



RSV

Book 9 The Wasp Men Attack

1/ THE HIDDEN CAVERN

IT WAS TIME—the end of hours of concentrated work in locked seclusion. Perry Rhodan depressed the purplish knob with its strange white engraving. The etched symbol reminded him of a letter in the old German runic alphabet; however, today its origin didn't matter. It was enough to know that it indicated the switch for cutting off power to the super positronic Brain. A monotonous vibration which he had only been subconsciously aware of ebbed away. The magic eye scales dimmed out and the sonic diaphragms became rigid and still. The largest, most versatile and powerful positronic brain ever to be stationed in the solar system registered zero activity.

Rhodan leaned back, exhausted. The dialogue with the almost omniscient machine was over with.

The vast silence that was just settling in the sub-Venusian mountain cavern was suddenly ruptured by a

repeated buzzing sound. Rhodan manipulated the intercom unit. "Who's there?"

"It's me!" Reginald Bell's husky voice left no doubt as to who was behind this anonymous "me". From his table, Rhodan activated the door lock release. "Come in, Bell!"

"What the devil, Perry!" Bell exclaimed as he came in. "You worry me! For more than 24 hours now you've barricaded yourself in this spooky cave. One would think that you were on the trail of the greatest secret in the world!"

"We're always on that trail, my friend, but if in spite of it all we still keep bungling, it must mean that the secret is very far off."

"I'm willing to bet you haven't eaten a bite during all this time."

"Correction! I had some dry food rations. I can't afford to make even little mistakes any more."

"Nevertheless I consider it misdirected ambition if you..."

"Even misdirected ambitions are a luxury I cannot afford. None of us can."

"Last night I rang your bell, this morning I tried three times, and right now I have been at your door exactly two hours trying to get in. Why didn't you answer?"

"Because I didn't know it was you. I didn't want to be disturbed. In the meantime the Brain has been so attuned that outside influences can penetrate it so long as it is activated."

"I've heard rumours that you have recently made a number of adjustments on the Brain. Is that correct?"

"What do you mean? Could you be more specific?"

"Khrest referred to your brainwave pattern. He insists that, perhaps, you know the exact structure of your own personal vibrations."

"Go on. Up to now you haven't told me anything. Are you trying to accuse me?"

"I am sure nobody has any intention of doing that."

"Of course not—that's because they are afraid of me. Nevertheless, I think they are jealous. Am I right?" Bell tried to avoid Rhodan's penetrating eyes. He regained his composure somewhat. "There is always some envy involved. But everybody believes in you. They know you are the boss and they are grateful, too, that they can always come to see you when they can no longer face their own problems."

"OK." Perry Rhodan nodded his head. "I do know my own vibrations. And this robot brain is tuned in on me, too. Never before have I encountered such a vast accumulation of knowledge ready to be divulged to me. And still the problem is not solved. I think in the same manner as an Arkonide, as far as that is possible for a person born on Earth. I think as the builders of this machine think, even though I have semantic difficulties. Unfortunately it is impossible for us to learn to translate the scientific material of the Arkonides in a matter of days. We lack the background of the Arkonide. Don't envy me, Bell. A conference with the Brain lasting 24 hours is mentally and physically fatiguing."

"But was it worth it?" There was both curiosity and expectation in Bell's voice. Perry Rhodan nodded his head. "They have hidden hangars deep inside this mountain. The Brain mentioned 6 spaceships."

"That's more than the Arkonides can use. Thora and Khrest need only one spaceship to return home in. I don't think you are elated with these developments, are you?"

"I must find those spaceships."

"But you are secretly hoping you will not find them, either—I know exactly what you are thinking, Perry. We need Thora and Khrest. We need them on Earth, and also in the solar system, but not 34,000 light-years away from here. You should keep quiet about the existence of these spaceships."

"Do you want me to use deception? Do you expect me to go behind the back of these Arkonides to whom Terra owes her political unity and betray them? Do you want me to repay their friendship by treating them like captives? I don't believe that such conduct would be conducive to the understanding between our two races."

"You call it betrayal. I call it diplomacy."

Rhodan made a strong motion with his arm, dismissing any further attempt at clarification of his position.

"We shall find what there is to find, Bell. There is no doubt that we must keep Thora and Khrest close by, if we intend to improve our own position and that of the people here on Earth and place it on a firm and healthy foundation. Nevertheless, we also must remain loyal to our friends. The hangars must be due north of here. We shall look for them. And you are coming along..."

"Six spaceships!" shouted Bell, impressed. "That's enough to accommodate all the personnel of the New Power. With six Arkonide spaceships it might be possible to accomplish a round trip through the whole universe!"

"So you would be willing to attempt an escape? Do you know what would happen if we were to dissolve the New Power?"

"Probably the same as what has happened to humanity repeatedly in many millennia of its existence. Envy, ill will, a craving for power. Wars. Perhaps there would be only one more war. The final war."

"You know pretty well. And since we are rather fond of humanity we shall temporarily give up any idea of a round trip through the universe. Even if the Arkonide spaceships should happen to be ready to go."

They went outside and Perry Rhodan locked the door to the room which housed the Brain, by means of a newly discovered code. Only he knew the key to it.

Before them a labyrinth of cavernous dimensions opened up. Over a month ago they had found shelter in the interior of the mountain on the northern hemisphere of Venus. For more than a month they had been tracking down the secrets of this last witness of a long forgotten Arkonide expedition.

In order to gain insight into these events, it is important to trace human history back more than 10,000 years.

In the prime of Arkon, when none of her people as yet showed any signs of degeneration, an expedition of several hundred Arkonides landed on Venus in a spaceship and built this fort as an operating base. Atom-melting rays had burned a maze of passages into the mountain cliff and erected a city invisible from the outside. The equipment of this station had done justice to the high standards of Arkonide technology and civilization in all respects. For Earth people of the 20th century, it was like a fairy tale and as unbelievable as the unreal stories of a distant future.

And it was like a fairy tale for another reason, too.

It appeared to them like the castle in Sleeping Beauty. The Arkonides of yore were no more. They had discovered Earth and had found the third planet an ideal world for settling down. The new colony of Arkonide emigrants had risen on Atlantis. Earth's first epoch of technology had been their gift to it, yet it had disappeared along with the whole continent that once existed between Africa and the Americas. Even though the group of humans had gotten used to their new surroundings during the last four weeks, they could not keep from reminding themselves of its historical background.

"I cannot understand that they are no longer alive," said Reginald Bell as they got into a small railway car which travelled into a few of the main branches of the sub-venusian city. "Did they all live on Earth when the catastrophic flood drowned Atlantis?"

"There is no explanation," replied Rhodan. "I wish you would get it straight in your head what the results of the findings indicate. Had there been any survivors, Arkon as the central planet would have been notified. They would have sent new settlers or at least would have dismantled this fort or re-manned it. Khrest and Thora explained to us that today nobody on Arkon knows anything about the existence of this Venus station."

"Naturally I have grasped long ago the implications of your combined theories. However I permit myself a certain amount of scepticism. It could have a different explanation."

"Do explain to me the reason for your doubts."

"Well, quite simple. Khrest and Thora were able to convince us that this station was built by the emigrants of an Arkonide spaceship. Now, however, you speak of six spaceships that are supposedly hidden here. Six spaceships make up a fleet. If there are really six full-fledged Arkonide starships on this planet, I am certain that these also had a direct connection with their own planet. Therefore it would appear that Thora and Khrest lied to us."

"You could have spared me that last comment. One should only come to such a conclusion after one's suspicions have been proven correct." Bell recognized that Rhodan was not in a mood to continue the debate, which was based on mere suspicions. Therefore he kept quiet and leaned back into the cushions of the little vehicle. It was following a long tubular extension of the cavern that stretched about 2 kilometres from the heart of the fort to a point deep inside the mountain. To Earthlings, the size of the whole layout seemed senselessly overdone. Bell voiced his impression and shook his head.

"Of course you have to marvel at the accomplishments of the Arkonides. Nevertheless I find it ridiculous to construct a simple fort of such dimensions. Undeniably it implies a pretty narrow-minded personality when a person shoots sparrows with cannons."

"One also shoots at the lack of grey matter when a person is not using the proper yardstick," replied Rhodan wryly.

"And what is the proper yardstick?"

"The Arkonides themselves. When you look at this labyrinth, you place too much emphasis on the expense as measured by our human technology. But with what the Arkonides have available to them, it is by no means such a terrific thing to bore passages and caves ten or 20 kilometres into a mountain."

Rhodan interrupted his didactic words and stopped the car.

"Come along!" he ordered abruptly and turned to one of the big gates which lined the passage at regular intervals. A flick of the switch on the closing mechanism sufficed to set in motion 7 tons of sliding

doors made from Arkonide steel.

Reginald Bell opened his mouth in surprise as his gaze fell on the open hall. Not that he was impressed with the equipment and the size, which was much too grandiose for his liking. Since the discovery of the fort near the end of May he had already had the opportunity to marvel at all of these things and he had tried to become accustomed to their scale. At that time the hall had been quiet and almost lifeless. Today, however, it was suddenly alive. Subtle noises of every level reached his ear. Measuring scales, dancing equipment needles, electronic and positronic lights beamed and flickered in a variety of hues. Robots of various sizes and shapes rushed here and there between the stationary machines.

"Close your mouth!" said Rhodan and gave Bell an indulgent smile. "I think you have already seen the factory."

"But I never saw it in operation. Did you start it?"

"I thought it was time we got such a completely outfitted plant as this into operation again. 10,000 years of slumber is enough—we can't let such productive capacities as this go to waste."

"Hm-m," said Bell, deliberating, letting on that he was still sceptical. "You were telling me a while ago about using the right yardstick. The same thing goes for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I think this fortress was built by Arkonides for Arkonides. So if anything gets produced here it could only make sense to an Arkonide."

Rhodan's expression became grave. He placed a heavy hand on his friend's shoulder. "Listen, Bell. There isn't much time because those six spaceships are weighing on my mind. What's happening here is important to Earth, not Arkon. Our new hypno-knowledge of Arkonide technology and science would be difficult to apply directly to human needs. For weeks I've been wrestling with that question. I've dug into every accessible nook and cranny of Arkonide knowledge and have finally come up with a carefully worked out general plan of action. What gets built here will be solely for the needs and use of humanity. This robot plant is going to produce robots again, as well as construction machinery and automatic weapons. Look at that automatic conveyor to your right. Those redesigned positronic work machines have never been seen before by any Arkonide!"

"You're doing this without Khrest or Thora knowing about it?"

"I'm doing it because it's the right thing to do. Thora and Khrest are intelligent Arkonides, yet as a human being I think I'm more capable than they are of judging what's good for Terra. Far be it from me to go behind their backs, if that's what you're getting at."

"But they might take it that way. The distrust between them and us is far from being erased. Even you are not sure of your own attitude, Perry. That's how it seems to me. I'm thinking of the six spaceships. Remember how we reconstructed the Arkonide emigrants' past history? Their colony on Atlantis has disappeared. If there had still been Arkonides on Venus at that time, they would have died by now because they would not have had a way to return to Arkon. The six spaceships that the Brain informed you of simply do not fit into this picture. Perhaps you will tell me what you found out?"

"There isn't much to tell. I was unable to elicit any details from the Brain with merely the keyword 'spaceship'. I only know that these ships have to be in a separate cave near the northern slope. We shall look for them and take it from there." Rhodan put together a battery of sonic measuring instruments and chemo-analytical gear. He activated a work robot that was parked nearby and ordered him to load his handiwork onto a small rail car and board it himself. Then they rode perhaps 700 meters farther north to the end of the passageway. A smooth concrete wall blocked their path to the mountain cliff.

"Do you think it goes beyond this?" asked Bell, swinging down from the car.

"The Brain spoke of a separate cave. According to that, there is no access to it from here. But first we have to find the location of the cave. —Robby, set the blue instrument down next to the car! The rest of you can stay up there." Reginald Bell was instructed in the operation of the instruments and after a few minutes he was in position to assist Rhodan, as his mind had been equally activated through a hypno-training course. Each measurement was double-checked, that is, once through pure echo impulses and again through chemo-analysis. That way, they soon had an exact picture of the layout and composition of the mountain range all the way out to its northern slopes.

At a distance of 8 kilometres, their measuring instruments suddenly registered a drop in pressure.

"The cavern!" shouted Bell, louder than necessary

"Okay!" Rhodan nodded his head. "Make a note of the co-ordinates! Let's proceed radially for now, to calculate the diameter of the cave. After that we can extend the measurements laterally." It took barely another half hour until they had completed their diagram on the electronically guided drawing board. And then there were two long faces.

"Do you understand that?" asked Bell.

"Not quite yet. At least we know, due to our double check, that the diameter of the cavern is actually no longer than 95 meters. An error is impossible."

"But you will hardly find six full-sized Arkonide spaceships in such a mouse hole. Maybe they have separate hangars."

"If it fitted into that, then a single spaceship would be too small. Our Good Hope measures 80 meters across. And she is only a patrol ship with an operating range of barely 500 light-years."

"Then we must be dealing with smaller vehicles," reasoned Bell. "With rescue ships or patrol ships. It seems our excitement over Thora and Khrest was superfluous. They have to stay."

"Here is the entrance", said Rhodan and pointed at the diagram which they had just sketched. He simply ignored Bell's words. But secretly he was hoping he would be right.

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They flew a few kilometres northward in the Good Hope. They made it across the towering mountain tops and, keeping the spherical spaceship close to the steep mountain slopes, they descended slowly. When they reached the proper altitude, Perry Rhodan stopped and regulated the gravitational equalizer, until the ship reached a steady position approximately 500 meters above the valley floor, appearing almost weightless.

They quickly found the entrance to the mysterious hangar. Although the erosion caused by the

Venusian rains had polished the northern slope nearly as smooth as a mirror, the synthetic surface of the double entrance doors was easily visible. Aided by their Arkonide spacesuits, which also had built-in antigrav equipment, Rhodan and Bell left the ship and approached the cliff. The closing mechanism and its combination setting posed no problem for them. They had gotten used to the Arkonide way of thinking through their hypno-schooling.

The man made portion of the cliff eased sideways and made an opening of 20 meters at most.

"Too large for a human being, yet too small for a spaceship," Reginald Bell stated matter-of-factly.

Before them gaped a dark, horizontal shaft. The low hanging clouds of Venus permitted only a dim twilight and barely illuminated the entrance to the tunnel. A quick thrust impulse in the spacesuits was sufficient to carry both men a short distance into the mountains. They turned their antigravity switches to zero and once more found themselves on firm footing. Aided by their own lanterns they soon located a highly complex circuit board. Rhodan worked a switch and immediately the cavern was bathed in a blue-white light.

The entire installation was still in working condition, just as it had been 10,000 years ago.

Just this fact alone was worthy of admiration. Yet in the course of the last few months they had had to get used to many an Arkonide marvel. The shock of the fantastic no longer had the same effect as it did in the beginning. And even more interesting than the lights that were powered by energy cells many thousand years old was the hangar itself.

"Exactly six!" noted Reginald Bell, impressed. "But they appear to be toys. I hope you are not disappointed." Rhodan's behaviour betrayed quite the contrary. He was ecstatic. Instinctively he knew what he had here. He peeled himself out of the bulky Arkonide spacesuit and leaped onto the first machine. "Toys you say? But then they must be dangerous toys. Come up here and take a look. There is room for exactly one man in such a thing. Perhaps you might give it some deep thought and then tell me what it is all about."

Reginald Bell reached for the edge of a delta wing and pulled himself up. "It looks like a pursuit plane. The spindle-shaped body appears almost transgalactic. It looks a lot like the space ships of the Fantan people. But the aerodynamic rudder effect and the delta-shaped wings could come from a drawing board on Earth."

"Commonsense and logic will always lead to the same results. Here is your proof. Or do you doubt that these Arkonide pursuit planes hail from Arkon?"

"Absolutely not. Even the similarity in the arrangement of the instruments proves it. Obviously everything is a little less complicated than on the Good Hope but the principle is the same. The single seat is located inside a pressurized cabin. The service panel for the particle-thrust engine is there. This guarantees lightning-fast jet propulsion. There is a switch for pressurizing the combustion chamber, and this electronic eye is doubtlessly meant for observing the propulsion nozzle adjustment vanes. I can see, Perry, you are not at all disappointed. You probably prefer this air fleet to six super-spaceships."

"One of these days we shall build such ships ourselves, Bell. I believe right now we are needed on Terra and these lightning-fast pursuit planes are just the right gift for us. What do you think about a test night?"

The excitement showed in Bell's eyes. "Do you trust me to fly this gizmo on the first try?"

"If you don't, you should have Thora give you your training money back. Go ahead! Jump into that crate over there. I'll take this one."

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The current manpower in the Venus fort was scant. Besides the two Arkonides Khrest and Thora, there was Dr. Eric Manoli, the telekinetic Anne Sloane and the teleporter Tako Kakuta of the Corps of Mutants of the New Power, as well as Lt. Col. Freyt, Capt. Rod Nyssen and Lt. Conrad Deringhouse, three former officers of the US Space Force, all of whom were living in the widely scattered caves.

All of them had pursued productive activity in the past five weeks and had contributed to the exploration of the forgotten Venus outpost. Only the three officers had felt somewhat superfluous when the others were talking about things they knew nothing about. They were neither familiar with Arkonide ideas nor did they have the advantages of an actual mutant. They were nothing but normal human beings whose healthy bodies and minds had enabled them to reach the Moon with a primitive spaceship from Earth.

But on June 12 something happened that changed all that. It had been exactly on Lt. Col. Freyt's birthday. "What would you like for your birthday, Freyt?" Rhodan had asked good-naturedly.

"To become an active member of the New Power, sir!" he had replied. "And that applies to my two fellow officers, too. We feel a little left out."

"And what would you like to do?"

"We would like to fly, if possible. Although we are only familiar with conventional machines of our own technology."

"Those I cannot give you, Lieutenant Colonel. But would you care to take a closer look at the Good Hope?"

That had been Freyt's birthday present. The three officers were taken on an all-day tour of the spaceship by Khrest and Bell. After that, Rhodan gave them an intensive hypno-training course. They literally learned in their sleep how to fly the Arkonide machines. They had been asked to lie down on low cots. Their arms, legs and brains had been connected to the senso-psychological teaching machines, after which they had been left to dream intensively monitored dreams, during which they were piloting Arkonide spaceships of all classes from one star system to another. Away from danger, they learned to carry out the most difficult manoeuvres and to repair damage in-flight. The positronic testing machine automatically issued the results of its continuous checking operations. Incorrect handling became less frequent and it had been just 3 days since Lt. Col. Freyt had announced to Perry that the three officers had fully mastered the solo piloting of the Good Hope.

A test flight afterwards had proved it. Since then, Freyt, Nyssen and Deringhouse had received a well-deserved vacation.

They made good use of it by taking short trips into the jungle of Venus. Around noon of July 7—they still figured time here according to an Earth calendar—the three quickened their steps on the return from a trip when they suddenly saw the Good Hope rising up. Deringhouse saw the ship first. "They wouldn't go home without us!"

"I am aware of Rhodan wanting to return to Earth. For two days now he has been sitting with the

Brain holding clever conversations."

"Then I would like to know the meaning of this. I hope the Arkonides aren't pulling any smart tricks!"

"You mean Thora and Khrest want to escape, smiled Freyt. "You're a hothead, Deringhouse. The Arkonides know very well the limits that have been set for them, so don't look for trouble before you see it. Maybe we could hurry a little, if that would pacify you." Half an hour later they reached the rampart of the fort. All of the controls of the defence weapons were located in the big dome.

Freyt took one look and convinced himself that no ships were within the atmosphere of Venus. The observation range extended as far as the south pole. Deringhouse's suspicions suddenly did not seem so farfetched. Yet, as the lieutenant started to speak, two blips suddenly shot across the observation screen. "What the devil was that?"

"Captain! Get a fix on those objects so that we can follow them," shouted Freyt, and Nyssen obeyed his orders. Shortly afterwards, the tracking screen had caught the two space interceptors and regardless of what complicated manoeuvres they attempted, they couldn't escape it. "They are exceedingly small ships," observed Deringhouse. "They have nothing to do with the Good Hope. We should call Khrest."

Freyt had already done so. Seconds later, the Arkonide came in on the televisor. "You called, Lieutenant Colonel?"

"We are in the observation dome, Khrest. Could you come up right away?"

"Is it urgent? I have something else to do."

"We discovered two flying objects which evidently do not belong here. They shot low across the mountain and then pulled up sharply. Their current altitude is 14,000 kilometres."

"You must be seeing ghosts, Freyt. The alarm system would catch every foreign ship and report it. There is nothing that can advance as far as this mountain without being recognized."

"Please have a look for yourself!"

Freyt stepped aside so that Khrest could see the tracking screen through the televisor. The men recognized a barely noticeable twitching in Khrest's face. "I'm coming right away," said the Arkonide. He came up in the express elevator and immediately dashed for the controls of the defence screen. "I'm ready to fire, Lieutenant Colonel. The screen is reinforced. Contact the strangers and threaten them with immediate destruction if they refuse to follow our orders!" Freyt fidgeted nervously with the radio and waited several seconds for it to warm up. But before he could speak, the loudspeaker afforded the men in the dome a heated dialogue for which they were totally unprepared. Rhodan and Bell were communicating on the same wavelength, since that was how the Arkonides of 10,000 years ago had designed the system.

"...I'll just turn around immediately, then, old boy! I am in no mood to be shot down by Khrest."

"It's too late to turn back. You've already been spotted. I suggest you try to communicate with the ground personnel. Perhaps they can be dealt with." Initially it did not look that way, because Freyt, Nyssen, and Deringhouse were literally speechless. Even Khrest had to fight his surprise before he could say anything.

"What's going on, Rhodan? How did you get hold of those Fantan models?"

"Fantan models, he says," Bell burst in. "I told you so when I recognized the spindle-shaped bodies."

"Nonsense! What you see here, Khrest, are genuine Arkonide pursuit planes. Dig into your storehouse of memories and see how your forefathers built such things 10,000 years ago."

Khrest immediately grasped the implications. "You have discovered the planes in the fort. Of course, Rhodan, if that is so, it fits. The spindle shape was copied from us by the Fantan people only 2000 years ago. Where did you find the machines?"

"Here inside the mountain. There are four more. And all of them are armed to the teeth." Perry Rhodan laughed.

"You blew the alarm, didn't you, Khrest? Otherwise we might have to take our chances with a test of power."

"Do not joke around with such things, Rhodan. You can destroy whole planets with the weapons of a space interceptor. The Arkon rocket bombs, after spontaneous combustion, cause all heavy elements above the atomic weight of 80 to erupt into an atomic fire. In addition, the live warhead can be specifically guided toward a certain element to create a holocaust through an atomic chain reaction."

"That may very well be," retorted Rhodan. "However, you may be reassured. We do not have the bombs on board. That does not keep us from carrying them on our next flight, though. I've had an idea in the meantime." Rhodan did not elaborate about his idea prior to landing. Bell had to return his ship to the hangar and fly the Good Hope to the fort. Rhodan took his little marvel directly there and landed it immediately next to the entrance of the fort. While he briefed Khrest on how he had discovered the six space pursuit planes, the three officers turned their attention to the machine itself. At last what they had always dreamed about had come true here on Venus.

"How do you like it, gentlemen?" inquired Rhodan.

"It's the answer to a space pilot's dream, sir."

"Too bad you've just had your birthday, Freyt."

"It sounds as if the spaceships could be given away."

"Not exactly. But I'll compromise, Lt. Col. You and Deringhouse attend another hypno-training course—specifically as applied to these little flit-about. After that you can be their guardians by order of the New Power." Freyt's eyes shone with pride. "Thank you very much, sir! You may depend on us."

"That's understood," nodded Rhodan seriously. "I need a fleet that is ready to fight. I want it small—but extremely fast and invincible. You know that through the incidents of the past few months in our solar system a number of intelligent beings have taken notice of us. The first few attacks we were able to counter. There will be greater ones to follow. If we are to persevere and survive, we too must mobilize. Yesterday's fighting power may not be good enough tomorrow. Here comes Bell with the Good Hope. You will fly back with him to north hangar immediately and have him show you the location.

Familiarize yourself with everything that you come across. Tonight we shall discuss the new hypno training course. I suggest we start in about 24 hours."Reginald Bell took the three officers aboard and took off again toward the North. Khrest and Rhodan turned toward the entrance of the fort. When they opened the gate, Thora came toward them. Rhodan got the impression she had been waiting for them there. She seemed reserved and cold; she passed the two men and went over to the space interceptor.

"The machine is from one of our old battle ships, isn't it?"Khrest nodded. "Rhodan found it. Six altogether."

"Salvage goods, or what do you humans call it?"

"What do you call it?" retorted Rhodan. He sensed the criticism.

"Stealing," said Thora harshly. "We call it stealing, Perry Rhodan. And after having become acquainted with human beings I know that you have a similar code of ethics. Surely you know that you are a thief. In the eyes of other human beings as well as in the eyes of the Arkonides. Where is your pride?"

"I have only very little left. You robbed me of most of it. You alone, Thora. But what's left of it I intend to keep. I need it, if I am to save humanity."

"You talk of saving humanity and completely forget about the galaxy."

"The galaxy will have to wait until there is order in the Solar System. A great undertaking must always begin at the bottom. Without a sound foundation, even the most beautiful tower will crumble."

"And the foundation is the people, right? Four billion ignorant people. Do you think they are strong and mature enough to support an entire island of the universe?"

"Young enough, Thora. It all comes down to youthfulness, the available reserves of vitality. Maturity comes slowly. What drives you to continually get back to that subject?"

"Because I have asked myself if I am still the commander. Already the name of my ship has been changed to Good Hope. That is a Terranian name."

"But it is a nice name and sounds hopeful. Don't you like it?"

"I am asking myself if I am still in charge of it," Thora insisted.

"That you are."

"But as a captive. And the name Good Hope remains an Earth name, even if it does sound beautiful."

"The picture of the Arkonides has changed. You have both become more sentimental than your pride permits. And especially you have become weaker. Your 'Great Imperium' is dwindling. How much hope do you have left, Thora?" She did not answer.

"Say something, Khrest!" demanded Rhodan. "Say one final word to clear it all up! Keep your Arkonide pride but please—try to have reason prevail!"

"The galaxy is one great chaos," declared Khrest. "Our Imperium is at an end, I believe. Inhuman races lay waste to the cultures which we have founded and each year are coming closer to our core. The Milky Way needs a new ruler. We recognize the threatening development thus far. I recognize also, Rhodan, which role you might play. I am just not certain whether you would be willing to do it."

"Which role would that be?"

"You are a humanitarian. You love these four billion people and would do anything for them. You would even let them rule the entire galaxy. Only—from ruling to dominating is but a small step."

"You have a good point there, Khrest. But that does not let you out of making a decision. You have to throw in a small pinch of trust. None of us can make any prophecies. It is sufficient if all of us are willing to do our best."

"Are you willing, Rhodan? Are you willing to let the others have what's theirs, what is due them based on their right to freedom. I want to speak clearly and openly and let this be my final word, as you have asked me to. Humans and Arkonides are similar in nature. It would always be to our mutual disadvantage if one of these days a totally subhuman intelligence would take over the control of the stars of this system. Fate has brought Arkonides and humans together. If you are willing, Rhodan, to fight for all of us and to utilize human energies for the good of the whole galaxy, you have my confidence."

"I am willing."

2/ INVASION ALERT

Two days later.

Storms raged across the northern hemisphere of Venus, whipping rain and cloud formations deep into the valleys and causing rivers and lakes to swell and overflow their embankments. Between the never ending flashes of lightning from the contending storms there streaked identical trails of mathematical linearity: five spaceships in takeoff.

After space pilots Freyt, Nyssen and Deringhouse had completed their special hypno-course, Perry Rhodan gave orders for close formation manoeuvres.

Communication between the five pilots was unusually gratifying.

"It's hard to believe what these birds can do," remarked Nyssen. "And when you consider that they were built more than 10,000 years ago, you can only say that our own engineers should get their tuition fees back."

"No panning of professional groups allowed," admonished Bell with playful seriousness. "Without the hypno-training course, your review flight would have drowned out today, Captain."

"Enough of that," commanded Rhodan. "We are leaving the Venus atmosphere and are moving across the north pole 120,000 kilometres away from here. Line up for a chain formation and pay attention to braking and turning signals."

Thirty seconds later the five machines were out of the Venusian thunderstorm, which was still raging below. Before them glittered the velvety-smooth universe, seemingly revolving around the white sun. Transmission of communications once again was normal so that even weaker stations were audible.

In all five of the space interceptors Terra's call for help was clearly received. In all five of the space interceptors the pilots realized that Rhodan's last order had been unnecessary. "...asking immediate return. By order of John Marshall, this is the New Power calling. We are calling Perry Rhodan! Oval spaceships, crew apparently consisting of Mind Snatchers, have landed on the Moon, according to information received from space station Freedom I, and have shortly thereafter started up again and disappeared into space. Renewed approach is to be expected. Mutant Corps simultaneously reports new and suspicious changes in exposed persons. Additional details are being broadcast simultaneously over secret wavelength AK 3. Rhodan, we request your immediate return. By order of John Marshall... This is the New Power calling. We are calling Perry Rhodan! Oval spaceships..." Rhodan ordered their immediate return to the fort on Venus. In a tight loop, which only their automatic inertial compensators made possible, the space interceptors plunged downward and dove into the raging hurricane. However, energy impulses neutralized the weather in the immediate vicinity of the machines and they were able to land without damage.

Even in the fort the mood was tense. Khrest also had received the message from the Gobi and had advised the men to be prepared for an emergency takeoff.

"Alright", nodded Rhodan. "Let the men board. It is not necessary that anyone stay behind. And don't forget to take three space interceptors aboard. Come on, Khrest. I want to hear what else they can tell us on wavelength AK #3." Rhodan and Khrest took the elevator to the lookout tower. The Arkonide main receiver had already spewed out a tape. But Rhodan did not finish reading it after he had quickly caught a few unfamiliar names—Instead he plugged in his own transmitter which came on at faster than light speed, or instantly, because of its 5th dimensional impulses. Contrary to the usual radio transmissions where the sending of a message between Venus and Earth in their present position would require more than 12 minutes, instant communication was possible over the five dimensional AK 3 wave. "This is Perry Rhodan! Calling station Gobi! What do you say, Marshall?"

"Hello, sir! Thank God you are here! Did you hear our message?"

"Naturally! The Good Hope is ready for take-off. But now I want you to tell me what you have sent over AK 3 until now."

"I'll let you talk to Mr. Mercant. He's standing right here."

"Hello, Rhodan! Mercant here!"

"Good afternoon! What's going on?"

"Two days ago, Kaats of the Federal Criminal Police called me up. For almost a year he has been after the gangster syndicate 'Bluebird', without even so much as having discovered anything besides their mysterious name. Now finally he is on their trail and he, insists that one of the three most important figures calls himself Clive Cannon and has a luxury apartment on Michigan Avenue in Chicago."

"That sounds very interesting. But I want to point out that the New Power has no intention of mixing into politico-economic criminal cases."

"Why do you think I am telling you this, Rhodan? Cannon was discovered quite by accident by an FBI man and it is this accident that I think will interest you. Cannon had owned a well-trained German Shepherd dog. Since the beginning of the week, this dog no longer acknowledges him. That in itself is not too significant. But they had been watching Cannon. He had long been known in social circles as a seemingly serious-minded businessman and some of his habits and connections were known as well. Colonel Kaats says that Cannon is no longer the same man."

"So you claim that he has been taken over by the Mind Snatchers?"

"We are almost certain. We shall continue to keep the syndicate under observation. If it is indeed in the power of the M.S., then a shift of economic and political interests must follow. Because extraterrestrial invaders will not restrict themselves to purely criminal acts."

"What do the other names in your message mean?"

"They are merely names of suspicious persons which we shall check out. I am convinced that the M.S. are intelligent enough to go primarily after our most influential personages. That begins with the president of the United States."

"Have you notified the world powers, Mercant?"

"Not yet. I don't want to be presumptuous and make that decision."

"In that case I am giving you the order! Through the International Intelligence Agency you have the best connections to the defence centres of the Eastern Bloc and the Asiatic Federation. Contact Kosselow and Mao-Tsen immediately! Make it clear to all nations on Earth that they must look for one another, because our best friend today can turn into our worst enemy tomorrow. But mainly I want you to mobilize the Mutant Corps, insofar as they have completed their training. I want you to take over the command temporarily!"

"Thank you, sir! I have already made suggestions accordingly and have worked out the details as to how to deploy our people most advantageously. However, I want to remind you that, despite our so-called superhuman capabilities, we are small in number. At the most we can handle only 6 or 7 people. Yet the attack front of the enemy ranges over the whole population and across the whole planet. In addition, only our telepaths are able to instantly recognize those who have been invaded by the M.S. We need a detector, Rhodan."

"I know", he said pensively. "The Arkonides have blessed us with plenty of instruments but not one of them is the kind we need for this situation."

"Don't you have a brainwave detector? I mean those little machines with which Bell and Kakuta had searched for mutants in Japan."

"Those things only locate abnormal brainwave patterns, which have been proven to exist also among us humans. We couldn't even determine among the mutants which type of paranormal ability they possessed. No, Mercant, those machines would not be of any help to us."

"We could perfect them."

"I am honoured by your faith in me," said Rhodan with sarcasm. "But do not mistake me for the Almighty! I'll see what can be done."

"Do you have an idea?"

"A hope. No more. But we shall investigate every possibility and leave nothing untried. For this I shall need your help."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Go to Kaats and tell him that he must leave Clive Cannon alone. I want him to stick strictly to surveillance without being seen."

"I shall try to convey this to him in a diplomatic way. I hardly think he will accept orders from you."

"That's your problem, Mercant."

* * * *

Reginald Bell reported the Good Hope ready for takeoff. But Rhodan advised him to wait. It was typical for the Chief of the New Power to spend time on seemingly unimportant details.

"What a set of nerves he has!" groaned Dr. Manoli and thereby voiced everybody's sentiments. Two hours later, Rhodan finally came aboard. He carried a chart with a stack of punched cards, positronic graphs and formulae which he put down without saying a word. He did not breathe a word about his work with the Brain.

"Are the space interceptors on board?"

"Yes, sir," nodded Freyt.

"OK!" Then we can start, Bell. I hope you don't need more than three hours." Reginald Bell switched on the H-reactors. The Good Hope accelerated slowly to 10.2 km/sec and then shot with an absolute thrust impulse of 800,000 tons into outer space. Then she accelerated to 500 Gs. Nevertheless, they did not come close to attaining the speed of light because of the short distance between Venus and Earth, although Reginald Bell pretty nearly fulfilled Rhodan's demands for a lightning-quick flight. After an hour of flight, those detection instruments were turned on which registered speeds faster than light, and which, through their five-dimensional impulse arrangement, would not be recognized by possible attackers in the ordinary universe. The disadvantage of such an observation was that only limited sectors of space could be surveyed, whereas vast areas which could be sighted in a straight line in four dimensional space could not be detected. For this reason, the conventional radar observation, which worked with only a few minutes delay over the actual distance, was employed concurrently.

Rhodan's orders proved correct. Where the M.S. showed up and disappeared at will, a renewed attack could be expected at any time. At nearly top speed—when Bell was ready to switch to increased braking power—the radar instruments indicated the presence of two oval spaceships. "M.S.!" shouted the men in unison. "They are headed for the Moon."

"That could be coincidence. It might just as well be that they are flying to Earth. Take the Arkon-detector, Bell!"

Almost simultaneously, search probes flashed through hyperspace, reaching for the roughly located targets. Within just a few seconds the probe beams found their opponent. Contact-reaction cells guaranteed that the guide probe would not let the two M.S. spaceships out of its grasp no matter what escape manoeuvres they might attempt.

"Distance: 25 million km from Terra! 44 million km to the M.S. spaceships."

"What is the distance between the M.S. and Terra?"

"Almost 18 million."

"That's all? Give me the map please!" demanded Rhodan. Above the control panel a red light came on.

"Angle between M.S. and Terra exactly eight degrees, 45 minutes, and 30 seconds," declared Bell. "The M.S. are almost heading straight into us, since they are coming from the other side. Their speed, however, is a little slower than ours. They have already started to slow down."

"Estimates do not help us."

"It's hard to say in advance what the enemy is going to do. At the moment he's going at normal speed and apparently feels undiscovered. But as soon as he's spotted us he can be expected to renew his acceleration. You know from experience how rough they are with their inertials."

"We're not taking any risks. Hold for 10 minutes at positive acceleration. Even if we shoot past Earth. Freyt!"

"Sir!"

"I want you, Nyssen and Deringhouse to get ready for takeoff! Full weapons for all three machines."

"One rocket bomb with atomic warhead is already on board, sir. The equipment for the rayguns is ready to fire."

"Very well. You are acquainted with the situation. My plan is to catch both M.S. ships before they reach Earth. The Good Hope will keep going without diminishing her speed as long as possible. As soon as we cut back, however, you and your interceptors will leave the mother ship and fly with renewed speed ahead. Fasten yourselves down well against the pneumo-mats, because you will undoubtedly have to slow down by as much as 500 G when you reach your destination. The antigravity projectors may not be able to balance that completely."

"I have been trained for 20 G plus, sir."

"That's good! But hardly good enough for Arkonide acceleration effects. I can only advise you to watch out and not overdo it. As soon as you see that the antigravs cannot keep up, you must reduce the braking power. I hope you destroy the enemy, but it's more important that you and the three space interceptors get back safely and all in one piece. You're too valuable an asset, gentlemen."

"Yes, sir!" replied the three officers and signed off.

* * * *

The action went like clockwork. At least in the beginning. According to Khrest's briefing, the Mind Snatchers had an inferior warning system, but mainly their detection devices barely reached as far as 10 million km. The Good Hope would soon have to slow down in order to let the little interceptors go ahead, since these, with their low degree of reflection, had the best chance to move up close to the enemy without being discovered. And they simply had to approach unnoticed if they expected even the slightest chance of success. The strength of the M.S. was their powerful defence shields, which they were able to put up around their ship within but a few seconds. An Arkonide raygun would be powerless to do much against that. The other advantage of the M.S. was their enormously quick manoeuvrability. As soon as they knew that one of their underhanded attacks had been discovered and was therefore doomed to fail, they would then seek their escape in flight.

Which did not serve the purpose of the humans. An escaped M.S. would return. Sometime, from somewhere. And again he would have the element of surprise on his side.

"Hello, Lt. Col. Freyt! Report when you are clear!" Perry Rhodan called out.

"All three interceptors clear for launch."

"Very well! Start them up! Increase speed as discussed. In 20 seconds the Good Hope is going to pull back. By that time you must be out!"

Three tiny grey dots disappeared in space in a straight line as Reginald Bell activated the jets to effect

a slow down. In only a few seconds the reflections on the shiny metal surface of the space interceptors stopped registering on the observation screens. A second detection ray searched for it and made them visible via the fifth dimension.

Direct voice contact with Freyt was established over the AK 3, without this being recognizable in the four-dimensional continuum.

Perry Rhodan would supervise every phase of the impending confrontation and, if indicated, announce any changes in his strategy.

"Correct course by two degrees starboard!" came the next order. Bell was a little surprised, since he had thought that he could fly the Good Hope home according to his own good judgment. But apparently her course still played a role in Rhodan's plans. So he obeyed without contradiction. Most men on board sensed what Rhodan had in mind by changing course. But their suspicions were confirmed when the chief called Freyt.

"Stay on the exact course, Lt. Col! We have changed course on the Good Hope by two degrees and will therefore show up six million kilometres away from your rendezvous with the M.S. In addition, we'll soon proceed comparatively slower so that the attention of the enemy will be directed toward us with certainty. That way, your chances to approach without being spotted are greatly increased. Again, good luck!" Another 48 minutes went by, when a certain manoeuvre by the M.S. indicated the Good Hope had been discovered.

"Now, just keep your chin up, lad!" said Rhodan, addressing Bell. "We'll go on without any further course correction. The speed reduction also remains constant. From the enemy's point of view, we are heading straight for a point on the other side of the Earth. If we continue like this on our course, he'll have to be convinced that we have not discovered him!" Shortly afterwards Freyt issued his orders and the crew of the Good Hope listened in on super-wavelength AK 3.

"One degree spread! Nyssen aft, Deringhouse starboard. Nyssen 2 G increase in acceleration! Deringhouse decrease acceleration by 2 G. You, Conrad, take on the first one, in case I miss him. Rod, you take on the second one."

"OK! Got it!"

The string of space interceptors fanned out. Due to the altered acceleration they now flew in oblique echelon formation. In the lead was Capt. Rod Nyssen, who had to dive past the first enemy spaceship in order to take on the second, before it was alerted by comrades on ship #1.

The M.S. held to their minor course correction. Apparently it had been a natural reaction to the appearance of the Arkonide space ship. Since Rhodan, however, had stubbornly stuck to his course, the M.S. were confident and stayed on their Luna-Terra course without altering their rate of deceleration. The three space interceptors, on the other hand, through their continuing acceleration, had nearly reached the speed of light. For the stabilization of the gauges, which were drifting toward infinity, the galactonauts had sprayed an additive into the starter jets in order to purify the particle spray. They developed a speed which no living being in the Solar System had ever before thought possible.

The enemy had not counted on such a sudden attack.

At the agreed-upon distance of 2 million kilometres, the space interceptors opened fire with their ray weapons. At the same time Nyssen and Freyt released their atomic space torpedoes.

The M.S. missed their chance to activate their powerful energy shields. When they discovered the flash of the rayguns it was already too late for them. The deadly beams approached them with the speed of light.

Both ships disintegrated almost simultaneously in a burst of pure energy.

The three galactonauts did not have time to worry about this fiery drama before them. The interceptors themselves were in danger. Minute by minute, their ever-increasing speed carried them closer to the edge of the raging inferno.

Immediately after the firing, they had to discontinue all acceleration and change course, during which a constant lateral pressure occurred for more than 15 seconds.

The three galactonauts lay stiffly in their pneumo-mats and instinctively counted up to 15. Only when they reached that point in full consciousness did they feel certain that they had survived it.

"Reduce speed!" Perry Rhodan's order suddenly boomed through the pressurized cabins. "Well done, gentlemen! Get together and decide on a mutually agreeable course to return to Earth as soon as you have reached a tolerable reentry speed. We'll meet in lunar orbit where we'll haul you back in." The men on the Good Hope got ready for a restful nap, when the hyper-detector suddenly came on again.

"What the devil is that now!" groaned Reginald Bell.

"Without doubt a flying object," commented Khrest. "It comes from exactly the same area which the three interceptors just inundated with energy. Apparently we are dealing with an M.S. lifeboat. These crafts are even smaller than our own interceptors and have room for a crew of 10 at the very most."

"That is impossible. Our attack destroyed everything that..."

"Your excitement is unnecessary. This craft is as good as unarmed. It cannot hurt us."

"That's not the question, Khrest! The question is how anyone was able to escape at all."

"They would not have had enough time to escape from one of the ships," remarked Perry Rhodan.

Khrest nodded. "That is true. I assume the lifeboat had been released earlier to carry out a special task. Please, let's pursue it awhile longer. We can afford to now." Khrest's suggestion was accepted. The tiny lifeboat of the Mind Snatchers had set course for Luna. Rhodan contacted Freyt again. The three interceptors returned on a radial curve of 800,000 kilometres and after 90 minutes reached the prescribed orbit, just ahead of the Arkonide spaceship.

"I estimate, Freyt, that you are the closest to the ship."

"Yes sir."

"Then begin the pursuit. Please, no attack! Such a fly can always be caught, as long as it does not fly directly toward Earth. I want exact co-ordinates of the landing area."

"Very well, sir! What about Nyssen and Deringhouse?"

"They can come in. We'll open the locks."The guard over the M.S. boat was doubled. In addition to the Lieutenant-Colonel, the hyper-detector was also on its heels. The men in the ship as well as Thora followed every movement of the enemy with great interest.

Freyt approached it with great speed.

"Careful, Lt. Col! We have to count on the M.S. having built a permanent station on Luna. They might shoot at you from there."

"OK, sir! I'll be careful. Are you watching us, too?"

"Only to be absolutely sure. But that is no reason to get carried away."

Freyt laughed. "With all this equipment that I have here, there is hardly a chance to become careless. Everything has to be tested at least once. For instance, I have here an Arkonide wonder camera with 500 frames per second, with infrared and ultraviolet frequency ranges, with a chemophysical positronic search brain and built-in developing mechanism for instant prints. Shall I bring you a finished film, sir?"

"The idea isn't bad. Get to work with the camera, then."Lt. Col. Freyt indeed brought back a usable film. The M.S. ship had disappeared near the equator on the backside of the Moon. Freyt's measurements pointed to the general area of the Mendelejev crater near the 80th longitude. in that location there were astonishingly weak metal traces whose alloys the positronic brain of the camera described as 'not occurring in a natural state.'"We have them there!" cried Eric Manoli. "We should pay them a little visit."

"We'll do that, although I don't want to risk any lives."

"Let's take robots! The M.S. will break their teeth on those, I think."A short time later the Good Hope

landed in the crater Anaxagoras, and unloaded a fully motorized contingent of robots who were given a limited scouting assignment. Their effective operating range was 6000 kilometres.

3/ THE EARTH PANICS

Some time later the Good Hope landed in a hornet's nest. In this case, however, the hornet's nest was the territory of the New Power in the Gobi Desert, although it could hardly be called a desert any more. The wilderness and the solitude had disappeared. Besides the energy dome, which measured 10 km across, another 1000 square km of ground had been included in the plan for cultivation. Hundreds of experts and technicians were busy with an army of work robots engaged in the task of building the widely branched out installations of a gigantic manufacturing industry from the ground up. And the rose virtually came to the "desert". Artificial thunderstorms and rainfalls had put an end to the eternal drought. The natural oasis had expanded and daily attracted more Mongolian farmers who pitched their tents close to the borders of the New Power so as to share in the profitable wonders of a slowly and increasingly verdant paradise.

From a bird's-eye view it all looked very enticing. For a few minutes the Arkonide spacesphere hovered at low altitude above the hustle and bustle, on orders from Allan D. Mercant, who had unequivocally refused to permit a landing outside of the energy dome. "You worry me," Rhodan had said. "I want to know what's going on in the land of the New Power and I see that good and positive things are happening. Or does it look any different when you get closer?"

"Land inside the dome, Rhodan! Since the M.S. have shown up again I haven't opened the energy shield."

"Aren't you needed in your headquarters on Greenland?"

"I am needed everywhere. But I had sworn to wait here until you return. I am now going to have the energy screen deactivated. For three seconds at the most. Otherwise the risk is too great."

"We'll make it." Reginald Bell's landing was a masterpiece. On the landing strip they were welcomed by

their closest co-workers.

Mercant pressed closer. With him was John Marshall and Dr. Haggard. Rhodan shook their hands. "Out with it, Mercant! What's the matter?"

"If you study today's World Press you will be able to find more than 300 suspicious cases of take-overs. Even if 90% of those are imagined, what is left would be more than shocking. It is the unreported cases that are cause for concern."

"In a word, you fear a mass invasion against the New Power!"

"That is obvious. The first M.S. who has taken control of an important politician or economist was informed about the significance of our nation. Whoever intends to rule the Earth must control the New Power. That is very clear."

"Admittedly so. That is why you have ordered a total curfew between the dome and the outlying areas."

"With what we've got, it is impossible to supervise our entire territory and to protect against any mind snatching. So we restricted ourselves to the dome. As long as the main body remains untouched, we will always have a clean nucleus for the counterattack."

"I am grateful to you. What is going to happen next? I gathered from our AK 3 dialogue that you have already initiated some action."

"I have spoken with my colleagues from the East Bloc and the AF. They will submit our recommendations to their governments."

"That smells of bureaucracy."

"It is going to go faster this time. Space station Freedom I witnessed your battle with the two M.S.

cruisers. The news of this great victory is already being broadcast this very moment by news agencies the world over. The danger is well known. In fact, it has already been propagated too much and been publicized everywhere, so that outbreaks of panic are increasingly difficult to suppress. There is nothing left for the governments but to declare an emergency state. But we will not get anywhere if we continue to distrust each other. Half an hour ago radio Singapore announced that a man in Manila kills his wife because the M.S. supposedly had taken control of her. Although neighbours seemed to think that their marriage was on the rocks. Who can talk of right or wrong today, if people are killing each other and then blame the M.S.?"

"We need a police force," said Rhodan. "I would like them to come from the ranks of your Secret Service: 500 men should be enough for right now."

"500?"

"500," said Rhodan with a faint smile. "What's 500 men for our problem and for those problems which await us in the future? We should not be so optimistic and assume that all stations can be covered by mutants. There are just not that many to go around."

"I shall get you the 500 men. It will take about a week. But I cannot guarantee there won't be any controlled ones among them."

"I don't expect that, either. Nevertheless, don't be such a pessimist. If only one of your 500 men is control led by the M.S. that would mean that the M.S. have already taken every five-hundredth one under their control. An improbable percentage, isn't it?"

"Permit me to revise your probability studies, sir! said Mercant. We agreed that the M.S. proceed with logic, that they would not concern themselves with the uninfluential masses. Therefore, of a population of 4 billion, only about 2 million would be affected here on Terra. I would think that the M.S. would prefer secret agents in addition to politicians and economists."

"You are stubborn, Mercant," smiled Rhodan. "You insist on talking over a subject with me that won't be acute until a week from now. Why don't we postpone our dissertation for 7 days? Perhaps by then we will have changed our opinions."

"You mean by then you will have found a way to discover those who are possessed by the M.S.?"

"What we need is a clairvoyant in the corps of mutants. I merely harbour certain hopes and plans. Let's stay with the facts of the present! Everyone has his work cut out for him. It is your job to get me 500 reliable policemen. For right now, then, we shall proceed according to your already established rules and regulations. No unauthorized personnel are permitted to enter the energy dome. All new personnel will be stationed outside the energy shield. Only men and women who have been proven to be clean and reliable will be permitted to enter our Control Central. Keep me posted, Colonel! Whom do you want as your assistant?"

"A mutant, please."

"How about Marshall?"

"Hm, I like him. But I understand a little about telepathy myself. I'd rather have a teleporter. That would match up better with me."

"Very well. Take Tako Kakuta. What is your itinerary?"

"To start off, I have to go to Greenland. Then to New York and possibly to Washington."

"Good. Have a good trip. If you have important news for me, please keep to the agreed upon times, if possible, so that we are not called away from our work too frequently. However, if it concerns matters impossible to postpone, I shall always be available."

While Mercant and Kakuta got ready for their trip, Rhodan straightened out his papers which he had brought along after his last meeting on Venus with the robot Brain.

"Gentlemen," said Perry finally, "it will hardly be necessary for me to make a detailed speech. You all know the situation. We are confronted by an enemy more malicious than anyone has ever known. We know neither his numerical strength nor his location. We don't know where the front line runs, only that it could run directly through the middle of our camp branching out in a million different directions. An attack against the M.S. makes sense only in space where we can pinpoint their ships accurately. The battle on Earth itself will first have to be initiated. Before we strike back down here, it will be necessary for us to

recognize the front lines. From a strategic point of view, two things appear to be needed at the moment: surveillance in space and enlightenment on Earth itself... Lt. Col. Freyt!"

"Yes sir!"

"You will have a difficult job for the next few days. It will be absolutely necessary that at all times of the day and night a commando of two space interceptors patrol the universe up to 500,000 kilometres. You will do it together with Lt. Deringhouse. Only one of you can be off duty at any one time. Arrange this among yourselves."

"Yes, sir!"

"Thank you. I'll expect your takeoff within five minutes." The three galactonauts left the room.

"Now to you, Doc Haggard! I'd like you to retreat to your laboratory and to think about where the M.S. might biologically be vulnerable to attack; purely theoretical, of course. If your laboratory is not sufficiently equipped, I want you to let me know immediately. Neither time nor material will be spared."

"I am honoured by your faith in me, sir. But promise me please that I will not get too many of these jobs that are straight research. And research in such a relatively new area could take years to complete."

"I didn't give you a deadline, Doc. Is that clear? Anyway, be sure you continue to keep the mutants under medical supervision. Inform the gentlemen that they will shortly be transferred to Venus for a general final training course."

"I shall dedicate myself to theoretical matters and at the same time fulfil my obligations as Minister of Health. However, should you nevertheless press for a quick solution to the problem, I respectfully request that you supply me with the best equipment."

"And what is that?"

"A mind snatcher or his body. And in addition, a transformed human being."

"I'll see what can be done." With that, Dr. Haggard was dismissed too.

Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell were alone.

"And now to me," said Bell laconically. "Wouldn't it be better if we reinforced the patrol flights?" he suggested. "You sound as if you want to join Freyt."

"Don't think because I am enjoying it. Freyt's job is the most important one of all. We have to prevent further landings at all costs—otherwise our counterattack will come too late. And that has to be planned in minute detail, which will be time-consuming. You know, even you can't fight a whole world of M.S."

"Under no circumstances do I underestimate Freyt's job. But only he, with the aid of Nyssen and Deringhouse, can finish it. I need you for the new commando setup."

"Isn't that Mercant's job?"

"All he has to do is bring 500 men within a week, whose usefulness has yet to be determined. After 2 or 3 aptitude tests, there won't be many of them left. That is why you must get another 500 or 1000 volunteers together. Also within 8 days."

"How should I do that? I don't have a smooth running organization where I can get my recruits."

"You need volunteers. Volunteers from all over the world. We don't get very far with agents only, even if we admit that these lads are exceptionally bright. We need soldiers, technicians, scientists, jurists."

"You make greater and greater demands. I've told you before that my personal connections are not enough to..."

"As far as I am concerned you can place one-page ads in the newspapers all over the world. You can get together with Adams in New York. He does have the necessary connections."

"Then I am going to New York?"

"Among other places. Before that, you are going to Chicago. Michigan Avenue, to be precise."

"To see Clive Cannon."

"Quite right. Cannon is under surveillance by the Secret Criminal Police. If Col. Kaats took my recommendation to heart, nothing has happened to the chief of the gangsters as yet."

"And what am I supposed to do when I find Cannon?"

"Invite him for a stay in the Gobi Desert."

"He may not be interested."

"You don't think so? As one person transformed by the M.S. he will try his best to gain firm footing here."

"But he'll be suspicious. Even a less intelligent swindler is going to know the meaning of such an invitation. In this case I would be more in favour of an act of force."

"I am not telling you how to do it. But I need Cannon here. And alive."

"Who can I take along?"

"Who do you want?"

"John Marshall."

"Permission granted. Now go and pack your bags. Notify Marshall. But before you leave, I'd like to talk to you a minute."

* * * *

Perry Rhodan made off alone toward the positronic Brain which was stationed in the energy dome. He had with him the documents prepared by the sister brain on Venus. But these documents were far from being prepared in depth. The sudden departure from the old Venus fort had barely left Rhodan time to give the problem any concentrated thought.

In order to find a beginning, he inserted the punchcards and positrograms into the machine. The first time around, his question was of a general nature. Even the Brain had to be guided slowly, step by step, with logical progression, toward the main problem. Not because it was possibly not capable of grasping more complex concepts in the shortest of time, but because it was of the utmost importance how the questions were stated.

"How can I identify the mind of a person?" began Rhodan... "Ask him who he is!"

"In this case we do not have a chance to ask," said Perry Rhodan. "The brain to be identified does not volunteer information."

"Every brain possesses a personal frequency pattern which can be measured through biofeedback methods," replied the Brain.

"It is our task," continued Rhodan, "to identify certain traits of a special group of brains. We are not concerned with one certain individual."

"That changes nothing in the correctness of my former reply."

Rhodan thought for a moment. This wasn't getting him anywhere. "The stimulus travelling from molecule to molecule emits a measurable field of energy. Measuring its frequency is made possible through our biofeedback equipment. Are you familiar with the mode of operation and construction of the equipment?"

"I am," the positronic robot replied readily.

"In this way, though, only deviations in the principle can be detected. We have no method of quality analysis. Through the brainwave pattern alone it cannot be determined, anyway. That much we know. My question is: what can we use besides the energy waves?"

"We have no knowledge of anything else."

Again Rhodan was at the end of the rope. But he didn't give up. Not only had the positronic Brain been developed to amass certain knowledge and information, it also possessed the ability to think constructively. Rhodan took a specific example of the positrograms which he had brought along and fed it into the machine.

"What is your answer to this?"

"The use of telepaths is recommended."

"Telepaths are not available in this case."

"Detection of brainwave activity can only be made via the use of biofeedback, since every type of liquid is electromagnetic in character. Improving the receptor is recommended. Greatest possibility for character determination lies in modulation or patterning."

"Patterning into a carrier wave?"

"That exists already. When we try to identify a brain, we are dealing with the sender."

"According to that, the viable secret presumably lies in the fact that the Arkonide biofeedback equipment operates on too narrow an energy range. Must we include the brainwave frequency of the carrier into their scope of resonance?"

"That is highly probable."

"What frequencies are we dealing with?"

The answer of the positronic Brain drowned in a shrilling of alarms. Perry Rhodan straightened up. His alert mind quickly switched over. Howling sirens were more significant than the most important answers of the Brain. The knowledge of the Positron Machine was not going to be lost. But every second that passed by was irretrievably gone forever.

Rhodan rushed toward the hall gate and looked around outside.

People hurried through the sandy streets of the still rustic town. That in itself was not surprising, since an alarm in the restricted territory meant only that everybody had to get to his prescribed station where he had to await further orders.

Rhodan's station was in his office building, which in turn, was the Control Central for the New Power. And only there the warning system could have been activated. The distance straight across the street was only a stone's throw away. Perry avoided using his pocket transmitter and started running without losing a moment's time. In the entrance to his office, Reginald Bell was expecting him in full travel regalia.

"Was this your idea?"

"Come on in. Out there by the gates it's pure pandemonium."

"M.S.?"

"That's what they say. At least that's one of their claims. They're causing a small revolution. In a case like this, you can never get a clear-cut answer."

"Are we dealing with a new invasion? Did the space interceptors let one of them get through?"

"Nothing like that. If we are dealing with the M.S. they would have had to be here on Earth for days. Here, let's have a look!" Rhodan stepped toward the television screen.

Bell made a viewing adjustment. The energy activated eye of the directional antenna searched further out and finally gave them a fuller view of the New Power area.

"Where did it happen?" asked Rhodan.

"Here," replied Bell and focused on an enlarged section. "Exactly northwest from us. Close to Post 37."

He did not have to say more. The picture spoke clearer than words.

Crowds of people thronged at the edge of the energy shield near the restricted area. And it was easy to recognize two groups that were hostile toward one another.

"Did you say 'revolution'?"

"That's it. Ras can tell you what else." Rhodan turned around to face the African. "What happened?"

"I was outside making a routine inspection. Exactly at Post 37. In the second area, scarcely two kilometres from the border wall, the Harris Corporation is building 10 factory buildings for the manufacture of plastic freezer components and other standard parts for aircraft interiors. A group of people standing near the cement mixers were yelling at each other. Some of them were obviously arguing and were starting to raise their fists. Naturally I intervened and immediately was threatened physically. However, none of them got that far, because it seemed they could not get together among themselves. Several of them seemed less aggressive and asked me if there were really transformed people in the realm of the New Power. Others answered for me and stated emphatically that they had evidence to that effect. One technician pointed to two men and openly accused them of being transformed. He kept them at a distance with a gun when they showed signs of attacking him. People immediately surrounded the two accused, but at the same time backed away from them, except four men who obviously were some of their closest co-workers. But without any hesitation they were also accused and told to start saying their prayers. Then suddenly someone pushed me into the centre with the other accused and I heard cries like He's one of them, too! Finish him! I saw the fanaticism in their faces and knew instinctively that these illegally armed scoundrels were ready for anything. A shot came from behind me, injuring one of the cement workers next to me. After that I teleported straight over here."

"It's a good thing you did. Anything else—Bell?"

"Nothing," said Bell and pointed to the television screen. "But I'm afraid we already have had killings. From what I can see, the two groups are approximately of the same strength. The group of attackers is obviously armed, which is why they are so confident and think they can afford to accuse anybody of being transformed." Rhodan took the microphone of the house transmitter and switched on the intercom.

"Rhodan here! No general alarm condition necessary. All those not called out, remain in readiness. Standby crew of the Good Hope, get ready for takeoff! Calling Galactic Ground Control—come in please!"

"Lt. Deringhouse speaking!"

"You get ready too and leave the restricted zone in the space dome at the same time. Figure on a countdown in 5 minutes at the most. The energy shield can only be kept open for about two seconds, for security reasons. It is entirely possible that the so-called revolution out there is a staged manoeuvre by an enemy faction designed to catch us off-guard. That is why it is your job, Lieutenant, to circle over as small an area of the New Power as possible and report every suspicious movement on land or in the air."

"Very well, sir!"

Turning to Dr. Manoli, Rhodan continued: "You, Eric, are in command until our return. We will remain in uninterrupted radio and television contact with each other. Lt. Klein, you operate the defence shield, as long as you are here. So far, you have done very well. But don't depend on your own natural instincts. The positronic count begins at 'second' minus 60."

"Very good, sir."

"Bell, you come along with me."

"Right! But I suggest Arkonide spacesuits."

"Not necessary. What we need is psycho-beamers and gravitational neutralizers."

Reginald Bell obeyed. The mend equipment was constantly in readiness. Also the Arkonide spacesuits, which Rhodan and Bell now merely used to reach the Good Hope without loss of time and which was stationed some thousand meters away.

The ship seemed like an empty cathedral to them. The steps of the hurrying men reverberated through the corridors and echoed behind them. Thora and Khrest were in the control room. They were simply there like a part of the inventory—The Good Hope was a last vestige of home to them. The two Arkonides lived here and looked on with dubious interest when an emergency situation put the people in an uproar. Other than that, they played the spectator, so long as it did not affect them personally. Thora, the commander of the once proud Arkonide cruiser, rarely made use of her inherited right. More and more, her life ended up divided between her proud past and the daily new situations that pushed her into contact with these humans from Terra.

Rhodan threw himself into the pilot seat and reached for the controls. The Good Hope came to life. She lifted off the ground and with easy acceleration floated higher. Two thousand meters above the Earth loomed the tip of the energy shield. "Rhodan to Lt. Klein! Altitude: 200 meters! I have put her on automatic pilot. Shift to positron-counter! Hello, Deringhouse! Maintain your altitude. At 500 meters, accelerate to 1 G! Give me the countdown over the transmitter, Lt. Klein!"

A mechanical-sounding voice counted down to zero. The take-off of the two ships and the lifting of the energy shield were now automatically locked in on a positronic setting which was monitored by Control Central. Nothing could go wrong now. At least nothing that concerned the liftoff. On Earth, however, the whole process had not gone without mishap.

The television transmitter, which had been focused on that critical spot, Post 37 in the northwest, had revealed the trouble.

The raving crowd, between whose fronts a narrow strip of no man's-land had been created, pressed close to the edge of the energy shield. One of the two factions had erected barricades and had leaned them up against the invisible wall. Two men had scrambled up on it in order to start a senseless demonstration. The scaffolding collapsed when the energy shield was interrupted. But two seconds later the power returned to the dome, pushing aside all matter standing in its way. The clumsiness of humans prevented them from using this moment advantageously.

The new energy shield erected after a two second interruption had the effect of a catapult. The so-called "clean" energy, which causes no radiation effects because it operates strictly on a kinetic basis, hit them like lightning. People tumbling forward were thrown back, flung several meters through the air and sometimes landed hard on the ground. The scaffolding was similarly affected. Boards and beams fell on top of the pushing crowd and completed the chaos.

Bell translated what he saw on the screen into action.

"First of all we need paramedics!"

"You must search immediately for remaining M.S. bodies!" interrupted someone in the background. It was Khrest's voice. "For M.S. bodies? You mean in our boundaries?"

"The scoundrels prefer darkness. The outer limit of the territory is not necessarily passable. It would certainly be possible that some of the M.S. hid their bodies in the vicinity."

"Would they have to?"

"One should not underestimate his enemy, I've heard the humans say," remarked Khrest and came forward. "That is a rule which many diplomats and strategists of many an intelligence in the galaxy have found out. But all aphorisms hold true only within certain limits. Beyond those boundaries lie the exceptions, which in turn prove the rule according to another of their own maxims."

"Which exception are we talking about?"

"The natural personality traits of the Mind Snatchers are simply superhuman in the eyes of a Terran. Your race, therefore, will tend to consider the M.S. as tremendously superior from the beginning, and therein lies the subconscious readiness to capitulate. If an obstacle seems absolutely insurmountable, it is easy to concede defeat."

"Now you're talking more about Arkonide properties than of human," ventured Bell in an attempt to correct Khrest. The Arkonide shrugged his shoulders doubtfully. "In your place I would not be so self-assured."

Rhodan wanted to get to the point. This was hardly the time to worry about the difference in human and Arkonide personality traits.

"You suggest then to see the M.S. in an objective light and to recognize their natural limitations."

Khrest nodded. "To overestimate them would be as great an error as to overlook their trickery. The M.S. are a greatly conceited bunch but heroism does not start with a capital H with them. They possess a strongly developed drive for survival which warns them of every risk. They are good with intrigues, very intelligent and very quick. But as I said before, they prefer their personal safety. You know, gentlemen, how the M.S. transform their victims. They come very close and then, without much ado, exchange identities. At the same time they always keep an eye on their own retreat. They need their own natural body close by, if possible, although their transfer into the human body is essentially more difficult than the return into their own."

"So that is your explanation for wanting us to search in the vicinity for M.S. bodies?"

"Quite correct. If they feel safe, they would then look for a hiding place for their own body close to that of their new host. Generally, we can assume a radius of about 200 meters for such a place. Although in other cases they have been known to move as far as several hundred kilometres away along with their

host bodies."

"After that, can they still return?"

"Only under extreme effort. It gets especially difficult when their host body's life is being threatened. His death would also mean certain death for them. That is so because the M.S. cannot jump from one person to another. He always first has to return to his own body, and this only as long as his host body is still alive. So that if you kill an M.S.-transformed person, the M.S. also dies."

"Let's hope you are right," said Bell in a sceptical tone. "You have no reason to doubt my explanation," retorted Khrest.

"I don't mean any harm. But once before you made a mistake when you looked at everything from an Arkonide perspective. You had maintained that a transformed person, whose self had returned into his own body, would go crazy."

"That goes only for humans and Arkonides between whose mentality there is a great disparity. So long as we judge only the M.S.'s themselves, you may depend on what I have just said completely." The appearance of the Good Hope created a fair amount of excitement among the gathering of people at Post 37. The clear division between the two factions had been shattered even as early as the collapse of the scaffold. Now their guilty conscience seemed to unite them once more. Because behind the Arkonide dome loomed quite a different kind of authority.

Rhodan landed the ship but asked Thora to keep it ready for takeoff. He then looked at Bell and winked at him. "Come on, Bell! But be careful with the neutralizer. Use only small, concentrated beams, and even those only when there is no other way out. I would not want to have a large area of our new construction to suddenly be without gravity. If all overhead loads should lose their supports, it would take us several weeks to clean up the mess."

"No problem, my boy," grinned Bell amicably. "I do not think we will have to use these things. Actually I carry them only as a safety precaution."

They stepped in front of the ship. The crowd had moved back a little and loomed there like a solid wall. Rhodan advanced toward them. Reginald Bell followed. "Thousands of strange faces!" he moaned as he walked on.

Rhodan was thinking the same. Most of the men had been drafted during their Venus expedition. A wave of reverence, mistrust and uncertainty met them. Some of them may have even harboured disloyal or deceitful thoughts. However, Rhodan and Bell just kept going without wavering. Even now, at 50 meters away from them, a mental duel began; even now, the two men of the New Power had to prove their authority which, on the basis of their position, they seemed to embody.

Perry Rhodan immediately went all out. He knew that there was no way he could overdo it now—it was either now or never. He did not stop when he reached the crowd. He kept going like a robot and Reginald Bell followed him with the same determination. The wall moved back. No one touched the two and a narrow path opened up.

Then Rhodan stopped abruptly. "Who is your section leader?"

Silence. Rhodan addressed the first man at hand. "Lost your tongue?"

"Professor Morton, sir," stuttered the man and looked around uncertainly.

"I want to speak with Prof. Morton!" said Rhodan aloud so that everyone could hear it. "Please give him some room!"

There was a stir in the rear. Without interference they let the section chief pass.

"Good afternoon. I am Perry Rhodan. Tell me what is going on here."

"I cannot explain it, sir. The whole thing seems to be a misunderstanding or the work of a small fanatical group. I am quite willing to tell you what I know, but could you first give us a chance to look after the injured?"

"You have a hospital in the vicinity. Why hasn't anything been done?"

"We do not have the authority, Mr. Rhodan. I am asking you for your help."

"Send the people back to their stations, Professor. My questions can wait."

Morton passed the orders along. Hesitatingly, a few of them turned around pushing against those behind them. Bell grabbed one of them by the sleeve. "What is your name?"

"Brian," said the man meekly.

"Good Brian. You are responsible to see that in two minutes we have enough helpers to assist the injured. You may go. Hey, you! What's your name?"

"Schley, sir."

"Mr. Schley, you're responsible for the cleanup operations. Take as many men as you need to be finished in twenty minutes!" The man disappeared with a hoarse "Yessir!" But not only he. Without exception, suddenly everyone was more interested in getting away. In no time the wide area was empty and Rhodan, Bell, and Professor Morton stood alone.

"That too is a weapon," grinned Bell, obviously satisfied.

"A psychological one," nodded Morton, smiling. "I owe you my gratitude. A few minutes ago it looked pretty threatening. It started a half hour ago. I..."

"No details, please, Professor. We have been watching everything pretty close from Control Central and from the spaceship. If today people accuse each other of being transformed by the M.S., it sounds pretty threatening, but the facts prove that it is purely a panic reaction. Or do you have reason to, believe otherwise?"

"Absolutely not, Mr. Rhodan. I have said before that I considered everything to be a misunderstanding."

"You said it. But do you really mean it?" injected Bell.

"I don't understand you."

"If you really don't understand me, you are alright."

"Why shouldn't I be alright?"

"You see, Professor? A little while ago we were facing a fairly good-sized revolution. Now you minimize everything. Behind that could be the purpose of getting rid of us. You have been transformed, haven't you?" Morton blushed profusely with excitement and couldn't immediately find the right words. "But that is absurd! Are you, too, supporting this damaging, creeping propaganda?" Bell remained cool. "It is absolutely not absurd, Professor. The M.S. are known to approach the most influential persons. At Post 37, that is you."

"At the moment, hardly, if I may say so with a little humility. If I really were an M.S., I would already have selected you—or better still, Mr. Rhodan—as a new host body."

"So you would have jumped across?"

"My human logic dictates that."

"Hm, what do you think, Perry? He seems genuine, don't you think?"

"I guess so. You have passed the test, Professor."

"Thanks a lot!" Morton visibly breathed easier. At the same time his face reflected bewilderment. "You have a strange way of checking people out. I would be interested in your method."

"As an M.S., you would never have thought of transferring from Professor Morton to Perry Rhodan. Because that is impossible."

They continued until they came to the energy wall and convinced themselves that there were only four cases of light injuries. Brian stood obediently by the medics.

"You see, I was right, " said Reginald Bell gratified.

"More than that, my boy. You were going to arrest three top revolutionaries. Even that was not necessary. All this goes to show how serious the mood is, just as it might prevail among all humans. Insecurity, mistrust and the willingness to act on the spur of the moment. We don't have much time, Bell, if we are to preserve the world from chaos."

"Quite right," nodded Bell, from whose freckled face the smile had already vanished.

"I am happy to have met you, Professor," continued Rhodan and held out his hand toward Morton. "But do not consider the seemingly effortless settlement of the unrest in your section as evidence of our safety. Now, as always, there is the possibility that there are M.S. among your men. It is just not feasible to question each and every one of them about it. Rather, I suggest you look for empty body shells. Before the day is done, I shall issue corresponding orders to all worker groups outside of the energy field. As soon as you have anything concrete to report, I'll expect your radio transmission. We shall be ready at all times for a counter attack.

* * * *

The Good Hope returned to the energy field. Lt. Deringhouse, who had not found anything suspicious to report during his surveillance from the air, made a simultaneous landing.

"Patrols are boring," said Bell consolingly. "But one of these days every routine activity is going to pay off. Do you have new orders for Marshall and me, Perry?"

"Everything remains the same, as discussed. First stop: Chicago at Clive Cannon's house. I need one transformed person and one empty body shell. In New York you will find Homer G. Adams, who will help you put together our police troop. I hardly believe that you will need any further details."

"We shall see. Goodbye Perry."

"The best of luck, my boy."

After Mercant and Tako Kakuta had left, Bell and Marshall also left their new home in the Gobi Desert. Whereas Rhodan sat in his office and thought to himself: I am staying behind. I, the man in the background.

Then he got up, stretched his body and went to the hall where the positronic Brain was waiting. The conversation was taken up exactly where it had ended when the alarm sounded.

"Modulation—carrier wave—total spectral range in angstrom units..."

"The old Arkonide detector merely determines such a brainwave pattern," explained the robot. "A telepath, however, reads thoughts. I suggest you build an artificial telepath."

And this artificial telepath would be the utterly perfect brainwave detector.

Rhodan remembered the cargo of the Good Hope which had brought from Venus the first worker robots. There were machines among them which simultaneously stimulated as well as supervised the work of their own. There were engineers among them whose talents ranged from mechanician to positronician.

Before the day was out they would begin work on design and construction of the first test model. Earth needed the telepathic detector or it would have to capitulate before the M.S.

4/ A MONSTER NEGOTIATES

Those who pass along Michigan Avenue during the daytime have to crane their necks in order to observe a piece of the sky peeking down between the skyscrapers. John Marshall lowered his head once more after having made his own observations about Chicago in general and Michigan Avenue in particular. Not far from the intersection of the latter with Congress Street, they had gotten out and were now approaching the hotel by the same name with obvious reserve. Reginald Bell was registered at the Hotel Congress under his real name, while John Marshall—even though he had taken a room on the 7th floor right next to Bell—called himself Joe Linker. Officially they did not know each other. Balconies in panoramic arrangement lined the side of the hotel facing the courtyard. Although these were individually separated by tall and heavy dividers with frosted glass panels, it would not be too difficult to climb over such a barrier.

The windows in the neighbourhood were dark. John Marshall took a chance and climbed in with Bell and pulled the drapes shut.

"There, now you can turn on the light." Bell switched on the light from the floor lamp next to his armchair.

"What about Cannon?" ventured Bell as Marshall was obviously taking his time.

"I have not contacted him."

"What's that?"

"Please reserve your opinion for later, Bell! Cannon is living in what amounts to a fortress. Whoever wants to get to him must pass through three lobbies and each one of them means running the gauntlet."

"Am I supposed to listen to a batch of excuses tonight?" interrupted Bell. "What good are you as a telepath, Marshall?"

But Marshall was unperturbed.

"Judging by what everyone around Cannon thinks, the man is in a double trap," he went on.

"Have you checked out his surroundings?"

"You know my job as a telepathist. For a troubleshooter I have found out a lot. Probably that is more important than if I had talked with the boss himself."

"Let's hear it!"

"One hundred meters away from the Kreysky Building, here on our side of the street, is a basement bar. It is in this restaurant where the first undercover men started their operation. The police as well as those of the Bluebird syndicate. Occasionally they even sit together at one and the same table and talk."

"Secret deals?"

"Hardly. Both sides are loyal to their line. They play cat and mouse and aren't even sure if they recognize each other. I'd say they distrust each other instinctively."

"And where does it get more interesting?"

"Inside the Kreysky Building, obviously. And surprisingly in the building next to it. At the street level, there are a number of small businesses. In the Kreysky there is a self-service store for soaps and cosmetics. Also a general sales agency of Mix-Centry."

"Those are the people who put their motors on everything that will run."

"Quite right. I have seen one-man cycles, motorboats and personal-size helicopter backpacks for the briefcase. I hope you not only observed but also looked out for thought change processes. Mix-Centry's business could prove to be very interesting." "How so?"

"I know from Adams that he is keenly interested in their stocks. Until now, the company is still firmly entrenched in the Kreysky syndicate. But as far as I know, our General Cosmic Corporation has already nibbled some of it away... But let's go on. In the adjoining building there are two stores, one an interior decorator, and the other handling fine pottery. I personally went by there twice so that I could observe details."

"Good, when you are fully familiar with the exterior, maybe then you'll be more interested in the fact that two female agents of the Federal Secret Police are employed in the cosmetic store. One is a supervisor and the other is a cashier. The manager on the other hand has only things such as Kreysky and Cannon in his head and holds an uncompromising position in regards to opposition—Even the manager of the Mix-Centry Sales Agency belongs to this category. Two days ago he unfortunately found himself compelled to hire a new man since his former co-worker had suddenly and unexpectedly been arrested by the police. Now the old man sits in custody awaiting arraignment. The new man is an agent of Kaats. However, the switch was so obvious that the boss became suspicious."

"Did he recognize Kaats' man?"

"Not really. He distrusts him on principle."

"Then he won't worry about it. How does it look in the other stores?"

"I have prepared a list, Mr. Bell." Marshall took out a piece of paper and placed it on the table. "In the first column are the names, in the second where they belong to the Bluebird gang or the police. After that follows their employment status. You can see that I found suspicious persons on almost every floor. Especially in the office of the attorneys Smith & Smith next door."

"Hm, Kaats evidently couldn't gain access at Smith's. All 12 employees, however, sympathize with Cannon. I'm afraid that if we start knocking there we'll find ourselves deep in a wasp's nest." "Reginald

Bell studied the list thoroughly. Finally he carried the sheet to the fireplace, held it over a burning lighter and scattered the ashes.

"It seems we are dealing with several different groups which interpenetrate. One guards against forces on the outside, the other attempts to break through to the inside and block from there. Kaats; guards Cannon's every move. To kidnap him will be difficult."

"Why can't you get some support from Kaats?" Bell brushed him off with a motion of his hand.
"Dealings with the police are time-consuming and probably lead nowhere. Kaats is not Mercant. Kaats serves the United States of America and does not even sympathize with the New Power. He probably would only take advantage of any information Mercant could give him, other than that he is driven by ambition and wants to do everything himself."

"You mean he too would be upset if we took Cannon along with us to the Gobi?"

"Definitely, Marshall. So you might as well get the easy way out of your head! We have our orders from Rhodan. A combined effort with Kaats would mean that we too would have to weigh our interests."

"So we'll do it the illegal way."

"It is not a matter of rules and regulations but of saving the whole Earth from the M.S. Only one thing counts: to carry out Rhodan's orders."

"I agree completely."

"I hope so. After all, you have laid valuable groundwork which enables us to design a most promising plan of attack. I have the outline that we just etched into my noggin. In the future we want to make as few written notations as possible. Another question: is there any possibility that any of the people you observed have been transformed by the M.S.?"

"No. This possibility I would like to exclude. We know it positively only of Clive Cannon. It is my opinion that the M.S. have advanced on the largest possible front covering the whole Earth. However, their first invasion wave will have been pretty weak, so that they have to spread their ranks pretty thin. It

would be sufficient that they occupy the key positions. In the Bluebird gang which is probably on the same intelligence level as the Kreisky syndicate, Cannon is in charge. All others are puppets and are only following orders."

"OK. Let's get down to business. You said that the adjoining building is especially suspect because of the more concentrated occupation by the gangsters. Have you noticed that the offices of Smith & Smith are on the same level as the headquarters of the Kreisky syndicate?"

"Of course. This puzzle fits together so well that we can depend with certainty on finding a path connecting the two buildings somewhere. The only question is, which end do we start at?"

"Both ends at the same time. Anyway, it is your job to find Clive Cannon. In the meantime I will see about Smith & Smith."

Although John Marshall showed up in the Kreisky building half an hour before the offices opened up, he had to wait, as two other gentlemen had gotten up even earlier than he.

At first it did not bother him, especially since this enabled him to concentrate on their inner life for awhile.

"...I was here first. I'll be finished before noon... talk to Cannon personally... what his mood is I have the recommendation of the Secretary... I'll threaten him with the GCC. Adams in New York buys everything he can lay his hands on. Even shaky undertakings... Nonsense! Cannon has to agree to the conditions. The Kreiskys should get off their high horse. If they do not want to be swallowed up by the GCC, they need everything they can get... even on less favourable terms... Naturally, it was late again yesterday!" A purely financial problem seemed to occupy the mind of his neighbour.

The other man sat farther away. Marshall had difficulty reaching the flow of his brainwaves. Finally he got up and paced back and forth, acting totally bored. He was just scrounging through a stack of newspapers when he made a good telepathic contact. And not only a good one but also a valuable one.

"...this youngster looks to me like a junior executive. Grooming tiptop, must be influential if he shows up here... But he must be getting the money for his car from the old man..." John Marshall did not feel exactly flattered. But here the point was not what other people thought of him. The next thinking process of the stranger proved it.

"...Orders are orders... I wonder how Kaats is going to cover me. Peculiar method for carrying out an execution in a constitutional government... If only they don't search me too carefully!—Maybe the third time around I'll make it through to the boss... This young man makes me nervous. Or maybe he is nervous. Why doesn't he sit down? Of course, if Cannon is transformed, nothing can happen to me. Kaats alone can make the decision how to eradicate those beasts. Anyway, everything is locked... Nothing can happen to me... Nothing can happen to me... should read too..."

"Excuse me, sir," said the police official aloud and reached for one of the newspapers. It looked as if Marshall had reserved them all for himself.

"Certainly, sir." John Marshall took the issue which he held in his hand just then and returned to his seat.

But he was unable to concentrate to do any reading. The man in the other corner was a police official. The man had orders to kill Cannon and was making his third attempt today to penetrate into the sanctuary of the Kreysky syndicate. Who knew whether Kaats ever had intended to cooperate with Mercant's wishes? In the long run it probably was too much effort for him to protect and guard a single transformed individual to that extent. A dead M.S. was a good M.S. And perhaps several hundred more were running around in the United States to whom he had to attend with the tools of the Detection Service. Considering it in this light, Col. Kaats was obviously correct.

But Clive Cannon, until now, had been the only M.S. transformed individual who had been identified with near certainty. Clive Cannon was therefore also too important a person to simply shoot and kill him.

John Marshall recognized clearly now that Bell had been right when he warned against a collaboration with the Secret Federal Police. The interests and plans of the New Power did appear to be somewhat dissimilar. Although Marshall found little consolation in admitting that now more than ever he was quite alone. He remembered that the contents of his pockets included several instruments of Arkonide origin that could protect him from great danger. Though he had to curtail their use as far as possible if he did not want to make himself suspect.

Additionally, it was important to change the original plan. Nobody was counting on an assassination. And Bell, who was going to look around this morning in the office of the attorneys Smith & Smith, did not have the slightest idea that the situation had changed. Consequently, Marshall couldn't completely go a new route. While the hand of the clock moved slowly toward the numeral nine, he tried to organize his thoughts and put some logic into them and was glad that he had been granted a reprieve by the calling of

the first gentleman. Five more clients arrived in short order, who, after a mumbled greeting, sat down and reached for the morning paper.

Marshall also made the rounds with each of them with a harmless visit but met with difficulty when he tried to sense the thoughts of those people who were sitting close together. The impressions became blurred. One of the five had to be sympathizing with the police official and also had to be informed about his orders. But who it was, Marshall was unable to detect. Not even through some furtive glances as a sign of recognition did any of the people give themselves away. They had been well drilled and did not take any chances. Well, Kaats would have sent his best men for an act of such proportions.

"Brown is next," a clear thought suddenly jumped at him. Brown had to be the police official.

And then the receptionist appeared for a second time to call Brown.

Marshall's nerves were ready to burst. The assassin was moving out of his range. He couldn't even follow him by sight anymore. Would he now miss his opportunity?

If Kaats' agents were to shoot the M.S.-transformed man in his presence, it would mean a severe dressing down for Bell and Marshall after their return to Gobi. And aside from that, it would be a decided victory for the Mind Snatchers, even if they were to lose an important position temporarily. Kaats' plans simply had to be averted. And Marshall had to keep his wits about him to prevent an inner panic.

The police official Brown could not have reached Cannon yet. As long as the first visitor had not come out, Brown would have a hard time to succeed with his plan in one of the reception rooms. If indeed he even got his shot off today.

Would he ever?

This last wishful thought Marshall had to strike. It was a nebulous thought on which he could not rely.

Then the door opened and the first visitor appeared with a taciturn and unhappy look on his face.

The door slammed shut.

Nobody called Marshall next. That is when he made a decision to act on his own initiative.

He got up and knocked. Without waiting for a reply, he entered. The lady behind the desk was all indignation and hostility personified.

"You can't go in unannounced. I must ask you to remain outside until it is your turn."

"It is my turn, Ms!"

"Please do not argue with me, sir! I have my orders. I suggest you try to follow our house rules. By the way, do you have an appointment? I could take a look to see if there is any sense in waiting."

"That was not only plain but also downright unfriendly, Ms.," said Marshall cynically, and daringly took the appointment calendar out of her hand. "I have as much an appointment here as death itself. Neither death nor I can simply be shown to the door. Is this analogy clear enough?"

The receptionist's facial expression reflected her consternation. However, as one of Clive Cannon's closest associates, she belonged to that category of people who distinguish themselves through intelligence and presence of mind. Alarm was the key word in her tumbling thoughts. To be sure, she was still hesitating. Braggards with impressive talk came to her regularly trying to get in. But she hesitated a little too long, so that Marshall urged her on encouragingly. "Go ahead and press the button, Ms.! Quickly, if you want to save the gentleman's life."

"Sir...!" Marshall was about to stop her with another defensive motion of his hand as he had done the first time but she was quicker. Nor did she announce her intentions through any tell-tale thoughts, but instead acted promptly.

Marshall was staring into the end of a pistol.

"You are going too far with your jokes. As long as you have picked a macabre subject, let's finish the game your way! So! I want you to leave right now!"

"And the life of Clive Cannon does not interest you?"

"I think as long as you keep away from him he will be perfectly safe!"

"Correction, Ms.! It will be in danger as soon as Capt. Brown steps into your boss' office. And so that you know exactly to whom I am referring, Brown was the one just ahead of me. I only hope he is still in one of the two adjoining rooms. As far as I know, he does not have a direct introduction to Cannon, but merely a recommendation by some secretary. Have I expressed myself clearly enough to direct your attention into the right direction?"

"Just one moment!" The lady got up and rushed over to the nearest door. "Hello, Phil! Where is the last gentleman I brought in to see you?"

"I've just sent him over to the next building," answered a masculine voice in the adjoining office. "Then go immediately to McPhan and let him wait! I have an urgent message for the boss. Under no circumstances must that man be seen first!"

Marshall heard chairs scraping and some flirtatious remarks. But the instructions were being carried out. Another door slammed shut.

"Hello, Bill! Excuse the interruption! The man who is with you is supposed to wait there for five minutes. The boss is busy with an important telephone call just now and cannot be disturbed at the moment."

"If the boss were on the telephone, I would know about it."

"The call is just coming through the switchboard. So you know what to do."

The man the lady had addressed as Phil came out into the first reception room. "And now I hope you will explain to me what this is all about, Marge."

"Let this gentleman here do it. He owes me an explanation too."

"My name is Linker," said John Marshall with a slight bow. "Will you guarantee me that Capt. Brown will not get in to see Mr. Cannon?"

"My name is Steinberg," said the man named Phil, equally polite. "What can you tell us?"

"First answer me my question, Mr. Steinberg! Is Mr. Cannon safe for the moment?" Marshall already knew it from the thoughts of the other. He even knew that Cannon had been notified that something was amiss from Steinberg's desk by a red warning light and not to open the automatic bolt of his door until the possible danger had passed. Marshall knew all that. But here he could not act as the telepath that he was. He had to ask his questions just as any other normal person would. Steinberg smiled cynically. "You ask funny questions, Mr. Linker. Of course Cannon is absolutely safe. That is exactly why you must now take your time and explain it to us."

"Search Capt. Brown. You will find a pistol on him. And possibly even several. He has come here with the intention of killing Mr. Cannon."

"Hm, Brown is a police official, right? Though he did transact business with me representing a private firm. And not for the first time today, either. How can you prove that he is a member of the police?"

"He not only belongs to them but also acts on their behalf."

"Mr. Linker, I would have thought you smarter than that. That means that the police are involved in murder. Officially, that is what you would have me believe."

"I will discuss further details with Mr. Cannon personally. You must admit they are important enough to justify it."

The cynicism in Steinberg's face increased steadily. "If you're trying to convince us of your innocence, Mr. Linker, I want you to know that you have already succeeded completely. I fear Mr. Cannon will neither see you today nor at any other time. But stay here for a moment while we have a look at Mr. Brown." Steinberg issued orders to several different people over a desk microphone and shortly after that there was a veritable invasion. Five men came from the second reception room which they obviously had entered through a side entrance. Then Capt. Brown was brought in. His thoughts already revealed that he felt he had been discovered. Yet outwardly he did not give himself away.

"Frisk these two men!" came Steinberg's orders. Suddenly John Marshall saw himself being handled the same as Brown. In fact the search seemed to be even more productive with him. While the captain merely carried three common type firearms, one of them quite compact and hidden in the lining of the coat, they found instruments on the youthful Linker that they could not recognize but which, because of their unfamiliar shapes, seemed that much more threatening.

"Hm," interrupted the lady again. "I think we found us an interesting pair."

"I think so too. The two will, of course, never admit that they belong together. But we will give them a lot of time to think about it. Please explain these things, Mr. Linker!"

"The devil I will. That is my private property and doesn't concern you."

"We shall confiscate this private property until the boss makes further disposition of it. Knox, don't you have two separate and bulletproof rooms for these two gentlemen?" One of the five armed guards grinned. "For such birds, anytime, Mr. Steinberg. May I take them with me now?"

"I protest!" exclaimed Capt. Brown. "You can't rob a man of his freedom just because he carries firearms while on duty for the government. May I point out to you that you place yourself in jeopardy and may expect to be punished accordingly? If there is anything you wish to accuse me of, do it legally! I am prepared to testify in any proper court of law."

"That I do believe," Marshall confronted Brown. "What the police sanctions, the attorney general will back up. But as for my being identified with what you stand for—that I'll correct as soon as I get out of here. I have the means and I also have the connections. All you have to do is take a look at that stuff on the table. These worthy citizens here don't even know what they are, much less how they work." The man

with the machine gun who had been addressed as Knox, had grown more curious and was stepping closer in order to get a better look at Marshall's gear. He even reached for the neutralizer. "You fool!" shouted Marshall. "Keep your hands off if you don't want to turn the whole building into a graveyard!" Again this warning sounded so contrived that no one could be expected to take it seriously. But Steinberg remained cool.

"What are these things, Mr. Linker? Are they weapons?"

"Of course! They are firearms and my warning to Knox affects all of you. It's in your own best interest and mine."

"Explain that in a little greater detail."

"There's nothing to explain. I didn't come here to give you any lessons. Besides, these instruments are too expensive for your pocketbook."

"Did you come from somewhere on Earth?" Steinberg posed a leading question.

"Well, what do you know!?" retorted Marshall with a contrived irony. "We're beginning to understand. But keep racking your brains now! With your intelligence maybe some day you'll arrive."

"We are going to keep you here until you talk, Linker."

"That smells of blackmail! Possibly even false arrest and theft. Do you think Mr. Cannon would go along with that?"

"I think so."

"Absolutely not!" a voice suddenly rang out through the loudspeaker. "Dismiss the men, Steinberg! Arrest Brown and send Mr. Linker in to me!"

"Right away, sir!"

From the way people acted, Marshall could see at once that none other than Clive Cannon had spoken. Within a few seconds the office had been cleared. Phil Steinberg made an inviting motion with his hand.

"Please, Mr. Linker!"

Marshall hesitated. "You forgot something!" he smiled and pointed to the neutralizer and the psycho-raygun.

"I don't know if Mr. Cannon would like it if you brought those things..." "I don't mind, Steinberg, if Mr. Linker will let you bring the instruments and put them on my table," came Cannon's voice. "Agreed," nodded Marshall.

Clive Cannon welcomed him like an old acquaintance.

"Have a seat, Mr. Linker!"

"In order to size you up more readily, Mr. Linker I've naturally been listening in on your conversation in the first reception office and am fully aware of what went on. The show, if you will forgive me for calling it that, was a little too serious for my tastes, so now I'd prefer to have a little discussion." Marshall was trying to snatch a pause in their conversation in order to catch anything of importance in his unspoken thoughts. But he was disappointed if he thought he could recognize the M.S. transformed man at first attempt.

"On the other hand," he heard Cannon continue, "what I heard was not only mixed up but also very strange. Can you give me a brief explanation for all this?"

Cannon's eyes were glancing at the neutralizer and the psycho-gun. In his mind halfway definable concepts were forming and Marshall saw in that the first cues for Cannon's M.S. identity. Because a human and resident of the USA would not be able to recognize these instruments by himself."It will be very brief, Mr. Cannon, because so far I've been forced to give your reception committee a lot of rambling explanations that lead nowhere. I have connections to the New Power. As you probably know, for weeks and months Perry Rhodan has been bringing together interesting people with whom he is building a sound foundation for the citizens of his country. In this connection, I have been able several times to arrange rather favourable meetings. For a lot of money, of course. For this reason I am coming to you today. The incident with Capt. Brown was certainly not on my agenda and I was informed of the intentions of the police only this morning. Unfortunately, that is why my appearance became a little dramatic."

"Despite this, you will find that I am quite surprised," said Cannon. "Anyway, I cannot imagine why the police might have a complaint against me. I find such behaviour of the law rather unusual."

"Nowadays they have something against the most upright citizens, Mr. Cannon. I don't need to tell you how the invasion by the M.S. has affected human minds. That is why it is no wonder when some officials of intermediate rank give orders to shoot this one or that. If you throw suspicion on the M.S. you can excuse any murder these days."

"M.S. suspicion sounds interesting," observed Cannon, as if totally unconcerned. But now his thoughts developed an activity of panic proportions:

"Discovered?—Have I been discovered? What is Linker thinking? Is he part of this game too? But that would be too complicated! Linker cannot know anything. He would have let them kill me, if he was sympathizing with the police..."

"...How is it that I, especially, have been suspected?"

"You shouldn't say 'especially'. Nowadays everybody is suspect if you so much as dream a bad dream about him. Nothing makes any sense. We have only one consolation, that our technical development soon will help us to overcome this. We are developing instruments with which to recognize M.S. transformed persons."Again panic welled up large in the thoughts of Clive Cannon. Far worse than what could be expected in a human being in a like situation. Now Marshall was completely sure that Cannon had been infected and that the M.S. had an entirely unheroic personality.

"You don't say!" laughed Cannon somewhat dubiously, as if he was sorry that these instruments were not yet available. "By the time your technology has been developed, the M.S. will have conquered the whole Earth, believe me!"

"You should not be so pessimistic," countered Marshall. "Of course something like that cannot be produced at will, like magic, but with Arkonide methods which are available in the Gobi, we can count on success within a few weeks. The New Power is calling on all its available resources to solve the problem and one of these days it will."

"One of these days...? You mean, perhaps, by tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow. But I will bet it will not take more than two, three months. Until then the people have to hold on. But meanwhile both of us, you and I, can expect some crazy fool to run amuck and shoot us. Nobody is safe any more."

"Nobody," repeated Cannon reflectively. His M.S. excitement had noticeably subsided. He was already eyeing new plans in which the technology of the New Power would play an important role. Thought wise, Marshall received approximately the following: "In two months they will be able to recognize us. In two months, then, the New Power must have been conquered."

"No one. Nevertheless, I must thank you, Mr. Linker. You have saved my life," Cannon concluded.

"I did it in my own interests," said Marshall. "After all, I was hoping to transact some business with you."

"That sounds a little friendlier. What does this concern?"

"You know Homer G. Adams and the GCC?"

"By now it has made the rounds that the New Power is behind it. But why do you talk about my strongest competitor?"

"Because competition is good. Let's play with open cards, Mr. Cannon! Naturally Adams is one of our best men. Actually he is almost too good. Do you understand?"

"Not quite."

"The New Power is first a political instrument. The economic facility which stands behind us in the form of the GCC is a necessary evil. But it becomes dangerous when it threatens to become autonomous. We would like to place our industry under separate leadership, and let our financial genius remain a mirror image. Would you trust yourself, Mr. Cannon, to give Mr. Homer G. Adams a little competition in our name?"

"Hm, that is an overwhelming offer—and a question that one cannot answer extemporaneously." It was indeed a difficult question. Nonetheless, the two men came to an agreement in the course of the morning. And Marshall had reason to be proud of his diplomatic chess move. Instead of having to beg Cannon to follow him to the Gobi, Cannon was begging him! With the frenzy of an M.S.-transformed victim, he sought any means to conquer the restricted zone of the New Power in order to prevent the further development of a successful M.S. detection device.

"I don't know," Marshall demurred uncertainly. "To bring you along is way beyond my jurisdiction. Rhodan had figured it this way: that you should continue to maintain your office and the whole organization of the Kreysky syndicate, and then add to it."

"I was not planning it any different. We shall continue the way we are here in Chicago and show Adams that he is not alone in the world. But you will understand that I must familiarize myself with everything. I need an idea of the size of the gigantic things you hear about from the Gobi Desert. I want to know who my superiors are. Certainly the position which they have in mind for me should be high enough to justify a personal discussion with Perry Rhodan."

"I recognize your position, Mr. Cannon. Give me a day so that I can get in touch with my people. Tomorrow morning at the same time I will call again and bring you Rhodan's decision. If it is favourable, I would suggest we leave immediately."

"I'll be ready whenever you say, Mr. Linker."

* * * *

In the hotel, Bell and Marshall briefed each other by radio. A climbing sortie across the balconies in the middle of the day was not advisable.

Bell was honest enough to admit his complete failure. Marshall's success at least helped to console him somewhat. "You know that Cannon suspects nothing?"

"Nothing in regard to my plan to lure him into the Gobi. Unless he tries a certain caper that could cost us our heads."

"Now all you have to tell me is that this thing has a clincher.

"A very big one at that. You have to go on to New York today, Mr. Bell. Cannon is planning an attack on Adams."

"Did he say that too?"

"He was thinking it. And very clearly at that. A transformee named Porter is going to contact Adams and invite him to a rendezvous on Staten Island. There, an original M.S. is going to await him to transform him. It is my opinion you should be there when that happens."

"I sure should. I'll leave in an hour. When is this mysterious Porter going to leave?"

"This afternoon. That means you have a little time. Before dark, the M.S. are not apt to do anything."

"OK! If everything goes well, I'll be bringing Rhodan a real M.S. within 24 hours. He will be very important to him."

"More than you think," countered Marshall. "Cannon wants to take his real body along. He was imagining large amounts of luggage. I'd like to know how he is going to declare that!"

"Hm, and why is he taking his original body? That could only give him away. Besides, he doesn't need it in the immediate vicinity, if he fears complications. The return to it is supposed to be possible over fairly great distances, according to Khrest's statements."

"But not the renewed transfer into another person."

"Why is that?"

"Well, the fellow has a very simple plan: as soon as he is in the dome he wants to leave Cannon and transfer to Rhodan."

Bell was dumbfounded for a moment. "Marshall, you're playing with fire. At all costs you must notify Rhodan in advance!"

"That was my intention. And now, have a good trip! Give my regards to Adams!"

5/ ATTACK FRONT: NEW YORK

As indicated by Marshall's information, Clive Cannon's luggage was indeed of ominous proportions. "What? You want to take all that, Mr. Cannon?"

The boss of the Bluebird gang was smiling.

"I can see you are thinking of 24 dozen dress shirts, right?"

"Something more like an alligator. But I'm sure you know we don't have a zoo in the Gobi as yet. If it's your intention to bring Mr. Rhodan a gift, you will have to think of something else."

"A gift it is, you are quite right. But exchange it I will not. I should think Mr. Rhodan would still have a touch of sentiment left."

"Now I'm really getting curious! A coffin undoubtedly can make a person sentimental. But a corpse inside it would border on the bizarre. Go ahead and open it, Mr. Cannon! I'm curious as to what sort of ideas you came up with." Cannon opened the lid. Inside the trunk was a life-sized replica of the Stardust, the spaceship which Rhodan had used to go to the Moon.

"Marvels of the technological age I can hardly offer your boss. He would have more success with the Arkonides. But this here, this memorial is worthy of a human being. Of course it is sentimental. Be honest, Mr. Linker! Is Rhodan going to like it or is he going to think me a screwball? I would not like to make a bad impression on him, you understand?"

John Marshall was temporarily dazed. He blinked his eyes and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. He forced a smile. "You may be assured, Mr. Cannon. Perry Rhodan is not far behind you when it comes to being sentimental. Have them take your luggage to the airport. We'll find a fitting place for the Stardust in the Gobi." They drove off to the airport.

It seemed just like a harmless weekend excursion. There were no heavily-armed escorts. On one of the outlying runways, a small private plane of the kind that was available to members of the New Power in any larger city of a certain size awaited them. The large trunk had already been placed aboard.

John Marshall himself did the flying. At an altitude of 20,000 meters he switched the controls over to automatic pilot and leaned back into his seat. For awhile the man talked about utterly trifling subjects. It was the same type of conversation that others would carry on about the weather and bad times. Meaningless, because neither of them could talk openly about that which was really meaningful to them and moving. Only Marshall had the advantage of being able to search in the other's mind. He faked a yawn and insisted that he had not slept well. "We have two hours now and could take a little nap."

Clive Cannon followed his suggestion and remained silent. And this silence was what caused the murderous thoughts to come to full bloom.

Marshall shuddered.

Was he flying with a human being? Or with a monster?

Long before the take-off, he had known what the "coffin" with the replica of the Stardust signified. There were two coffins. The one on board did not contain a harmless rocket model, it contained the other half of Clive Cannon, the one he needed to be a real person. And it contained the body of the Mind Snatcher, which represented the prison for Cannon's human mind. And even this imprisoned mind still had an emanation, even though it had been sentenced to a death-like existence inside of that "shell". He could not defend himself or get anyone's attention. But he lived and felt the prison of that monster's body. He let the telepath know that he was going through hell; the likes of which no human being could ever imagine. John Marshall longed for the landing. He felt the limits of his mental endurance. Two or three hours more in these tight quarters together with the threatened and tortured thoughts of the two exchange psyches would surely drive him to the edge of insanity.

Then they flew over the Gobi. Over the realm of the New Power.

The usual dialogue took place. The positronic checkoff for split-second entry into the energy dome. And then the rocket ship landed from a vertical approach.

In the meantime Perry Rhodan issued his final instructions. He had asked only a few people to assist him with the welcome of the plane from Chicago. They were Dr. Manoli, Dr. Haggard and the teleporter Ras Tschubai.

"I alone will do the talking?" explained Rhodan once more. "Do not enter into the conversation until I give you the signal. And do not, under any circumstances, challenge Cannon to show us his strange gift. You see, at that moment he is forced to take action. And I want to be the one to pick that moment myself. I only want you to be alert, ready to shoot, and to control yourselves. Take care not to let Cannon know immediately that you see the monster in him."

The welcome was fit for a State Department visitor, only the journalists and honour guards were

absent. While Rhodan accompanied Clive Cannon to his office, two robot attendants waited until the two men had disappeared inside the building. They then proceeded to the loading ramp of the plane and took the long, heavy trunk out with the trained care one usually expects in that type of work. They set it down in an adjoining shed and then stationed themselves at their posts nearby, as instructed.

The men, meanwhile, had arrived at Rhodan's office. "As far as I know, Mr. Cannon, our friend Linker has already discussed the basic ideas with you."

"It was necessary in order to convince Mr. Cannon to take over the planned position", said John Marshall.

"Quite right", continued the transformed man. "Generally speaking, I have been informed and am willing to accept the position you have offered me. Also, I want very much to thank you for allowing me the opportunity of visiting the almost mythical Control Central of the New Power."

"Your wish was, of course, reasonable, Mr. Cannon, and you see I agreed to it right away. However, you will of course understand that the New Power must observe certain precautions in the present situation.

"How do you mean that?"

"Well, every visitor must be examined to see whether he has been invaded by the M.S."

"Yes, Yes, of course. Mr. Linker told me about it already. He said that probably in a few weeks you will have discovered a method by which you can recognize an M.S. infiltration at first glance."

"That is correct. The research work is in high gear and the basic technical concept is also known. In three months at the very most we will distribute these instruments to all points on Earth. We here in the Gobi Desert also have other methods through which even today we are in a position to detect an M.S."

With this sentence the duel began.

Clive Cannon and the stranger in him had been at top alert. Now the signal had been given and several reactions were taking place in this split second simultaneously.

The natural fear of death of the M.S. was trying to hide itself behind the sensibility of the human being. But the shock was too powerful. Clive Cannon couldn't help getting up stiffly from his chair and casting a tortured glance sideways. He observed the muzzles of five pistols all pointed at him from all directions at once.

Resignedly he fell back and suddenly looked relieved once more. "Boy, Mr. Rhodan, you really had me scared for a moment. Will you show me your present method?"

"Not show but use it. Naturally we have to check you too. You see, if you are normal, absolutely nothing will happen. Should there be an M.S. inside you, though, we will catch him in just a few minutes."

"With these pistols?" Cannon laughed out loud.

"You are quite right", nodded Rhodan. Before we shoot, you see, the M.S. inside of you would have to leave the human body and return to his own. The exchanged human mind of the real Mr. Cannon would then tell us everything."

"Sure. But the M.S. would then have escaped you anyway."

"Not necessarily, Mr. Cannon. Let's stay with your own example. Let's assume your M.S. body has been deposited somewhere nearby. We then have to count on the M.S. starting a renewed attack on someone else immediately. He would select the most important one that would be available—me, for example!"

"Naturally, that is very interesting from a purely theoretical point of view."

"Now think along with me! How could the New Power protect itself against such a new attack?"

"Hm, I don't know. To be honest with you, I have never really given this sort of thing any thought before. I do, of course, listen to the daily news and read the papers..."

"Then I will tell you. We would have to find the original body of the M.S. We would have to guard it and kill it at the proper opportunity. The attack on me would then be nipped in the bud and humanity freed from another invader."

Marshall encountered great difficulty with his telepathic observations because too many people were too close to him. But Cannon's brain activity had again risen toward the end of the discussion to such an extent that his emission was clearly in the foreground. "Obviously," said Cannon seemingly bored and without conviction, "you would have to find the M.S. body and then kill him."

Everybody could see that Cannon was trembling. Everybody expected the ego to switch. But it appeared the monster was also interested in information. He had been shocked by Rhodan's revelations and captivated at the same time. He still hesitated. "There would be a third possibility", explained Rhodan wistfully. If the M.S. would give up any further attempts for action and give himself up. That would save his life."

Clive Cannon laughed shrilly and without constraint. "But then you would have to have the body. Where will you find the body?"

The master of the New Power pointed to a row of buttons on his desk. "Look here! When I press here, an impulse activates two robots. These robots can shoot. At this moment they are standing right next to your big trunk which contains your so-called gift to the host."

For the M.S., the dilemma in which he found himself was finished.

He jumped up, emitted an inhuman yell and threw himself on Perry Rhodan.

* * * *

From Chicago to New York it was only a stone's throw. Reginald Bell landed around 16:00 hours,

took care of formalities at the airport administration office and requested a porter to send his voluminous luggage to the Cumberland Hotel, where he registered via videophone.

Afterwards he went over to the GCC Building without stopping anywhere else and was quietly looking forward to seeing Homer G. Adams again, the Minister of Finance of the New Power, the little man with the big, intelligent head.

In the reception room, Ms. Lawrence welcomed him. They were happy to see each other.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Bell! It's nice of you to come around once in awhile. I'll fix you a cup of coffee right away. OK?"

"Oh, fine! But would you please serve me the java in your boss' office. I've a few things to discuss with him."

"Ah, yes, the boss! Mr. Adams already has completed three business trips with an average distance of 500 kilometres today. You will have to wait for him a moment. I tell him every day that he is overdoing it and that he isn't as young as he used to be."

"Do you think that type of compliment is very diplomatic?"

"I am not sure if any kind of diplomacy can help him. Mr. Adams does exactly what he considers right. He cannot be influenced."

"Not even by a pretty young woman."

"Mr. Bell! What do you mean by such a remark?"

They both laughed and agreed that Bell should have his coffee in the reception room with Ms. Lawrence. She offered him some cookies and prodded him to talk.

"In a minute. But first I want you to tell me where Adams went and when he will return."

"Well, you know, twice today a man was here to demonstrate a new gadget that is ready to be patented. I don't know anything about the technical details. But anyway, theoretically it appears to be a very promising thing, which cannot be said about most of the inventions that are brought in here daily. A quarter of an hour ago the boss returned from Albany. Since the man had already been waiting for several hours, they left together soon after. That is to say, they were going over to Staten Island." Bell shot up out of his chair. "To Staten Island? Are you quite sure about that?"

"Of course! Is that so exciting?"

"What was that man's name?"

"Wait a minute. His name was Porter."

"Porter! Porter! Damn! Don't you know that Porter is one of the M.S. transformees? Come on, let's go! We mustn't lose a second!" Bell pulled the receptionist into the next elevator car and they went up to the roof. There he took the first company-owned helicopter they came to and unceremoniously pushed Ms. Lawrence into it. Only when he had the chopper on a southerly course did he say anything.

"Staten Island is pretty big. Did Adams say where?"

"He mentioned the Relling Docks. That's all I know," the girl blurted out. Other questions were on the tip of her tongue but she was too excited to be able to talk cohesively. The thought that her boss was about to fall into the hands of the M.S. had a shock effect on her. Bell told her in a few short sentences what he had run into in Chicago.

"We miscalculated. We thought Porter would, like us, start from there. But now I know that he was living in New York and would be able to come and see you in your office immediately after hearing from Cannon. And to think that I took my time in Chicago having lunch!"

They crossed the Upper Bay.

"Do you know your way around here?" inquired Bell.

"You have to keep more over to the right toward Newark Bay. There, see that building with the green roof? I think that's where it must be." The helicopter gradually descended. They were able to recognize ships, boats, cars and people. As yet they were unable to see that the people were fleeing.

Only after they landed did they find out that they had gotten into a witch's cauldron. Hundreds of workers, among them a few women, were fleeing to the west, gripped by panic. "What the devil is going on here?"

Bell had opened the Plexiglas hatch. Suddenly a man was hanging onto the side.

"Go on! Take me with you! And take off now, if you value your life!"

"Just a minute! Don't you want to tell me first what is going on here?"

"What's going on here?" screamed the man half crazed. "The M.S. have landed! There, behind the building they are, by the hundreds. Go on, man! Don't ask so many questions!" The man pulled himself up to the door sill and, threatened them with a heavy iron bar which he had raised above his head.

* * * *

Homer G. Adams really had not known. Inventors came to see him daily. Mostly they were crotchety people who, for the last 20 years, had taken 3 or 4 hours daily of their spare time to devote to the rediscovery of the perpetual motion principle. Porter had impressed him as more objective than the others. And besides, he had not mentioned the perpetual motion machine but spoke only of an electromagnetic jet which was supposed to save a spacecraft travelling in outer space approximately 90% of the fuel normally carried on board, due to utilization of the energy sources naturally available.

Adams noticed the trap only after it was too late. Porter led him into the hall. "Behind these doors is my laboratory. I think you will be convinced in only a few minutes."

But behind the doors there was nothing that resembled a laboratory. The room was empty. The only decorations were five genuine Mind Snatchers, who slowly and stiffly marched toward him.

Adams had no time to let the optical impression of those monstrous spectres react on his analytical mind. The manlike bodies with 4 arms and 2 legs, the insectlike heads with the many-faceted peripherally placed eyes—all that lost its meaning when confronted with the immediate mental attack. Adams did not know which one of the five was attempting to enter his mind. He only felt the piercing pain which penetrated his brain like a scalpel and seemed to pry it loose. He knew that he was falling to the floor. But he did not feel himself hitting the floor. And then an unfamiliar entity mixed in with the sensation of ripping.

It was the feeling of triumph.

"We have got him—you belong to us—we've got him—Homer G. Adams—we have the GCC—we've got New York—I've got you and you will go where I want you to." Adams was lying on his back and at the same time was standing beside his body bending down over himself. In this paradox it was not important that that could not be. Neither was it important that the body on the floor represented the human entity and the one standing bent over represented the Mind Snatcher. Important was that he saw himself twice.

The impressions were superimposed on top of each other and interacted with each other like a double exposure. The man's eye was reflected in the thousand faceted insect eyes. Adams even forgot the agony over his inability to define the ego. He saw himself craving to conquer. He also saw himself full of fear bordering on panic which made him want to turn away and plunge himself into the void. The hour of open attack on New York by the Mind Snatchers had come!

They all knew the moment. The M.S. and the transformed humans.

Porter saw the commotion outside. He jumped onto the pier and scattered the crowds into chaotic flight with his make-believe agitation. The M.S. followed them. Four of them from this room. They were not attacking anyone's mind as yet. So far they had merely wanted to impress through their monstrous appearance. In that, they succeeded completely. During this time no more spectators were watching the duel between Adams and the M.S. They were alone and each battled with his own natural defences. Just for three minutes, however, because the man was stronger physically even if he had long ago passed the youthful stage in life and had a big head and was small of stature.

At some point Adams' hands had dug deep into the flesh of his adversary. Chitin crumbled under his fingers and a dark red fluid ran onto the dirty tile floor. The pain was gone. The monster was dead. Completely exhausted, Adams got up. Unconsciously and purely by instinct, he brushed the dust off his clothes. His mind was concentrating on the danger of New York. He knew how much the M.S. knew, and acted accordingly.

The Relling Docks were swept clean. The harbour lay lifeless in the fog. A few sirens wailed in the distance. Thousands of the most strategic positions in this world metropolis, meanwhile, had been taken over by M.S. From mayor to police chief, from industrial tycoon to the Chiefs of TV networks.

Extras were being printed proclaiming the death penalty for anyone leaving the city or any unauthorized news broadcasts. The noose was drawing tighter around the metropolis. How long before it was completely closed?

Adams realized he could not waste another minute.

A return to Manhattan inevitably meant a waste of time.

He turned south and decided to use one of the cars parked directly next to the building. Somewhere he would pick up an airplane. . .

* * * *

"Mr. Bell!" screamed Jeanette Lawrence and pointed in front of them.

"You fool!" roared the man with the iron pipe. "Don't you see what is going on here?" Reginald Bell did see. And he also knew that at this very moment the search for Homer G. Adams had become completely useless. On the pier appeared several Mind Snatchers. Not hundreds but only four of them. But these four were enough.

"Come on. Get inside!"

They squeezed into the two-man compartment and Bell started the engines. When they had landed on the roof of the GCC Building, pandemonium had already broken loose in the streets. The militia as well as the police were patrolling the asphalt jungle of Manhattan. Whether human being or M.S.-transformed person, it was suddenly immaterial. The M.S. were in command... "I can't understand it!" cried Jeanette Lawrence. "After all, 8 million invaders couldn't suddenly come into town."

"Obviously a few hundred are enough. If they occupy the key position in the political and economic structure of the city government, the masses are powerless."

"Eight million people against a few hundred?" Her question ended in a shrill, hysterical laughter. Bell helped her into an armchair.

"There now, sit down here and take a deep breath... Now exhale... Now do that again a couple more times. I'll try to explain to you why we are powerless. You see, the M.S. all know one another. But no man can say of another with certainty whether he is loyal or not. There is no unity even among the healthy ones."

"But the two of us! We both know for instance that we have not been infected. Why don't you send a radio message to Rhodan?"

"Because I can't. You heard the mayor's announcement on the way over."

"And you intend to follow that? Because they are threatening the death penalty? My God, Bell, I would have thought you had more guts than that!"

"Try to pit courage against technological advancement! No, Ms. Lawrence, don't try to act superior now! I did try to reach him. Obviously you didn't notice it. It doesn't work." She stared at him in disbelief. His resignation did not make any sense.

"You are an M.S., aren't you? You have been transformed, Bell! Of course, what else could it be?"

"Don't talk nonsense! Come along with me!" He led her to the microphone in Adams' study. With a few swift hand motions, he had cleared the instrument and was calling Perry Rhodan. They waited. Seconds, minutes. No answer. "Now do you understand?" groaned Bell. "The warning is only a formality. The M.S. have had enough time to study our mentality and can now anticipate our reactions. They placed New York under an energy shield."

"Like in the Gobi Desert?"

"In principle, yes. Though it is possible that it is constructed differently. If we can believe Khrest, there is no intelligent life out there that can construct energy shields like the Arkonides. From our attempt to use the radio we only can deduce that the radio waves hit an obstruction, so that at the moment the only thing that has been proven is that the energy shield absorbs the so-called radio frequencies within the electromagnetic spectrum. Whether the shield can stop pure matter would have to be seen.

"Then why don't we try it!"

"How do you imagine it should be done?"

"With the helicopter, for instance."

"So that they can shoot us down, right? Or actually fly against an invisible wall and crash."

Jeanette Lawrence looked at him hopelessly. "So it's all over for us." Bell shook his head. "Not if you muster the same amount of courage as you expected of me just now."

"What shall I do?"

"Nothing but be brave and stick it out. Here in New York."

"You are flying alone? Mr. Bell! Listen to me! Adams once told me something about Arkonide hyperwaves. They supposedly operate in five dimensions."

"Yes, I know. But they have such transmitters only on the Good Hope, in the Gobi station and on Venus. Listen carefully, Ms Lawrence! I have already considered every possibility. I'm going to fly alone and take the news of the fall of New York out with me. I am the only person now who has the technological capabilities to do it."

"What do you have?"

"I have an Arkonide spacesuit. Surely, you have heard of it?"

She looked at him wide-eyed. "Yes, Mr. Bell. I have heard of it. There are supposed to be only two of them. Perry Rhodan has one..."

"...and I have the other. Here in New York. It commands an energy field through which I can alter the visible frequencies and the radio frequencies. I shall be invisible when I leave New York."

6/ HIDDEN SHADOW MONSTER

"Don't shoot!" shouted Rhodan. At the same moment he jumped out of the way so that Cannon's lunge ended in a resounding thud against the desk. When he jerked around he again saw the pistols facing him and he hesitated. He also hesitated to jump into the body of the M.S. Escape now seemed impossible. Marshall, who had picked up his thoughts, said: "You have a third choice of which Mr. Rhodan spoke just now. Give yourself up! Prisoners are not being executed as long as they cooperate with the power making the arrest."

Cannon looked inquiringly at Rhodan. "What are your plans?"

"We shall make a deal with you. If the discussions turn out positive for all of us, I'll be willing to return you as spokesman to your own people. Of course, not as a human being."

"Why don't you then let me return to my body right now?"

"Because you are safer for us this way. Well, what's your decision?"

"You are going to give me conditions, aren't you?"

"I can't tell you that now. The decisions are much too important for me to reach them alone. We shall conduct our discussions in the presence of the positronic Brain." Again something within him recoiled. "You are planning treachery, Rhodan!"

"Do not project, Cannon! I believe you are familiar with the workings of a robot brain? If I was planning to kill you I would not have to go to so much trouble."

Clive Cannon nodded slowly. "Good, I suppose. Nevertheless I would like it if we could hurry up a little."

"In this point we are already agreed. Eric and Ras, take him over to the hall and stay with him until I get there."

Manoli and Ras Tschubai led Cannon away.

When Rhodan was alone with Dr. Haggard and Marshall, he asked them: "What was he thinking about? Is he planning to betray us? Does he know anything of my plans?"

"What are your plans, sit?"

Even as a telepath, Marshall could not get through Rhodan's thought barrier. "I am seriously contemplating a negotiation with the M.S., if that is at all possible. Naturally, I understand that the invaders would not curtail their aggression because of the fate of this isolated being. More important is the research of the M.S.-possessed brain. We'll measure and check Cannon without him realizing it. He really doesn't know anything, does he?"

"No, in that regard he does not even suspect anything."

"That's good. Come on!" The men were about to leave the office when the radio receiver set turned on automatically.

"Adams to Rhodan—Adams to Rhodan! Please come in for immediate reply!" Perry Rhodan quickly crossed over to the radio controls. "Rhodan here! What's wrong, Adams?"

"Thank God, sir! Listen! I am stuck here in Canada—exactly at 50° latitude North and 85° longitude West—at the railway line Quebec-Winnipeg."

"How in blazes did you get there? That spot's almost in the wilderness."

"Take note of this too, Mr. Rhodan: I had to flee New York. The city is occupied by the M.S. and almost totally in their hands. Since yesterday afternoon, all news has been censored by the M.S. You must take immediate counteraction and, if possible, have me picked up from here. I had to steal an old prop plane and now I have run out of gasoline."

Perry Rhodan listened to the alarming news but a robot could not have reacted with less emotion.

"Can you be more specific about the situation in New York?"

"No sir! M.S. were trying to invade me. That's when I had to get out of there. I left town right away from Staten Island and went south."

"M.S. were trying to invade you?" Suddenly there was a trace of suspicion in the voice of Rhodan. "Now I am even more curious how you could escape their influence."

"You may rest assured, Mr. Rhodan! I am completely OK. Obviously you knew what you were doing when you took me into the Mutant Corps. My so-called photographic memory has talents which I fully recognized only yesterday. I was alone with the M.S. It was a fair fight. That fellow simply couldn't get the better of me. My inner self indeed seems to be dependent on the memory cells. It sticks to me and won't leave. When the M.S. attacked, there were moments when I felt as if I had already been taken over. Already I was looking out of multi-faceted eyes and I knew what those M.S. had in mind."

"Just a minute! You just said you didn't know the situation in New York."

"Of course! But I had to get out. There is a big difference between the plans of the invaders and the situation in the city."

"You should be a little less of a perfectionist, Adams. Now, what plans did the enemy have?"

Homer G. Adams told what he knew. That was enough for the men in the Gobi Desert, and even as Rhodan continued, he was making plans for a counterattack.

"Is there any danger the M.S. might have followed you?"

"I don't think so. If they had recognized me, I wouldn't even have been able to leave New York."

"Then wait! I'll send Ras Tschubai to you. Any further plans in regards to New York I will announce later, Keep your lines open. By the way, did you hear anything of Mr. Bell when you were in New York?"

"No, why? Was he coming?"

"Yes, he was," said Rhodan dejectedly. "And he did. Now we have another reason to look in on that city."

"Not necessary, Perry! I'm already over the Japanese Channel." —It was Reginald Bell's voice which had cut in on the line. "My God, Bell! Are you alright?"

"Absolutely."

"Weren't you in New York?"

"Sure, that's where I'm coming from. The Arkonide spacesuit helped me get out,"

"You're absolutely too much! You're coming down about when—in say, half an hour?"

"Exactly."

"Well—so much for that! I have an important job to do.

* * * *

An Arkonide positronic brain had different ways of delivering answers. It could make its findings known over a loudspeaker, magnetic tape, magnetophone or photographic tape as well as on punchcards of Earthly origin or, as a close equivalent, through impulse-writing on plasticards. There was a similar range of methods for the input of questions, so that Perry Rhodan was able to work on two levels simultaneously.

With collaboration from Cannon he dictated the correct questions into the microphone. The most important work process concerning the detection of an M.S. brain in a human body, he fed into the keyboard with written symbols.

In this manner he received two answers within 20 minutes. One of these Rhodan showed to his prisoner.

"The Brain cannot be bribed, as you can see. At the moment, there is little sense in having you be a spokesman for us. Your good intentions and your fear alone are not enough. I think we will be patient for a few days longer and see if the situation on the front might not change to such an extent that your side might eventually be ready to negotiate."

Cannon gave in to his fate. If he could see one thing clearly, it was his own loss of power. Two robot guards led him away.

For his friends, Rhodan had a more optimistic view. "Read this, gentlemen!"

It was the magnetic tape with the results of the M.S. examination.

"That's the solution," remarked Dr. Haggard after a moment of silence. "Congratulations, Mr. Rhodan!"

"It's not the final solution for a totally integrated telepathic device but at the moment we'll be satisfied with being able to isolate an M.S. brain when we're looking for one. And that we have accomplished! See here, in these three formulas we have everything we need. Our basic principle is in the Arkonide brainwave detector. Before the day is out we'll program five robots with the data received and I'm convinced that within 24 hours we'll have our first finished model."

"Our robots are going to build one?"

"Yes, ours!" grinned Rhodan. "Naturally I'm referring to those that we brought back from Venus. They can do it. And if you don't believe it, Doc, I will gladly take your bet."

"No thanks, sir! Your optimism is enough for me."

"Very well, then we can continue our examination of the M.S. body which at this time houses the personality of the real Clive Cannon. First something else, though. We haven't heard anything from Mercant for a long time, have we?"

"He still has three more days."

"Hm. Anyway, I think enough has transpired in the meantime that he should think about reporting in."

Rhodan called the Greenland base of the IIA. They called Mercant to the line. "Hello, Mr. Rhodan! Anything new?"

"Hello, Mercant. A few things have happened. But first to you. You were going to see Adams on your way back?"

"Quite right. That is tomorrow."

"Forget that. New York is in the hands of the M.S."

"Are you joking?"

"Absolutely not. Adams and Bell are the only ones who were able to get out of the city yesterday."

Mercant replied with a snort. "Come on, now! Only half an hour ago I talked with colleagues in New York."

"And every answer that you received has been censored by the M.S. Don't act dumber than you really are, Mercant! Return immediately to the safety zone! I urge you. And bring along anyone you can recruit for our cause in the meantime."

"There are exactly 304."

"That's enough. Arrange it so that you can land here in 24 hours at the most."

"As you say, sir. Goodbye"

"Goodbye!"

* * * *

Homer G. Adams had lain down in the pilot's seat of his disabled craft and tried to take a nap. Suddenly something startled him. He could not say what it was. All he knew was that it had been caused by something inside his brain. He looked down at the ground, then climbed onto the wings in order to see better. From there to the horizon he saw nothing suspicious. Only pastures, endless brush, neither man nor beast. Two kilometres away were the railroad tracks. Nothing had changed since his landing. There was nothing for him to do but wait. To sleep and perhaps to dream.

Dream!

Had he been dreaming? Where did these doubts come from?

Never in his life had Adams had any difficulty with his memory. This ability had been with him since his childhood. He read a poem and immediately memorized it. He studied mathematical formulas and remembered them. He had gotten used to the gift and eventually had accepted his so-called genius as a fact.

And now suddenly this doubt?

Adams walked a few steps through the brush and then returned. He tried to do a math problem in his

head—one that was essentially like those he handled all the time in his stockmarket manipulations. He had been an M.S. Yes! On Staten Island a part of him had been taken over by an M.S. He had seen through faceted eyes, known what the enemy knew. But he'd remained Homer Adams and had choked the monster to death. They'd neither overpowered him nor destroyed his photographic memory. As a human being he had remained the same... And then he knew what it was! A part of the M.S. personality was still within him. Pushed far to the back. Unusual for him, who never could forget anything. It was just there, like a shadow. In his subconscious. And the new question which could not be self-critical enough!

Why had he flown to Canada? To get away from the States, since that was where the M.S. were starting their big invasion?

That would be illogical because the M.S. didn't follow state lines created by human beings. What drew him to Canada? This brush country, where the 50th parallel just happened to intersect with the 85th degree of longitude? The subconscious? Adams fought against this figment of the imagination because it contradicted his human genius. And yet he felt compelled to listen to an inner voice. There was something else within.

He closed his eyes and struggled for deepest concentration. For several minutes he sat there in the shadow of the airplane. Then he got up as if in a trance and walked toward the railroad tracks. Two kilometres. A quarter of an hour.

His doubts turned to conviction. Suddenly he knew. He knew what the dead M.S. had left behind inside his brain.

The culverts! At intervals of 100 meters, culverts had been dug through the railroad embankment. And one of these hid the entrance to a man-made grotto.

Adams walked the distance with somnambulistic certainty. The very first one was the right one. A hidden switch. A concrete wall moved aside and bared a stepless path which gently sloped downward.

More than 200 lifeless-looking bodies. No guards. Only the imprisoned egos of the invaded humans lay trapped in soulful agony within the monstrous beings.

Adams backed away. Just before he reached the airplane, Ras Tschubai's plane showed up to take him back.

7/ COUNTER ATTACK!

So many important People showed up that it looked like a class reunion.

Allan D. Mercant had returned from Greenland. He had brought with him 304 volunteers for the police troop of the New Power and, as Rhodan had suggested, abandoned his plan to stop off in New York. Homer G. Adams, whom he had wanted to see there, had already arrived in the Gobi Desert and the two now had an opportunity to welcome each other under protection of the energy shield.

All conversation ceased when Perry Rhodan entered from his office. The groups broke up and stepped aside in order to let him by. The chief of the New Power had something to tell them.

"Ladies & Gentlemen! I want to make this short. I have read your reports and it is my conclusion that we do not have much time to turn the tide in our favour, in favour of Earth. Our surveillance of the most important personages of our planet could not be completed as planned, simply because we did not have the necessary number of telepaths available. Our enemy has succeeded with his first massive attack in at least two spaceships dropping an unknown number of Mind Snatchers on Earth. After the destruction of his base in Tibet, he reportedly was able to set up others. He even was successful in getting control of one of the largest cities in the world, although the public is led to believe that everything is status quo. You may realize from this how dangerous the enemy is."

Rhodan reached into his pocket and pulled out a device that, in principle, most of them were familiar with. Only the shape had been changed slightly.

"You all know the brainwave pattern detector. Our dream of converting this into a sort of telepathic instrument has been accomplished today with some limitations. Through an exact analysis of a brain that had been invaded by an M.S., the positronic Brain was able to give us new completion data in a very short time. Here you have the improved frequency detector, Ladies & Gentlemen. It enables us to recognize M.S.-transformed people at first glance through a simple reading of the scale. I have already tested it on our prisoner Mr. Cannon. Within the next few minutes you will have a chance to observe this

instrument in action and to convince yourselves of its effectiveness. Mr. Mercant, are your 304 candidates for our police troop ready at Post 42?"

"Yes sir."

"We'll all take the new local train and go to the northeast exit of the restricted zone. Lt. Klein, I want you to take control of the energy shield. We'll keep in touch over VHF. You, Bell, stay here and watch the radio." Bell nodded only slightly.

"Let's go!" said Rhodan. At Post 42 the 304 recruits had lined up and were waiting to be let inside the restricted zone. When Rhodan gave his radio signal to Klein, the whole protective cover of the energy shield collapsed. However, for the protection of the central area all three space interceptors had been ordered into intensified patrol duty. They had orders to shoot without special instructions at anyone without permission attempting to enter the central area of the New Power. In addition, more than 100 robot guards were patrolling the border which then was suddenly unprotected.

Rhodan had already briefed Mercant on the way over.

"I want your men to march single file through Post 42. Have them march past me at no more than 5 meters distance. Should one of them already be invaded by the M.S. I will give you a signal. You will arrest him immediately."

Mercant entered the outer area alone and gave his people the necessary instructions. Without exception they were intelligent and disciplined men, and within two minutes the police corps aspirants marched in.

They gave a military salute almost as if in a dress parade. Rhodan acknowledged regularly and even found time for a reply to each questioning glance.

Their bright, open faces revealed the high quality of these men. Automatically John Marshall counted along. He stood one pace away from Perry Rhodan.

"257 - 258 - 259 - 260 - 261... !" Marshall swallowed hard, almost simultaneous with the detector's

signal."The tall blond there," said Rhodan to Mercant. "Arrest him!"

"Right, Lt. Pirelli! Will you step over here, please!

As the Nordic-looking man with the Italian name gave a slight start, Marshall whispered in the background: "Definitely, sir. He is one of them."

Pirelli hesitated.

"The devil, Lieutenant!" roared Mercant, suddenly very agitated. "Shall I send you a written invitation? You're holding up the works! Go on, march, gentlemen! 263...!" Pirelli obeyed and the men marched on.

"Wait a minute, Lieutenant! Your face seems familiar. I would like to talk to you," said Rhodan and then turned his attention to the others again. He knew that enough artillery was directed at Pirelli to check any untoward movement immediately.

John Marshall continued to count to 304. Neither he nor the detector found another M.S. captive. That was a good average.

"Hello, Klein!" Rhodan called into the microphone. "Close the screen! The inspection is finished." And to Pirelli: "One question, Lieutenant. I want you to think your answer over carefully. Would you be willing to be the intermediary between me and the M.S.?"

Pirelli's face twitched imperceptibly. But those persons present knew that inside his body and mind a far more dramatic action was taking place. "I don't understand, sir!"

"You have been identified as an M.S., Lieutenant. That is why I asked. So what do you say?"

"How could you identify me as an M.S., Mr. Rhodan? Where do you expect to get with this bluff?"

"You don't ask the questions here, Lieutenant, I do! You have been recognized as an M.S. Your answer will determine whether I will use you in my plans or whether you will be shot immediately."Pirelli took an unplanned move forward but stopped before anyone could consider his attitude conclusively threatening.

"His fear is keeping him back," explained Marshall. "He is completely in our hands, sir. Because his M.S. body is not within transfer range. Just where it is, this gentleman is not about to say. He senses that I am a telepath. He is trying to scramble his thoughts."

"Alright, Marshall! So you see, Pirelli, how much we know. If we shoot you now, that'll be the end for you. Finished. Now, what is your answer to my first question?"Pirelli straightened himself up to his maximum height and attempted to show pride in his posture. How might the cowardly ego of an M. S. feel in such a body?

"I am in your hands, Mr. Rhodan. If you order me to be your spokesman, I shall obey. However, in my subordinate rank I am not in a position to say anything about the prospects of such negotiations."

"That is not necessary, Lieutenant. You will be isolated until tomorrow. You will have two robot guards by your bed who will kill you instantly at any sign of an attempt to escape or use of force. Tomorrow you will receive my further instructions. Thank you."

* * * *

Now there were 303 handpicked, excellent men left. For Rhodan this was the right occasion for a full-scale welcoming speech, considering that here was the young nucleus of the New Power. But again he made it short and unconventional.

"...maybe soon I will have more time to devote to you, gentlemen. Today, any second wasted is irretrievably lost. Eat hearty when you sit down to dinner which is waiting for you. My personal representatives, Mr. Mercant and Mr. Bell, will be giving you the necessary instructions."In the office, Rhodan held a conference with his closest associates.

"You're pretty reckless," declared Bell at his first opportunity, when Rhodan had still not mentioned

any of the real points of importance. "Are you trying to teach me a lesson again?"

"We're not talking about my academic ambitions but about your personal security. While the men marched in, you didn't wear any kind of protection. You were trying to talk Pirelli out of using any kind of force. Do you think that with only your hypnotic stare you're going to be protected against these people?"

"Of course I do. You were being taken in by Pirelli's attitude. Apparently you don't realize yet what a cowardly nature actually hides behind these creatures. An M.S. will never commit a crime as long as his own life is in danger.—And now enough of this exchange of opinions! The latest world news is coming in and after that we will probably realize once more that, even with noble intentions, it will always be difficult to let the people know we are sincere. The still-lingering complaints are our best evidence. I'll make one last attempt to convince the world. Our witnesses will be the people in New York. Because if there is anyone who can convince the inhabitants of this planet of the gruesome reality of the M.S. it would be the population of this metropolis that has been ravished for three days."

"The first requisite for all this would be to liberate these 8 million people."

"That is my plan. The robot factory already is manufacturing the first series of the new M.S. detectors. I have ordered 400 of them for a start."

"When will they be available?"

"Tomorrow morning. All available mutants, except the telepaths, will be equipped with them as well as the new police cadets and my closest associates. You, Bell, will fly to Luna tomorrow morning with 200 men and will first make contact with the robot command post stationed in the Anaxagoras crater. Evaluate the results. In case they have not established the location of the M.S. lunar base it will become your duty to take over. As soon as you have your goal in sight I will expect your report."

"Only a report?"

"Initially. The attack, which you ostensibly yearn for, will hardly be long in coming. Important is to attack simultaneously. That is why I want you to wait for my orders!"

"Very well!"

"As for you, Mr. Adams, don't tell me that you have no talent for heroism. I will give you several good men on whom you can depend. I have in mind Ras Tschubai and 20 new policemen. Your destination is the Canadian base of the M.S. You too will hold your attack until I give the orders."

"As you say, sir," replied Adams in his humble manner, which he always demonstrated whenever it didn't have anything to do with money. The last and most explicit admonition was directed to Allan D. Mercant, official chief of the International Intelligence Agency, which was under American leadership and unofficial member of the secret corps of mutants of the New Power, under Perry Rhodan. Mercant received an armada of six battle-ready, multipurpose rockets with an ample supply of weapons, adequate loading capacity and sufficient speed. His job was to free New York.

* * * *

As a new day dawned over the Gobi Desert, darkness was settling over New York.

The engines had been started.

First came Mercant's group which was followed by a single jet plane heading for Canada. The Good Hope waited until last. Despite her more distant goal she had to give precedence to the stratosphere air traffic but her acceleration capabilities in space enabled her to make up for any delays, even across planetary distances. Rhodan was alone in the headquarters building. He had refused any help and had sent every able-bodied man to one of the three focal points of the expected hostilities.

His assistant was technology whose threads converged in the master controls in front of him.

As expected, the first message came in from Luna.

"Hello, Perry! Reporting AOK landing in the Anaxagoras crater. Police troops disembarking. Next report after contact is made with robot commando."

"Thank you. Good luck. Over!"

"Roger. Over & out."

The hand of the clock moved on.

Next message. "We are circling over New York. Advancing into the city as anticipated without interference. Control measures obviously are only applied to anything leaving the city. We are landing on six different sites. Will proceed as discussed. Over!"

"As discussed." More precisely, this meant that within the next half-hour 50 of the most important personages would have armed company. They would be recognized instantly if M.S.-transformed and be treated accordingly with the necessary dispatch. Rhodan's orders had been distinct and unequivocal. In the fight against the M.S. there was no clemency. "Hello, Mr. Rhodan!" It was the voice of Adams. "We are going to 50 latitude and 85 longitude. My old airplane hasn't been touched."

"OK, Adams! Take your positions along the railroad embankment and wait!"

Ten minutes radio silence. Then Reginald Bell's voice thundered across the airwaves. "... we headed South across the dark side of the Moon. Next landing in three minutes in the Mendelejev crater. Robot commando clearly identified the position of the M.S. base. No sign of life. Over." Then the reports tumbled in on top of each other. They came in on emergency wavelengths at the same time. Sound tracks recorded them for Rhodan. Thirty minutes later the situation came into focus.

Three lively M.S. guards had been killed on Luna. Bell reported the discovery of more than 500 stiff M.S. bodies whose erstwhile egos almost certainly were wandering about on Earth.

Rhodan interrupted the message. "No more details! Load every one of the bodies on the Good Hope immediately and bring them into the restricted zone. How long will it take you?"

"There are 200 of us. Each M.S. weighs on the average twice as much as a human. At moon gravity,

that makes about 25 to 30 kilos. I need 15 minutes."

"Hurry up, Bell! I urgently need your 'catch'!" Adams too received his instructions for further action. His job was much more difficult. With 20 men he had to load 200 M.S. bodies. Though Ras Tschubai soon relieved him of his greatest worry. The African had brought along a neutralizer by the use of which the nearly lifeless bodies were practically lifted off the ground. Now the job merely required dexterity instead of muscle.

Around 11:30, the Good Hope set down and shortly afterwards the "Adams" commando landed as well. The New Power was in possession of 732 M.S. bodies which were being stored in the jurisdictional area outside the energy barrier.

The Good Hope took off minutes later for New York and moored itself to the mast of the Empire State Building.

The Good Hope was bulky and presented a good target, yet she was impossible to attack. Her superpowerful Arkonide transmitters hammered on every available frequency, sending Rhodan's appeal to the people and to the M.S. Rhodan's voice drowned out every attempted interference up to the power of 3000 kws. They not only heard him in New York—the whole Earth heard him! And those who were still free, fell in with him. Three days of M.S. dictatorship in New York had been enough to convince them that only the superiority of the New Power was able to save them successfully. Mercant arrived with 100 detectors. The Good Hope brought another 300 that became available on Luna and in Canada.

The war in the sea of concrete broke into small individual confrontations. From street to street, from house to house and from room to room the confrontations continued. Rhodan's men came alone. And even though, after the first onrush, they came as no surprise, nevertheless they were the victors. Only a few of the M.S. continued to fight in the face of defeat. Most of them feared for their lives and clung to their host bodies, since their own were out of reach except for a few. The news of the kidnaping of 700 mindless body shells on Luna and in Canada pushed the panic of the invaders to extremes. The M.S. were finished. At exactly 12 o'clock noon, the mayor, the police chief and 7 senators were able to go on board the Good Hope and give their first reports of their experiences. The faces of the first few rescued men were flashed around the world via television. Everywhere people had left their jobs and rushed to their radios and TV sets in order to witness Rhodan's on-the-scene description of the battle between the New Yorkers and the invaders from outer space. "The devil's reporter?" someone in the spaceship could be heard to remark and recalled to memory a famous radio scare of some decades past. But it was followed by a question mark. Already it contained the assurance that Rhodan's broadcast, which had been heard all over the world, was a serious matter. It was the call to every individual on Earth, the hour of cosmic calling.

Today this fact penetrated into each and every private corner from Tokyo to Lisbon, from San Francisco to Moscow. We are not alone in this world! There are others. And some of them are assuredly not of a friendly nature. A few minutes later Perry Rhodan directed a personal appeal to the governments of the world. He did this in his capacity of Prime Minister of the New Power. And he was successful. This time at last, the will of the people forced their elected representatives to go the way of Perry Rhodan in the Gobi Desert and finally to cooperate in uniting the peoples of the Earth.

The terms of defeat that had been presented to the M.S. were unequivocal and uncompromising. The monsters were given the opportunity to be picked up by one of their spaceships in a Mars orbit and be taken back to their own world. But despite this humane treatment, they did not fool themselves into thinking that they still had a chance against humanity. A pact dictated by Rhodan forced them back behind their cosmic borders.

"It is up to you," Rhodan concluded, "as to how you want to explain the facts to your government. Earthmen and Arkonides are allies and outlaw any violation against their individual jurisdictions. Remain within your own cosmic borders and you can have all of us as friends."

* * * *

The last emissaries of the Terran governments had left the Gobi Desert and taken with them conciliatory and hopeful messages for their countries. At that time 10 members of the Mutant Corps were standing in front of the Good Hope, which was ready for takeoff. They were to be transferred to Venus where they were to receive their final hypno-instructions through the giant positronic Brain and graduate to become members of the New Power's Secret Mutant Corps, after having completed their preliminary training courses."...for today and perhaps also for tomorrow we have been victorious," said Perry Rhodan in a send off speech. "But I must warn you that the Brain does not deny the possibility of renewed hostilities."

"For that reason we are dependent on each other. You & I! We must be strong and alert and... we must learn from this. Our path into the universe is long and dark. You must all help me to find it in safety!"