know what's going on and if necessary can take appropriate action." The exit lock was already open. While across the way the outer hatch of the Arc-Koor was still sliding to one side, Rhodan and his accompanying men were already descending the wide ramp and on their way toward the appointed rendezvous point. Pucky waddled eagerly behind and strove to prevent too big a gap from developing. When they were about 400 yards away from the Drusus, Rhodan gave the signal to halt. This was approximately the middle of the stretch between the 2 ships. A number of boulders made inviting seats to rest on. In the west they could see the silhouettes of the mountains standing against the pale sky. The yellow sun was high in the heavens and furnished a pleasing warmth. The high plateau country around them stretched out on other sides through forests, valleys and plains. There was nothing to be seen of any human settlements. The passenger ramp was just now extending to the ground beneath the Arc-Koor. A large, powerful figure appeared above in the open hatchway and looked across at the 8 men. Talamon! He raised his right hand in a signal of

greeting, then came striding down the ramp. 4 or 5 men of normal stature followed him. 2 of them were Springers and the others doubtlessly Arkonides. When the envoys of the Regent finally stood on the ground under the spherical ship, something very peculiar happened which immediately alarmed Rhodan. Quite clearly he could see that the portal of the exit lock was widening to a point where it was big enough for an auxiliary craft of some kind to emerge. Was Talamon about to bring out some tanks? But then, before he was able to transmit an appropriate command to Baldur Sikermann, he remembered Talamon's announcement that the Regent had also sent along a mechanical representative. He watched the enlarged airlock port cautiously while Marshall whispered: "Talamon has no bad intentions. The small positronic brain is leaving the ship now. There it is already..." Out of the lock floated a mighty hemisphere of metal on its antigravity fields and sailed gently down toward the planet's surface, where it maintained about a half-yard of altitude. Rhodan realized that it was an almost true to life copy of the Regent on Arkon although the dimensions had been reduced to half size. The Regent's 'baby' was about 100 feet in diameter and displayed also an array of antennas on the half-dome as well as viewscreens and what were presumably screens for making positronic impulses visible. As 'Baby' floated nearer Rhodan perceived in one viewscreen the actual positronic Brain on Arkon. It had to be a direct transmission through hyperspace because Arkon was virtually light-millennia distant. Talamon hurried to keep pace with the approach of the Regent's surprising representative. He arrived almost simultaneously with the robot brain at the collection of rocks that Rhodan had selected for their point of contact. "I am glad to see you, Rhodan," his voice boomed through the clear air. "I'm really glad." Rhodan could sense the note of sincerity in his words. "I'd be telling a lie if I said I felt any differently than you do," he replied cordially. "The Regent couldn't have sent me a better intermediary." He took hold of Talamon's hands and returned their relatively gentle pressure. "The intervening years haven't aged you any." The Mounder blinked his eyes, which were barely visible under his bushy eyebrows. "When a man is wealthy and has a lot of money he can get along pretty well with the Aras-and they've got all kinds of anti-death potions and cures. I have even that to thank you for. But you don't look so bad off, yourself. Where's your fountain of youth?" Rhodan gave him an inscrutable smile. "On an unknown planet that is called the World of Eternal Life. I found it purely by accident." "Oh no!" roared Talamon, almost splitting his sides with laughter. "You're still up to your old tricks, trying to pull my leg!" He got off that ticklish subject and indicated the Drusus. "You don't mean to tell me, though, that you built that battleship on Terra? Isn't it the same class as my Arc-Koor?" "It is that, old friend, and it was built on Earth. We have several of them. I'll admit we used the Titan as a model but nevertheless I'm fulfilling my part of the agreement by coming in a ship of our own. "That I am happy to admit," smirked Talamon who both understood and agreed with Rhodan's stratagem. "But may I say hello to your companions now and introduce them to mine?" A general shaking of hands ensued all around until it came turn for the silent and motionless robot brain that had been hovering on the periphery of the group. And that naturally ended the handshaking. Only Pucky wanted to use the opportunity to make contact with the personal representative of the Regent but before he could push between the men and precipitate possible complications in the matter the Regent took the initiative. "I greet you, Perry Rhodan," rang the cold and mechanical words from a hidden loudspeaker. "Yes, it is I myself who speak to you. That which you see before you is nothing more than a relay station. We are thus in direct communication and it's exactly as if you were here on Arkon-or I there with you." "My greeting likewise to you, Regent of Arkon," replied Rhodan while concealing his excitement. "It's good to meet again after such a long time." "For me it has been but a few seconds," said the mechanical voice unemotionally. "But I agree with you; I am also pleased to see you. In the interim, much has happened." Rhodan noted that his mutants had gone with Talamon and his

companions to sit down on the nearby rocks. Khrest stood off to one side with another Arkonide engaged in a stimulating conversation. And beyond loomed the mighty Drusus—standing by in threatening silence. But across from her stood her mirror image, equally menacing. "I know," said Rhodan. "Yes, your agents have learned much, Rhodan, but I doubt that they know all that has happened." The conversation was carried on in sufficient volume so that the 2 delegations could understand every word. Marshall and the other mutants listened carefully to every word that was said. Talamon also showed interest in the parley that was going on. "What could they have missed, Regent? I know that you have made the Arkonide Empire a powerful factor again in the Milky Way and that you have reestablished peace. I am frankly very pleased about that. You have swept all enemy factions out of the way. In the Empire, order and peace reign. That's all I know, Regent. The only thing I'm wondering about is, what do you know about me and Terra?" "Not much," admitted the robot Brain. "A certain length of time ago, Terra was believed to have been destroyed. You yourself were considered dead. And now suddenly you make an appearance again. So that places new facts before us to which I must adjust myself." "Aren't you curious as to how it all happened?" "Why should I be? You live, Rhodan. That alone counts. Perhaps you intended to deceive me. If so, then you succeeded. The past is settled; only the present is important. And naturally the future. That's why I wanted to meet with you." Rhodan knew that over there in the Drusus the robot psychologists were monitoring every word that was spoken here. The evaluations and interpretations were processed automatically and the results were already at hand. He hesitated, then overcame the urge to have the output data come through. Under no circumstance did he wish to arouse the Regent's suspicion. "Then I take it, Regent, you don't want to know how I managed to fool you and the whole galaxy?" "Later, perhaps, but now there are more important problems. As you have observed, peace and order reign in the Empire, including the entire portion of the Milky Way that is known to us. All races of people live in peace and there are no more wars. At the most few pirate groups here and there try to get a toehold but they're always tracked down and destroyed by my troops. I give or recognize no mercy for those who wish war." "I confirm that our thoughts are in accord," smiled Rhodan and looked straight into the viewscreen behind which he presumed the pickup camera to be that was send his image to Arkon. "So it raises the question as to why we don't work together?" "We shall have to work together, Rhodan, if our existence is not to be endangered!" This time the Regent's voice revealed the first signs of being actually alive. It seemed to Rhodan that the vibratory harmonic of the Brain's words was worry and fear—indeed, an apprehension for naked existence itself. "I am ready to do just that, Regent, under certain provisos. In no case will I agree to be your servant." "That I do not ask of you, even though such a situation would be better than dying. And that danger, Rhodan, still exists." Once more Rhodan sensed the gravity of these statements. Unfortunately he wasn't able to make use of his weakly developed telepathic faculty now because the thoughts of a positronic brain could not be read. "What danger?" he asked simply. "It can't be defined but it has been present for as much as 10 years already. No one but myself knows about it because whenever it appeared anywhere there was nobody left behind who might have reported the matter. Do you understand, Rhodan? No survivors!" Rhodan seemed to feel an icy hand touch his heart. Did another great war threaten the united Milky Way? Did there exist some new deadly enemy who was ruthlessly determined to exterminate all humanoid races? "Can't you draw some inference as to the nature of this foe, Regent, from the kinds of weapons they used?" "Weapons?" came the Regent's question in a tone that was cold and flat. "The unknown enemy has thus far not revealed his weapons. Perhaps I haven't expressed myself clearly enough, Rhodan. I said, there were no survivors. Perhaps I should express it better: after an attack by this sinister opponent, not one living creature is left." "Are they blasted out, burnt out with energy beams?" "Not even that. They simply disappear. Entire planets have been depopulated this way. They belonged to our

Empire, having a good civilization and enjoying a well-developed biological environment with ample fauna and flora. Then, one day, on a given planet there is suddenly nothing left but the plants. The people and animals disappear as if they had never existed. Until this day I have not succeeded in finding an explanation for the phenomenon. Every precaution so far has proved fruitless. There is no defence against this enemy." Rhodan cast a quick glance at his people and at the Regent's delegates. By Talamon's reaction he perceived that the Mounder had known nothing about this danger. Talamon had turned pale and stared almost helplessly at the robot Brain. The Springers and Arkonides appeared to be disconcerted and fearful. Only Rhodan's mutants remained calm. Rhodan turned once more to the 'Baby' Regent. "What do you propose to do and how may I be of assistance?" Without hesitation, the machine said: "We have to consolidate our strengths and our intelligence in order to be able to face this danger. In this regard you are at least more mobile and flexible than I. I admit that you have more animated and capable forces at your disposal. Perhaps I have the superiority in power. Neither one nor the other will be enough by itself to stop the foe or to vanquish him. Together we will succeed-if at all." "If at all...?" Rhodan drawled the question out in some wonderment. "Don't tell me you're ready to give up hope!" "Rhodan, I've fought against this invisible menace for 10 years. 10 years is not very much time but time enough to furnish an insight. If we don't succeed in at least perceiving the nature of this horrible attacker, we are lost. The enemy will depopulate the whole Milky Way." "You exaggerate!" said Rhodan sternly. There simply couldn't be a menace of the magnitude that the robot Brain depicted. "I will help you, Regent-specifically as an equal partner and a friend. If it appears to be necessary I would even request the power of command over your battle fleets and fighter robots." "That won't work," said the Regent in a cool tone of rejection. "I cannot confer power over the Arkonides upon you." "I'll admit you are faced with a difficult decision. But either you will agree to trust me or one day the invisible menace will have gobbled up your whole empire. You yourself have nothing to fear since you are composed of inorganic matter." "I carry the responsibility for all life in this part of the Milky Way..." "Then act accordingly! Transfer part of your power to me so that I may fight this opponent." A slight pause ensued. Baldur Sikermann made use of it by cutting in and transferring a message from the laboratory of the Drusus. One of the scientists there explained in a whisper: "Our analyses show that the robot Brain is speaking the truth. It can't cope any more with this new danger that has appeared and it's glad to find a helper. It will accept all of your conditions, sir, there's no doubt about it." Rhodan answered in low tones: "Thank you, Dr. Ali el Jagat." More loudly, he said: "Sikermann, I think it would be wise to launch a few small patrol boats and have them set up surveillance around Mirsal 3. The Arkonides will follow our example." "It shall be done, sir!" Over by the rocks, Talamon nodded. He gave his officers in the Arc-Koor identical instructions. One minute later the agile guppies climbed vertically into the sky and darted into observation orbits. Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief. The danger of a surprise attack had been considerably lessened if not eliminated. For one shuddery moment he asked himself who could possibly attack them, then he turned once more to the robot Brain. "Have you arrived at a decision, Regent?" "Equal powers, Rhodan; in no case can I promise you more without endangering the stability of the empire." Rhodan nodded. "I could bargain for more but I'll forego that. I'll take only what your own free will dictates that I should receive from you. The time may yet come when you'll be ready to charge me with more responsibility. And now, tell me your plan." "I have no plan, Rhodan. We shall wait for the next attack so that you can get a picture of the situation. Then you will share your conjectures with me and we will confer as to what should be done." "Conjectures?" "Hunches, if you will. I have my own ideas concerning this foe-who he could be and how he operates. I don't wish to share these thoughts with you now for fear of influencing your own deliberations on the matter. If you arrive at the same conclusions independently of me, then there

will exist the possibility that we have found the truth. I warn you, Rhodan, it could well be that this truth may be a shattering experience. Your mind may not be able to withstand such a concept. It's pure madness..." Rhodan remained cool and collected. "I am prepared for the worst of possibilities, Regent. There are no mental dangers in this for me. Is our conference at an end now or do you have any further suggestions?" "None for the moment. You may get together with Talamon and discuss your method of mutual operation. I'll establish contact with you as soon as the unknown enemy attacks again. For the first time I am hoping that he will not keep us waiting long." The image of the subterranean chamber housing the steel hemisphere of the robot Brain faded out. The Regent 'Baby' continued to hover motionlessly on its antigrav fields. Undoubtedly it was itself in contact with the Regent but it took no further active part in the local events. "Well, you heard the Regent. Did you know about this threat?" asked Rhodan of Talamon. "I didn't have the slightest suspicion of it until today," replied the Mounder and Rhodan could tell that he was not lying. "What kind of creatures would come out of the depths of the Milky Way like that and depopulate our worlds?" "I haven't the slightest idea, Talamon. Anyway it looks as though we can forget all the other problems that we had on our minds up to this time and we can get down to business. Something has come up that's more menacing and dangerous than anything in our experience. We don't know what it is. An unknown danger is always deadlier than one that may be recognized by its characteristics." Talamon was about to answer but he was interrupted by the buzzing of Rhodan's wrist receiver... Sikermann's excited voice came through. "Alert, sir! One of our guppies has put out an alarm!" Almost in the same second, the Regent's robot relay station began to glide away toward the Arc-Koor. Talamon noted it but made no comment. One of the Arkonides in his group took a small case out of his pocket and pressed a button. A voice was heard, loud and clear: "Get back into the ship! Red alert! This planet is under attack!" For some seconds, Rhodan was surprised and confused. Had he fallen prey to a prearranged trick? But then he saw Talamon's face turning white and he knew that all of them had been catapulted suddenly into the midst of events that no one had foreseen. Red alert?! He spoke swiftly into his wrist communicator: "What's going on? I want more details!" "Our reconnaissance craft started to track alien spaceships but they lost them again. The pilots claim that the other ships were able to make themselves invisible." "Invisible?" Rhodan repeated the question-and then it hit him with a frightening shock. "Invisible!" John Marshall and Talamon joined him. "I have to get back to my ship," said the Mounder, to await further orders. This incident was totally unexpected. What the devil is happening?" "I don't know any more than you do," replied Rhodan while his thoughts raced and he tried to recall what the Regent had reported to him concerning this uncanny assailant. "At any rate, one thing is certain: this planet is being visited by an unknown force." "Unknown? Maybe the ones the Regent was telling us about?" Talamon straightened up and looked across at his ship. "But-then why don't they start attacking?" Rhodan signalled to Marshall and the others. "There's no time to discuss it, Talamon. You heard what the Regent said-we are equal partners. Hopefully this partnership will be more permanent than it was 60 years ago. So we'll be fighting our future battles together and I'm afraid we're in the first one already. Well take off and wait to see what happens. We'll keep our Com stations in constant contact. Lots of luck, Talamon. The next few hours should tell us how we may mutually combat this terrible menace." "Luck to you, Rhodan," responded the Mounder and without another word turned and strode away toward the Arc-Koor. His Arkonide and Springer companions followed silently. Without exception their faces had lost their normal healthy colour. Rhodan remained behind alone with his mutants. Pucky had already teleported himself into the Drusus and they were joined by Khrest. "We'd better get to the ship, Perry. That alert wasn't given idly-it had a very serious tone. The Arc-Koor is already preparing for an emergency takeoff. It's my advice to hurry!" Without further conversation,

they started moving. Behind them the miniature Regent glided into the lock and Talamon followed with his staff. Seconds later the giant spaceship rose and hurtled into the sky. It had faded to a mere point by the time Rhodan and his men reached the Drusus. Baldur Sikermann was waiting for him in the Control Central. "Liftoff!" ordered Rhodan and added a few other instructions. Then he hurried into Com Central and asked for contact with the scoutships. Minutes later when he returned to the Command Central, his face was as colourless and frozen as a death mask. Khrest started involuntarily and sat down in the neighbouring swivel chair. Marshall cast an imploring look at the other mutants, aware that he had never in his life seen Perry Rhodan in such a nonplussed and horrified state. Something ghastly must have occurred. In a toneless voice, Rhodan spoke to Sikermann. "The Drusus will take up an orbiting position at one light minute's distance from Mirsal 3. Issue orders to have flier K-13 ready for takeoff..." "Your special ship?" observed the First Officer. Rhodan nodded. "Yes. Marshall, Ras Tschubai and Pucky will accompany me in addition to the normal crew complement of 15 men. I want to leave the Drusus within 5 minutes." So far even the telepath Marshall had not been able to probe Rhodan's thoughts. The screen surrounding them prohibited any penetration. The tension mounted. "What are you planning to do, chief?" asked Marshall. Rhodan looked past him as he answered. "Do you know what's happened, John? These invisible ones--call them the Unseen if you will--they've begun their attack on the Mirsal System. The danger that the robot Brain told us about is reaching out for us now. If we are not able to handle this menace..." He fell silent. But Marshall had already gotten the picture. And the others along with him. 3/ CITY: "MARIE CELESTE" A humorist had once dubbed the auxiliary scoutships 'guppies' and so they were called to this day. The spherical little ships, 100 feet in diameter, were space-worthy craft capable of making hyper-transits over light-years of distance and they carried quite adequate armaments. The K-13 was hardly any different than other ships of its type but it was also equipped with hypercom gear and a tele-transmitter. In addition it had certain supplementary built-in features which had proven themselves on many a mission. In the comparatively small control room there was not much room for very many crewmembers but when one opened the door to the adjacent communications section the 2 spaces together provided a surprisingly roomy area. Behind the operating controls sat Stepan Potkin, a squat, muscular Russian with a stubble of bright blond hair. He was a lieutenant and was considered to be one of the best pilots around for smaller spacecraft. So it was no wonder that Rhodan had selected him to be the commander of his K-13. As usual, Pucky sat on a nearby couch and pretended to be bored whereas in actuality he looked forward to the adventure with keen anticipation. The idea of battling against something unseen excited him although he was not able to suppress a certain uneasiness. Marshall and Tschubai were standing close to the door while Rhodan sat next to Potkin at the controls and stared at the videoscreens. The Drusus had penetrated outer space long since and gone into its orbital course. Of the Arc-Koor there was nothing to be seen. Once more Rhodan felt the chill in his spine as he faced the thought: now we are alone and somewhere an incomprehensible danger is lurking, waiting for us. Mirsal 3 became larger again as the K-13 dropped toward the planet at half SPEOL, slowing its plunge in order not to melt by heat of friction in the atmosphere. The night side was dark and only revealed the occasional glow of brightly-lit cities. The only reassuring thing about those lights was the knowledge that life still continued here. If the Unseen had already struck, there would have been nothing but darkness below. But the main thing now was to investigate the daylight side. Before Rhodan lay the opened catalogue of the Arkonide astronauts. Its information was reliable and up to date--or at least Khrest had maintained that it was. Rhodan entertained some doubts, particularly concerning the current status of the data. According to the catalogue, Mirsal 3 was a world that was inhabited by humanoid intelligences. The original inhabitants had not developed to a height of more than 5 or 6 feet and they

sustained their own form of civilization, which was somewhat similar to that of the Middle Ages on Earth. They did not know space flight but they were familiar with the sight of Arkonide ships landing here and there, whose crews they worshipped as demigods. On Mirsal 3 there was still the old system of states and nations, which was customary on all worlds which had not yet reached the cosmic stage. Princes and kings ruled over the common citizens, whom they subjugated and exploited with their armies and mercenary troops. The rulers sat in their fortified castles and lived it up. The common man had to work for his mere existence. Rhodan set the catalogue to one side. Somehow human types of development were the same everywhere. Mirsal was no exception. The K-13 shot downward and made a whistling glide into the atmosphere. 2 minutes later, as they flew along over a small settlement, Marshall remarked, "I don't understand why nobody can be seen down there." Their velocity had been greatly reduced to hardly more than 120 miles per hour. "If there'd been an invasion here, we ought to be able to discover the traces of it." Rhodan slowly shook his head. "You forget what the Regent reported. There are no traces." Low houses huddled around a mountain on which stood some kind of castle. Medieval highroads wound their way through cultivated fields, giving mute evidence of the limited means of travel. Carts still laden with peasant produce were in the market place but not a person nor any other type of life was to be seen. Rhodan narrowed his eyes and gave a command. "Potkin, fly straight west and slow down when we get close to a larger town. I'd like to take a look at it." The city appeared soon directly before them in the afternoon sunlight. The tidy rooftops sparkled and glistened as if covered with gold and silver but this was merely due to the thin metal shingles that were in common use here. The streets were broader than in the villages but still there was not the slightest sign of life. Even at this altitude the city had the appearance of a ghost town. "Land down there in the open square," Rhodan ordered. He didn't know why but he was seized by an uncanny premonition. Never in his hundred years of life had he been confronted with the kind of situation he feared he'd be faced with here. The indications given by the Regent had not been exaggerated, by all appearances. And if even a robot Brain could sense fear... "I can't pick up any kind of thought waves," said Marshall suddenly. "Certainly the beings who constructed these houses must be able to think." Rhodan did not answer. He followed the landing manoeuvre on the screens and waited for the familiar light jolt of the ship that signified they were down. Then he signalled to Marshall and Tschubai. "You 2 and Pucky come with me. Potkin, stand by to cover us with weapons if necessary and don't let us out of your sight. I'm depending on you." "Yes, sir!" answered the Russian gravely and he shut off the engine. "You may rely on me, chief. Are you taking any weapons?" Rhodan nodded affirmatively and went out of the control room accompanied by the 3 mutants. Before they got to the airlock they procured some hand rayguns and a few atomic grenades from the weapons cabinet. Then, a few minutes later, they stood on the surface of Mirsal 3 for the 2nd time. The K-13 had landed in the middle of the open square. It showed signs of some sort of simple maintenance and had probably been used for town meetings and market fairs. Close to the ship was a vehicle that had obviously been drawn by an animal. The reins hung down loosely as though the horse-or whatever was used here in the place of a horse-had slipped free of them. Rhodan looked critically at the reins but said nothing. Marshall, who happened to pick up his thoughts, also glanced at the reins. A questioning expression came to his face. But he didn't have time to solve the mystery of the reins because at that moment Pucky whispered excitedly: "Over there... on the wall!" They saw it simultaneously. A shadow flitted past the spot, paused for a moment-and then disappeared. "It can make itself invisible," said Pucky excitedly and he was more nervous than they had ever seen him before. "He simply dissolved into the air in front of our eyes!" "And his thought impulses?" asked Rhodan as calmly as possible. "Did they also become invisible?" He did not receive an answer because there wasn't any. With ready rayguns they entered the nearest house and searched

it. To their amazement they found everything in such order that it seemed the inhabitants would return at any moment. Nothing had been disturbed or misplaced; everything stood or lay in its proper location and position. On the primitive hearth a fire still burned, even though the heavy logs had burned down, thus indicating that no one had replenished the fire in hours. But they did not meet a living soul. "Where are they?" gasped Ras Tschubai, who was gripped by superstitious fright. "They just couldn't simply have disappeared!" Pucky, who was so used to scoffing at things, now remained silent. In grim speechlessness he stared at the abandoned household articles, into the empty rooms and hallways and out of the windows at the lifeless streets. The nape of his neck bristled, indicating the mouse-beaver's inner agitation. Marshall placed a hand on the African's arm. "Everything has a natural explanation, Ras. We'll find out yet what all this means. I'll grant you it's an unusual situation not to find any trace of the struggle or any clue as to the how and why of it-but as I say, we'll still get to the bottom of it." Even Rhodan had to admit that this was very poor consolation. But he couldn't improve on it, himself. In the rest of the houses the same condition prevailed. Not a living soul or an animal; nothing. There was only the same typical orderliness in all the rooms and an almost expectant atmosphere, as though the vanished occupants would return at any moment. But the robot Regent had already stated that they would never return again... Rhodan pushed on farther. They traversed several narrow side streets and arrived at the outskirts of the town. Here the aspect was more humble and rural. The large houses gave way to smaller ones behind which there were gardens and fields and animal stalls. It was in one of these stalls that they ran into the same puzzle for the 2nd time. There were chains fastened to the walls which ended in rings. It was obvious that these rings had encircled the necks of fettered animals. And now they lay empty and unopened on the ground in the stalls, all of them in the same position next to each other in which the animals must have been standing. Who had freed the animals from their fastenings without opening the rings? "Even those reins we saw were still all hooked to bridle and harness," muttered Marshall, remembering the abandoned horse cart. "It's just as if all the animals dematerialised." Again Rhodan did not answer. Pensively he stepped outside into the light of the sinking sun and started on his way back to the K-13. He knew that they still had a long way to go. And certainly a dangerous one. Lt. Marcel Rous was in command of auxiliary craft K-7. He approached the night side of Mirsal 3 from outer space. Marcel was a dark-haired man who was high spirited and his enthusiasm for things was sometimes out of proportion to his commonsense. In spite of a love of life, he was reckless and daring and his impulsiveness had already gotten him into many a previous scrape. At an altitude of merely 1500 feet he swept along above the surface of the unfamiliar terrain. His loudspeaker poured out a ceaseless radio voice traffic covering reports from other 'guppies' and the corresponding return instructions from the Drusus. Something had happened on this strange world but nobody would venture to say just what it was. The tracking instruments of the K-7 had more than once registered solid objects in the atmosphere of Mirsal 3 but were never able to hold their trace for more than 3 or 4 seconds. Then the screens would clear and the electronic blips would die away. Marcel was sure that even ships with unimaginable acceleration capability could not be swift enough to elude the range of the tracking sweeps. It was equally impossible for ships to escape the multiple high-intensity beam sweeps of the special tracker, even if by some technical means they could be made invisible. Normal light and electromagnetic sources could be warped to one side but not these specialized tracking beams. Even invisible ships would have to become visible on the screens. But such was not the case. So Marcel Rous sensed in all this an element of the mysterious and permitted himself to be drawn into its spell. Ignoring all commands from the Drusus he decided to make some investigations on his own hook. With this purpose in mind he had dropped down out of orbit and plummeted like a bird of prey toward the surface of Mirsal 3. There was a reason he had chosen the

night side. Here he felt he had less chance of being discovered by the uncanny opponent than in the bright light of the sun. Of course he had no way of knowing whether or not the unknown foe were capable of seeing perhaps as well in the dark as in the light. Rous recognized at first glance that an invasion in the ordinary sense of the word had not occurred here. Down below everything appeared to be peaceful and normal. In the large cities the streets were straight as an arrow and brightly lit, therefore unmistakable. Although the inhabitants of Mirsal 3 were representative of a more or less medieval type of civilization, nevertheless they employed electricity. Perhaps the Arkonides had helped them to discover at least this one modern convenience. At any rate, the cities were brightly lit, which indicated a bustling state of activity. This impression persisted until Rous decided to fly still lower and come to a hovering position above the centre of the city. The viewscreens gave the Frenchman a still closer look at the houses and streets and at that point he caught his breath. It was almost 10 seconds before he turned to a 2nd man who shared the control room with him. "What do you notice about it, Becker?" The cadet directed his attention to the screen in front of him. It took him a few moments to adjust his eyes to the brightness so that he could make out details beyond the glare of the street lamps. Then he leaned back and replied: "Why do they keep their streets lit up when they're all asleep?" Rouse nodded slowly. It was precisely the question he had asked himself. "It's long past midnight by local time. In almost all the houses the lights are on full blast, just as if it were only around 9 in the evening. And it's a worse case farther east where it's more like 4 in the morning and they're still all lit up. Yep, it gets curiouser and curiouser..." When it came to being venturesome, Cadet Becker was not to be outdone by his superior officer. "Well, if we were to make a landing down there, maybe we could-" Rous answered somewhat undecided: "We aren't cleared to do that, Becker. We're not permitted to act on our own. And if we did we'd carry the responsibility for the whole crew. If something happened..." "So what could happen?" asked Becker, giving him the moral support he had hoped for. "We haven't anything to fear from the inhabitants here, certainly, who haven't even got energy weapons. And as far as an alleged invasion by an unknown enemy is concerned... well, so far I haven't been able to see any signs of it." Rous was obviously hesitant. "I don't know. Maybe I'd better make contact with the Drusus and try to get permission for a landing..." "Whatever you think, sir," said Becker somewhat formally, as though he was offended. "Anyway, I'm convinced that they won't grant you permission. The chief doesn't go for unnecessary risks, except when he takes them himself." "Hm-m-m," murmured Rous, who was vacillating between duty and temptation. Fortunately he was interrupted in his deliberations. From the loudspeaker came the voice of David Stern, who was on duty in the Com Room of the Drusus "K-7, come in! State your location." Rous let out a curse and then activated the transmitter. "Lt. Rous here! I'm on the night side of Mirsal 3." "You left your orbit?" was the astonished reply. "Yes. We were pursuing an alien ship but lost all visual and instrument contact with it. It must have landed in the city that's under us now. Should we pursue farther?" It took a minute for an answer to return. "You are ordered by Lt.-Col. Sikermann to proceed as follows: you will land in an easily observable place and send out 2 fighting robots with 3 crewmembers. You will personally remain on board the K-7 and take off at the slightest indication of an attack. Is that clear?" "And my men?" asked Rous. "I can't just leave them in the lurch." "The ship must not fall into the hands of the enemy! Where your men are concerned, we will take care of that matter." "Any further orders?" "No, Lt. Rous. Keep in contact with me. That is all. Over and out!" Marcel Rous glanced at Cadet Becker, whose eyes were bright with anticipation. "It looks like I drew the short straw, Becker-so that gives you the chance to grab a medal or something. You might even get a promotion. Take 2 men and 2 robots with you-and then you've got yourself a furlough in town." Minutes later they hovered over a brightly illuminated public square and then descended swiftly. The spherical ship

landed gently. Rous had activated every available viewscreen in order to obtain the maximum possible circular perspective of the place. He studied the square and the adjoining houses carefully. Nothing moved. The city actually appeared to be dead. It struck him as odd that there were objects lying around on the uneven pavement which had no business being there. Over there next to the gutter, a broadsword was leaning against the base of a wall. Close by lay a shield. It looked as though a sentry had unburdened himself of these accoutrements in order to take a stroll for himself. A short distance away, Rous saw a collapsed suit of armour that showed signs of having been in a heavy fight. Nowhere was there a breath of life. The brightly lit rooms seen through the windows were empty; not a single shadow revealed itself on the light-flooded windowpanes. "Ready?" asked the lieutenant. The answer came by radio from the airlock. "Cadet Becker with 2 men and 2 robots-ready to begin the mission, sir." "Good luck!" replied Rous. Becker breathed a sigh of relief, even though his lively sense of adventure of a few moments before had subsided somewhat. But after all, weren't the 2 heavily armed robots protection enough? They could defend him against a whole company of attacking enemies if need be. And the 2 cadets who accompanied him were not exactly softies. The impulse-beamers lay easily in their hands and revealed not the slightest tremor. No, he could rely completely upon his companions. The outer hatch of the lock swung open and the ramp glided down to the ground. Becker took the lead, followed by the robots. The 2 other men brought up the rear. The silence of the sleeping or murdered city surrounded them. Nothing was to be heard other than the heavy tread of the robots on the stone pavement. Becker felt the fear of the inexplicable rising up within him, threatening to overpower him. The dark sky arched above the bright street lamps, looming like a black hole out of which the foe could strike before he could be detected. The foe? What foe? Was there any enemy here at all? Becker stayed close to the 2 robots. "You men watch behind us and to both sides," he whispered to the other 2 cadets, who kept their weapons continuously in a fire-ready position. "I'll concentrate more on what happens ahead and above us." The public square was not overly big but it still required almost 2 minutes for them to reach the house fronts. There were many potholes in the street but this was not surprising, considering that the people on Mirsal 3 still lived in the equivalent of the Middle Ages. Becker looked about. Not 200 yards distant was the K-7 standing on its telescopic struts. He knew that Lt. Rous was sitting at the viewscreens, watching every move he made. Without doubt his hands were also ready at the fire controls of the heavy rayguns. The reassurance of not being alone flooded through Becker like a pleasant balm. Purely by chance he caught a shadowy movement out of the corner of his eye and turned around swiftly. It was up there in the 2nd story of one of the houses. The light from the window was not quite as bright as in other places and it even varied its intensity as he watched it. The impression was that someone was going back and forth in front of the light source and blocking it at irregular intervals with his body. Becker felt his pulse start to race. This was it-the one special chance of the whole mission! He had to grasp it at any cost! "You wait down here," he whispered to his men. Then he looked at one of the robots. "R-2, follow me!" "Don't you think it would be better if...?" one of the other cadets started to say but Becker cut him off. "I'm going alone! Why expose all of us to danger at one time?" "Becker!" came Marcel Rous' voice over the radio. In the wrist receiver its volume was not too great. "Be careful!" "Don't worry, Lieutenant. I'll be on my guard." The steps of the staircase creaked protesting under the weight of the robot but Becker didn't care now. Nothing could hold him back. He had seen something and he was going to find out what it was. Who could be walking back and forth up there in an abandoned city? Had one of the inhabitants been left behind? Why? Becker decided not to indulge in vain attempts to answer senseless questions. He tightened his grip on the butt of his weapon and climbed the stairs behind the robot. The door to the 2nd floor apartment was open. The vestibule beyond lay in

semi-darkness since only the staircase well had a light. No sound was to be heard as the robot halted and waited for Becker. But then a door creaked loudly and clearly. Becker started at the sound and brought up his gun. It had come from the apartment in question. So someone was there after all. First the alternating light, now the creaking door. This could be no illusion-not now. Becker signalled to R-2 and went in ahead. The robot followed cautiously. The door of these living quarters had a crude lock that would not have hindered any intruder. But the door was already open. Beyond it, Becker now noticed that a 2nd door also stood open. It led into a room that must overlook the square outside. Perhaps to the very window behind which he had seen the moving shadow. Becker glided forward until he was close to this latter door. He waited until R-2 had joined him, then kicked the door completely open and entered the lighted room. It was empty. The window was open just a crack and Becker now became aware of a light draft coming from it, which gently swayed the door behind the robot. The door creaked again. At the same time he saw a light curtain wave like a ghost next to the source of light, which was a night lamp on a table. Nearby were 2 beds. The covers had been pulled off, revealing the clear impression of 2 human bodies. Becker was almost tempted to check with his hands to see if the impressions there were still warm. The waving curtain in front of the bed caused the light from the lamp to wax and wane against the window facing the street. The door creaked because of the breeze. The riddle was solved. Somewhat disillusioned, the cadet lowered his weapon. He had let himself get all stirred up, like a fool, over a lousy bed curtain. "What's happening?" Marcel Rous' voice suddenly broke the silence. "Everything's okay," Becker answered curtly, and turned to go. "It was just the wind. These people forgot to close the window before they decided to migrate." "Any special observations?" Becker took another look around. "No, Lieutenant. Some married couple's bedroom, very comfortably furnished. I'd like to know where the occupants have gotten to. Their clothes are still hanging over the chairs. They must have been moonstruck and decided to take a trip in their nightgowns." "Mirsal 3 doesn't have a moon," said Rous dryly. "Come on out of there, Becker." "I'm coming," replied Becker and he turned again to leave. Just as he reached the street below and saw his 2 waiting companions, something happened that he wasn't able to explain later. But the 'later' part for any explaining seemed also problematical. At first he saw the spaceship only 200 yards away, brightly illuminated by all the street lamps and the glare of surrounding windows. Then he saw his 2 companions and the waiting robot. And in the next moment everything began slowly to disappear before his eyes. Becker was brought to an abrupt halt when he noted the change. His robotic companion took no heed of it but simply marched on by. But even as the robot passed, he saw that even it appeared to dissolve into the air. He let out a horrified cry that was even heard by Rous. Becker could only hear the voice of his commanding officer faintly ringing in his ears. "...back here at once! On the double! Otherwise you will..." Becker heard no more. He stared into the widened eyes of his 2 men. One of them hesitated as though to grasp him but then turned to flee. He had opened his mouth as though shouting at him but Becker heard no sound. Not only did the world around him sink into a complete darkness but into soundlessness as well. And then it became black, all silent and peaceful. It was like being 500 fathoms deep beneath the surface of the sea. But now even all sensation had left him. Becker felt nothing more. Lt. Marcel Rous saw Becker come out of the house and was about to breathe a sigh of relief when the uncanny phenomenon occurred. At first Becker became faintly transparent, only to disappear then completely. He must not have had a chance to hear the command to return but his companions and the robots probably did because they set themselves in motion toward the ship. Meanwhile, there was no more of Cadet Becker to be seen. The place where he had just been standing was empty. Whereas the 2 robots took their time, the 2 remaining men began to run in an attempt to reach the safety of the ship as quickly as possible. But they were not swift enough for the mysterious force also reached for them. At

first their legs weirdly disappeared and then their lower torsos. For one terrible moment Marcel saw the heads of the 2 men flying through the air, about 5 or 6 feet off the ground. Following the motions of their now invisible bodies, they bobbed along in a shallow sort of sine-wave. Then they, too, melted away into nothingness. Marcel Rous perceived the phenomenon without comprehending it. Unscathed, the 2 robots marched along toward the open airlock of the K-7. "K-7 to Drusus! 3 men attacked by the Unseen and... also made invisible!" Rous shouted into the microphone. He couldn't think of any other way to put it. "They've disappeared..." "Take off at once!" came the return command. "The 2 robots are still..." "Take off!" Rous was jolted into activity by the tone of Sikermann's voice. In a single hand movement he rammed home the drive switch to full acceleration, even while using the other hand to close the outer lock. The night-shadowed planet receded into the depths. 2 robots were left behind. They watched the ship's departure in unruffled robotic calm. Their positronic brains were capable of comprehending all logical occurrences but in this case they were at a loss. They remained behind on an uninhabited world and searched for the enemy. But they found him not. "Out here space is full of thought-impulses," said Fellmer Lloyd, speaking to Rhodan out of the videoscreen. "But not one of them makes any sense. It's as though these aliens could only think in splinters and fragments. Do you follow me, chief?" "No, not in the slightest." Rhodan was sweeping low across the depopulated cities of the day side, trying to find a sign of life. "It seems that the attackers live in outer space. Here below there's hardly a trace. Marshall and Pucky aren't getting many of those alien impulses at all." "Out here its swarming with them-but they're senseless. As I said, they're just so many fragments. A real brain-rocker!" "Try to get a clear fix on at least one of those thoughts. That alone would be a helpful beginning..." "It's impossible. You might as well try to judge the contents of a book by a single word or by its cover. Unfortunately there are critics who like to do that but it leaves something of their reliability to be desired, I'm afraid. It's the same here with me now: I catch a single thought fragment-how do I make something out of it?" "Don't give up hope, Lloyd. And above all, try to determine the source of the impulses. Maybe Ralf Marten could press through to the source." "Hold on, I'll give you Marten. He can tell you himself." A slight pause followed. Rhodan watched the other viewscreens and saw the landscape of Mirsal 3 pass beneath him. Abandoned castles stood in the midst of empty cities and towns. In the cultivated fields he could still see evidence of empty harnesses where draft animals had been. Riderless farm vehicles stood about in the midst of fallen articles of clothing and the drifting smoke from the embers of campfires. Ralf Marten appeared on the screen and greeted him casually over the intervening 600,000 miles. As a teleoptician he was capable of transferring his mind into another living being and seeing through the other entity's eyes. But this time it appeared that his talent had failed him. "Lloyd told me what you want, chief. I've tried it but the source of the impulses we're picking up is too indefinable. You can't tie down any direction. I've tried a couple of transfers but they always ended in nothingness. Even when I was sure of my bearings, my mental projections landed in empty space. No, chief, it's senseless. I can't pull it off." Rhodan remained calm. "I'm not reproaching you, Marten. We are facing an enemy that is bodiless and invisible. It now appears that he also knows how to disguise or conceal his very mentality from us. That's even worse than what we had feared. We're powerless as long as he doesn't make a direct attack, out in the open-and it appears that he's not interested in that." "Lt. Becker and 2 crewmen of the K-7 dissolved into thin air, chief. Certainly that's an open attack." "I'm not entirely sure whether or not we should consider it as such," replied Rhodan. "It could have been a mistake on their part. In any case we have to be on our guard the next time we set foot on Mirsal 3. And if we're going to solve this riddle we'll have to land again. The Regent of Arkon's been at this for 10 years already, so we can't expect to succeed the first day. Keep on trying, Marten. Sooner or later

we'll have a stroke of luck. Rhodan waited until David Stem switched circuits. The face of Baldur Sikermann appeared on the screen and it was exceptionally pale. "What's wrong with you, Sikermann?" asked Rhodan in some wonderment. He had never seen this officer in such a state of consternation. "Did the Galactic Gremlin grab you?" "Him I could take care of," replied the lieutenant colonel with a trace of returning self-control. "But these cracky blips and bogeys all around, they're driving me donk! Every minute I think the Drusus is about to crash into an alien ship our beams pick up on our course-then suddenly there's nothing again." "But you should be overjoyed, not disappointed." "It's no joking matter!" retorted Sikermann peevishly. "Incidentally, what's your position?" "Rats in his belfry!" misquoted Pucky from the background where he lay on the couch. Rhodan gave him a reprimanding look. "We're on course for the Drusus and we'll be on board shortly. I'm planning to go back with a beefed up crew and make another landing on Mirsal 3. Maybe even with the Drusus itself." "Oh brother!" moaned Sikermann. But that was all. Rhodan cut the connection and concerned himself with navigating the K-13. Lt. Potkin responded to the course programming and went into high acceleration. Almost simultaneously with the return of the K-7 under Lt. Marcel Rous, the K-13 glided through the wide maw of the ship's lock and landed in the hangar area of the Drusus. "Potkin, stay here and stand by for takeoff again. I'll be right back." Rhodan waited for Marcel Rous to get out of his ship so that he could get a first-hand report again on what the lieutenant had experienced. But even the eyewitness account brought him no closer to a solution. The incident had no rational or logical explanation. The attackers apparently had the capability of making themselves as well as other life forms invisible. This was the plain fact and nothing more. "This is a foe whom we dare not underestimate," said Rhodan when Marcel had finished. "To combat an invisible enemy like this we're going to have to concentrate every possible means at our disposal and put it to use. Let's hope that Becker and his 2 companions can be rescued. Keep your ship ready for action. I don't know yet how much we're going to have to throw into this battle." Marcel watched him go and then climbed back into the airlock of his guppy. He muttered to himself: "I'd sure like to know what he means by 'battle'. He can't mean we should make war against something invisible!" Rhodan left the hangar and hurried through various antigrav lifts up to the Command Central where Sikermann was waiting for him. All mutants were present and there also was Khrest whose face reflected an unusual state of alarm. "The aliens must be in a continuous state of hypertransition," said the Arkonide gravely when he saw Rhodan. "The tracking equipment makes them show up plainly and then in the next second the indicators give positive proof that nothing's there. I'm afraid that the theory of invisibility isn't quite the correct one." Rhodan nodded thoughtfully. "That's what I've been afraid of, too, even though that doesn't explain much, either. How are you doing, Marten? Any success?" "About 5 minutes ago I tried a transfer jump. The thought impulses were coming from a definite direction and were holding for quite a few seconds. For a moment or so I made contact and penetrated into an alien brain but before I could start to see through the other entity's eyes I was ejected violently. That's something that just never happened before." "Do you have any way of explaining it?" Ralf Marten shook his head in despair. "None, sir. It's incomprehensible. But I'm convinced that it wasn't some other living being that ejected me out of its brain. It was rather something else, a thing that seems to be some uncanny force or power. I was detected by the entity I tried to penetrate and it did something-what it was, I don't know." Rhodan regarded Marten through narrowed eyes. "Did you ever try to penetrate one of these entities just as his ship was going into hyperspace? Would that explain the effect you're describing?" Ralf Marten nodded, somewhat surprised. "Well I can imagine something like that happening, of course, but naturally I don't know for sure. You don't mean to say that maybe...?" Rhodan dodged the question. "I don't have any direct supposition about it. It's just that we have to examine every possibility and put it to use." He looked at the others.

"I want to land on Mirsal 3 with all members of the Mutant Corps. We take off in the K-13 in 10 minutes. The Drusus will follow exactly 3 minutes later and will also make a landing. I've located a favourable place by the walls of a city." "Why do we have to take all the risk by ourselves?" Sikermann wanted to know. "What about the Arkonides?" "You mean Talamon and the robot Brain?" "Yes, they're the ones I mean." Rhodan shrugged his shoulders. "Talamon is under the command of the Regent, not under mine. I don't have the right or power yet to interfere with him." Sikermann was about to say something more but then he decided to remain silent. With his mouth tightly closed, he turned to the controls. Rhodan regarded his broad back for awhile, then he beckoned to Khrest. "It would be better for you to remain here, Khrest. Give Sikermann all the support you can in his tasks. We'll remain in contact." Together with his mutants he returned to the hangar. It took another 3 minutes for him to shoot out into space in the K-13 and establish a direct course for Mirsal 3. At a great distance, the Drusus followed. Within another 10 minutes he landed on an open field before the gates of a city which was devoid of any living creature. As though isolated from them, the Drusus made a separate landing 3 minutes later. All life on the planet appeared to have been extinguished. Nothing moved and even the mysterious appearance of alien blips on the tracking screens had diminished. Marten and Lloyd were no more successful than Marshall or Pucky. They couldn't pick up the slightest trace of an alien thought impulse. Had the Unseen suspended their attack? Rhodan distrusted the lull in activity. He suspected that it was much more like the calm before the storm. From his open airlock he watched while a file of fighter robots in full company strength marched out of the storage holds of the Drusus and approached the edge of the city. Pucky suddenly appeared beside him. "Sikermann wants to see you, Rhodan. He claims it's urgent. It seems that Talamon has been heard from." Rhodan asked no questions but instead hurried in the lift up, to the Com Central. Sikermann's face stared at him from the viewscreen. "I am in contact with the Arc-Koor, sir. Shall I relay it?" "Switch it over here and fast!" Sikermann's face disappeared almost instantly, to be replaced by the massive head of the Mounder. There was a desultory smile on Talamon's face as he recognized Rhodan. "I wanted to talk to you before I go into transition." There was a note of regret in his booming voice. "I don't want you to think that I'm afraid but I have to follow the Regent's orders." "And the Regent is telling you to retreat?" asked Rhodan incredulously. "How is that possible? I thought the Brain asked us to investigate the great danger that's threatening our universe..." "It doesn't want to expose the Arc-Koor to any danger, Rhodan. I'll bring the ship to Arkon and then I'll come back here in my own ship. You can depend on that." "I can't stop you, Talamon, however regrettable it is. We have our one chance now to discover the unknown enemy, but-so I'll have to do it alone. Say hello to the Regent for me." "Your words sound bitter to me," said Talamon in a troubled tone. "It's not my fault if I have to get out of here. The Arc-Koor is already racing toward the transition point-I'll be hypering in 5 minutes. Goodbye, Perry Rhodan. I'll still make it back here today." "I'll be expecting you," answered Rhodan, ending the conversation. Deep in thought, he returned to the airlock and watched while the company of robots marched through the gates into the city. "What now?" whispered Marshall. "There's nobody in the city-I should know. There's not a smidgen of a thought-impulse around." Rhodan answered in a slow, strange tone of voice. "The Unseen might as well be non-thinkers as far as thought-waves are concerned. They not only have an optical cloak of invisibility but a mental one as well." Marshall did not answer. He felt as if suddenly turned to ice... 4/ UNSEEN ASSAILANTS Through the deserted streets of the city moved 4 men who seemed outwardly calm and collected but were at a vibrant pitch of tension and excitement within. 5 paces behind them waddled Pucky the mouse-beaver, who formed the rearguard. Since he couldn't walk as swiftly as the others, he had to make the best of it. Rhodan and Fellmer Lloyd were in front, followed closely by John Marshall and Ras Tschubai with their weapons

in fire-readiness. The Afroterranian strained hard to conceal his instinctive fear of the supernatural but it was a doubtful effort even in spite of his schooling and his state of maturity. In separate deployment through the city, the robots searched everywhere for signs of life. Rhodan could participate in their communications through his wrist radio. There had been nothing new up to this point. A high, massive-looking building caught his attention. He came to a halt, and-gratefully-so did Pucky. "That looks very imposing," said Rhodan, pointing to the building. "Might be the town hall or something of the sort. Shall we go in?" "Why not?" agreed Marshall. "This invisible danger is present everywhere but maybe we can find a clue there as to what's happened to the inhabitants of the city." The others nodded. They all moved forward once more. Then Rhodan stopped before the lofty main entrance. "Pucky, do you care to take a look in there?" The mouse-beaver understood immediately. "If you think I'm afraid you're wrong," he retorted reproachfully, since he was also reading Rhodan's mind. "After all, any time I want to I can disappear in case something goes wrong." Marshall shuddered slightly. "It's gotten to where I can't hear that word 'disappear' anymore without getting a rash of gooseflesh." Pucky gave him a quick glance, concentrated on making a short teleport jump into the building-then disappeared in a swirl of shimmering air. In 10 seconds he was back. "It's a place of public assembly like an auditorium," he announced, smoothing down his fur. "I was in a wide hall where the lights were all still blazing, even with the sunshine. Nobody's there but it looks to me like they may have taken a break and could be coming back any second." "Let's go," Rhodan decided, already climbing the wide steps. "We can't neglect the slightest possibility of a clue, however small it might be. We have to find out where these people disappeared to-otherwise we'll never find our own men who were snatched by the Unseen." After traversing various halls and small rooms, they finally arrived in the big chamber that Pucky had visited. They stood wordlessly just inside the door and sensed once more the uncomfortable nearness of the sinister force that threatened to seize them. The hall was empty as were the rows of seats which formed a half-circle rising upward toward the rear like an amphitheatre. There was a desk installed in front of each of the seats, on which were papers and writing materials. It actually did appear as though the delegates gathered here had just stepped out for a short recess. Nobody would leave their notes and memoranda lying there like that if they didn't intend to come right back. "Somebody is here," whispered Fellmer Lloyd suddenly. "I can sense it clearly." Rhodan himself was a partial telepath but he sensed nothing. It was different with Pucky. "Lloyd is right," he whispered. "There's somebody here in this hall. I can... feel him. Yes, that's the right word. His thoughts... there are many thoughts but they're meaningless and fragmentary. They come and they go..." Ras Tschubai was grimly silent. His hand clutched the butt of his weapon while his eyes roved about in search of a target. Rhodan, sensing he was getting ready to rescue himself by teleporting, warned him softly, "Under no circumstance may you teleport from here-unless you take 2 of us with you. Is that understood?" Ras nodded like a criminal caught in the act. There were plenty of hiding places in the chamber. The enemy could find concealment behind every chair, bench or desk-that is, if he found it necessary. Bright light flooded the wide room but there was no one to be seen. "Maybe it's just our nerves," whispered Rhodan, searching for some explanation. "They may be deceiving us." "Nobody is fooling me," Pucky protested shrilly and he stiffened his ears attentively in the air. "Somebody is here! In fact there's quite a few 'somebodies'-I just can't see them, that's all!" Rhodan regarded the rows of chairs with a furrowed brow. He was acutely aware of the fearful danger hovering over all of them. He didn't even think much of his own theory about over-taut nerves. He had the sudden impression that he had seen somebody up by the speaker rostrum. It had only been a shadow that emerged out of nothingness and as quickly disappeared. A ghostly wind seemed to waft through the chamber-as cold as a draft from a tomb. It enveloped the 4 men and Pucky in its chilling presence. Then it faded away. Again a shadow swept straight

through the hall. Ras Tschubai raised his weapon swiftly. The high-energy impulse beam whizzed brightly toward the blurred target-passed through it and set fire to the row of benches beyond. Smoke curled up, then flames leapt toward the ceiling. Even Marshall fired senselessly at a target that disappeared in the same moment it was perceived. "I'm for hightailing it out of here!" cried Pucky in fright. Nobody had ever seen Pucky this way, not even that time on Volat when he had befriended the giant Kittikat after first having fled from her in fear. "There's no defence against those...!" "Smooth it!" Rhodan whispered. "If we run now we won't ever find out who we're dealing with." He turned toward the shimmering shadows and outlines of light silhouettes, calling loudly: "Whoever you may be, let yourselves be seen. We have no hostile intentions." There was no answer. Instead, something horrible was happening to Fellmer Lloyd: the mutant began to dissolve. Rhodan needed only half a second to see the weird phenomenon and take action. On an impulse, he shouted: "Tschubai! Grab Lloyd and Marshall! Jump outside!" Almost simultaneously he reached for Pucky's arm. "Out! You jump too quick!" Then the chamber receded from his eyes and when he opened them again he stood outside on the street next to Pucky. In the same moment 3 human figures materialized about 50 yards away-Ras Tschubai together with Marshall and Fellmer Lloyd, the latter having been reinstated to his full substance and solidity. Then Rhodan realized: the only thing that could rescue one from the grasp of the Unseen was a teleporter. He breathed a sigh of relief. Even if the foe was unknown, at least now there was a means of eluding him: men in the company of a teleporter could escape at any time an attack by the Unseen. Rhodan had a sense of having won the first round in this unequal battle. Even though only on points, of course-and that just barely... "There's something about our theories that doesn't jibe," said Baldur Sikermann, looking dubiously at Rhodan. "I've discussed this very thoroughly with Capt. Gorlat." An unprepossessing man of middle stature, red-haired and energetic, Capt. Hubert Gorlat was the security officer of the Drusus. His profession had taught him to indulge in sufficient circumspection prior to any conclusion making so that he could avoid mistakes. Rhodan looked beyond Khrest and fixed his gaze on Gorlat. "Do you have an idea?" he asked with interest. The captain nodded slowly. "Maybe it can't be called an idea but I'd like to warn everybody against making false conclusions. We've determined that the ships of the Unseen actually cannot be seen and can hardly even be picked up by our tracking equipment. Their bogey blips simply disappear again. At least that much, I believe, we can rely on as established fact." "Correct!" admitted Rhodan. He concealed his curiosity, even though he had a suspicion of what was to come. "It's also established," continued Gorlat, "that these aliens can even make inorganic matter become invisible. Now I have asked myself why they haven't done so with our robots. Until now they have only taken humans prisoner-if such they may be called." Rhodan nodded reflectively and was about to say something when he was interrupted by the shrill clamour of bells ringing. Simultaneously a howling of sirens was heard outside the ship. Red alert! They were sitting in the Command Central of the Drusus. The guppies stood close by ready for takeoff. Rhodan and his 4 mutants had only returned a few minutes before from their reconnaissance foray in order to have a palaver with Sikermann and his officers concerning the situation. And now this general alarm! Rhodan was the first to reach the open airlock. The nature of the alarm indicated that this was an attack here on the surface and not from outer space. The 3 other auxiliary craft were standing close to the K13. There was no sign of the crew. The energy cannons aimed threateningly at the city walls and the open city gates. The hatch cowlings of the Drusus glided to one side to reveal the spiral-fluted muzzles of the heavy impulse beamers, which now emerged and swivelled toward the city. But where was the enemy? Sikermann came panting up to Rhodan, gasping for breath. "Our robots... where are they?" "They're combing the town," replied Rhodan. "Up till now they haven't found a living soul." Sikermann pointed ahead. "Don't you hear that, sir? There's shooting in the city. The

alarm was set off by the robots. They must have clashed with an enemy. Up in Com Central some of the robot radio contacts have been interrupted." "Ras Tschubai, come with me," said Rhodan and he took the Afroterranian by the arm. "No, nobody else! Let's go, Ras-jump!" "Where to?" "To the market place in the middle of the town. We have to find out what's happened. And don't forget, Ras, the minute either of us is attacked by the Unseen, teleport immediately! It doesn't matter where to-just away! It's the only security we've got." Sikermann was still talking but into empty air. Rhodan rind Ras had already disappeared. They materialized inside the city and for a moment stood in solitary isolation on the wide plaza. The fronts of the houses loomed menacingly on all sides but Rhodan knew that the weird opponent would not be hiding in these dwellings. He undoubtedly had other capabilities. For all they knew, the foe could be standing right in front of them-and they couldn't see him. They couldn't see him because he was invisible and also screened his thoughts from them. "Robots-over there!" shouted Tschubai and he grasped Rhodan's arm, ready for another jump should the occasion demand it. "They've opened fire against whom, though? I don't see anything." Rhodan stared in amazement at the opposite side of the square where a broad avenue terminated. There he saw 10 robots retreating toward the plaza while firing all their weapons into the avenue in the direction from which they had come. The energy beams melted the pavement and the walls of the buildings. The molten masonry dropped ponderously to the ground and formed puddles which soon hardened. Once Rhodan made out a fleeting shadow that seemed to crumple in the blast of a ray beam-then it disappeared. Otherwise the invisible enemy remained passive. He did not return the fire. "How come the robots are retreating?" asked Tschubai. His entire body was trembling. Rhodan didn't blame him. "They must be under attack, Ras. I don't know." Rhodan stopped in mid sentence. His heartbeat almost faltered as he suddenly realized that Capt. Gorlat's theory or observation had not been formulated without reason. The leading robot dissolved into the air. First its lower portion disappeared up to the torso linkage. Its weapons kept firing but then they suddenly ceased and were no longer there. Briefly the upper portion of the body hovered above the ground without apparent support, then it disappeared, including the head. So these enemy beings could also snatch up the heretofore unconquerable fighting robots into their shadowy realm, from which there had been no return thus far. The remaining robots still fought as they retreated. At least one thing was certain: they had seen the enemy and attempted to destroy him. They had no weapons other than their energy guns at their disposal. They could not be blamed for the fact that such weapons were of no use here. The 2nd Arkonide colossus disappeared. "If the Unseen continue to press forward, they'll destroy all our robots-I mean-well, destroy isn't the right expression. I should say: grab them all. That's what they do-they just haul them over into their invisible realm." Rhodan spoke factually as though there were no danger present. "I'd give plenty to know what it looks like on their side." "Where?" asked Tschubai, who stared motionlessly at the marching robots, just as another of them dissolved into nothing. Rhodan didn't go into the subject. He was facing another problem. "We have to stop them because if they get to our ships the enemy will attack them too. And I wouldn't know how we could prevent it. Back to the Drusus, Tschubai!" Baldur Sikermann was still standing in the open airlock. He sighed in visible relief when he saw Rhodan. "A short message came in from the Arc-Koor, sir. Talamon hasn't gone into transition yet and is staying here in the system. He has made a remarkable discovery that he wants to inform the Regent on Arkon about. He hopes it'll get him the permission he needs to be able to help us in the fight against the Unseen." "A discovery?" asked Rhodan. "You mean he didn't say what it was?" "No, sir, I'm sorry. He'll be getting in touch again. Did you have any luck, sir?" Rhodan shrugged. "It depends, Sikermann. The Unseen are even attacking our robots. I'm afraid we'll have to get out of here." "And the robots? Do you want to sacrifice a hundred of the best fighting machines?" "I'm afraid most of them have been sacrificed already, Sikermann.

We were too optimistic. If we wait much longer we'll be lost along with all of our ships-and I wouldn't even know what kind of a fate that would be. Maybe we'd just simply dissolve or be invisible and continue to lead a shadow existence. Get going, Sikermann. Clear for takeoff. The guppies are to return into the Drusus and then we go." "Where to, sir?" "If I only knew-!" Rhodan was angry with himself for letting himself go like that. He had to get more control of himself if he was going to be the leader. He was urgently in need of a clear head. "Take an orbit around Mirsal 3-distance, 2 light-minutes. Hypercom on continuous reception. If Talamon calls in I want to be notified immediately. I'll be in my cabin." He left without another word. Ras Tschubai watched him go, then met Sikermann's gaze. The lieutenant colonel cleared his throat in some embarrassment. "I've never seen Rhodan like this," he said. The African agreed with him. The guppies glided into the hangar deck of the Drusus. The outer locks closed at the same moment the 2 last fighter robots came through the city gate, still defending themselves against the enemy. Then the mighty spherical spaceship raced upward into the clear sky, to disappear shortly thereafter into the depths of the void. Sikermann furrowed his brow when the intercom buzzed. Disgruntled, he switched it on. "What's the matter? I've got enough to do with this navigation..." "Hangar here-Lt. Wroma. One of the guppies is missing, sir." Sikermann almost lost his tongue. "Mat?" he gasped, disconcerted. "But all of them were..." "The K-7 is missing. The commander is Lt. Rous, sir. I thought he was assigned to stay outside but then I found out over the intercom that all guppies were on board..." "Baloney!" shouted Sikermann, forgetting his decorum. "Who's going to lay that one on the Chief? Right now he's just about had it!" Naturally, Lt. Wroma didn't know. He switched off. Sikermann connected himself with the Corn Central. "Stern, are you in contact with the K-7?" The Israeli took a few seconds to verify, then returned a negative. "I'm sorry, sir. No contact." Sikermann stared grimly at the controls and viewscreens while Mirsal 3 continued to recede into the well of emptiness. Lt. Rous must be down there somewhere. If he still existed... 5/ PHANTOM PLANET Marcel Rous was well aware that he was violating all orders when he shoved the accelerator of the K-7 to full power and shot out into space in a shallow parabolic curve. However he was also aware that he would never have gotten Rhodan's permission to go searching for his vanished crewmen. Not that Rhodan was inhuman. It was just that unalterable resolve of his not to reveal to anyone the position of the Earth. But it would only take one prisoner in the hands of the enemy to make that danger possible. And the enemy already had 3 of them. If the K-7 should fall into their clutches, they'd have 15. One of these 15 might spill the beans... Rous saw the Drusus recede from him as he followed the planet's curving surface and glided once more into the night side. All videoscreens were operating; the communications were shut down; the K-7 was cut off from the outside world. Rous knew that his own men would be against him if they found out that he had acted contrary to Rhodan's orders. And the fact that all he wanted to do was to help his 3 missing men didn't alter the situation. It wasn't too difficult to relocate the town where the 2 robots had been left behind. They were still standing unharmed in the market place, passively waiting. Marcel landed close to them and took them on board. Anxiously, he listened to their report. "Nothing further has occurred," said R-2 unemotionally. "There was no attack made against us. There is no trace of Cadet Becker and the 2 other men. We have searched through all the houses in the vicinity. The city is uninhabited." Marcel asked, "What about the shadows? Didn't you see any?" "None, sir. The city is uninhabited." Rous cursed silently to himself and sent the robots to the hangar. Then he gave orders to prepare the small scout flier. These scoutships were only 10 feet long. Equipped with antigravity fields, they could hold 2 men, but were not intended for long-range operations because they were only capable of reaching light-speed. However, for observations within a solar system they were ideal. Marcel Rous selected Cadet Dubruque, a countryman of his, to accompany him. Even to his closest friends, Dubruque was to some degree an oddball. In

his spare time be devoted himself to the still not-quite vanished art of painting and it gave him immense satisfaction to do portraits of his comrades, even though they would always claim after a sitting that they did not recognize themselves on the canvas. It was no wonder, since he painted in the abstract. There was hardly room for the 2 men in the narrow cockpit. Rous asked his companion not to touch the radio. The K-7 received his order to stay put and wait for their return. Only in case of an emergency were they to ascend into an orbit. Then the small flier shot out of the wide open airlock, after which it slowed down quickly and floated along through the brightly lit streets about 6 feet off the ground. Marcel Rous felt safe. He knew that with a single movement of the controls he could shoot out into space. Nobody would be able to grab him that fast, not even, the Unseen. He remained high enough to be able to look into most of the windows at the lighted rooms inside. Often he would even stop whenever he thought he detected any movement. But each time he was deceived. All the rooms he saw were empty and deserted. They cruised through the city for 2 hours before Rous was convinced that not a single living being was to be found here—other than himself and his men. The Unseen, if that was the appropriate word, had simply decamped. If such were not the case they would have attacked long since and spirited them away. Discouraged by not having found any trace of his 3 missing crewmen, he returned to the market place. And there the sight that met his eyes was such a terrible thunderbolt that it paralysed him momentarily. With his eyes fairly popping in fright, he could only stare at the place where the K-7 had stood. The guppy had disappeared. "Rous must have lost his mind!" raged Sikermann. "If I catch up with him, he'd better watch out!" From a prone position on his bed, Rhodan looked up at Sikermann's face on the inter-station vidscreen. He did not betray how tired he was—nor how exasperated. The commander's news had torn him out of a much needed nap. "I don't know whether you will ever see Rous again," he said calmly. "Do you know his motive? Why did he do it?" "I don't have the slightest ideal He's gone crazy. "I don't believe so. I have a much stronger hunch that he wanted to rescue his 3 missing men, however insane such an attempt may be. I believe he's only following a sense of duty, in spite of disobeying my orders. Let's wait and see what comes of it—if anything. Do you have anything additional to report?" "None, sir," replied Sikermann, somewhat troubled. "We've reached the orbit you wanted. Still no news from Talamon. We're on open reception." Rhodan got up and nodded to Sikermann. "If you need me, you can reach me in Marshall's cabin." Without waiting for the vidscreen to darken, he went out into the corridor. He took a lift to another deck level and minutes later entered the cabin of the telepath. The latter had already sensed his approach and was therefore not surprised to receive Rhodan's visit. "I've got a decision to make," said Rhodan after he had seated himself. "Either to stick around here beating a dead horse and waiting for a chance break or to return to Earth. What do you think?" Marshall appeared startled. "Don't tell me you're giving up, Chief!—when Rous and even a whole ship have disappeared!" "That isn't what makes the decision so difficult," returned Rhodan, attempting to correct the mutant's train of thought. "The exaggerated caution of the Regent sort of dampens my enthusiasm for pulling Arkon's chestnuts out of the fire. If I didn't think that maybe someday the Unseen could also find the Earth..." "You would have already made your decision in that case," said Marshall, smiling at him. "You read my mind, Marshall. Call in the other mutants." He remained seated in silent thought until they had all been assembled inside the small cabin: Tama Yokida, whose talents had not yet been utilized; Fellmer Lloyd, who had a close call; Ras Tschubai, who had rescued him; Ralf Marten, whose attempts had thus far gone awry; and Pucky, who appeared to have an immense respect for the powers of the Unseen. Marshall remained close to the door. "Mutant Corps present and accounted for!" he announced with mock-military seriousness. Rhodan looked up. There was a warm light in his eyes as he regarded his old friends. And a little hope, as well. "I don't believe that we've ever been faced with such a crisis as this," he began while apparently looking beyond the men. "The Regent

said that this invisible enemy has already depopulated entire solar systems without anyone having been able to do a thing about it. What would happen if they were to find the Earth is unimaginable. For this reason my original plan of returning to Terrania cannot be carried out. One of the Unseen could be on board the Drusus. We have no possibility of determining that, because telepathy has failed us. So we have no alternative: we must remain here until we have found our opponent and unmasked him. A return to Earth can only happen after we are absolutely certain that the Unseen have gone from this system. I don't dare to believe in the possibility of our being able to destroy this enemy." Pucky's lower lip sagged, producing a tremendously sorrowful expression on his roguish face. "Why did we have to meet up with invisible phantoms? Why not just ordinary monsters, Springers and other freaks? Then I could toss clear into the next star. But the Unseen...? Br-r-r...!" "We'll take care of them yet," said Tama Yokida calmly. "So far we've always been able to face any danger." "Well spoken. However, I'd be grateful if you could at least give us a hint of what to do." "Unfortunately, I can't do that," admitted Tama dejectedly. His confidence was demolished at one stroke. "Let's add this all up," continued Rhodan. "The Unseen depopulate inhabited planets but don't seem to be concerned about inorganic matter. They don't even bother with plants, only animals and humans. It was only after we engaged them again that they also defended themselves against the robots, thereby proving that they're probably able to bring inorganic matter under their influence. So this suggests to me that they're clearing off the planets with a very definite purpose in mind. It appears that they need them for some reason. But not inorganic matter. They only destroy that in self-defence." "And the end result?" asked Marshall. "It's too early yet to make a summarization. We can only register the facts and make suppositions, nothing more. It's certain that we can't make a stand against the Unseen without suffering a defeat. But it's also been established that they can never catch a teleporter if he jumps in time." "Then we've got it made," chirped Pucky and looked at Ras Tschubai. He didn't answer. Undistracted, he watched Rhodan. "I wouldn't say that too loudly," advised Rhodan, addressing Pucky. "If I should just happen to decide that I want to send a spy detail down to Mirsal 3 it would be made up of teleporters." Pucky caught his breath sharply and sat down on his broad hindquarters. "You mean you're serious? I might have guessed it. But count me out! I'm not fighting any space ghosts. Ras should go. If the Unseen get a look at him, his looks alone would be enough to frighten them to death." "Maybe if you go," countered the African, "they'll betray themselves by fits of laughter. But anyway, Chief, if it absolutely has to be well, naturally I'll go." Rhodan knew that even Pucky wouldn't refuse to obey the order. He could rely on his mutants. "It may be necessary, perhaps, if Rous doesn't come back, because I shouldn't like to risk the loss of an entire ship." As a buzzer sounded, he looked at the vidscreen. Sikermann looked into the cabin. He seemed excited. "Talamon is in contact with us, sir. He wants to talk to you." "Well then, switch it over, Sikermann." The commander nodded and disappeared. Seconds later a swirl of coloured circles and dots was seen on the flat surface of the screen, which slowly gave way to a forming pattern that came to be a face. The Moulder. He put on a grim mien in which a certain satisfaction was unmistakable. "Is that you, Rhodan?" "I hear you, Talamon." "But I can't see you. Turn on the camera. "I'm not in the Com Central, Talamon. Just talk and we'll save valuable time. Why haven't you gone back to Arkon as the Regent ordered you to?" "I got permission to stay here another 10 minutes because I've made an unusual discovery. I wanted to tell you about it." "What discovery?" "A strange ship, Rhodan. A very small one. It's shaped like a spindle and flattened out astern. It's going out of the system at a very low speed. The flame-jets of the engine would indicate it's using the old prehistoric fluid rocket propulsion, the kind that even the Arkonides once used in the beginning of their space travel. But that was many tens of thousands of years ago." Rhodan sat motionlessly in his chair. He stared at Talamon, regretting that the video portion was only one-sided. After

a few seconds he asked, tonelessly, "Do you think that it's a ship belonging to our invisible enemy?" Talamon was hesitant in his reply. "That's what I thought at first but it's hard to imagine. Beings who can make themselves invisible would have to have an advanced technology that would at least be equivalent to ours. I just can't swallow the idea that they'd be limping through space with chemical rockets with every light ray in the place passing them up. How can they hope to get to another solar system?" "You're right," admitted Rhodan with reluctance because he would have preferred that a ship of the Unseen had been found. "But who could it be otherwise? The inhabitants of Mirsal 3 don't know about space travel." "I've been beating my brains over that question and can't come up with an answer. Can you join me where I am, Rhodan? I'm trailing the alien rocket at a proper distance and am not letting it out of my sight." Rhodan demurred. Down below on Mirsal 3, Marcel Rous was carrying out a desperate mission-or at least he was trying to. Could he leave the brave young officer in the lurch? True, he hadn't acted according to orders but his motives were honourable and unselfish. In such cases Rhodan was in the habit of considering the circumstances. If he were in the Frenchman's shoes he'd hardly have acted any differently. He made a decision. "I'll get there very shortly, Talamon. Meanwhile, give your position to my navigator. I have to take care of a small matter here." The video image faded, to be replaced by that of Sikermann. Rhodan took care of his 'small matter'. "We're going to go down and make a landing again, Sikermann. Remain only for 10 seconds-then take off again and lay a course for the position that Talamon gives you. Is that clear?" "But..." "No exceptions, Sikermann. I know exactly what I'm doing. Get under way! Land somewhere down there on Mirsal 3." Sikermann's bewildered countenance disappeared from the vidscreen. "So it's that again!" sighed Pucky. He had taken part in spy sorties before and knew what Rhodan was planning. While the Drusus hurtled once more toward the planet and prepared for a pit-stop fast landing, Rhodan gave his instructions. "Tama Yokida and Pucky will teleport outside as soon as we touch ground. I'm taking the Drusus to Talamon's position and will be back as soon as possible. You know, Pucky, that you and Tama aren't in danger. Just maintain physical contact at all times and in that way you can teleport at any moment. So nothing can happen to you. We will remain in telepathic contact, Pucky. Your channel is Marshall. Everything clear so far?" Tama nodded silently. Pucky grumbled. "I'd like to know why all the talk? Anyway, well take care of the 'small matter' you mentioned." But his lower lip sagged into such a doubtful expression that it nullified any last shred of conviction. The Drusus made its landing and took off 10 seconds later. Pucky and Tama Yokida were no longer on board. It was almost as if Marcel Rous had received a blow on the head and he could practically sense the physical pain of it. Had his ship taken off without him? True, he had given orders for them to take such action if need be but he never assumed that they'd just go off and leave him in a pickle like this. He had said in case of danger. Had such a danger presented itself? There were no indications of it here, yet considering these uncanny enemies that didn't prove much. He circled the area several times where the K-7 had been standing. It had disappeared without leaving the slightest trace of its existence. "Now we're alone on this phantom planet, Lieutenant," said Dubruque calmly. "What now? I'd recommend that we look for the Drusus." Which wouldn't have been a difficult task, since the small flier was equipped with a normal radio transceiver. If Rhodan were still in the system and remained there for the time being, he'd pick up their call sooner or later. But... Marcel Rous shook his head stubbornly. "We haven't done what we came for yet, Dubruque. Should we give up- just like that? And as far as the K-7 is concerned, I think the boys in the control room are going to owe us an explanation. Wait'll they hear from me." "And where would you say that will be?" asked the cadet beside him, still as collected as before. Marcel Rous didn't answer. He let the flier climb slightly, then picked up speed and steered for the next town. Within just a few minutes the lights of another city twinkled through the

semi-twilight. It wasn't until they had lowered altitude again and were gliding along closely above the uneven pavement of the streets that he spoke again. "We're going to search everywhere, Dubruque. They just have to be somewhere. And if we don't find them, maybe at least well come across a trace of the Unseen. They may have discovered a method of bending light rays but they're certainly not disembodied. That's what I'm pinning my last hopes on." "I don't understand, Lieutenant." "If it's any consolation," said Rous grimly, "I don't quite understand it myself yet, but I'm keeping an open mind. When the right moment comes, the answer will come to me." "Let's hope!" grumbled the cadet as he turned his attention to the deserted streets. He was determined to find a clue that would lead to the Unseen. But in this both men were disappointed. Not only had the city been abandoned by all living beings but apparently also by the Unseen themselves. No further attacks occurred. In the next town they made a brief sortie on foot, while prepared at any moment to run back to their small ship and take off. Perhaps even that might not save them but the close proximity of the flier gave them a reassuring sense of protection. But this city also remained quiescent without event or attack. Then they ascended into the rising sun and started their search on the daylight side of the planet. Here the surveillance was easier and progressed more quickly. It was strange to see the burning street lights in the deserted narrow streets and roadways and equally peculiar to observe the lights in the empty dwellings. No one was there who could turn them off. But also there were no signs of the Unseen. Marcel Rous did not give in. He landed in every town, in every little settlement and even in front of isolated houses in the country. And what he found was always the same: abandoned dwellings, empty animal stalls, lonely and unceasing silence. This led him to believe that the Unseen had left the planet of Mirsal 3, once it had been depleted of all life. The invasion was at an end but no one had taken possession of the conquered world. Why had they conquered it... Tama Yokida looked back at the Drusus but within seconds the mighty sphere became a tiny point in the blue sky and then disappeared. He kept direct contact with Pucky with his hands. Pucky did not watch the departure of the Drum but carefully observed his surroundings instead. He knew that the Unseen were not able to take him completely by surprise. He had already been able to detect their approach and thus been forewarned. And he was fully prepared to teleport with Tama at the first sign of danger. Under no circumstances were these phantoms going to catch him. Pucky was pleased to discover that some of his fear of the Unseen and the mysterious had abated. If he had to he could eventually cure himself of his apprehension. This certainty permitted the mouse-beaver to regain his spirits and his courage so that he became his old self again. His change of mood worked its effect also on the Japanese. "Now it's up to us," he whispered. "If they strike, nobody can help us. You have to be quick, Pucky." "Nobody's as quick as I am," Pucky assured him confidently. He looked about. "They've set us down in the mountains instead of a city. But why not start our investigations right here? Maybe the Unseen have overlooked some old hermit who lives in a cave. Then we'll finally find out what's happened." Actually the Japanese did not share Pucky's vain hope but at least he didn't attempt to influence him in an opposite trend of thought as was the habit of stupid and conceited people. Tama was even firmly convinced that the cause of all hate and bitterness back on Earth was the fact that everybody was always concerned about forcing others to their own point of view. To avoid a long trek, Pucky made short teleport jumps with Tama. Although they covered only distances that lay in their line of sight each time, it was a tremendous means of quickly covering a lot of territory. It was already getting dark by the time they reached the rim of the mountainous country and looked down at a wide plain below. In the middle of it was a large city. It could clearly be seen that the lights were burning already-or yet. There was no sign of life. All this time, Tama had never let loose of Pucky's paw for a second. "Should we have a look at the city?" he asked, meanwhile having lost all fear of the Unseen. "Maybe well find a clue." Without answering the other's

question, Pucky sighed. "I'd like to know where the heck that crazy lieutenant went to. He couldn't simply have dissolved in the air with the guppy." "Maybe he could have, Pucky," contradicted Tama worriedly. "We have proof that the Unseen can affect solid matter—they can pull inanimate material into their invisible world too." "A whole ship?" asked Pucky dubiously. Tama shrugged his shoulders. "We have to consider even that possibility." He didn't yet realize how close he had come to the awful truth. . . . In the meantime, Rhodan arrived in the Drusus at the coördinates Talamon had given him. The Arc-Koor was a good 2 light-hours away from Mirsal 3 but on the other hand it had come much closer to the yellow sun. It was an observation that Rhodan registered without comment but which he had no intention of ignoring. When the puzzling rocket came within optical viewing distance, he took note of a 2nd peculiarity. At a velocity of just 300 miles per second, it was labouring its way out of the solar system. Out of it! And it came from the direction of the sun! Talamon didn't keep him waiting long. Rhodan had hardly made a communications contact before the Mounder appeared on the viewscreen. "I'm glad you're here, Rhodan. I've had a discussion with the Regent in the meantime. When I told him about the primitive rocketship and expressed an opinion that it might be a vessel of the Unseen, he gave me permission to stay here with the Arc-Koor." Rhodan was frankly astonished. "Does that mean the Regent agrees with your opinion? I'd have to rule that out." "Why?" "The robot Brain thinks too logically to assume that the Unseen would use liquid-fuel rockets to scuttle from star to star." Talamon grinned broadly. "Whatever the Regent happens to assume, I've been given the order to investigate the rocket but to be very careful about it. So your additional support has arrived just in time." Rhodan glanced at the other viewscreen. Unerringly and without any change of course, the small rocket continued toward its unknown destination. This much Rhodan believed he had learned: that unknown destination happened to be Mirsal 3, the depopulated planet. What did they seek there? "Alright, so what should we do, Talamon?" "Quite simply, we stop the rocket. With traction beams." "Without hailing them?" "Why not?" Rhodan shook his head. "I'd like to try making radio contact with the crew first. Do you know Talamon, that I don't buy your idea in the least, as far as it's being a ship of the Unseen? On the contrary, I have another theory entirely." "What is it? I'd be very interested in hearing it." "In a few minutes I can give you its course data from my nav computer. But figure it for yourself: this rocketship is travelling outward from the sun, on a course that's headed for Mirsal 3. Its low velocity is a strong indication that the crew can't fool around and take detours along the way because that would take too much time. Therefore it's obvious that the rocket can only be coming from the 2nd planet in the system." "Impossible!" laughed Talamon. "The 2nd planet of Mirsal is uninhabited." "It is supposed to be uninhabited," corrected Rhodan calmly. "That's a slight difference. The Arkonides don't take the trouble to investigate every planet in a system; and besides, the catalogues are outdated. We shouldn't forget that. In any case I'm convinced that those enterprising space sailors have their origin on Mirsal 2." Talamon pondered over this and then nodded. "Perhaps you have something. So where does it get us?" "There are several conclusions, I'm thinking. At least we have the fact that here's still another race of people who are trying to conquer space. I don't know who these inhabitants of Mirsal 2 happen to be but anyway they're a higher class of civilized beings. They need our help and we shouldn't frighten them with a magnetic field. Let's try them on the radio and maybe we'll get an answer." Talamon condescended. But before Rhodan could pass his instructions to Com Central, the results came through from the nav computer. The robot Brain of the automatic navigator had made a flawless reconstruction of the rocket's course, which confirmed Rhodan's guess. Without any doubt it had originated from the 2nd planet of Mirsal and was attempting to reach the 3rd planet. It must have been under way for a number of days already and would not reach Mirsal 3 for weeks yet, if it did not increase its present speed. Was this an exploration rocket, trying to reach its neighbouring planet? Beyond

this Rhodan could arrive at no further answers and was restricted to mere conjectures. Which was all the more reason why a radio contact was important. He went into the Com Central and personally supervised the activity of the men there. But in spite of all efforts to pick up an answer to the continuously transmitted call signals, the receiver of the Drusus remained silent. Either the designers of the rocket had never discovered the art of radio communication or they weren't concerned with contacting the 2 space giants which had appeared so suddenly out of the void. Unconcernedly the steel object pursued its course. Talamon finally became impatient. "That isn't going to work. We have to stop them and sweat some answers out of them. Shall I take them on board or do you want to handle it?" Rhodan hesitated for a moment and once more observed the mysterious object of their deliberations. Somehow the sight reminded him of the time, 70 years ago, when he himself had traversed the staggering distance of Earth to the Moon in such a rocket. That silvery something out there, not more than a mile away, was a fragment of the past, and yet for each race of beings who invented and built such a ship it was always the beginning of the future. Their reactions and feelings now must be similar to his own that time when he first beheld the mighty spacesphere of the Arkonides which had made a crash-landing on the Moon. They would no doubt he assailed now with the same fears that had confronted him then. Their pattern of fate seemed to compare with his own at that time, down to a hair. "I'll take care of it," he said, finally answering Talamon's question.

6/ ROCKET TO OBLIVION

After a few hours, Marcel Rous and Dubruque knew with 100% certainty that aside from themselves there was not another living being remaining on Mirsal 3. The planet was depleted not only of its former inhabitants but of the invisible invaders as well. The Unseen's mission here appeared to be at an end. There had not been one sign of further attack and they could move about freely in the cities or the countryside without the least fear of danger. Here and there they encountered some of the lost fighting robots from the Drusus wandering aimlessly about, still attempting to challenge the enemy. Pucky and Tama were forced to the same conclusions. In their random teleportations they raced from place to place without finding anyone. Even the uncanny phantom apparitions failed to appear. Pucky had not picked up any thought impulses but when it suddenly did happen, although it was of course surprising it turned out to be no cause for alarm. Their last jump brought the 2 mutants to the top of a mountain which was crowned with a mighty fortress. It was reminiscent of the castles of the European Middle Ages and by the local standards no doubt represented a powerful bastion. Certainly it had once been inhabited by the prince or monarch who ruled the surrounding country. Now it lay deserted in the glare of the bright sunlight. Rigid and silent, Pucky stood in the centre of the wide courtyard and looked up at the battlements. Tama was close beside him but had let go of his paw. "There's nobody here," said the Japanese. "I can't see anybody." Pucky didn't answer. With his ears lying back on his head, he listened in a specific direction. Tama became alert and looked across toward the drawbridge, which spanned a deep moat. -What is it, Pucky?" The mouse-beaver finally condescended to answer. "Somebody is here," he whispered with perfect calmness. "I'm not exactly certain who it is but there's no possibility of it's being one of the Unseen. Those things' thoughts are blurry and shadowy. I think it's..." "There!" cried Tama suddenly, pointing straight ahead where a massive tower formed a corner of the main castle structure. "What is that?" Pucky looked in the direction he was pointing. The sunlight was brightly reflected from a metal object there. Momentarily blinded, Pucky closed his eyes and then slowly opened them again. Only part of the object could be seen because it was half-obscured by the tower. It was a cone-shaped metallic form which lay motionless on the ground. "Let's go, Tama!" The Japanese followed with some hesitation while gripping his weapon in one hand. Before they had arrived at the tower to be able to see the mysterious object fully, Pucky said, "It's Lt. Marcel Rous. He and another crewman are searching the castle." Pucky concentrated on a teleport jump, aiming himself

at the source of the thought impulses. Then he dematerialised along with Tama. In the same moment, Marcel Rous and Dubruque entered a great hall that was just as empty as all the other rooms in the castle. On either side of the hall, weapons and other articles of armament leaned against the wood panelling of the walls. In an open fireplace were the glowing embers of a fire. In a copper vessel the last trace of water was steaming away. It could only have been a few hours ago that people were here, snatched away by some incomprehensible fate. Whither now...? Pensively, Marcel Rous' gaze turned to the long table covered with all kinds of drinking vessels and wooden plates. It was as though a gay company had been sitting here at a feast when the calamity struck. Rous started suddenly as he saw the air shimmering between him and the end chair. Then he saw the 2 materializing figures. He quickly grasped Dubruque's arm. "Don't shoot! It's our own people. Mutants!" Pucky and Tama appeared. "Dubruque has probably been watching Western movies again," remarked Pucky peevishly. He examined the empty hall. "Where did you leave your ship, Rous?" The lieutenant finally recovered from his astonishment. "You sure found us in a heck of a hurry," he said. "The whole planet is empty. We have thoroughly searched it and haven't found a living soul!" "A marvellous piece of observation!" Pucky's mock praise was deliberately sarcastic. "But you didn't have to go to all the trouble. What do you think the Chief is going to say to all this? And the K-7? Aha-so you don't even know that! Well, that makes even a finer cuddle of fish!" The mutant grinned at Pucky's misusage. "I only wanted to help my 3 missing crewmen," said Marcel defiantly. "Even Rhodan can't deny me that. Now the K-7 has disappeared! You should be helping me to search for it instead of criticizing." "In the last couple of hours we've covered the whole surface of Mirsal 3 but, we didn't find any trace of a guppy." "Do you think the Unseen stole it?" "There could be some connection maybe," Pucky nodded. He waddled confidently toward the 'exit that led into a wide hallway. "Let's all take a look at the castle together. I keep hoping we'll find some Mirsalese who was overlooked-and I have a feeling there's one around here somewhere." "Here-in the castle?" Rous sounded dubious. "But we've been everywhere." "Is that so?" said Pucky. He began to organize certain incoming thought impulses which were now becoming stronger. It was as though someone were awakening from a deep sleep and starting gradually to think again. "Did you also check the cellar vaults and dungeons?" Rous slowly shook his head and followed Pucky, who was already out in the hallway. Wide stone steps led downward into the depths. Tama and Dubruque made up the rearguard. The deeper they went the darker it became. Fortunately, Marcel Rous was equipped with a powerful flashlight, which he turned on. They must have descended by now under the surface of Mirsal 3 but the staircase led still deeper. It seemed as if the steps were leading straight into the centre of the planet or at least they went deep into the interior of the mountain on which the castle had been built. Finally the staircase ended. The passageway continued straight ahead. The air was clammy and damp, as though it was not easily renewed in these depths. Somewhere farther on there was a noise. Unconcernedly, Pucky kept on going. "Relax. It's a prisoner. The Unseen must have overlooked him." Then they were standing before a stone door. "I'll teleport into the room beyond," offered Pucky but Tama touched his arm with restraint. "Why, Pucky? Shouldn't we all go together? Let me open the door." The mouse-beaver understood the real motive behind the offer. Why shouldn't Tama have a chance to also show what he could do for once? At first the Japanese tried in vain to use his telekinetic power to break the ponderous metal lock that barred the way but finally he resorted to a more pragmatic method. He drew his thermo-beamer and stepped closer to the door. With the energy finely concentrated, he melted the lock. The heat generated by the operation seemed pleasant down here in the chill damp of the subterranean corridor. The heavy bar and lock mechanism before him began to glow and melt. Then it all crashed to the ground in a clanging of bars and chains. With a sigh of relief the mutant stepped back out of the way. Pucky's own powers were sufficient to push the door inward. It turned

ponderously in its hinges but finally yielded. The 3 men looked excitedly over Pucky's shoulder into the dungeon. It was empty. Alongside the vacant beds of straw, chain shackles fastened to rings in the wall were lying loosely on the stone floor. This and the mute testimony of various wooden bowls lying about here and there suggested that prisoners had once eked out a bare existence here under inhumane conditions. "Over there," whispered Pucky and he led the way farther. And now the others became aware of what he saw. The dungeon was not entirely empty. One prisoner had been left behind. He lay on the partially rotted straw and stared at them with widened eyes filled with terror. His torn and shredded clothing hinted of the dramatic circumstances under which he had been captured. Which was emphasized quite clearly by the bloodied bandage around his right arm. Pucky probed into the thoughts of the prisoner. "He knows nothing about what happened," he said. "He's been here for weeks already and has been waiting to be sentenced. Down here the Unseen must not have been very thorough. This one would have died of hunger if we hadn't found him." With Tama's help the iron shackles were quickly sprung open. The Mirsalese prisoner, who was about 6 feet tall, was listless and permitted them to do with him what they wished. He probably even thought that his final hour had come and that any resistance was useless. Once he stammered a few words, which Pucky could understand but didn't answer, although he was also a weak and somewhat undeveloped hypnotist. But it would not have been difficult for him to establish communication with the man. Marcel Rous didn't speak until they were all standing outside in the castle's courtyard, relieved to be in the warm sun where the last vestiges of the chill and shivers were finally driven out of their limbs. "What do we do now? The flier is too small to accommodate all of us. Should we separate?" "What for?" asked Pucky, surprised. "There's a transmitter on board that thing, isn't there? Well then! We make contact with Rhodan and ask to be picked up. Until then we can wait here in the castle." The lieutenant was obviously in a dejected mood. "What's the chief going to say if I return without the K-7?" Pucky's face remained expressionless. "We'll find out soon enough, lieutenant. If I were in your shoes I wouldn't be too happy about the reunion. In the meantime, think up a good excuse. I'll worry about making a radio contact with the Drusus!" Tama took charge of the released prisoner while Pucky clambered into the small flier with Dubruque in order to call the Drums. . . . Rhodan's hand was just reaching toward the intercom switch when it suddenly paused in midair. He saw something that needed no further explanation. Simultaneously, so did Talamon aboard the Arc-Koor. The bow of the small rocketship, which had been hovering without apparent motion between the 2 mighty space battleships, began to evaporate. At first it seemed as though a shimmery haze was enveloping the blunt, silvery snout, but then it began to slowly disappear, as though it were hesitantly and reluctantly slipping into some other medium. Inch by inch the uncanny transformation continued—steadily and inexorably. A new attack by the Unseen. Rhodan jumped up and ran into the Com Central. "Talamon!" he shouted and waited until the broad face of the Mounder appeared on the viewscreen. "Did you see it?" "As clearly as you did, Rhodan. What should we do?" Rhodan brushed the dark blond hair from his forehead with an unsteady hand. "If I only knew!" There was a pause while another few inches of the rocket became invisible. David Stern, who was at the regular radio console, suddenly began to wave his arms excitedly. Perry pulled the earphones from his head. "Hold it, Talamon—yes, Stern? What is it?" "They're transmitting!" shouted the chief communications officer. "The people in the rocket are sending a message! I don't understand the signals but there's no doubt they're coming from the rocket!" "You heard him, Talamon," said Rhodan, turning again to the viewscreen. "So what now? How can we defend them against an attack of the Unseen when we don't know ourselves how to attack them?" "Protective fire!" replied Talamon swiftly. He was grim. "We'll lay a ring of energy beams around the rocket. If that doesn't drive off the Unseen, then the devil's got his hand in it!" "I'm with you," said Rhodan with equal swiftness. "Keep in touch!" Without waiting for an answer, Rhodan hurried again into the Command

Central and issued the necessary orders. Since the start of the attack of the Unseen, hardly 30 seconds had passed. Almost 3 feet of the rocket's bow had disappeared in the meantime. Rhodan wondered briefly why the process was so slow but noticed simultaneously and to his alarm that the rate of disappearance was increasing now. Before his orders could reach the battle stations, the small rocket had become another 6 feet shorter. Then the battle began... The Arc-Koor and the Drums were less than a mile apart. Between them floated the small rocket, still under attack by the Unseen. This meant that the weird opponent must now be located between the 2 great battleships. In order not to damage each other, Talamon and Rhodan raised their respective ships slightly so as to have the target below them. The batteries opened with their defensive fire. A ring of fire surrounded the rocket. It seemed to stand there motionless, enshrouded by the effects of the most advanced technology, combining the very powers of Good and Evil. The impulse beams passed unhindered through the space between firing point and target. There was nothing in between. The attackers were not only invisible but also immaterial. There was absolutely nothing there-yet they were present! Through narrowed eyes, Rhodan stared at the incomprehensible phenomenon. About 10 feet of the rocket's bow could no longer be seen. He then activated the antigrav beams and generated a corresponding field, which had to work its effect on any kind of matter. John Marshall had been standing close by and had observed the spectacle in silence until now. "I'm picking up thought impulses again," he said. "They come and go like ocean waves. Sometimes they are strong but they're completely incomprehensible. You'd almost think they're coming through a distortion interference scrambler-but of course that's impossible." "Nothing is impossible!" muttered Rhodan as he saw another 3 feet of the rocket dissolve into nothingness. "We are powerless! There's nothing we can do to help them!" He got up and went in to David Stem. Talamon was not on the viewscreen. In his place sat an Arkonide who was stationed before the Arc-Koor's communications console. "Call Talamon!" said Rhodan. The Arkonide nodded and disappeared. 5 seconds later the face of the Mounder appeared on the screen. "Rhodan?" "It's useless! We have no weapons against the Unseen. We can't help that rocketship!" "This beats me! What kind of a menace are we up against? What kind of beings don't even counter-fire? There's nothing we have that will bring them into line!" Rhodan shrugged. "The Regent of Arkon said he's been trying to do that for 10 years now. How can we accomplish it in one day?" Talamon ran a hand through his beard. In his eyes was a gleam of actual fear-but he strove to conceal this weakness. "Rhodan, you have your mutants!" The statement came almost as a reproach but at the same time it expressed the helplessness of the Mounder and the Arkonides. Indirectly it also betrayed the helplessness of the gigantic robot Brain on Arkon. "What good are mutants if they can neither see nor feel nor detect the enemy? How can a teleporter aim himself at a destination when no destination exists? They jump into emptiness, that's all. The Unseen don't even send out normal thought impulses so that they can be traced. How can a telekineticist grasp something that isn't there? No, Talamon, we're beaten!" "Rhodan!" Talamon's voice was full of bitterness and despair. "Are we going to give up? The existence of the Milky Way depends upon us!" Casting a side-glance at the viewscreens in the Command Central, Rhodan was able to see that the flaming inferno of energy had closed completely around the defended area. There was nothing that could reach the small rocket without destruction. Anything approaching it would have to be dissolved into nothing, consumed by the unimaginably concentrated power of the destructive impulse beams. And there was the rocket now only 60 feet long. "No, we won't give up, Talamon!" But we've lost the battle for this little ship. The courageous space travellers of Mirsal's 2nd planet have had to pay with their lives for their attempt to reach their neighbouring world. And we have to just sit around without offering any help. Maybe they'll even think that we are their cruel attackers." "If they noticed the attack at all," Talamon added. "Would they have called for help otherwise?" "Is that what they actually did?" asked the

Mounder doubtfully. "Nobody's found out yet how to decipher their message. Anyway, the signals have stopped." Rhodan nodded slowly. "Let's cut off the protective fire. We're wasting energy needlessly." Rhodan noticed that the Unseen had now started their attack on the stem of the vessel as well. Only a few seconds more and they would swallow their prey without a trace. On the tracking screens of the Drusus, the blip that represented the rocket grew smaller. Then it disappeared entirely. The little rocketship, 120 feet long, bearing a great cargo of hope for the future, had ceased to exist. "There are many ways of looking at what happened, Talamon. We don't know what's actually become of the rocket's passengers. Are they really dead? Are they only invisible to our eyes and our detection equipment? There's another important question I'd like to ask: is this the only rocket that took off from Mirsal 2?" "So do you think I should stick around?" Yes, Talamon We're going to pay a visit to Mirsal 2 and..." He was interrupted. Sikermann's excited voice came from the Command Central. "We're getting blips from the direction of Mirsal 2. It must be a whole fleet!" Rhodan shot a swift glance at Talamon. "Wait!" he said and with 3 jumps he was with Sikermann. "What is it? Where?" Then he saw for himself. The tracking screens revealed at least 50 slowly moving points. They were large enough by now to also be visible on the viewscreens. A few control buttons made the transfer possible. Seconds later, in the place of indefinable tracking blips, recognizable rockets drifted across the convex surface of the screens. At first glance Rhodan realized that these were the same types of rockets as the one that had just dematerialised before their eyes. "It looks as though they were escaping from something," he muttered. Maybe the Unseen are attacking Mirsal 2. Sikermann! Get ready for a short transition to Mirsal 3. We have to pick up Pucky and Tama. Maybe we'll locate the K-7 at the same time. And then we'll return to this location. Hurry it up! Transition in 5 minutes!" Without waiting for the confirmation of his First Officer, he went back to the Command Central. "You wait, Talamon!" he said, repeating his previous request. It sounded like a command. "I'm picking up my people on Mirsal 3 and I'll come back here. We will make a joint report to the Regent." "Good, Rhodan. I'll wait." Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief. For the first time his features relaxed slightly when he said: "Don't worry, Talamon, we'll do it yet! We won't need any 10 years until we expose this invisible enemy. They must have a weak spot somewhere and we'll have to smoke it out. But first we have to know who they are and where they come from. I consider that to be the most urgent problem: where do they come from? From what part of the Milky Way? When we find that out..." "And if they come from another galaxy?" "You aren't serious, are you...?" "Is there anything that might be impossible now?" asked the Mounder, posing a counter-question. Rhodan refrained from answering. He knew only too well that nothing was impossible any more. Not after today! He dismissed himself with a short nod and returned to Sikermann. "Are you ready?" "30 seconds to go," confirmed the First Officer. He gave instructions to the crew over the intercom. "Going into transition-2 light-hours-25 seconds to go!" Rhodan sat down and signalled to Marshall. "Contact Pucky right away. We have no time to lose." "10 seconds," droned Sikermann unperturbed... 7/ MENACE TO MIRSAL 2 With an increasing sense of uneasiness, Talamon stared at the empty space where the mighty Drusus had been located. 2 minutes had passed since the transition. How much time would Rhodan need in order to pick up his people on Mirsal 3? Talamon was anything but the apprehensive, fretful type. For thousands of years his clan had functioned more or less as the armed escort and general security cover for the commercial fleets of the Springers and had overcome many a difficult situation. In the past few decades it had become more peaceful in the Empire, even though the perennial war against the pirates had not come to an end. No, until now Talamon had never known fear. But now-actually since yesterday-he knew the meaning of fear. The encounter with this invisible menace had shaken him to his core and left him weak. The shrill sound of the alarm tore him out of his fearful torment. "Sector 18-b-9! Emergency!" A voice bellowed at him from the intercom. "The Chief

Engineer is disappearing!" An icy hand clutched at Talamon's heart. His face became colourless. With a lightning move, his hand struck a switch on the intercom. "Who is this?" "Lt. Rab-Ort, Tech Detail! He's only half there!" "Who?" "Chief Engineer Morlag! His legs have become invisible!" Talamon hit several switches in front of him and roared into the microphone. "Short transition! In 5 seconds..." The Arc-Koor dematerialised. Talamon left all further navigation to his officers. He had jumped up and dashed out into the corridor where he hurled himself into an antigrav lift. 30 seconds after the transition he arrived in Section 18-b-9, where he became rooted to the spot in the open doorway. He couldn't believe his eyes. Lt. Rab-Ort leaned against a control console, pale as death and trembling in every limb. Eyes filled with terror, the comparatively young Arkonide stared down at the outstretched body that lay on the deck, stiff and weirdly deformed. He was dead. Talamon knew that a distance of 2 light-hours lay between him and the location of the attack. The Unseen would not be able to track down the new position of the Arc-Koor very quickly-or at least he hoped so. Therefore, he had time. The man there on the deck was Chief Engineer Morlag. His mouth was wide open as well as his eyes. They still showed evidence of the monstrous fright and terror of his last second of life-and the awful pain that must have gripped him. "What happened?" asked Talamon almost tonelessly. "Rab-Ort, pull yourself together. Every detail is important! The smallest particular could be a matter of life and death!" The Mounder sensed that he had become suddenly cold and clearheaded. His fear vanished and all that remained was an iron resolve to be able to furnish Rhodan with some small clue. "Speak out! We haven't a second to lose! What happened at the moment of transition?" The Arkonide's momentary paralysis began to leave him. Talamon's firm levelheadedness had its effect on him. Still weak, he finally found his voice: "Morlag was standing over there when it began. I happened to look at him and saw that his legs had become invisible. He didn't seem to notice it, himself, because he continued his work as though nothing was going on. He seemed to be floating in the air without his feet." "Go on!" demanded Talamon as the other paused a moment. "Keep talking!" I called to him. He looked down at himself and gave a yell of fright. That's when I put in the alarm. Morlag panicked-he was running all over the place, even though he hardly had any legs. But he moved sluggishly, like he was wading through a bunch of mud or something." "Aha!" cried Talamon. His brain registered the first clue. "Then came the transition. Suddenly, Morlag cried out in pain. I could see how the invisible part of his body seemed to be struggling to get free of the unseen forces, that's the way it was! The Unseen were gripping him tight but the transition was stronger. They had to let go of him-but it only happened a second after. I'll never be able to forget Morlag's death cry!" The Arkonide covered his face with his hands and sobbed to himself. Talamon waited patiently. He could understand the lieutenant, realizing that he might have had the same reaction were he in his place. Anyway, what he could see before him was enough-it gave him the rest of the story. Morlag's body had been violently elongated in the process. Formerly about 6 feet tall, the dead man's body was now at least 8 feet long! Silently, Talamon turned about and returned to the Command Central. His hand resting on the transition control, he waited tensely and impatiently for Rhodan's return... David Stern picked up Dubruque's emergency call and located the castle 5 minutes later. A guppy was launched from the ship, which served to transfer the men on board along with Pucky. Also the rescued Mirsalese, apparently the last of his people, was brought to safety. There was no trace of the K-7. Since Rhodan had witnessed the disappearance of the rocketship from Mirsal 2, he gave up hope of ever seeing the guppy again. The Unseen had snatched it away. The manoeuvre for receiving the other guppy on board had hardly ended before Stern announced the new position of the Arc-Koor. Rhodan changed his transition course and the Drusus made its hyperjump. He felt relieved when he saw the great Arkonide space-ball appear not more than a light-second away. Talamon's face gazed at him from the videoscreen. The Mounder gave his report. Rhodan

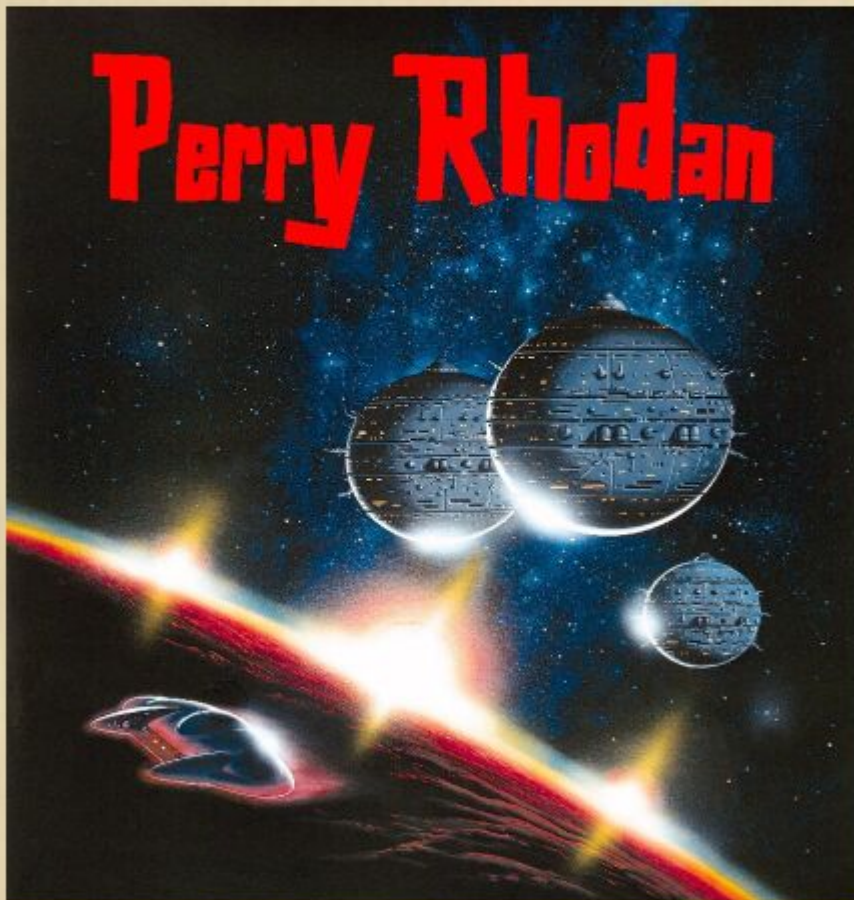
became grave and remote as he listened to the story of the terrible death the Arkonide had suffered. But he did not forget to register every detail and to draw corresponding conclusions. His voice sounded husky when he said: "So transitions help only when they come at the exact time. We'll have to remember that. And now set up a contact with Arkon, Talamon. I'd like to speak with the Regent." Talamon nodded and gave the necessary orders. When the steel half-dome of the robot Brain appeared on the viewscreens of the Arc-Koor and the Drusus its face was composed and expressionless. The positronicon left it to Rhodan to lead the conversation. "Regent, our first encounter with the Unseen is behind us. The planet Mirsal 3 was depopulated. We could not prevent it. Our psycho-cybernetic analyser indicates a strong probability that Mirsal 2 is the Unseen's next point of attack. The Arkonide catalogues list this planet as uninhabited. However, we have evidence that Mirsal 2 is inhabited by a race of people who have advanced to the beginnings of space travel. We have to help them." "I can't forbid you to do so," came the mechanical voice of the robot Brain. "But Talamon will return to Arkon with the Arc-Koor." "No!" said Rhodan sharply. "Talamon is going to stay with me and we'll work together to combat the Unseen. The only way I'm going to take this risk is with the support of the Empire. That's a matter of principle, Regent!" "A ship like the Arc-Koor isn't just carelessly tossed into the gamble and..." "Is this the only ship you've got?" inquired Rhodan scornfully. "Do you want to weigh one ship against the existence of the galaxy?" The robot Brain took about one second before it answered: "Very well, Rhodan—the Arc-Koor will accompany you." "I'm also taking command of the Arc-Koor, Regent! Talamon will be under me." "I cannot..." "You can, Regent! Talamon himself would rather answer to me. Besides, it won't work to have such a mission be led by 2 equal commanding officers. Only one can give the orders, Regent—and that will be myself!" Once more the robot Brain needed only a second in which to weigh all the alternatives and to announce its decision: "Your request is granted, Rhodan. I have known that it would come to this. The Arc-Koor is under your command. And behind you stands the full power of Arkon! Liberate us all from the menace of the Unseen, Rhodan!" "And then what happens, Regent?" This time there was no hesitation: "We shall then talk about an alliance between Arkon and Terra." Rhodan nodded. In his eyes was a barely perceptible gleam that expressed a Terranian sense of secret triumph. He was close to the long-awaited goal. But first, the Unseen had to be defeated. "Well make contact again, Regent, maybe after we've left Mirsal 2. If I need help I'm going to ask for it." "It's at your command, Rhodan," came the unemotional reply of the robot Brain and then the screen went dark. For long seconds there was silence and then Rhodan looked into the expectant eyes of Talamon. Suddenly he smiled and then the Mounder also began to grin with relief. "Congratulations," said Talamon. Rhodan continued to smile as he answered: "Let's hold off until we see if congratulations are in order. Anyway, during the coming days—even hours—there won't be much cause for laughter. We have some rough times ahead of us, old friend. But the thought of having Arkon's strength behind us makes the going a little easier." He caught Sikermann's questioning glance. "You can follow the same instructions I'm giving my First Officer, Talamon. The same coördinates apply to you." "Will we fly directly to Mirsal 2?" "That's right. If we succeed in making the invisible danger visible, then it will have lost its terror. We have to give it a try. Until later, Talamon." "Until later," answered the Mounder. His voice sounded shaky even though his eyes harboured a gleam of confidence. Rhodan went back to the Command Central, where Marshall met him. "Well, John? How's that Mirsalese we rescued?" Marshall shrugged. "He has nothing to report that could be of interest to us because he's been down in the dungeon for days. I'm sorry, Chief, but his story doesn't bring us one step closer." "Never mind," said Rhodan. "We'll find the clues we need on Mirsal 2." He gave Sikermann his orders. Sikermann took the calculated coördinates from the small nav-computer and relayed them to the Arc-Koor. Across the room, Pucky slipped off the couch and waddled over in a

rather stiff-legged manner. He drew himself to his full height in front of Marshall and Rhodan and made an observation. "This fellow Talamon," he said. "He has a terrible fear." Before reacting, Rhodan ascertained that the Drusus was on its course to the 2nd planet. The Arc-Koor followed like a Siamese twin. Then Perry looked down at Pucky, a hidden twinkle in his eyes. "So?" he said, considerately bending down slightly toward the mouse-beaver. "And what may your little problem be?" "I-? My-?" Pucky was taken off-guard by the question. Disconcerted, he stroked his rust-brown fur for a few seconds, as a man might finger his moustache in embarrassment or nervously run his hands through his hair. Then his bright eyes gleamed and his incisor tooth appeared in an expression indicating he was in control again. "What-me worry? What problems should I have? I'm no Mounder! I'm not even one of you poor humans-I'm a superior animal! I leave it to the rest of you to be wary worts!" Marshall found Pucky's puckyism infectious. With tongue in cheek he replied, "Well, I guess that puts us in our place, Perry. A wort to the wise is sufficient!" But, Perry Rhodan was already in another place. His attention was firmly fixed on the viewscreen where Mirsal 2, deceptively at that distance, appeared as a small star. In his mind's eye, he resolved the pseudo star from an incandescent fireball to a globe of land and sea masses. A planet where he would soon risk his life in the service of the Earth and for the principle of Peace to try to eliminate the awesome threat to planetary existence of the invisible menace of... the Unseen. The End



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