

Perry Rhodan 031 Robot Threat New York 1/ HOUR X Transition out of hyperspace. They came from the 5th dimension where they had been nothing but energy and had merely consisted of structures reflecting their natural identity. The process always caused the same bodily pains. Routine practice was of no avail: each new transition brought a new shock. It was an aching in their bones and as normal space reclaimed their bodies their eyes had to slowly readjust. Colourful dancing figures appeared from out a peculiar twilight. They vanished slowly as reality became visible piece by piece. And then Rhodan looked into Bell's broad grin, which was not too convincing. Reginald Bell was not ashamed to groan aloud and to swear as he rubbed his neck. It did not matter to him that the entire crew of the STARDUST Command Central was watching. He was convinced that everyone was primarily concerned with himself because the pain and the shock had befallen them all. "Thank God! We are home!" These could only be the words of someone who had lived for a long time in cosmic concepts. After all, they were still far beyond the orbit of Pluto, about 80 astronomical units from Earth. On the other hand, when one considered that this space jump could carry them a distance of 320 light-years within a minimal period... A droning buzzer pierced their random musings. It sounded as if 100 transformers had become defective all at once. Instantly the waning ache in their limbs was forgotten. A siren could not have caused more uproar. "You see! Our hyperjumps just had to go wrong sometime! I don't want to look when the bow screen warms up." Reginald Bell was not the only one experiencing fear. A sound, no matter how familiar, loses its insignificance when it occurs simultaneously with the return from hyperspace. In spite of all the safeguards provided by the highly developed Arkonide technology, humans instinctively remained suspicious. By now Rhodan, who had experienced the shortest moment of anxiety, was grinning. "The screen is warm, gentlemen. I don't know why you are getting so excited." The instrument panels in Command Central had long since sprung to life. The familiar constellation of the Sol System was glistening on the screen. Search beams and radar were automatically extended. Complicated antennas were picking up all recognizable impressions from the electromagnetic spectrum and relaying them in comprehensible symbols onto the central observation panel before the eyes of the chief pilot. There could be no more doubt: the transition had gone smoothly. They were home again. Still Rhodan's grin only lasted a few seconds. The noise had been caused by the overly powerful hypercom system of the ship. Within moments it had absorbed a lengthy message with its electronically controlled impulses, each one-tenth second long. The synchronized automatic decoder saw to it that Perry Rhodan had the text within a few moments. Cruiser Terra to Stardust! Cruiser Terra to Stardust! According to investigations by the Tifflor team the enemy agents being sought on Earth are Arkonide robots. There is reason to suspect that the robots are owned and operated by the New Power. Inquiries lead to the conclusion that specialized Traders have surreptitiously reached the Earth and were able to program the robots for their purposes. Acute danger for Earth!-Cruiser Terra to Stardust-Cruiser Terra to Stardust! The tape replay stopped with a click. For seconds deathly silence reigned in the spacious Command Central of the giant vessel measuring 800 meters in diameter. "So it did make sense to send Cadet Tifflor on this secret mission," Rhodan stated. The message seemed to satisfy him, since it confirmed his plans, rather than to disturb him. Bell, however, was not in the least inclined to feel triumphant about such bad news. "Your little Tifflor will get you into a monastery yet, where you can meditate in peace!" the blue-eyed man scolded. "You don't seem to have grasped the deeper significance of that message. Perhaps you will allow me to interpret that aspect for you: on Earth all hell has broken loose! That takes care of number one! And number two is: we have to set Venus aside and fly back to Terra instantly." "We still have three minutes to make that decision, my boy," Rhodan declared dryly, intending no sarcasm. "A change of course in our position doesn't make a difference of more

than one angle second. But it is essential to go into top acceleration..." As he was talking, Rhodan supplied necessary instructions to the flight console board. Propelled by gigantic forces, Stardust shot forward seconds later. In the body of the ship it became very lively. The concert of the wailing propulsion generators competed with the noise of the straining gravity absorbers. The welfare of the crew was not impaired in the least by all the proceedings. The cosmos seemed to be moving, not the ship. The Command Central was like a supportive pole, like the middle of the universe. Rhodan leaned back in his pilot seat. "And now we need patience, 12 hours of patience until we land on Terra." That was the irony of the laws of nature. The space-jump of 320 light-years could be compressed into objective minutes. But normal flight to the border of the speed of light-which had to be observed within inhabited sun systems for safety reason-required half a day for a stone's throw of a good 10 billion kilometres. Patience! ... The situation on Earth had entered a new, critical phase. Rhodan was eager to fulfil a promise of many years standing and finally prepare the two Arkonides, Thora and Khrest, for their permanent return to Arkon very soon. However, he considered it urgent to achieve a total political solution-an encompassing world government-for Terra. And mystifying events were causing renewed unrest in the peaceful structure. Two three-man destroyers belonging to the New Power had not returned from a patrol mission. At about the same time a spaceship of the auxiliary craft class, a so-called guppy, had vanished. And this all occurred in a most peaceful period with no perceivable threat of an outer-Terranian invasion. But that was not all. Now on alert, patrol vessels of the New Power had discovered that unknown ships had landed on Venus and then taken off again shortly there-after. Disturbances in the space-time structure yielded measurements of transitions which could only have resulted from hyper transits by unknown units. The largest positronic computer within the sun system, permanently positioned in the northern hemisphere jungle on Venus, assumed with well-founded probability factors that an unknown power from the depths of space had discovered the position of Earth but was avoiding an open conflict. After this had been determined, Rhodan alerted his mutant corps, dispatching them around the entire globe in exhausting tours of duty. To no avail. Even his extrasensory corps members, some of whom were telepaths, returned empty-handed. In Terrania, the capital of the New Power in the midst of the Gobi Desert, they were at a complete loss. By all indications the various enigmatic events on Earth could only be accounted for by the presence of foreign agents. But no one could find them. And if a mutant was unable to find them, one could truthfully admit that all resources had been exhausted. But not Perry Rhodan! He turned the tables. "If Mohammed will not come to the mountain, then the mountain must go to Mohammed," he figured and proceeded to turn one of his promising cadets, namely Julian Tifflor, into a suspicious agent of the New Power. Tifflor was the bait. And the unknown adversaries nibbled at it. They overtook his spacecraft K-9, flying under the command of Maj. Deringhouse, and with a tractor ray skyjacked it to the double sun system, Beta Albireo, 320 light-years away. Immediate pursuit was taken up by Stardust with two guppies on board and escorted by the two 200-meter cruisers Terra and Solar System. Still Rhodan was prudent enough not to overestimate the combat effectiveness of his little fleet. He could not risk an open attack, keeping a safe distance for the present and merely observing the situation instead. The information supplied by the Arkonide Khrest only confirmed his policy. They had meanwhile learned that they were dealing with the legendary Galactic Traders: the base location, Beta Albireo, was a sure sign of that. And Khrest was able to give them an elaborate rundown on the guild. 8000 years ago, by Earth-time reckoning, the Traders, Arkonide descendants, broke away from the Central Empire. Their unsteady mode of life drove them into a nomadic existence, although they had developed an independent culture and technology. While the once so mighty Arkon degenerated more and more, they found power and wealth in the reaches of the galaxy. Their essentially unmartial nature did not hinder them from attaining their

objectives by any means. One of these objectives was called Earth. . . . Patience! Rhodan's demand was a hard trial for all of them, even for him. Another 12 hours before landing on Terra! So much could happen in that span of time. The foreign agents were robots from their own ranks. Reprogrammed robots! Very little was discussed in the Command Central. Wherever the Chief of the New Power was present in person, respect instinctively prevailed, even though everyone knew that Perry Rhodan was open to any reasonable idea. The only one who seldom kept silent was Rhodan's deputy, Reginald Bell, or Reggie, as his closest colleagues called him. Reggie found the appropriate words to ease their inner tension. "You're all sitting there as if they were about to serve the last meal before execution. What difference do a few hours make till we land? At least we know the score now. After all, those flipped-out robots have been knocking around in our territory for weeks and the Earth is still there, in spite of any subversive activity those guys might have already undertaken. After we've landed it will soon come to an end. I think we'll cross up their plans but good." Bell fell silent. Here and there someone nodded approvingly but no discussion followed as he had hoped. Perry Rhodan issued a few orders to the observers and requested course controls. After this routine manoeuvre was over the silence set in again. Thoughts once again went to the future and to the past. So the K-9 with its commander Deringhouse and Cadet Tifflor had fallen into the hands of the Traders. Meanwhile it was known that Tifflor and his comrades had succeeded in reaching an ice planet on which they had hidden. Rhodan had sent them the peculiar furry creature, Pucky, who could aid them well because of his versatile parapsychological abilities. However, there was no more to be done for the stranded group at the moment. The advent of Trader ship reinforcements had to be reckoned with at any moment and they were units of Arkonide excellence. If Rhodan wished to defeat these foes, who were his equals, he would have to attain superiority elsewhere. And 'elsewhere' could only be found on the planet Wanderer, the planet of eternal life. Yet to find Wanderer was not a task for routine navigation. Astronautical yearbooks and ephemeris tables were of no help either. The planet of eternal life was a world without a sun. It was a vagabond that lay embedded in the gravitational fields of the Milky Way system, able to change its course according to the whims of its ruler. Specifications on any given position could be made by the highly developed positronic computers with fairly accurate probability and the 'most intelligent' computer available to the New Power was stationed on Venus. This fact alone had prompted Perry Rhodan to return from the distant Albireo System. He needed the data on Wanderer's present position in order to fetch what he still required to be more than a match for the Traders. Thus the alarm sent by the patrolling cruisers could by no means be regarded as part of his scheme and yet Rhodan made the best of this fact too. At last there was some clue to the mysteries on Earth. For the plight they were all stuck in was steaming from Earth. Things were chaotic on Terra. For weeks the unknown foes had escaped detection and now, due to Tifflor's effort, they had finally discovered that the instigators were not human beings but robots. That was reason enough to forego a landing on Venus for the present. What good were victories far out in the galaxy if the Earth, the basis of mankind, fell increasingly under the control of the adversary? Rhodan deliberately did not convey the information he had received to Terrania. He wanted his arrival to be a surprise. The enemy agents were not to realize too early that they had been detected. Reaching the Jupiter orbit, Stardust sent in a first dispatch, a brief statement to inform the base in the Gobi of Rhodan's imminent landing. Confirmation in Terrania was given by Col. Freyt personally. "Thank God that you are coming, chief! A lot has happened while you were away." "Don't get me worried, Colonel," Rhodan answered jokingly to confuse any possible enemy interceptors. "I'm not exactly bringing favourable news back either. But I do hope that you have at least dug up those unknown agents by now." "I claim the right, sir," Col. Freyt answered in a reserved manner, "not to be smarter than you and your mutant corps. We have prepared an

exhaustive report about our campaign and I shall take the liberty of handing you our conclusions upon your arrival." "Don't make things so suspenseful, Freyt! What does it all amount to?" "That there are no enemy agents." "Thanks a lot, Colonel! You can just keep surprises like that to yourself. People returning home should really only be told pleasant news. I think you still may learn that in the next 10 years ... Stardust emerged in the opened energy dome of Central Terrania. Several vehicles were awaiting the officers at Landing Field A to take them to their quarters. The other crew members were transported in some robot buses. Only 10 maintenance men remained behind, who immediately contacted the service robots to arrange for a thorough cleaning and overhaul of the gigantic spacecraft. Rhodan himself drove straight to Freyt's office, accompanied by Reginald Bell. Contrary to custom, the Colonel had not appeared at the reception of Rhodan and there was nothing ceremonious about his greeting as Rhodan and Bell entered his office. Freyt made a dejected impression. He stood up behind his desk and said somewhat wearily: "Please have a seat, gentlemen." He hesitantly sat down and heaved a sigh of relief. The sigh seemed to mean that from that moment on he had returned the responsibility for the New Power to the hands of Rhodan; still he did not seem relieved. "It's the same old story, sir, only that the enemy is getting bolder by the day." "You told me there were no enemy agents, colonel." "According to our investigations, there aren't. But they are all the more present when you read the newspapers, Mr. Rhodan." "OK! Tell me about it, Freyt. Forget our conversation! We are alone and can speak openly." "I doubt that we are alone, sir." "Now don't be neurotic, colonel! I've yet to know you to suffer from hallucinations, so don't start now." "I mean it just like I told you, sir. It is definite that the agents exist but no living being on Earth can be identified as one of them. You yourself saw the failure of the Mutant Corps..." "Don't remind me of my failures. We know more today. Cadet Tiffdor has found out that the mysterious agents are our own robots-or at least some of them are. Col. Freyt stared at his boss. "Our robots," he stammered. "That is..." "...neither impossible nor unbelievable, Freyt. It is the only explanation and Tiffdor is quite positive. He did not simply put two and two together, he listened in on our enemies. And the explanation is plausible. Everyone knows, for example, how difficult it is for our telepaths to read the thoughts of robots. The process of thinking occurs within a different frequency range than that of natural people. Furthermore, artificial cell reactions are substantially more primitive and crude than in our brains. So you may rest assured that my explanation is reliable." Freyt suddenly seemed transformed. His bearing displayed the optimism so typical of him. "But then everything is all right, sir! We cut off the robots' energy and bring them all in for a general overhaul." "I already made that decision 8 hours ago," Rhodan countered. "But I do hope that you are able to imagine what it would mean if we were to inactivate all the work robots at 3 in the afternoon. Our plants are operating at top capacity. Elimination of a few thousand supervisory attendants would cause indispensable reactions to cease. Just imagine that a blast furnace tap-off were neglected or that the graphite control of a reactor wasn't checked or... Col. Freyt raised his hand in protest. "Of course I understand, Mr. Rhodan. Our industry is inconceivable without the constant service of robots. It would be a catastrophe..." "We are slaves of our technology," Bell completed his line of reasoning. "A crazy situation: the enemy is our own personnel and when we switch it off our entire city will blow up the same day! This dilemma is a task for you, Perry." Rhodan proceeded to demonstrate that the problem was not as difficult as they imagined. However, it would require a desperate expenditure of energy on the part of the human inhabitants of Terrania. "We have 7 hours in which to prepare the campaign. At 10 p.m. the last shift in normal industries returns home and by that time 90% of our plants are shut. So we only have to bother with the remaining 10% that work day and night. The power plants, the general control stations, hospitals, police units, the strategic surveillance service and so on... By 10 p.m., gentlemen, all of these positions must have

been inconspicuously taken over by people. At 10:10 the energy for all robots will be switched off." "For all work robots, Perry," Bell interjected. "Don't forget that the combat robots are individually operated and are not dependent on the central computer." "That's a risk we will have to take," Rhodan declared. "You can't achieve everything with one campaign. But the work robots do make up 80% of our entire stock. With them out of action at least the major risk is removed. -Round up the immediate staff, Colonel! I want to speak to them in a half hour." Instantly Terrania went into a flurry of action such as it had seldom seen. Under most stringent secrecy and telepathic control, Rhodan's closest co-workers were given their instructions. They then issued orders to their various subordinate branches. The uninitiated observer would not have noticed any change in that day's events. The tourists from all parts of the Earth, visiting the territory of the New Power in average contingents of two to three thousand daily, noticed nothing but the beneficial activity of this nation so small in area. And in all innocence they sensed the peace, the security and the power of Rhodan's empire. As hour X inevitably approached they were to be found in the night clubs or in their hotel beds. 10:00 p.m.-sirens proclaimed the end of the workday, the end of the last shift. 10:05 p.m.-nervous tension increased among the initiated. Their nerves were on edge. 10:10 p.m.! Somewhere within the central energy dome a hand knifed down the decisive lever. Simultaneously thousands of work robots ceased their activities. Electronically controlled transportation vehicles stopped. Wherever machines operated other machines, the direction and the work terminated. In vital industries trained personnel replaced the striking mechanical beings within seconds. Life had to continue. And everything was prepared down to the last detail. The people of Terrania worked more than 5000 special shifts; yet the assumption of many functions that progress had delegated to machines years previously went without a hitch. It was a reversion to the discomfort of backward times. But despite its terseness, the secret order had made every participant realize that vital issues were at stake. Police cars were suddenly speeding through the streets with droning loudspeakers. "All inhabitants of Terrania! A disturbance has arisen in the central robot control station. Please remain calm and disciplined: it will take several hours to repair. The Ministry of the Interior will soon provide substitute vehicles steered by men. Will guests and residents of Terrania more than 15 minutes away from their homes please wait at the normal stops. Passengers with short distances are requested to return by foot. There is no cause for alarm! Maintain discipline! The Ministry of the Interior will soon..." They had opened headquarters for this campaign in Col. Freyt's office. Freyt had meanwhile become a sort of mayor in Terrania, although that was not his official title. He was Rhodan's deputy in the territory of the New Power and conducted the affairs of state and of the capital whenever Perry Rhodan was away. And Rhodan was often gone. Perry's deputy in universal matters was Reginald Bell. The two men had a lot to endure from the burden of 'business trips.' Most of the time they were outside: in another country, on another planet or even in another sun system. Freyt's task was more prosaic, although he had a strong resemblance to Perry Rhodan in his character and in outer appearance. Mostly he stayed behind in the Gobi as representative of his chief. When Rhodan returned there were often long activity reports about routine everyday affairs. Sometimes there was some excitement as well. Like today! Col. Freyt did not conceal his relief at Rhodan's presence. There had rarely been hours that critical in Terrania. Reginald Bell even maintained that it was the most exciting day he had spent since settlement in the Gobi ten years earlier. "Our campaign worked remarkably well. Not one single report of action completion missing and I know that precision work like that is only possible in the New Power. But now something else has to happen..." "You'll see soon enough what happens next," Rhodan answered. "Your worrying hasn't made the world stop yet." "But the robots stopped. I would just like to remind you of the fat promises you had proclaimed over mobile loudspeakers and national radio. And yet you knew all the while that for the

time being there is no possibility of reactivating the work robots without incurring the risk that was just eliminated." "It's night time, pal. In the next 6 or 7 hours there will be very little thought spent on when the robots will be intact again. The situation will get critical in the morning when the first to awaken need coffee water. We will have to be finished by then. Bell only shrugged his shoulders in disbelief. He thought of the many thousands of robots that had to be individually inspected. And humans had to do it! They left Freyt's office and went to the elevator that brought them to the basement. There were plenty of vehicles waiting there that could be steered manually. In three cars they drove out of the back courtyard to the general utility hall about four kilometres away. There around 300 engineers had installed test stands and were already working intensely as Rhodan entered with a staff that included several mutants. In nonstop succession the trucks rolled up, their cranes carefully unloading deactivated robots onto the ground. Rhodan and Bell entered the hall and visited a few of the test stands. The Chief of the New Power spoke with the head engineers and technicians. They just exchanged a few polite words, since the work sequence was clear. The 'patients' were sorted according to special classes and then conveyed for cancellation of their old programming. Very few of them were given a new program immediately, the ones that were needed for some duty that night. Most of them had to wait for new assignments. They left the hall after convincing themselves that the work on the robots was going smoothly. Before entering his car, Rhodan turned to Tako Kakuta, the little Japanese teleporter, who by virtue of his mutated sensory powers was capable of transporting himself to any other location in the shortest time. Within the geography of Earth, distance made no difference. "Hey, Tako! You make a jump to Capt. Klein who is heading the action against the combat robots. Get a brief report and then come directly to Col. Freyt's office. We will be there in five minutes at the latest." "OK, sir!" the teleporter nodded. For one moment he concentrated on his jump destination, then dissolved into seeming nothingness. For the men of the New Power the momentary disappearance of a teleporter was an everyday occurrence. "The rest of you please come with me," said Rhodan. He had already decided on a specific plan for that night but intelligent planning included preparedness for the unexpected. For that reason he could not dispense with the mutants under any circumstances. They always had to be on hand for special cases. Rhodan went down the row. Many of his best mutants had remained behind with the powerful telepath John Marshall on the two heavy cruisers in the Beta Albireo System. However, Rhodan could depend on the men and women who had returned to Earth with him. In addition to Tako Kakuta there was Anne Sloane, the blond, delicate American with the powers of psychokinetics. She had improved greatly in the past years through constant training. There was Ishy Matsu from Japan, a good telepath. There was Wuriu Sengu, the broad-shouldered wrestler type. His mental powers allowed him to see through solid material. The tracker, Tanaka Seiko, possessed natural brain receptivity for radio waves. He did not need a radio to tune into all possible frequencies. And finally Kitai Ishibashi was available that night, a so-called 'suggestor' who had command over strong hypnotic powers. Under his influence anyone would do what Ishibashi wanted, while believing that he was acting of his own volition. They reached Freyt's office. "If everything goes as you expect," stated Dr. Manoli, an old and close friend from Rhodan's moonflight crew, "we will be able to spend the night here comfortably." Shortly thereafter Tako Kakuta arrived. He did not enter through the doorway or any other opening in the wall but came in the uncompromising manner of a teleporter. Directly in the middle of the room he materialized, back from his short jump. "Everything OK, sir!" he reported. "Captain Klein had his hands full and said I was only disturbing his work but at least he said that you need not be concerned." Rhodan looked annoyed. "I want a specific report, Mr. Kakuta! I don't want to see the day when Klein doesn't have time for me. And don't you ever let yourself be put off with a few nice phrases. Is that clear?" "Of course he did give me a few figures to

bring back," Kakuta sheepishly explained. "Here is the note, sir." "It's alright, ladies and gentlemen. Things seem to be going smoothly for Klein, too. Midnight on the dot the safety squad opened the attack. Over 500 combat robots have been deactivated thus far in single strikes. By dawn the mission should be completed and we can issue a reassuring bulletin in the 7 o'clock newscast." "I wish I had your optimism," Bell answered dryly, remaining comfortably reclined in his deep plastic armchair. "If the cruiser Terra's report is correct, the majority of our robots are aiding the enemy. I just cannot imagine that the Traders reprogrammed the work robots only. On the contrary! It's probable that a strong and intelligent adversary would sooner seize control of the combat machines: firstly they are actually constructed for open conflict and secondly, being cybernetic individuals, they are more independent than a centrally controlled work robot." "Your reasoning is perfectly correct," Rhodan agreed. "And that's why I briefed Capt. Klein very intensely. His fight tonight is tougher than many full scale battles we have gone through. His special commandos consist solely of officers and non-commissioned officers... But you heard what Tako said." The teleporter nodded as if it were necessary to comfort their concern. "For three minutes I just listened to Capt. Klein giving orders and receiving reports. It's all ticking like clockwork. Three men approach the activated combat robots. Most of them are behaving quite normally, obeying their first rule which is to uncompromisingly accept the decisions of human beings. They allow themselves to be deactivated without resistance..." "Most of them?" "Yes. There are supposed to have been three exceptions but before they could switch on their protective screen they were atomized by our troops with manual impulse rayguns. When the sun rises it will all be over." All eyes automatically turned to Rhodan, who suddenly did not seem to share the general optimism. He frowned. "Hm, Reggie. What do you think? Isn't it all going a bit too smoothly?" "I know what you mean. A combat robot should have quicker reactions than that. It should manage to close its protective screen when it is attacked by a human. Besides, if the Traders have reprogrammed some others to serve their ends, they should be offering resistance to our shock troops. Otherwise the whole thing doesn't make sense." "That's just it. I think our flight to Venus will have to be postponed a few hours or days. We won't leave Earth until we know that everything is alright here.-I'm going away for a few minutes. Take over the command, will you, Reggie?" Reginald Bell nodded. No one asked Rhodan what he was about to do. He jumped into a car and sped away towards the central airport. In that area the positronic computer of Terrania was stationed. He entered the massive building. There wasn't a person to be seen. The security gates opened for Rhodan one after another as he identified himself by brain-wave pattern as Chief of the New Power. Then he stood in the vast hall and made some calculations. The results were fairly satisfying but he still had more to do. The events on Earth-even if they could be dealt with in a short time-had disturbed Rhodan's plans. His return to the Solar System had been exclusively motivated by the large positronicon on Venus. The data he needed to locate the planet Wanderer was anchored in that extensive installation; hence it was only the computer on Venus that could furnish the required information. Rhodan spoke the message into a tape and then played it back. "Perry Rhodan, Terrania to P-computer, Venus. Secret circuit PQ-3 Z4! Instructions for preparation. Prepare all material for Project Eternal Life-Wanderer! Recall alert until recontact! Confirmation please!" He approved of the text so Rhodan gave it to the hypercom. Operating on a fifth-dimensional basis, it made a simultaneous transmission. Seconds later the answer arrived. "P-computer to Perry Rhodan, Terrania! Instructions clear. All material for Project Eternal Life-Wanderer being prepared. Recall alert until recontact! Agreement secret circuit PQ-3 Z4! Supplement for completeness: restrictive stipulation for project Wanderer excludes any representatives. All information will be personally accessible to Perry Rhodan only. End." The telecom screen darkened. Rhodan went out to his car and drove back to Freyt's office. Nothing new had come up there. "Tako, jump over to

Capt. Klein's again!" "Right, sir!" "Why don't we just all march over to Klein's headquarters?" Bell inquired. "We would get the progress reports first hand." "We're staying here," Rhodan decided. "A concentration of the most essential women and men in Klein's district could only arouse suspicion. I don't want to expose the headquarters for today's mission to additional danger. Klein must work under cover as long as possible." Kakuta carried out his orders, remaining absent longer this time. But the news he brought back was more encouraging. "Half of all the combat robots stationed in our territory have been put out of action, sir. Eight other machines had to be destroyed because they put up resistance. Captain Klein has no losses to report." "It's really going without a hitch," Bell said in satisfaction and for a few hours that remained correct. When the new dawn broke, every last combat robot had been deactivated. In the early morning hours the transport to the inspection hall began, where the 2.30-meter-tall giants were subjected to the same inspection as their colleagues from the labour caste. At 7 o'clock Capt. Klein handed in a complete list itemizing the time and place individual machines had been deactivated. Eleven positions bore the notation 'destroyed'. "You managed that fantastically," Perry Rhodan praised the Captain. He spoke a few seconds too soon for at that moment the turning point arrived. 2/ THE IGNITER STRIKES The characteristic buzzing of the viewcom started automatically just as the droning of the alarm sounded. Above the screen the red light flashed on at short intervals. A lieutenant came into focus on the screen. "The robots are on the march, Captain. They broke out of the hall and are advancing in broad formation on three streets..." The lieutenant held the lens of his apparatus out of the window of his guardhouse and everyone in Klein's office was witness to the proceedings. More than 1000 combat robots were streaming out of the hall, flooding the wide front courtyard. They had already formed into three spearheads, penetrating towards the north, the west and the east. "Issue a withdrawal order to all military posts, Captain!" Rhodan cried. "Every last living being in the vicinity of the hall is to retreat at least 500 meters and take formation... Mutants to Col. Freyt at headquarters: get going, Colonel! Reggie, you come with me!" The two friends jumped into Rhodan's car and raced off in the direction of the positroniccomputer. The drive did not take much longer than 150 seconds. 150 precious seconds, they both thought. Still they knew that this loss would be regained. Of course it was possible for Rhodan to send an alarm from any locality. The all-purpose device on their wrists could do that. However, calling a specific alert phase was not sufficient for the present catastrophe. There were several thousand possibilities programmed in the positroniccomputer, already present for emergencies, by which means all special reactions could be simultaneously determined and communicated. Rhodan had barely opened the last gate-the computer was immediately activated for reception of orders by his mere appearance. "Reggie! Box 3! Let's have it!" A drawer filled to the brim with perforated cards slid out of a wall cabinet. Rhodan grabbed a bundle of cards out of his friend's hand and threw it in the three-meter-long input slot. Bell handed him other packets, which disappeared unsorted into the first phase of the selector. Rhodan pressed 9 buttons consecutively, the combinations of which he knew by heart since his Arkonide hypnotic schooling. "Now take three deep breaths and exhale slowly!" That hardly took more than 15 seconds. As they finished, the first evaluation was finished and Rhodan was holding a card in his hand. "This is it! Alert reactions for the entire New Power area, taking into account the absence of all purely individual robots combined with danger from within..." The card had long since disappeared into another section of the computer. The hyper-dimensional apparatus sprang into action at hundreds of spots. Each basic reaction triggered off new ones. With lightning speed the positronic impulses registered the entire assignment and subsequently automatically undertook the complex and manifold task of dispatching orders. Rhodan and Bell could only stand by and again take three deep breaths. The dispensation of orders also covered the civilian sector. Higher civil servants received their notification

of action instructions directly over home and office viewcom connections. General directions were issued over national radio, the normal programs being automatically interrupted. As the positronic computer prepared for the first repetition, Rhodan added a personal message that was broadcast over a network of loudspeakers, primarily outdoors. This reached everyone in the territory of the New Power... including the enemy... but that could not be avoided at the moment. With admirable brevity Perry explained the state of emergency and concluded by announcing that further special instructions would follow secretly. They left the computer. As they stepped out into the street the first troop trucks assigned to guarding the most essential technical installation of the nation were rolling up. Soldiers jumped off and took up positions around the block. Rhodan winked at them optimistically and received trusting glances in exchange. He could rely on these men-of that he was certain. Bell had the same impression. "Our company morale is good, isn't it?" He grinned and hurried to jump into Rhodan's already moving car. Back to headquarters! There the orders were already being carried out. The immediate staff stood prepared and clad in the cumbersome Arkonide combat suits. "We'd better not wait any longer to get into those things ourselves," Bell urged. "We won't last long in ordinary cars without them." "You are going to turn into a mind reader one of these days," Rhodan teased. He was already changing into his suit. The helmet was left open. In an emergency it could be connected very quickly. Arkonide combat suits had been issued with increasing frequency in the past years to important functionaries and men on special assignments for the New Power. Originally only Bell and Rhodan had had them but the fantastic versatility of the devices had resulted in their being used by the Mutant Corps and higher officers and civil servants. The Arkonide suit is a somewhat clumsy article of clothing worn over normal dress. It is capable of flight by virtue of a built-in anti-gravitational device and has light wave deflectors that can render the wearer invisible within the frequency range of the 'normal' human eye. Finally an energy blocking screen about equivalent in strength to those of combat robots saw to the personal safety of the wearer. An officer was waiting for them outside. He was the commander of the troop detailed to guard Col. Freyt's office. "OK, Captain," Bell said. "Do your duty and be sure you only allow people with important messages to enter." Rhodan had meanwhile turned his attention to the viewcom screen. The major stationary facility on Earth had switched on the connection which now produced a picture taken from a bird's eye view by helicopters. No more than 8 minutes had elapsed since the alert and yet the street scene had already changed rapidly. The three troop wedges of the robot army were marching unchecked. So far they had not met with any resistance worthy of mention. Captain Klein's line would be reached at any moment, however; and as apprehension was still growing, it happened. The infantry concealed in the houses opened fire with their impulse rayguns, blazing thermal energy, the only threat there was to the artificial beings. Part of the attackers marched on undaunted; only a few of the giants toppled over or disintegrated. Most of them automatically surrounded themselves with the protective screens fed by their own little miniature atomic power plants. The outer robots fanned out, moving towards the houses as quickly as their awkward gait permitted. "You stick with the enemy, Captain," Bell suddenly said to Klein, "but clear me a line to the Air Force." His words did not surprise anyone. Because of the alert released by the P-computer, everyone knew where to go and whose command to follow. As official Security Minister of the New Power, Reginald Bell had automatically assumed top command, a fact that was not changed by Rhodan's presence. Col. Friedrichs reported on viewcom. "Sir!" "Your report, Colonel!" Bell requested. "Fighter squad started as planned. One-man fighters assuming security of national territory. Three-man destroyers patrolling up to moon orbit. Within the closed energy dome only helicopter engagement possible. Twenty-five units just started, flying towards the three robot spearheads. Which weapons do you recommend, sir?" "Bombs are ruled out! We don't intend to reduce our own city to ashes. Use helicopter weapons, direct aim, Colonel!

Take impulse rayguns! They are most effective against robots." "Right, sir!" The connection was broken and interest again turned to the observation screen. Things did not look so good for the city, at least what lay within the energy dome 10 meters in diameter, the most significant centre of Terrania. The screen showed bursting walls, 5 and 6 storey houses collapsing like wooden huts on the streets through which the robots were advancing. These war machines could think independently and they had at their disposal the most formidable weapons a soldier on Earth had ever carried. When they received fire from the infantry, their perfect position finders immediately located the foe. The mass of soldiers, however, were not equipped with individual protective screens. They did not have a chance. Loudspeakers announced that tank support was on its way. They hurried back. Everywhere isolated figures emerged from cover and dashed away. The ray weapons of the robots had good targets again. The reaction ability of robots lay far above the human. Their nervous system was less complicated than a biological being but nonetheless in some respects it was more utilitarian. For man and animal the nervous system is a warning system spawned by the instinct of self-preservation. This necessity was almost non-existent for the robots. Their specialty was attack and destruction. The first robot law, 'You may not kill a human being!' was quite flexible. It could be interpreted to mean 'You may not shoot at people who are friends or allies!' The minute a living being was declared to be an enemy, all scruples ceased. And the changes undertaken by the Traders resulted in the robots considering all people as their enemies. The humans became more cautious, availing themselves of any shelter. Their faces were covered with sweat and dirt as they arrived in the reception centres. Officers checked them in. Short shock massages. Energy tablets. New weapons. A few tanks were rolling up again. New ones were being manned. And solitary fighters that had escaped the hell outside continued to return. "Where the devil are those helicopters!" Bell cried. "They're coming!" Rhodan said in a harsh tone. The head of the middle robot column melted under the flashing impulse rays. Eight combat machines were annihilated. Then something peculiar happened. The robots were crowding up close together in groups of six, seeking some sort of contact. The observers at once realized that they had found it. They were mutually recharging their protective screens. Their six-fold strength could not be penetrated by the impulse rays of middle weight weapons aboard the helicopter. One could be proud of those fellows' intelligence, thought Rhodan, if they were only fighting on the right side. The moment the helicopter attack wave was over, they disengaged the groups of six and turned to renewed attack. "We won't stop them this way," Bell groaned. "Why aren't there any mutants in this battle?" "There are," Rhodan said oracle-like, since Bell's question had been purely rhetorical. They all knew that the guidelines they had received from the P-computer for this alert had advised against the engagement of mutants, at least not before it became necessary to put all their eggs in one basket. A principal regulation required the shielding of mutants if there was a 90% probability of their destruction. "We have a teleporter, a telekineticist, a telepath, a seer, a tracker and a suggestor at our service," Bell listed. "Tako can only affect himself, Anne would be good if she weren't too precious, Ishy can't find out anything from machines. Wuriu and Tanaka are of just as little help to us. Kitai hasn't had any success with machines, either. What good are they then?" "I want to volunteer," said Anne Sloane, the delicate blond. "Using telekinetics I have moved objects weighing tons..." "But not in the midst of battle," Rhodan contradicted. "There's no point to it, Anne, pitting yourself against these giants. You would be able to stop them and even force them back for a little while-but it wouldn't take long until you would get it. You're no match for their superior strength." "I can whirl them in the air and let them fall to the ground. They would break into pieces." "Not another word out of you," Rhodan refused. "We have other things in reserve. Tako, come here a moment!" Rhodan spoke softly with the teleporter so no one could understand him other than Ishu Matsui, perhaps, who was a good telepath... Tako's face

was suddenly beaming and he nodded vehemently. "OK, sir! I'll be back as quickly as possible." Then he disappeared from the room. No one dared to question Rhodan. When he was being secretive he stuck with it and would reveal nothing. The screen presented a radically changed scene. The advance of the robots had been temporarily stemmed on all three streets. But only temporarily! The tanks had managed what Anne Sloane had intended to accomplish with her natural powers. Using anti-gravitation ray devices the defenders had created gravity-free fields within a small radius. Some of the robots had begun to float and shoot up into the air. When they passed the effective radius of the antigrav, they plunged to the ground. Very few of them survived the crash. Bell took stock and found that thus far almost 50 robots had been destroyed. Still there were over a thousand more marching towards their target: towards the controls of the energy screen, the positronic computer in the Gobi. "If a miracle doesn't occur, at least 800 robots will survive," Bell declared. "We have to deal a decisive blow..." "The centre containing the most important installations is particularly heavily guarded. Besides, the building housing the positronicon has its own screen," Manoli stated. "Thank you for the lesson," Bell said sarcastically. "I still can't share your optimism. We have all seen that the robots can build up a reinforced defence by contact closure. I bet those guys still have a few surprises on tap. And if those surprises are part of their attack strategy, there is no reason for even the slightest optimism." The robots had introduced a new manoeuvre. The introduction of antigrav devices had retarded their advance. At critical moments of tank shelling they crept forward. As long as they did not push off from the ground, they remained fairly near to it. Some of them even tried to exploit the opportunity by hurtling themselves forward, achieving speeds for which they had not been constructed. Three combat machines lunged forward in this manner and with surprising swiftness landed between the flanks of four tanks. The heavy vehicles were instantly victims of the attacker. Total loss. The next move further thwarted the attack. The spearheads divided, then continued their advance in 6, 8, 12 columns. This forced the humans to lose precious time spending reinforcements into several new blocks before they could resume the attack. The robots thus gained over 1000 meters headway in a short period. "What the devil! Why are you acting so mysterious, Perry?" Bell exploded. "You must explain to me what your scheme is with Tako! After all, I am Minister of Defence!" All eyes automatically turned to Rhodan. His grim expression did not display the confidence he had still radiated only a few minutes earlier. "Hey, Perry. Something wrong?" "They are encircling block J-D 3. And the man I sent Tako to lives there." They did not all know whom Rhodan meant. Block J-D 3 was large, containing more than 200 apartments. Ivan Goratschin was sleeping. His left head, which to distinguish it from the right one bore the name of Ivanovich, had awakened a few seconds earlier. The reflexes in the limbs saw to it that Ivan soon opened his eyes. "What's up?" "Don't you hear anything, Ivan?" "I always hear something the moment I awaken. But I'd rather not hear anything at all. And that's why you should have let me sleep." Ivanovich availed himself of their common right arm in order to scratch himself. Since both heads had only one body at their disposal, they constantly had to come to terms about its use. But Ivan Goratschin was used to this since birth. Moreover, he possessed a peaceful character, so that in most cases the heads agreed. This time, however, Ivanovich had a different opinion. He considered the noises very important. So he suddenly raised the hand that had been scratching and before Ivan knew what was happening, his own fingers were pinching his earlobe. "You devil! What's that for?" "You'd better prick up your ears, brother dear. I hear something that isn't good. And if you fall asleep now, it won't make the bad any better. I think it sounds dangerous." "It sounds like war, Ivanovich. It's trampling and thundering out there like rolling tanks." "Like shooting tanks," corrected the younger by 31/2 seconds. "If tanks are rolling, it's a parade. If tanks are shooting, it's war!" Ivan Goratschin got out of bed quickly. He ran to the window in his nightclothes and tried to open it.

"Dumbbell," Ivanovich moaned, "windows can't be opened in Terrania. The air-conditioning provides fresh air." "I don't consider that progress. You've got to be able to lean out of a proper window. That shows how impossible these things are, plastered shut. You can't even find out whether the enemy has marched into Terrania." "No enemy can march into Terrania," Ivanovich contradicted, "and certainly not into the energy bell in which we are living, as everyone knows. You must have been thinking of our liberators from Siberia." "The world, or Terra as one now says, is unified. This is a raid from outer space. When I think of what Rhodan told us about the Traders and how that Mutant Master abused us, I don't feel so well." "That's nonsense! The New Power is the strongest bulwark in the Milky Way." "You said yourself it was war. What else could it be?" "We'd better get dressed and get out of here." "I'm not taking one step into the street in this weather. There's steel in the air-and even worse. Those newfangled rays, I tell you. You can't see them, can't hear them..." "There are some that can be heard and seen." "And some that can't be seen!" Ivan thundered stubbornly. It seemed that a little tiff was brewing between the two heads. But at the same moment both of them realized that there was something to be seen through the closed window. In the sky they could make out a chain of helicopters plummeting down in sharp curves. The muzzles of their impulse weapons began to flash. Ivan Goratschin turned pale. That scare had eliminated all differences of opinion. Heads and body reacted together as if they only responded to one brain. Instinctively Goratschin backed away from the window. "This is no manoeuvre and no parade," Ivan declared. "I bet the Traders have infiltrated and intend to conquer the New Power. We should go to Rhodan at once and help him." "We should?" Ivanovich echoed without conviction. "We don't even know where he is. The government centre is two kilometres from here. When we go out on the street no one will tell us who is a friend and who an enemy." "We'll ask the people," Ivan naively said. Finally the two heads agreed that they at least had to get dressed. Goratschin had barely knotted his tie when Tako Kakuta appeared out of nowhere. The twin-head became frightened again. He was still too unaccustomed to the manner in which the teleporter made his visits. He did realize immediately, however, that he was a member of Rhodan's closest circle. "Mr. Kakuta! You make us very nervous with these indiscretions." "By the cosmos, Goratschin! I've been looking for you everywhere in this apartment. Who would dream that with this ruckus outside you would still be in the bedroom?" "It is still very early in the day and we were tired," Ivan declared. "What has happened?" the left head interrupted. "How is it possible that some other power in the world has penetrated Terrania?" "We'll have to postpone explanations for later. For the present accept the fact that it has actually happened," Tako Kakuta said. "Agents of the Traders have forced our combat robots to aid them and the entire army of metal men has suddenly gone berserk. Rhodan sent me to ask for your help, Mr. Goratschin." "Rhodan could have ordered us," Ivan commented. "Order or request," Ivanovich continued, "we are on his side. What shall we do?" "You are our last hope, Mr. Goratschin." Both heads straightened in childish pride. "The combat robots are just a lark for us, Ivanovich declared. "You must be exceedingly careful, Goratschin," the teleporter warned. "It will be no service to us if you fall in the first encounter. You have more to lose than anyone else, namely two heads!" "We are strong," Ivan declared. "The strong man gains his full power when he acts intelligently," Kakuta philosophized. "Are you ready now? Then please come with me! I'll take you to Rhodan." The apartment was on the first floor. It didn't pay to use the elevator. The street was swarming with people. "There are more than we imagined from the window," Ivanovich said in astonishment. "They are all running in the same direction. Is it an attack?" Beads of perspiration appeared on Kakuta's face. "They're fleeing!" he explained, less friendly than before. "The front is on the other side. We have to go left at the corner, cross the street and take a detour through block J-G 7. The section to our right is no longer safe. Beyond the central department store we may come

across a vacant car." "Why don't we take a robot taxi?" "Because the robots are rebelling. Now come on, out into the thick of it." Just as Kakuta gave the command to go, he grabbed the twin-head and held him back. It was a reflex action. All at once the house began to quake in all its joints. The walls seemed to come alive. A crack the width of a finger crunched as it formed in the ceiling, wandering down to the floor within seconds. The plaster was crumbling and raining down on their heads. They stood in the entry to the house, petrified. Kakuta counted aloud to 5, then it seemed to have passed. The building was still standing. Outside on the street, however, all hell had broken loose. Fragments that must have broken off the roof and the upper storeys fell into the milling crowds, killing men, women and children. The wave of fleeing people pushed them over. Goratschin wanted to run to their aid. "Stay here!" Kakuta yelled. "That's what the orderlies are for. If we don't concentrate on our own task now, all citizens of the New Power are doomed and not just those few over there. Is there a back exit to this building?" "Yes. It leads to a private street for residents." "Let's go, Goratschin! Maybe it is less crowded." Kakuta's hunch was more correct than he had wished. The street had been completely swept clean. They left the building. At that instant the door of the house opposite theirs opened and a robot stepped out. Kakuta whipped out his hand raygun and fired, simultaneously returning to the protection of the building by reflex teleportation. Goratschin reacted less swiftly. His view had been blocked but as he realized the menace and the flight of his ally, he felt panicky. For seconds he stood rooted to the street, without any shelter. He was awaiting the death thrust. Fractions of time units. He was still alive. Then Goratschin's will power concentrated on the robot, which had probably only hesitated because it was baffled by the person with two heads. That hesitation was its undoing. The mutant Goratschin needed only to think and the calcium content of the robot went into a destructive chain reaction. "I don't understand what is taking Tako so long," Rhodan said. "He must be aware of what is happening in block J-D 3." "Being a teleporter, it is really easy for him to escape any blockade," Manoli pointed out, unable to understand how the chief could disregard that fact. "Sure he can! But he won't get Goratschin through." "So Goratschin was your secret!" Reginald Bell groaned. "Why didn't we get the idea of using him earlier than this? This is so obvious. Maybe our reactions aren't functioning right any more? Eric..." "Are you asking me as a doctor?" Perry Rhodan interrupted the debate with a wave of the hand. "If you are seeking a psychological explanation, Reggie, there is only one. We are unconsciously relying too exclusively on the strategic direction of the positronicon. This complicated alert was programmed earlier. There is no place for Goratschin because the computer did not reckon with him. Our alert program is exactly one year old. Goratschin only joined us last September." The robot army had almost encircled block J-D 3. Rhodan ended his explanations. They all knew that it was much more important to take action now and the developments of the following minute made this necessity even clearer. Col. Friedrichs was sending armed helicopters into block J-D 3. Bell immediately issued counter orders. "Have you gone mad, Colonel? You're shooting right into the midst of civilians!" "The fronts have intermingled, sir. We can't get at the robots at all if we are to spare the lives of our people at any cost." "Kindly leave those decisions to me! Instruct your men to get closer to the enemy. Pick off the robots individually! But don't exterminate the intelligence of the New Power!" Everyone knew that Bell's decision turned the helicopter raid into a suicide mission. The robots had already shot down three machines and the sensitive antigrav weapon was of less and less use. Everywhere the fronts were entangled in close combat. Whoever neutralized gravity there would whirl in the air himself, which would have caused the ultimate chaos. "Bell to Col. Friedrichs! Concentrate all available air forces on block J-D 3 for the duration of one assault wave. It is imperative that that section of the city be taken by us." For three minutes there was silence before the viewcom screen. Bell's order resulted in an immediate shift in the course of the

battle. The concentrated attack on block J-D 3 had transformed that section into a hell. Due to the strict use of precision fire, it became apparent that the losses on the side of the machine-people predominated. The fleeing men got a breather and could make some headway. The spearhead of the rebelling robots was losing power and speed. The cybernetic creatures seemed to be impressed by this tactic and for a moment it seemed they were confused about what to do next. Bell commented triumphantly: "Those fellows are bewildered! Friedrichs! Pull back the reinforcements immediately and concentrate on block H-G 7. Same manoeuvre there!" "If you have any objections to my intuitive decisions, Perry, speak up before it is too late," Bell addressed his friend. "I still don't know what has happened to Kakuta and Goratschin and just how you want to use them." "Just keep it up, Reggie! The constant change of counterattack tactics is the only way to disconcert the robots, to the extent that is at all possible." There was no mention made of their losses, although Friedrichs had again forfeited four helicopters. At last Kakuta reported in on hand telecom. "I got Goratschin out of bed, Mr. Rhodan. We're still stuck in his house. The relief attack was worth its weight in gold. Could you direct the nearest heavy tank over here? Ivan is good at attack but he has very little means of defence against assault from behind." "OK. Stay in the house. We'll send you a tank with strong protective screening." "Thank you, sir!" Capt. Klein acted immediately without waiting for specific instructions. Two 70-ton tanks were standing by in block J-D 9. Klein dispatched them to Goratschin's apartment. "One of them will have to make it. Insure coverage!" "At your command, Captain!" the lieutenant replied curtly, breaking off the connection. The attack on block H-G 7 was less effective, perhaps because the robots had adjusted to Bell's plan. "We'll have to think of something new." It was a depressing prospect. Their concentration of forces at two points had its disadvantage too. The robots had been able to advance six assault arms towards Norway within minutes. "Those metal devils are taking advantage of every opportunity," Bell mumbled. "They should actually figure that the place we most heavily defend is their most important target. Is that intelligence?" "In my opinion, if we want to discover their plans," Dr. Manoli interjected, "we have to find out how they communicate." "What nonsense! We know that exactly. But who is in command of them?" "That's what I meant." "I have them now. Would you keep quiet a moment?" Everyone turned to look at Tanaka Seiko, who had previously hardly spoken a word. The thin, delicately-built Japanese had always been known to be a quiet, reserved person in the community of mutants. This characteristic must have been a necessary consequence of his parapsychological ability of 'direction finding'. To a greater extent than even a telepath, he listened inside himself. His additional sense was, technically viewed, nothing but an exceedingly complicated radio apparatus such as human and Arkonide had had thus far been unable to produce. Seiko 'heard' radio waves. Moreover, he was able to spontaneously undertake a wave determination that allowed him to clearly tune into the transmission he wanted to receive. However, the concentration required minutes at a time and left him bodily weak. He was sitting in an armchair, his eyes shut. "Who do you have, Tanaka?" Seiko rebuffed them with a wave of the hand that silenced even Bell and Rhodan. Obediently they waited. The viewcom began to buzz, now of all times. Bell simply turned back the reception button, throttling picture and sound. He whispered into the microphone: "Wait two seconds. Reception now impossible." There was heavy protest at the other end of the line but it was ignored. Who did Tanaka 'have'? That was the most important question. A short while later he relaxed. "I intercepted a robot communication frequency. We have to vacate these quarters, Mr. Rhodan." "For what reason? The robots have no aircraft and they are still 11/2 kilometres away. "One of their spies has discovered that our defence headquarters is located here at Capt. Klein's office. They had previously assumed that we were in your office in the government building." "OK. You keep listening and see to it that you don't lose the frequency. If we are disturbing you, you can go into the adjoining

room." "Yes. That would be better." Seiko disappeared. "...give up all responsibility! With all due respect, gentlemen!" The sudden outburst issued from the viewcom, which Bell had turned up to its full volume. An enraged Col. Friedrichs appeared on the screen. "Now it's your turn, Colonel." "It's about time! My troops cannot hold their position any longer. People against robots. That is an impossible..." "Get to the point, Colonel!" Bell thundered. "My losses have climbed to 14 helicopters. I need ground troop relief." "You are the relief, Colonel, and I'm sorry about that. We have no more people and can't come up with any. The energy bell will remain closed for security reasons. Pull back your units for 10 minutes and then regroup with the rest. The Mutant Corps will attempt to relieve you. Await further orders." "In 10 minutes the enemy will have reached our staff field position if they are no longer harassed from the air. I request permission to transfer my headquarters to the north." Bell threw Rhodan a questioning glance. He nodded approval. "OK! Go back to block A-N 12, Colonel. That takes you very close to the airport but just get it straight that there can be no further changes from there." "Thank you, sir!" A snapping sound broke the connection. "And now the mutants! We have no other choice, Perry." Rhodan silently surveyed his people. "Ishy, you are a woman and a telepath. Your talents are not suited to a conflict with robots. I would like you to return to the government quarter." She nodded obediently. "Immediately?" "Yes, please." Ishy Matsu closed her Arkonide suit and said goodbye. She started from the roof of the house and disappeared-invisible to the robots. "Incidentally, we are going to hold out here until the encirclement. Captain Klein, inform the guard battalion of the new situation. Arrange for acute defence alert. All vehicles equipped with energy screens are to take up hedgehog position." "At your command, sir." On the viewscreen the menace of the new situation was already becoming apparent. The robots' intent was still vague but due to Tanaka Seiko everyone knew the target of the war machines' movements. They had suddenly concentrated almost a quarter of their striking forces eastward. Had they already realized the momentary weakness in the humans' defence? In the absence of air attack they found almost no resistance. On receiving the least fire, they were destroying entire house facades. Three crossroads before Capt. Klein's headquarters they came across the first larger defensive position. Three tanks lined up next to each other, forming a closed energy screen across the entire roadway. Their concentrated impulse fire stilled the energy of 7 attackers: 7 robots went down in flames. But robots know no fear. Blindly fanatic, their front rolled on towards the tanks. At that moment fire from another street downed the helicopter that had been responsible for the wireless picture transmission within the viewcom system. All optical contact between the street events and headquarters was cut off. Reginald Bell let out a coarse oath. Ivan Goratschin was not only ugly because he had two heads. His entire appearance made a monstrous impression. He was one of the many negative mutants born after the first Russian atom bomb tests in Siberia. The negative effects showed in several ways. His size of 21/2 meters, his shapeless columnar legs, his scaly skin with its green shimmer and his angular, bulky body all made him into a monstrosity. In character and biological capacity he was almost a paradoxical mixture of good and bad. If he hadn't mutated into an 'igniter,' he could have been regarded as innocuous. Both heads dictated to the twin creature a patient, naive and subservient nature. From early childhood on, his fellow men had called him a 'freak,' which had engendered a pronounced inferiority complex in him. Thus far he had never managed to show any individual initiative. For a whole generation his two brains had lived in some sort of competition, which had distorted his mental capacity. And while in relating to others the two heads were unanimous, that was no substitute for his lack of determination. Ivan Goratschin had developed into a truly subservient type. He wanted to serve and be repaid in charitable love. The legendary Mutant Master, who had covered the Earth and the New Power with treacherous gang warfare, had been Ivan's strategic discoverer. He had taken him from Siberia and exploited him to every

evil end. Ivan was simply naive and-an 'igniter'. This characteristic, which was later to achieve for him particular status in Rhodan's Mutant Corps, consisted of the fact that the currents of his mind affected calcium and carbon compounds much as heat impulse does gunpowder. The moment Ivan Goratschin concentrated, calcium atoms entered the process of nuclear fission. Since calcium or carbon can be found more or less everywhere, the 'igniter' could just about kill any living creature or destroy any object as soon as he thought about it intensely. That was when he ceased to be 'innocuous'. The destruction of the combat robots had demonstrated that. Ivan was standing in front of a pile of plastic and metal. The sight returned some of his self-confidence. He was not defenceless, not even against the relentless war machines. But he would have to be cautious and that thought caused him to hastily retreat behind the gates through which he had just emerged. The street remained empty. No further shot was fired. But what if he left the shelter of the walls? Hadn't other robot eyes already sighted him from some hidden corner? There were hundreds of windows across the street and his doom could be lurking behind any of them. He waited. When he finally thought of Tako Kakuta his fright returned. Why had the teleporter disappeared? It could only be because here the air was laden with lead and energy. It just could not be a good idea to remain lying here. All at once the noise increased. His ears had become accustomed to the various battle sounds in the distant streets but now more than 20 helicopters were streaking across the sky, firing impulse rays. The streets were no longer empty. Two, three robots appeared, stalking about. Then there were more. Ivan poked his head out the gate, then pulled it back under cover. There were about 30 combat robots marching across the street. It looked like a retreat. Did this mean that Perry Rhodan had already been victorious? Goratschin's naiveté was somewhat too extreme. He immediately became careless. If Rhodan was winning, he, his most uncanny mutant, wanted to have participated. Without any further hesitation he stood up. Fully erect, he was twice as high as the wall. His head and upper body were exposed and the robots were at most 20 meters away. Perceiving and reacting were one and the same in Ivan. His only advantage lay in surprise and he knew that. Before getting up he had prepared his thought concentration. In that process the two brains complemented each other like relays, which was the reason for the partial success of his attack. More than 10 of the machine warriors gave up their 'lives' before they realized the danger. Those in the second and third echelons meanwhile had time to react. They saw the two-headed mutant and did not stop to wonder about his inhuman figure. Ivan's attack was a clear indication of the menace he posed and that was the sole gauge of the robots. They took aim with their stereoscopic eyes, which were also sighting mechanisms. The release of impulse rays worked automatically. At that moment something swept Ivan Goratschin off his feet. He toppled over, landing in the grass behind the wall. His two pairs of eyes stared in amazement at the face of Tako Kakuta, who was also crouched behind the wall. "Come on! Follow me, you nitwit! But stay on the ground, just creeping on your knees and elbows." It was an unusual way for a teleporter to remove himself from a danger zone but in this situation he could not simply wish himself away with the awkward Goratschin in tow. He could not grab him and take him along on a jump. They had both long since realized how imperative Kakuta's intervention was. Even before the twin-head fell to the ground the first impulse vibrations whistled over his head, demolishing the front of the house. Then the robots lowered their fire, aiming at the wall. Fragments of the wall were whirling around Tako and Ivan's heads. Beside them it began to feel increasingly hot. When they had progressed about 10 meters the wall gave way. The energy ray had separated the silicon from its compound and, at almost 2000° C., had caused it to melt. The wall flowed like glowing red lava. It had a hole. Did the robots think they had eliminated their opponents? Weren't they intelligent enough to know that a man can crawl? They were, but they were also oriented towards human reactions. When a human flees, he moves to the right. The robots thus took aim at the wall again. But Tako had done the exact opposite. He had

crawled into the corner of the garden nearest to the robots and Ivan had trustingly followed him. "They are still 10 meters away," the teleporter whispered. "The next attack must be perfectly prepared. You think of their destruction in time, Ivan. I will teleport to the house across the street and shoot the pulse-ray through out of the window. But don't ignite longer than three seconds. Then throw yourself to the ground and crawl away as fast as you can. I'll take care of the rest." With a slap on Ivan's back, Kakuta left. That had all taken place within a few seconds. To judge by the sounds, the robots were preparing to move on. Goratschin concentrated. The first shot rang out of the house across the street. Tako had singled out the front group of four robots, who were still shooting at the garden wall. After a few seconds the impulse raygun got through; the protective screens of the combat machine broke down completely as the impulse energy hit the reactor casing. 12 or 14 four-armed robots wheeled around and took aim at the new foe. However, Tako's appearance at the window was like a fleeting shadow. The teleporter had already jumped two floors down to the adjoining house. He rushed to the window to ascertain the new situation. Ivan-Ivanovich Goratschin was standing upright in the garden. Not a flash, not a single ray of energy was flickering around the stony figure. It just remained there and seemed in the three seconds of motionlessness and concentration as if someone had placed it there for eternity. Yet it was only a moment of eternity that decided the fate of 9 four-armed combat robots. In the centre of their bodies the spontaneous chain reaction of the calcium atoms commenced. That was their death. Ivan followed orders. He dropped down without waiting for the results of his 'igniting'. The remaining five robots set in motion without any noticeable delay, two to the right, three to the left. Kakuta demolished one of them, teleported another 30 meters through rooms and walls, and destroyed another one. Goratschin, who suddenly abandoned all hesitation, took care of the rest. With outstretched arms he let himself drop in the direction of the street and thought only of destroying the enemy. Kakuta's warning cry was no longer necessary. The robots were no match for this onslaught of impassioned human concentration. Every last one of them succumbed to the devouring blaze in their synthetic bodies. The street had been fought free. Kakuta appeared beside Ivan. "I've forbidden you to be so careless, hang it all! Every other person clings to his life and is careful. But you..." Goratschin showed two disappointed faces. He had actually expected praise for his action. Obediently, shaking both heads, he followed the teleporter into the house, where he called by telecom for a tank. 3/ ROBOTS ON THE RAMPAGE "The last phase," Perry Rhodan murmured. "It will decide who is the stronger." The friends didn't feel comfortable with that thought. Their chief had rarely been so unsure about the outcome of a battle. He had always trusted in himself and in the superiority of the technology at his command. But today the technology of the New Power was partially on the side of the foe, which was an entirely new situation. The ring encircling Capt. Klein's headquarters had drawn tighter. The robots had already overrun the first two posts in most of the streets. The ground was heating up under their feet in the literal sense of the word. Rhodan ordered his staff to retreat. "Don't make such a long face. You look like a frustrated hero, Reggie! It's not a question of who shows the most courage today but who burns his fingers the least. Close your combat suits. Notify the commander of the guard battalion, Capt. Klein. We will try to supply replacements as fast as possible." Klein saluted and left. Rhodan manipulated his wrist apparatus and called Kakuta. "Hello, Tako! We are moving to my office. You and Ivan make your way over here, though, in order to relieve Klein's staff troop. No further orders for the present. Are the two tanks there yet?" "No sir!" "Then wait there. It can't take long." Capt. Klein returned. "All taken care of, sir." Rhodan nodded. "Our destination is clear, so let's go! And don't anyone forget to turn on the light-wave diverter. We must remain invisible." They started from the roof. Each combat suit was a vehicle in itself. Rhodan hovered in the air awhile to get the complete picture of the state of things. It did not look good. More than a

third of the territory within the dome was occupied by the robots. "Wuriu," Rhodan called over telecom during the flight. "Sir!" "I am thinking about the helicopter that was shot down. You stay up here for the next hour and give me a steady report. We cannot afford to hang around blindly in our offices." "Yes sir!" Telecommunication was not risky. While the robots could intercept certain normal transmissions, the telecom apparatus operated on a coded impulse basis. They landed on the roof of the government building. As they switched off their suits some confusion ensued that soon turned to relief. The government building was full of people who worked there and had been forced to remain due to the alert. "It doesn't look good, Mr. Rhodan, does it?" a young office girl asked. The Chief of the New Power managed his first smile in hours. "No, Ms. Grohte, it doesn't look so good. But we are making every effort to improve the situation. You stay at your post. It will all work out." They took the elevator to Bell's office. There they met the two Arkonides, Thora and Khrest, who had no special assignment for this alert but were to remain there for security reasons. Thora, the platinum blond woman from the distant planet Arkon, immediately approached Rhodan. "How do things look, Perry?" Her familiar tone and harsh look did not quite match. Rhodan shrugged non-committally. "The decision will be forthcoming soon, Thora." You should put a guppy at our disposal, Perry. Khrest and I have a right to keep out of this fight." "There no doubt about that but the plan requires that the dome remain shut. No one may leave the centre of Terrania. "I don't agree with..." "Alright! When things get critical we can talk about it. At present the government quarter is in no danger. We have the front under control." This the Arkonide had to accept. A short while later Kakuta reported in. "The tanks have arrived, sir. We boarded and are riding in the prescribed direction." "The third barrier to Capt. Klein's staff battalion has been penetrated by the enemy," Wuriu Sengu announced. "The building is within firing range. Flank advance has slowed down but a central spearhead is forming in the direction of the government quarter." "There you have it," Thora declared. No one bothered to respond. Bell ordered the renewed engagement of all available helicopters. Colonel Friedrichs confirmed it resignedly. "If Ivan's action coincides with the attack of the helicopters, I expect a lot of results. If we are able to add a third factor, it would work even better. You are in command, Reggie, and you don't need me. You won't need Anne and Kitai, either." "It will do if you leave me Tanaka to get the bearings on the enemy transmitter. But what did you mean?" "The third factor, pal: our assault troop is invisible! That will help." Rhodan offered no further explanation. He could not afford to lose anymore time lest he come too late. The three left the room and rode to the fourth cellar floor. There they each got five normal demolition bombs that were bearable in weight but still each had the effect of a ton of TNT. The name of the tank commander was Sgt Cary. He was a patient man and a genius at freight loading. Within three minutes he had managed to stow Goratschin's 21/2-meter-long body in his crowded tank. And that was not all! There was room for Tako Kakuta and the other crew members. Ivan's abilities were not unknown to the men of Terrania. They suddenly felt very secure in their tank. Cary racked his brains: how was Goratschin going to work-he certainly could not move much. "That's nothing," the right head explained. "There are no protective screens that can resist my thoughts, at least none that robots have. And this little bit of steel on your tank is of even less consequence. All I need is to look out your observation window..." "Here is a telescope. It is more precise and comfortable." "OK. That's good, comrade," Goratschin's heads cheered in unison. The two tanks were driving side by side. Their protective screens could be switched to produce an additive effect when their generators were close together, which resulted in more than three times the radius of each energy screen individually. Every tank commander knew that trick; however, it required masterful driving, as the adjacent chains of the two vehicles could not stray more than 20 centimetres apart. The area surrounding Block J-D 3 was completely deserted. Here and there lay dead and demolished robots. The

rubble of collapsed houses was no hindrance for the giant tanks. The area occupied by the robots started two streets farther along. A lucky hit by the tank gunner eliminated the first sentry but the situation turned critical instantly. The exchange of fire attracted a dozen foes, who attacked in a broad front. "Watch out, Ivan!" Tako Kakuta called. "I've got them in the telescope. Shall I...?" "Naturally. What are you waiting for?" Now the full demonic scope of Goratschin's mysterious powers came into play. Fully trusting the tank, it was unnecessary for him to think of escaping, which allowed total attack concentration. The combat robots burst apart. All that remained was an indefinable, glowing something or other. The counterattack by the two vehicles rolled right over them. One block farther. New enemies, more than 30 who immediately took up sustained fire. "This is too much!" Cary shouted. "Our screens can't withstand it! We must turn around at once!" "Wait a second!" Kakuta answered in just as loud a voice. Cary was commander but an officer of the Mutant Corps always remained his superior. Ominous flickers were dancing in front of the observation glass. The energy screen was being stressed to maximum capacity. Then at last the force of the attack diminished. Ivan's matter-devouring thoughts had found their way. The street had been fought free. Onward! Beads of perspiration appeared on their faces. Onward! Helicopters thundered low across the sky. At last they were back! Onward! Course: Klein's headquarters. The videophone conveyed continual calls for help from the three encircled areas. "Hold out!" was Bell's order from the government building. That was a weak consolation for the defenders. It sounded better when the impulse weapons of the aircraft resumed fire. Scattered traces of optimism even appeared when the New Power state transmitter broadcast the progress observed by Wuriu Sengu. "The mutant, Ivan Goratschin, has meanwhile entered the battle. In the last 15 minutes alone he has destroyed 72 combat robots." Intersection of two main streets! Another 53 meters to Capt. Klein's guard battalion. No foe anywhere in sight. "Careful!" Kakuta said. "Robots do love open combat but we don't want to rely on that. Ever since this morning I know that they like surprises too." At that moment it happened. The four corner houses—all 12 storeys high exploded simultaneously. Concrete chunks, 1000 tons of them, whirled around, then hailed onto the intersection. The energy screens of the tanks withstood the immediate blow but even an atomic motor could no longer move them from the spot. "We are stuck! Anything can happen now!" Cary should not have said that. Apparently the robots were very well informed about the transmissions of Radio Terrania. They approached from four sides, well over 100 of them. Cary shouted into the videophone. "Immediate aircraft action at intersection Kepler Avenue-Fermi Street! Robots attacking assault troop Goratschin. Tanks stuck in concrete debris!" Ivan had to wait. His powers worked all the better the nearer he was to the object. Still Kakuta and Cary urged him on. "The robots could start at any moment. They have reached the critical distance." At that instant concrete dust sprayed the observation window. The tone of screeching generators revealed that they had been driven to maximum output within seconds. "All energy to the screen," Cary shouted. "Stop shooting!" The attack was left to Ivan alone. He made every effort and had isolated success but the robots were still too far away for him to eliminate them in one blow. "If they notice that there is a critical distance for the 'igniter' we are doomed!" "Helicopters!" groaned the sergeant in the driver's seat. It no longer sounded very hopeful. The telepicture revealed at that moment that the neighbouring tank was no longer producing energy. It had been hit. The mutual screen was now only half as strong. "This is the end!" the Lieutenant insisted. "Come on! Let's get out!" "Detachment stay back!" Kakuta shouted. "Just don't lose your head, Cary! What do you think will happen to you if you run across the street now? -Sergeant, try reverse!" He obeyed but they simply did not move one centimetre nor was it possible to shoot their way free with their own energy artillery. The rubble that had to be cleared was lying in the corner they could not reach. "Alright then, protective screen at full energy, Lieutenant. That is our last chance. And you, Ivan, hurry,

please!" Ivan and Ivanovich answered with a groan. In the enemy line 3... 4... 5 specimens blew to bits. "Good, Goratschin! Well done, Goratschin! But more, still more, Ivan Ivanovich! We'll soon be under fire ourselves. Those fellows have only let loose a couple of stray shots up till now. When they start concentrating everything on our few square meters, we won't have a chance to think." The humming of the screen generator climbed higher, losing itself in the highest treble pitch no longer audible to the human ear. Warmth, heat! Sweat in their eyes! Was it their imagination or had the energy screen given out? "Ivan! Good going. But more, much more! There are more than 100 of them." Kakuta tore open his shirt collar to get more air. His instinct was urging him to a telejump, by which he could have saved himself. But he had to stay with Goratschin. He was responsible for him. Then the robots began a general assault. "Bombs away!" Rhodan ordered. Six demolition bombs fell, seemingly from nowhere, detonating in the concentrated phalanx of combat robots, sending them crashing into each other. The energy screen protected them from flying fragments but the air pressure tore them off their feet. That was the moment for Anne Sloane and the gravity absorber. Rendered invisible by her Arkonide suit, the telekinetic expert had dipped almost to the ground and was hovering between the roofs of two houses. With one single thought she encompassed a group of 20 robots and pushed them upwards. At a height of 80 meters she withdrew her kinetic power and let her victims plunge to the ground. The impact made the robots into worthless scrap. Onward! Repeat that again. Anne Sloane was left to her own devices in that street, for they had to ward off three attack formations simultaneously which were working their way towards the tank from the north, the south and the east with mechanical stubbornness. Tako Kakuta had answered the last telecom call. "Mr. Rhodan is here! And Anne Sloane, the telekin. They will get us out of this, Ivan. Just hang on!" "Two bombs, three more times!" Perry Rhodan commanded. Renewed chaos among the robots. What Anne Sloane accomplished with her brain, Kitai Ishibashi and Rhodan managed with some difficulty with their antigrav rays. As soon as the rebelling combat machines were thrown off balance by the bomb explosions, gravity was withdrawn. They shot up in the air like soap bubbles, returning to the ground in gravitational acceleration. None of them survived the crash. Only a few of the robots had been able to hold out on the ground. They had disappeared into neighbouring houses and abandoned their attack on Cary's tank. "We're saved," Tako Kakuta realized. "OK! We are coming," Rhodan announced. "Anne and Kitai, land on the intersection at once! But leave the light-wave deflectors on. There should still be some robots in ambush." The crew of the second tank was dead, the left side of the vehicle totally demolished. Anne Sloane went close to Cary's tank and concentrated. It was a ghostly sight as concrete hunks weighing tons suddenly began to move by their own power, floating to one side. Little by little the obstructive rubble disappeared. "Now drive on, Lieutenant!" Cary passed on Rhodan's order to the sergeant. The tank had no more difficulty. "Thank you, sir! That was great!" "No need for that. Go to Capt. Klein's battalion. The encirclement should be broken on this side. Still be careful! How is Goratschin?" "Excellent," Kakuta replied. "He is really enthused over your achievements." Rhodan flew over the front with the two mutants. The situation still looked precarious in the eastern circle. There the robots had entrapped the guard regiment of a power plant and the people had already suffered severe losses. "Repeat performance," Rhodan said. "The same thing all over again... what the devil is that?" They were still 1000 meters away when a dozen robots floated before their eyes and then plummeted down. Telecom. "General inquiry! Who is operating in an Arkonide suit over the eastern ring?" "I am!" a familiar voice called. "Don't get in my way, Perry! Keep to the south!" "Have you lost all reason, Reggie...?" "Absolutely not. Colonel Freyt is still there. I put him in charge. When the three of you took off with simple demolition bombs it was a cinch to figure out what you were up to. We should have started this long ago. You don't have to bother about this section. Help the lieutenant in the middle

section instead." Rhodan agreed because what Bell was saying was completely correct. They turned around. They checked guard battalion Klein. "Onward!" Rhodan ordered. They were not needed there, either. Ivan Goratschin had raged against the robots as if he had gone berserk. The people were now able to move about freely on the street without seeking shelter. Brief exchange with Kakuta, who was still sitting in Cary's tank with the igniter. "We are on a western course, Mr. Rhodan. Location at present block H-G 4. Ivan is in full swing. We are not encountering much resistance. All of the larger robot units have been wiped out. Now they are only attacking in threes or fours. Our energy screen can take that." Here and there solitary combat machines were still exploding. Wuriu Sengu confirmed the detail observations. Col. Freyt ordered troop units newly prepared to counterattack. It was shortly past one o'clock when the mopping up operation began. Rhodan announced his return to headquarters. "Yes, please, sir. Come immediately," Freyt replied. "I have an important report to make." "I'll be there in three minutes." The people in the Ministry of Security's office looked worried. That was understandable. The population of Terrania had suffered heavy losses. "What's up, Colonel?" Rhodan asked. "A report from Mr. Adams. The situation is the same in New York!" Rhodan was silent for the moment he required to draw a deep breath. "More precisely, please! The GCC is located in the midst of a metropolis!" Freyt turned on the tape recorder. "Sender: General Cosmic Company, Business Manager, Homer G. Adams. Address: Mr. Perry Rhodan, Terrania, New Power, Gobi. Date: August 3d. Time: 23:45 hours-East American. 600 robot policemen of the GCC out of control since 23:30 hours. Incident without explanation. Three men killed trying to approach the robots to turn them off. State of total confusion in GCC Centre. Several floors of main administration building seem to be occupied by the rebelling machines. Requesting advice and support." "That is all, sir." "It's enough, Colonel. I fear we will have to disseminate our forces even more. Isn't Bell back yet?" "No sir." Bell was called and informed of the new developments. He reacted with a bit of coarse language, stopping abruptly when his gaze fell on Thora. "And this is what is called rush transition, to Wanderer. I'd like to know what is supposed to become of our fleet in the Albireo System if we are constantly detained here right in front of our house door." "It is the same enemy. The actors are just wearing a different mask. Still we have to take care of them. We cannot leave Earth in this condition." "Then I suggest a blitz. This morning we developed a few good tactics for dealing with robot deserters. There are still a few running around loose but Freyt can easily take care of them. The dead and wounded will be the main job. The work robots will be able to help with the clearing-up task. They have all been checked and can be reactivated on short notice." Rhodan nodded. He sent a brief express telecom message to Adams informing him that within minutes his request for help would be considered. "Undertake nothing until then, Adams! We will contact you again shortly." When Bell had spoken about a blitz no one present had taken him for a dreamer. But before the brief consultation was concluded, a report from the news centre arrived that dropped the optimism down another peg. "Special bulletin from Berlin. The GCC administration office in Central Europe is in the hands of rebelling combat and police robots. The mayor of Berlin has declared a state of emergency." "Special bulletin from Sydney. The GCC administration building, Australia Southeast, has been blasted by unknown perpetrators. Unable to control 40 robots on a murderous rampage in the city. Police and the military are powerless..." "Special bulletin from Durban. Police robots of the General Cosmic Co. have attacked and killed the human personnel. Very few escaped. The robots are entrenched in the building and have sent an ultimatum to the government of the Union of South Africa regarding surrender of state power." "Special bulletin from Montevideo..." "Special Bulletin from Manila... from Madrid, from Kuwait..." Blitzkrieg! But a lightning operation on the part of the Traders. Wherever the GCC, the economic power factor of the New Power, had established agencies, the robots were now stationed. "If the Traders have now reached our

agencies and infiltrated them, it amounts to a world conflagration," Rhodan realized. "The radio news we just heard is not final. Our branch offices and industrial plants are situated on the globe more than 200-Hello, control station. Get me a direct connection to TCEF immediately!" The Terranian Counter-Espionage Federation was headed by short, wiry Allan D. Mercant, whose headquarters were in the Umanak estuary in Greenland. His face now appeared on the viewcom screen. "I know what you want, Mr. Rhodan. Congratulations on your victory in Terrania..." "You have been informed?" "As it should be. My agents are already at work in Canada, too. Incidentally, your office in Quebec wasn't mentioned in any of the radio bulletins. It doesn't exist anymore. I don't know how I can be of help everywhere, Mr. Rhodan. After all, I do not have 100 million soldiers at my disposal. We will have to divide things." "Send special troops, heavily armed, to New York! If that city falls the entire world economy will crumble. And spaceships are the last thing I can use there." "I can release two divisions for New York but I don't know if that will be enough against the emperor of New York..." "Against whom?" "The emperor of New York. Didn't you know that in the course of last night the robots proclaimed it a monarchy?" 4/ CHAOS IN NEW YORK Adams' office had never housed so many people. The air was stuffy despite the air conditioning. "...I thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Just remain in your rooms and keep calm. Similar occurrences have been observed throughout the world. Even Terrania was not spared but they were able to crush the uprising of the robots. And Perry Rhodan is on his way here." A tired wave of the hand. The people crowded out. They could not all return to their offices since the lower 10 floors were occupied by robots, as was the roof with the landing strip for helicopters and other vertical take-off planes. "Air!" Adams shouted desperately. Ms. Lawrence was standing in the doorway, the leading light of his executive secretarial staff. It was obvious that she didn't seem very self-confident that day, as she didn't even inquire about Adams' wishes. "This letter was delivered for you, Mr. Adams." "Thanks! No, you stay here. I can't bear to be alone today. The mail can wait till tomorrow-or even longer." He opened the letter and read it. "The Emperor of New York will honour you with a visit at 2 o'clock. Prepare for his reception and issue instructions for his safe conduct. If you or any of your staff commit any unfriendly act, the GCC will be blasted. We demand obedience and are a good master to those who love us." Adams crumpled up the letter but immediately regretting his impulsiveness straightened out the sheet of paper. "You read it, Ms. Lawrence!" The secretary complied. Her shrill laughter revealed that she believed every word of it. She was dumbstruck with fear and panic. "We have an emperor!" Adams laughed. His mirth did not sound genuine either but that was understandable. "The robots have elected an emperor! I would like to know which little clerk they ended up with. What do you think, Ms. Lawrence?" "I think that it isn't a thing to joke about. And I know that I have never been so afraid before in my whole life." "This is no invasion from outer space, young lady," he attempted to console her. "These are no monsters but simply robots, built by humans. Let's approach the thing logically for a change, Ms. Lawrence: these fellows have gone crazy. It is improbable that an entire series is suffering from some construction error. The damages would show up consecutively in that case but not all at the same hour. I am convinced that some undetected person has reprogrammed them, perhaps only the most intelligent among them. He then passed on the assignment to the specialized repair robots." "Forgive me, Mr. Adams, but I just don't have your nerves and can't contemplate the reasons now. I'm not a scientist, either, who could grasp the details. You have to make the arrangements." "Arrangements?" Adams echoed in a drawling tone. "You don't seriously believe that I will treat this note differently than any other scrap of paper? Emperor of New York! childish insanity!" "The children of insanity have killed over 1000 people in Terrania. I wouldn't like to be one of the millions in New York." The short, hunchbacked man behind the desk pulled his head back between his shoulders. "In Terrania they started a vicious war,"

Adams considered aloud. "In New York they want to negotiate. How does that fit together?" "In 10 minutes it will be 2 o'clock, sir," the secretary urged. "Think of the people in this building!" "Alright. I shall receive the emperor. Perhaps, he will be amenable to a longer discussion I could introduce him to Rhodan. Your idea isn't all that bad. Prepare enough coffee, Ms. Lawrence. I mean a small pot is enough for me but the emperor's taste will certainly be different." Homer G. Adams gave the required instructions so that the employees would behave properly upon the arrival of the emperor. Then he spoke to Perry Rhodan over telecom. "That is a pity," Rhodan declared in conclusion. "We won't be able to be there before 2:30 but I will send you Kakuta." The teleporter arrived at Adams' office at three minutes to 2. At the same moment Ms. Lawrence announced the arrival of the emperor, so nervous and frightened that she could barely pronounce his name. "Let me take your place," Kakuta said. Adams tried to resist, insisting that he was no coward. "That's not the reason," the Japanese replied. "I can disappear more easily than you. Get your Arkonide suit on and sit down next to us. Invisible. You can appear at any time if it really becomes necessary. I'll keep the telecom on so you will understand every word inside your helmet." "A another two minutes, Ms. Lawrence..." Three minutes passed. The emperor was in no hurry. He inspected all of the anterooms, thoroughly and asked the people some questions, naive ones true to his kind. On the other hand, he displayed highly specialized knowledge. 2:03. The emperor entered the room. "You are not Mr. Adams." "I am Tako Kakuta, first teleporter of the Mutant Corps, and I can disappear whenever I feel like it." "I am the emperor. Call me emperor." "As you like, Emperor." "I want to talk to Mr. Adams. Get him at once." "The boss has been detained, Emperor. I am representing him in all matters. The emperor just stood there for several seconds. Then two heavy combat robots rolled in. Now the great difference became apparent. The emperor was a secretary robot with much stored knowledge. His class was equipped for broadest general education and highest intelligence. His height was 1.70 meters. Kakuta recalled that outside of the New Power this type was also equipped with individual steering systems like the combat robots. It was not worth connecting the few existing machines to central control computers as they were so rare and so widely dispersed. "I am the emperor of this city and demand obedience. Any refusal to obey an order will be punished by death." Kakuta knew that he could not expect any willingness to negotiate from this partner. He would have to drop his plan to involve him in a long discussion. "I shall get Mr. Adams, your majesty." "Not majesty. I am the emperor." The obstinance of the mechanical secretary was offensive. Kakuta controlled himself. He went into the adjoining room, leaving the door open so that the invisible Adams could follow him. "It is necessary for you to make an appearance, boss." Adams left his helmet open. The emperor took no notice of his peculiar attire. "We need your cooperation, Mr. Adams. I am offering an elegant office in my residence in the Empire State Building. Your indispensability to me is your greatest guarantee of survival. The new empire cannot get along without any people at all. Follow me!" The emperor left. The two combat robots stood at either side of the door, waiting to escort the greatest financial genius in the world. This development came as a surprise to the two men. They were quite accustomed to matter-of-factness but the new ruler's ceremony went much too fast for them. They wanted Adams and no one else. Once Adams was gone, war would come to the GCC building. "Follow the emperor!" one of the robots ordered. Adams obeyed. He was pale, his hands trembling. Kakuta hoped that it was anger and not fear. A moment later the teleporter had to take care of himself. The last robot turned back and raised his lower left weapon arm with the impulse raygun. Kakuta teleported into the adjoining room and heard the unmistakable sounds of destruction. Adams' office must already look like a battlefield. Now the cat had been let out of the bag. Switch on telecom! "Hello, Mr. Rhodan! I'll leave my transmitter on. You keep watching. Out! I have to jump again." Kakuta jumped into the second anteroom, through which the emperor still had to pass. "Halt! Not one more

step!" He had his raygun pointed, aiming directly at Adams. The emperor was startled. "Out of the way unless you wish to be destroyed!" "One second, Emperor! You need our most vital man. A contract is required by humans. Your robots have already shot at me. I demand guarantees to eliminate underhandedness." "The emperor commands, the others obey!" "Count me out! If you can't understand reason, I shall kill Mr. Adams. It's your choice." Kakuta opted for security. He shot the first combat robot, who had just entered the room. Then he ran on to destroy the second as well, who had just completed his senseless work of destruction in the boss's office. Neither machine was adjusted for acute danger and therefore had not switched on their protective screens. Kakuta returned to the second anteroom. He seemed to be feeling better now. "And now for our contract, Emperor! A contract including guarantees for the entire GCC office. Otherwise you will never leave this building. Your robot dynasty doesn't interest me in the least. My sole concern is the firm." No stirring of emotion could be detected in the machine. How could there be? Which put the human all the more on guard. "I am the emperor and I command. The others obey." The arrogance of the machine increased Kakuta's irritation. Just don't lose your nerves now! If this creature was the 'emperor', why not just take him prisoner? Why not just destroy him? The teleporter placed his finger on the firing pin but he was not convinced that a shot from his weapon could save New York. It was impossible that the entire army of rebelling machines was adjusted to this one single positronicon. The emperor business had to be a bluff. What was he to do? "I will kill you, Emperor, if you don't grant us fair negotiations." "If you kill me, connection to the residence would be interrupted. That triggers off an alarm. In no time your building would be a pile of rubble." "No violence, Kakuta," Adams interjected. "The emperor will have taken adequate precautions. I have a better deal to suggest..." "Speak up," said the emperor. "You assign us 20 police robots in passive condition. We could then protect this building." The voice of the emperor sounded like snoring. Perhaps it was meant to sound like ironic laughter. "In the new empire there is only one police force. Your suggestion is unacceptable. I am the emperor, the others obey." Kakuta's fury gave way to slight satisfaction. At least he had succeeded in engaging the emperor in a discussion. The topic was of no consequence. He would have settled for the simplest subject. "Wrong, Emperor! The GCC does not belong to you. We will simply arrive at some sort of coexistence. Don't forget: no one can destroy the New Power..." "The New Power does not belong to my residence. It will receive a different emperor." "He has already died, in case that interests you. And 200 of his warriors along with him." "The fate of the Gobi inhabitants is regrettable but it is not for us to discuss here." "It should serve as a warning to you. "I am the emperor, Mr. Kakuta. This audience is ended. Have the door opened! Two policemen wish to enter." Kakuta teleported out into the corridor, landing amidst a band of 10 robots. He immediately jumped back, for he could not have lived another 5 seconds out there. "You are mistaken, Emperor. There are not two but at least 10 of them. Are we to interpret that as a threat?" "Have the door opened!" the emperor commanded. Those were his last words. Immediately thereafter he collapsed with a crash and was just a heap of scrap metal. "Enough delaying tactics," Perry Rhodan said, suddenly becoming visible. He was followed by Anne Sloane, Dr. Manoli and Tanaka Seiko. They set their Arkonide suits on zero and opened the helmets. Several office employees had fainted. "Eric, take care of them." "How did you get in, sir?" "Through your office, Mr. Adams. It has a huge hole in the outer wall." "You killed the emperor." "What does that mean, 'emperor'? There are at least another 55 specimens of his sort in this city. They could all become emperor, perhaps they already are. We have to evacuate the city, ladies and gentlemen. First the building of the GCC. The danger is too great." "First the robots outside," Kakuta warned. "They could break in here at any moment." "OK!" Rhodan nodded. "There are five of us with combat suits and impulse weapons. Eric, you remain at the door as sentry. Anne and Tako go up one flight..." "You won't get through. Didn't Tako say that

they were crowding behind the door?" "Is that right?"~ The teleporter nodded. "Then door open and massive fire. The fellows will most likely be without energy screens. We have to finish them off within 50 seconds." Perry Rhodan was aware of the fact that this would be a challenge to the foe. He had already weighed the question back in Terrania of whether it might not be better to leave the robots unscathed. There would have been fewer dead on this day. But, objectively considered, what was the alternative? Keeping silent, holding back, just taking it? The robot army would have continued their espionage with no interference. They would have divulged to the Traders far out in space near Beta Albireo every important position on Terra and the outcome would have been the capitulation of Earth. The Traders were Arkonide descendants! It was certain that they were technically superb opponents. No, Rhodan had spent a lot of time weighing the matter in his conscience. Any delay of a confrontation with the robots would have worsened the situation for the people. It was good that they had now arrived at open battle; the nightmare would be ended all the sooner, despite certain miscalculations in the energy dome. Despite the tragedy that from hour to hour the conflict was taking on world-wide proportions. It had gotten worse than Rhodan had anticipated. This only increased his determination to push for a decisive end. The door flew open! The robots stood there, vulnerable. While their controls were still erecting their individual protective screens, the energy from Arkonide impulse rayguns began to whip through the air. The corridor turned into an inferno. None of the robots had any further chance to resist. In closed combat suits Rhodan, Anne Sloane and Tako Kakuta jumped out. Their own defence screens rendered them immune to the deadly rays. "Secure the way, above and below us!" Rhodan ordered over telecom. "Tanaka! Where are you? Stick with Tako and get upstairs. Anne, we two are going into the lower floors." The elevators had unfortunately been damaged by the attack and were out of order. That was a definite handicap. The disadvantage was fortuitously not so great for the wearers of combat suits. They could float through the stairway and were not dependent on stairs. Rhodan and Anne reached the 12th storey. "Stop!" They were surprised not to have met with any resistance as yet. It was to be expected that the robots had by now at least secured all accesses to the various floors. Rhodan drew his conclusions from that fact. He was accustomed to thinking over every new fact and discerning the possible causes. One presumption widely known was that there were about 600 combat robots and an additional 800 service robots stationed in New York. That was a ridiculously small number distributed over a city of 10 million. Even if the enemy considered the GCC Centre of particular significance, he would still be 'thrifty' with his personnel. "Just don't be afraid, Anne," the boss of the New Power reassured his companion. "I have the feeling that we are overestimating the position of the robots in this house. Think of the 10 lower storeys they are supposed to have occupied and of the roof!" They floated downward-the telekineticist always a short distance behind Rhodan. One single robot was standing at the main entrance to the suite of offices on the 10th floor. It stood there like a bored sentry who didn't expect any excitement during his shift of duty. "How insensitive these things are! They take no notice of the fact that 30 meters above them a whole group of their comrades have been totally destroyed." Rhodan's words sounded soft in Anne's ear. The space inside their suits was completely insulated. Even soundwaves could not reach the outside. Silent and invisible, Rhodan approached the foe. The solitary guard inspired him to something special: first he shot at the most dangerous arm, the weapon bearer, then his legs and finally the upper arms. The robot sank to the floor, a mere torso, but in its head all sorts of reactions immediately developed. The loudspeaker facility was buzzing at regular intervals, as if it were part of a warning system. The robot was calling for help. Rhodan jumped in front of it and switched the main lever in the creature's back, completely setting him out of commission. "Lift him, Anne! Come on, make it snappy! Get him up to the central office. At any moment..." It was already happening! Three combat

robots appeared at the opposite door. They froze for a moment. A human would have probably reacted emotionally and shot anyway, although seeing nothing. The robots hesitated because they could see nothing. But they did activate their matter tracker, against which invisibility was not of much use. "Careful, Anne!" Rhodan whispered. "Lift the robot! I must have it in this condition. And you go with it. I'll cover you." The radar tracking of the robots required about 15 seconds. That sufficed for the telekin to escape with her victim. Rhodan floated downward as the passage to the 9th storey was less intensely observed by the robots. From there he began to fire before the three giants got around to that themselves. He knocked off two of them at once. The third had sufficient time to trace Rhodan's position and shot back. The protective screen of the combat suit buckled under the pressure of the enemy's impulse rays. The fluorescent glow of the friction point between the two energies clearly revealed Rhodan's location to the robot. It increased the firing power of its weapon arm; the human did the same with his raygun. Due to the changed focus adjustment, the rays were compacted so tightly that it was as piercing as a sharp needle. Such facility with this particular weapon required tremendous practice and accuracy of aim. When fighting robots, it was furthermore necessary to have exact knowledge of their anatomy. Rhodan had exact knowledge. He hit the individual reactor and thus was victor in that duel, which had almost ended differently. The robot was deactivated; still Rhodan waited a moment, checking out the two floors between which he had stationed himself. There was some action below him but in the 10th storey nothing was stirring. He floated upward again. Anne Sloane had already brought the torso to Mr. Adams' floor and deposited it in a washroom. "Aren't you overdoing your humane treatment a bit?" Adams asked, shaking his head. "Since when do we take robots prisoner?" "That machine is very valuable to me. We'll take it to Terrania and have it examined. Perhaps it will even reveal how the conspiracy came about." Kakuta and Seiko reported in a little while later. "The roof has been fought free, sir. Five robots had been posted there." Adams immediately understood what was meant and he voiced his qualms. "You think we should all get out of here, sir?" "I thought that was your burning desire the past hour." "True, but the Central Office of the GCC is an invaluable work site which could never be replaced. The files and records of this building alone..." "It's alright, Adams! I will assume the responsibility. The people come first. I don't want to lose any of them. I assume that the moment we have gone the interest of the New York royal family will turn to other objects." Minutes later a spherical giant dropped down onto New York. The city of unlimited opportunity celebrated a new triumph in that hour. Despite the robot menace, the terrified populace ran out into the streets and to the rooftops to watch the spectacle. The spaceship Stardust had a diameter of 800 meters. As it hovered a few meters above the flat roof of the GCC skyscraper, it overshadowed half of Manhattan. It was Perry Rhodan's ship! Did it signify hope? For some. For the employees of GCC. More than 12,000 people were put on the vessel within two hours. No one remained behind. And the robots were seemingly powerless against this escape. Unless they were not even interested in intervening. New York was big! And it had an emperor, although the emperor had 'fallen.' The radio stations broadcast the news with much pathos. A few hundred people had already been forced into service by the machine creatures. Others—the majority—remained of no interest to the new dynasty. After some hesitation the workings of destruction began. The combat robots had gotten their way, whether with or without the consent of the 'emperor', nobody knew. That was not crucial. The facts were crucial and they presented themselves just as they had in Terrania. As dawn broke over the east coast of America, two TCEF divisions of Mercant's reached the city. They brought air landing troops and heavy, energy screen equipped tanks. They also brought one-man fighter planes. The ground troops readily got a foothold. They were far to the north of the city, where Broadway took on a modest residential character. But there was little that could be accomplished from the air, as the pilots of the fighter planes soon

realized. It seemed futile to hunt 1400 robots scattered throughout the city. Thus at around 9 o'clock the pursuit planes were replaced by helicopters. The stream of fleeing people was rapidly diminishing. During the night the robots had merely regrouped. This had misled the inhabitants of New York. They had not grasped the danger and decided to remain at home. When the first report of the robots' rampage came through, panic and chaos ensued. The highways leading out of the city, the railway stations and airports were instantly congested. Two of the first 10 passenger planes to depart were shot down by combat robots. They crashed in heavily populated areas. The two TCEF divisions, supported by low-flying helicopters, attempted an intense advance. They encountered no interference for 6 kilometres but then they all came to a sudden standstill in all southern streets. At 9:35 the second counterattack by the robots set in. The ambush should have cost Mercant's troops heavy losses but orders had been set from the start and the initial lack of resistance failed to confound them. Their protective screens were activated as both divisions marched on without faltering. Nonetheless there was no reason to cheer. About 100 very effective combat robots had cordoned off Manhattan to the north. Another 400 were creating havoc in the city, terrorizing the population. And service robots were aiding their 'comrades' as well as they could. 10:15. Report by Allan D. Mercant to Perry Rhodan: "We are unable to advance, sir! The actions of the Air Force do not bring fast enough results, and endanger the civilian population. Every minute takes its toll in lives. We need a blitz campaign." Response by Perry Rhodan to Allan D. Mercant: "We have evacuated all GCC workers from New York. Stardust is returning to the city. Hold out, Colonel! We will hurry and be on the spot in 12 minutes." But Rhodan's operations could not be restricted to New York. Simultaneously 6 additional auxiliary vessels of the GOOD HOPE class, called guppies, had started from the Gobi. Each one had two mutants on board. One-man fighters and destroyers had started from all points on Earth where the aircraft of the New Power was stationed. Hundreds of ships patrolled the Terranian airways, waiting for final orders. Berlin, Sydney, Durban, Montevideo, Manila, Madrid, Kuwait and another three dozen geographical localities had received a yellow light on the map at General Staff Headquarters of the New Power. Anne Sloane had flown to Berlin, Tanaka Seiko to Manila and Wuriu Sengu to Durban: The mutants were rare and Ivan Goratschin was only one of a kind. He was on board Stardust. 10:27. The shadow of the gigantic spherical space-craft reappeared over New York. "And why is there no effect on their morale?" Reginald Bell desperately asked. "If our opponent down there were human they would have split a long time ago." "It was our intention to construct combat robots with nerves, after all," Perry Rhodan answered. "Now we have them..." They adjusted the tuning of the observation screen. Details became visible. They were discouraging images. The losses of the TCEF divisions had increased rapidly. The streets were littered with battered tanks. Mercant's troops were retreating. Greenland called. "You don't have to explain what's going on," Perry Rhodan said. "I can see it with my own eyes; in fact, more distinctly than you can. Issue an official retreat order. That is the only way to lure the robots out of the city. And that is the most essential thing to do now, if we don't want New York to be wiped off the map." "Right, sir!" "Over & out." Ivan Goratschin got into a tank which had been lifted to the ground in a controlled gravitational field. Ivan's figure did not fit into a normal combat suit. 30 additional tanks had been landed in that manner. They were equipped and manned as usual and assigned to detract the foe from Ivan Goratschin. Because of the situation on the front the area around the intersection of 5th and Broadway had been cleared of robots. The Landing Corps of the New Power got down easily and immediately fanned out in groups of three. The teleporter, Tako Kakuta, was appointed personal liaison man between Rhodan and Ivan. "You jump as often as necessary, Tako. Ivan is a nature boy from Siberia. He doesn't think much of telecom or other technical aids. It would be better for you to stay with him. Ivan's nerves must not be strained in any way. He must be able to concentrate his powers wholly on igniting the

robots." At 10:34 Kakuta reported Ivan's first successful knockout. At that moment the hypercom in the Command Central sounded. "Connect us at once!" Rhodan ordered the officer on duty in Communications Central. The call which had set off the automatic controls of the large receiver was typical. The commander of the ship could conduct any conversation from his seat at the 'bridge.' In the Communications Central, however, 'registration' was been carried out by more than 30 people. All frequencies had to be kept under observation at all times. Three dozen communications experts and several small electronic robots were constantly occupied with controlling the radiowaves. Reports on the status of events on the entire globe were constantly being received. Rhodan had just put down a report concerning Anne Sloane's arrival in Berlin. The sound of the hypercom buzzer indicated a very distant caller. "Connect us at once!" "Right, sir!" "Cruiser Solar System to New Power! -Cruiser Solar System to New Power! Maj. Nyssen wishes to speak to Mr. Rhodan! Report in please!" "What the devil! A direct connection," Bell said in astonishment. "Something big must really be happening." The pneumatic post near the Chief Pilot's seat spat out a tube. A young lieutenant grabbed it and handed Rhodan the note. "Ivan has had more success, sir." "Don't bother me with Ivan now! Capt. Bols, you keep your eye on the automatic decoder and don't let any other calls through on my line..." "Hello, Maj. Nyssen! Perry Rhodan speaking on board Stardust. Position Earth atmosphere." The thin face of the short, wiry officer appeared on the viewscreen. Nyssen was sporting a grin, despite the gravity of the problems. His rasping voice only sounded pleasant to those who knew him well. "How are things, Major? I can't use any bad news. Across 320 light-years the five-dimensional impulse base achieved instantaneous communication. "Following orders we are keeping a safe distance from the Traders, sir. Enemy reinforcements are continually arriving and our situation is becoming increasingly difficult." "Is this supposed to be a call for help, Major?" "When can you come back? After all, it is important for our tactics for us to know that, Mr. Rhodan." "We will come back, Major, as soon as we have visited Wanderer. You know very well that under these circumstances I can't designate a time. So the order to hold out remains. Any other news?" "Two observations, sir, that could be important. An hour ago we noticed considerable displacement of the Trader fleet. Suspicions that this could mean preparation for a full-scale attack on us have not yet been confirmed. Our communications officer thinks he discovered a direct transmission to Sol but naturally that cannot be proven." "Alright, we will investigate. Anything else?" "The ORLA 11 can't be located in the enemy formation." "Then you destroyed it. Congratulations, Major. Tiffloor will be pleased to hear that his former jailer, Orlgans, has been eliminated." "The ORLA has not been destroyed, sir. It simply vanished. I fear a new trick of the Springer captain's." "Then I can only advise you to keep a close watch. You will still have to do without us for awhile. Hold the fort, Major!" "Right, sir! Any other orders?" "Switch off now. Give my greetings to the fleet! Out." The connection was interrupted. For some time the nervous tension on board the STARDUST had not been as great as at that moment. Everyone was aware of the time pressure the entire expedition was facing. The fleet in the Albireo System needed immediate help. The P-computer on Venus had prepared the data on Wanderer and was waiting for Rhodan. Wanderer itself, in which they had vaguely placed their hopes, was floating in unknown regions. And the rebellious robots were raging on Earth. Rhodan was a special man. Ever since he had received 'eternal life' on Wanderer, which had only been granted to Reginald Bell besides himself, he had indeed acquired extraordinary status. Still, today, he should have been capable of even more. He should have been able to be everywhere at once. On the observation screen the catastrophe of New York was becoming more and more evident. Entire series of blocks were being transformed into flowing lava streams by the combat machines. The corners of Rhodan's mouth hardened grimly. 5/ DESTINATION VENUS "Combat readiness for Stardust! Repeat all clear!" Rhodan's command signified that he was about to enter the battle with the entire ship. "You know what you are

doing, Perry." Reginald Bell's statement could have been a question but it wasn't. "I am endangering human lives, if that is what you mean. But more lives will be endangered if we don't undertake everything in our power." The shadow over the atomic hell of New York grew. Wherever people were still to be found in the city, they knew it was their only hope because they all knew that it was Perry Rhodan's ship. The energy screen of Stardust touched the tops of the highest skyscrapers. The giant came to a standstill close to the Empire State Building. "Commander to gunners! Single fire only. No bigger charges on surface targets. Every possible life must be spared. Keep exact record of knockouts!" When the last all-clear had been received, Perry Rhodan ordered firing to commence. Stardust slowly soared northward, nearing the front. Ivan Goratschin was at the time at 42nd Street. Kakuta came on board for two minutes through teleportation. "35 downed so far, sir. Some of the tanks had to pay the price, too. Exact figures are not available. "How is Ivan doing?" "He's in good shape. He works well against machines. No pangs of conscience. But he has become accustomed to my presence..." "Then see to it that you rejoin him." Kakuta disappeared on the spot. Some robots had attempted to shoot at Stardust. Their absolute failure, caused by the superstrong energy screen of the spherical spaceship, prompted them to change tactics. They formed groups of threes and kept close to the buildings. Bell cursed them in terms that would have blistered their metal hides. "Don't get excited, Pal! This is our first sign of success. The robots can't think of attacking now that they are busy with defence." At 11:18 the ultimate success of the human beings began to become apparent. The TCEF divisions had lured a large segment of the enemy out of the city, where Stardust had blasted almost 150 machines with a heavy disintegration ray canon within seconds. Mercant's soldiers could advance again. Later they joined the tanks of the New Power in the centre of Manhattan and crossed the East River into Brooklyn. Appeals by the emperor of New York were carried on several broadcasting stations. He ordered the people to hold out, just as all dictators tend to do when their system is on the verge of total collapse. The men in the Command Central of Stardust could afford their first smile. "Now just try and tell me the emperor has no human weaknesses," Bell declared sarcastically. "His instructions clearly indicate insanity." "That's not quite true. The fact that at least two dozen secretary robots consider themselves emperors accounts for the discrepancies. There must have been a short circuit in their communications system. This proves to me that the power of the robots is broken. It will still take a lot of work, however, before the last combat machine is destroyed. We still have one guppy on board. You, Col. Freyt, will remain here with the K-18 until all danger has been removed. Get in touch with Capt. Sirola and inform Mercant on Greenland." "At your command, sir!" "Thank you! Prepare to eject. Stardust is leaving the Earth at 12 o'clock... Order for mutant officer Kakuta. Return at once! Ivan will have to manage without you." ... Bell leaned back in his chair, breathing heavily. "I am used to your speed, Perry, but you are outdoing yourself. You have forgotten a few mutants in Europe, Africa and Asia." "And the ones in South America and Australia. We can pick them up later. Right now it is essential to get to the positronicon on Venus... if nothing new intervenes." "Do you have that feeling?" "I am thinking of Nyssen's last communique from the Beta Albireo System." "You mean the Traders' directional transmission! That doesn't worry me. It is obvious that they would be having continual communication with Earth. We were both convinced that the robots would not just engage their military capacity against us but that they were engaged in espionage. That is confirmed by the activity of the work and service robots. Our appearance only sparked the open conflict." "That's all well and good," Rhodan answered, "but you forget the results of our monitoring. There was no contact between the Traders and our robots, at least no direct contact." "What does that mean, not direct? A spy that cannot communicate his observations is useless." "Exactly-that is why I think there must be a relay station. On Venus, for instance." "That is a pure

hypothesis." "Naturally. But we will find out. Just think of Nyssen's contention about the directional transmission. Furthermore, Orlgans, the Springer captain from the Trader federation, has supposedly disappeared near Beta Albireo. What is more logical than to assume that he is approaching the sun?" Stardust was speeding towards Venus. Rhodan sent a secretly coded direction to the P-computer stating where he would soon pick up the data on Wanderer. If Orlgans was indeed on his way to Terra, there was even less time than before. The entire communications room crew was instructed to concentrate on hypercom observation. They had just about covered the ten-fold distance to the moon when the first result appeared. "Hypercom impulse from the depths of the Milky Way, sir." "No tracking report?" Rhodan asked the young officer. "One second, sir. It only lasted for one second." "And why do you have electronic assistance?" "At your command, sir. We have it now. Direction Beta Albireo, almost exactly." "There, you see! That must be the transmitter Nyssen talked about. Or could it be one of our cruisers?" "No sir! None of our decoding systems match. We can't decipher the texts." "Not yet," Rhodan said. "For the moment we are only concerned with the location. Alert all tracking stations, Lieutenant. I am sure that our hypothetical relay station on Venus will soon reveal itself." "At your command, sir!" "And you take a little walk with me through the ship," Rhodan urged Bell. ... Their stroll turned into a wild chase. Rhodan was not only rushing because he was eager to resume control of Stardust as quickly as possible. A hundred problems were tormenting him at the same time. They took the elevator to the next floor. Bell found himself being led into Perry Rhodan's private laboratory. His friend pointed at the badly damaged combat robot. "Recognize him, Reggie?" "The torso from New York?" he guessed. "We fixed a few hundred like that." "That's the one I put out of commission in the GCC building. It's in better shape than it seems at first glance. The most important installations in the body are intact. And as you can see, I have already prepared the experiment. Bell nodded. A tangle of wires led from the robot's body to various measuring devices. For lack of time, Rhodan had not yet been able to carry out the projected examinations. "It's good that you're with me. That will save us a lot of explaining." "Do you think you can get a lot out of this machine?" "I hope so. The programming it was given by the Traders' agents has not been erased yet; on the other hand, I have given it the conscience of the New Power again. It is an ambivalent creature possessing much knowledge." Rhodan interrupted his explanation and switched on the viewcom connection to Communications Central. "Hello, Lt. Evans! Give me the mysterious wireless message of the Traders on my receiver." "At once, sir!" The transfer was a matter of seconds. Rhodan recorded the compressed message on cable and played it back at various intervals. The intelligence section of the robot was activated by a simple adjustment. "Help, Robby! How is the reception?" "Good, sir! It will suffice if you run it off at one speed." "OK. Who sent the message?" "Springer Captain Orlgans." "Thanks! How does it read?" "Orlgans to Station Sol. Support not possible for the present. Trader armed forces entirely restrained at Beta Albireo System by heavy counterattack of enemy cruisers and destroyers. Order SZ 7 remains in force." "One moment! What is order SZ 7?" "Order SZ 7 is the command to hold out. It demands absolute, immediate engagement of all military means against the population of Earth." "Thank you! Continue with the message." "That's all there was." "OK. Why were you able to decipher the message? As far as we have determined, there is a relay-station in the Sun System that transmitted your news." "Our receiver is too weak. In this case the Communications Central of Stardust is functioning as the relay." "Hmm, that makes sense. Where are you beaming your reports to reach Orlgans?" "In the direction of Aldebaran-Taurus..." Bell interrupted the robot with a mock coughing fit. "And your hunch was Venus, Perry. Seems to me you were wrong." Rhodan shrugged his shoulders. "It was purely intuition. Saturn is in Taurus at this moment. Has it anything to do with Saturn, Robby?" "I can't say. There is no information available to me." "Liar!" Bell thundered but Rhodan defended him.

"Robby has no reason to lie. We'll make more progress if we believe him. We've at least got something to go on. The Saturn System isn't so big that we can't lick the problem. At any rate, we will have to change your course fast." "For God's sake," Bell groaned. "This is gradually making me nervous. I'd like to know what the positronicon on Venus thinks about our returning to the bridge." Rhodan had already placed his hand on the lever that turned off the robot when Bell stopped him. "Just a moment, Perry! We still have 10 seconds. I have to ask this fellow an important question that none of us has yet solved. Listen to this! -You feel as if you were again serving the New Power, Robby, right?" "Yes sir." "Don't be so elaborate!" Rhodan urged. "Alright. -Remember the robot rebellion in Terrania?" "I did not participate, sir." "But you were able to communicate with one another." "Yes sir." "Good. Your uprising was divulged to us beforehand. Before you could attack. We deactivated your comrades in Terrania. The combat robots, too. Nonetheless they marched forth in the early morning hours and caused much disaster. How do you explain that?" "It's easy, sir. The human police could only handle the robots individually, consecutively. They made the mistake of not rechecking the combat machines once they had been registered as passive. Other robots still free went to those comrades while your police action was still taking place and switched them on again. It was a planned stratagem that all the combat robots allowed themselves to be deposited in the general utility hall." "Turn that thing off, Perry!" Bell cried angrily. "If I have to listen to that any longer I'm going to get an inferiority complex." ... Hypnotic training and galactic practice had made them very quick-witted and alert: By the time they had returned to the Command Central, Rhodan and Bell had already mentally processed their newly-won insights. Rhodan took over command. "Changing course!" This was followed by details and confirmations. Saturn? Copilots, engineers, navigators, assistants and orderlies registered the new destination with astonishment. Evans brought the tracking results. "Answer to Trader base in Beta Albireo is being beamed from Saturn System, sir!" "Thank you, Evans! The course has already been set. You try to reach more exact destination contact." The communications men proved that they were not exactly superfluous. "Exact location of enemy transmitter, Mr. Rhodan! Saturn moon Titan, 7° west longitude, 74° north latitude. Near the north pole in other words." "Thank you, Lieutenant! You did a good job." "Repeat fine tuning for new course! Corrections..." Stardust was again cruising at the speed of light, crossing the Mars orbit, racing through the peripheral areas of the planetoid rings and dipping into the blackness of space. Jupiter stood in opposition. Saturn with its 9 moons was the next tangible target. The monitoring devices of Stardust were uninterruptedly concentrated on the enemy relay station. Three more transmissions were intercepted, all calls for help from the Terranian robot army. In the fourth and last transmission the Titan station reported danger itself. The robot in Rhodan's laboratory provided the decoding. "Titan to Organs! Titan to Organs! Battleship Stardust approaching at SPEOL. Maintaining exact course. Coincidence impossible. Our position must have been betrayed. Urgently request support." Springer ship ORLA 11 cannot be spared. Start the counterattack. Arkonide guppy sufficiently armed for surprise attack... change of transmission code! New standardization: 74562 AT 9..." The rest was incomprehensible. Rhodan's questioning of the robot brought no results. It was not programmed for the 74 562 AT 9 key. The incomprehensible language was immediately fed to the large positronic computer on board but the enemy code was so complicated that it could take hours or even days before it was deciphered. The decision would be made in minutes, however. Stardust was already engaged in its braking manoeuvre and was only 85 million kilometres from Titan. "Organs still made two mistakes," Bell maintained with satisfaction. "We know that he himself cannot come here and that he has an Arkonide 60-meter auxiliary craft at his disposal. We can thus just about estimate the strength of the adversary awaiting us on Titan." "We can estimate it very exactly, as a matter of fact," Rhodan declared with

restrained anger. "The word 'guppy' was mentioned in the transmission. That is a nickname that we gave to ships of that class." "You conclude that we are dealing with a ship from our fleet?" "Nothing is likelier, my dear friend. May I remind you that we are still missing a K-1 under Lt. Dayton? It has not been found to this very day." "But our crew would not participate in an attack against the New Power. People are not robots that can be reprogrammed with a few tricks." "A ship can be conquered and manned with their own people. I assume the Springers are no fools and they will know how to utilize Central Arkonide technology." "Does that mean we can write off Dayton's crew... Rhodan could not supply the answer. That much he did not know either. Another 15 kilometres to Titan. "Reggie, I suggest that you escort us with three destroyers, although our own firing power hardly makes that necessary. We don't know how the thing will develop. In any case, I want someone to take a look around Titan. The Springer stations interest me." "You don't want to land yourself?" "Perhaps we won't get around to that. So get ready. Take two more off-duty officers with you and a crew. Three destroyers under Bell's command left the mother ship, shooting ahead with short acceleration impulses. They took tangential courses in order to circumnavigate the largest of Saturn's moons a few times. At that moment the guppy started. They had expected it and were prepared. Bell even wanted to dive right at it but Rhodan prohibited a change of course. "That fellow is earmarked for us. Steering manoeuvre on your part only when attacked." "OK!" Bell grumbled crossly and obeyed. The guppy silently zoomed nearer. The interior noise of a spaceship accelerating at top speed is lost in the vacuum of space. "Yes indeed. It's the K-1," Khrest the Arkonide determined. "And here come the missiles." Three space torpedoes were racing towards them. The energy screen of Stardust arched itself. It was a display of thermophysical energies devouring each other. Three bombs against the screen. If only one of the missiles were to penetrate, it would engender an inextinguishable atomic blaze in certain elements below the atomic number of 80. All heavy elements would in any case be affected. It was not a pleasant feeling to find oneself under fire by this medium of mass destruction. One needed a lot of faith in the strength of the defence screen. Measuring devices deflected, indicating the strength of the energy attack. "65%," Rhodan muttered. Seconds later the needles flicked back. The first attack had been endured. The second followed with five bombs. "78%!" "Why are you waiting?" Dr. Eric Manoli asked Rhodan. He regarded him for a moment and kept silent. Should he have said it was because of the guppy K-1? That would have sounded sentimental. And perhaps he had other reasons. The thought of Lt. Dayton, for example. Reggie reported his position beyond Titan. "We have clearly sighted the station. An inconspicuous transmitter. Everything else seems to be located in the interior of the moon. Incidentally, how are you doing?" "Thanks! Two attacks survived. Don't bother about us. You land!" As they concluded their brief conversation the third attack was launched by the guppy. Six Arkonide bombs! "83%!" The generators were howling in high frequency tones. They were straining as hard as they could to recharge the energy screen from one fraction of a second to the next. The needles of the stress indicator tended downward. But then Stardust was gripped by vibrations that could only be absorbed by the gravity stabilizers after a short shock. The needles abruptly shot to 98%. Screams mingled with this moment of eternity. Warning devices had registered matter approaching astern. That had all transpired too quickly for the human nervous system to have responded in the moment of nervous tension. If anything could help at this point, it was solely the positronic automation. The three destroyers that had emerged behind them had each shot off one Arkon bomb. That had been followed by the direct hits and the final exertion by the automatic defence equipment. "72%!-36%..." The needles fell back but their position was no longer correct. New calculation! Saturn was floating at a 20 million kilometre distance. "But that isn't possible," Manoli insisted, still gripping his shoulder, his face distorted with pain. "We have multiple controls. Everything must have ceased to function if you are

right." "But..." "No 'buts', Eric. That was an involuntary space jump. The energy forces released by our duel were by pure coincidence so synchronized that a real curvature of space was created. They almost catapulted us out of the 4-dimensional continuum. I suggest we see to the guppy first. It is too dangerous to go on being considerate." "Hello, Flynn! What's going on?" Bell asked his bomber rifleman in dismay. "Has our tracking screen slipped out of place?" Lt. Flynn knew that Bell's question was meant more seriously than it sounded. "There would have to be at least one energy cloud round if the bandits had destroyed the Stardust." "Your deductions are not bad as long as they apply to your range of experience. But now we are dealing with an opponent whose real strength we may not even know. They might have built their weapons into the captured guppy. As Bell spoke he had operated the transmitter. Secret emergency wavelength! "Bell to Rhodan! Bell to Rhodan! -Answer, Perry!" A short pause. Then "Rhodan to Bell! What's up?" "Thank God, Perry! Where the blazes are you? We lost your position!" "A little involuntary space jump. 15 million kilometres. The enemy sent another three destroyers after us that no one had reckoned with. But don't worry about it. We will take care of the K-1. I'm expecting an exact situation report on Titan from you soon. Out." With a sigh of relief, the men leaned back in their chairs. The destroyer dipped down and finally left the satellite's orbit. Rhodan was forgotten. Their entire concentration was applied to the landing, for the icy world of Titan, whose crystalline methane-ammonia atmosphere with a goodly admixture of inert gasses was prone to all sorts of chemical reactions, had to be handled with caution by any astronaut. At Bell's command all three pilots switched on the so-called vacuum screen, creating a 'neutral' zone around the machines in a radius of 500 meters. They succeeded in landing without any unforeseen difficulty next to the transmitter tower. No resistance. "Wait!" Bell ordered. "Let the temperature sink. Switch on artificial cooling. All clear report as soon as hull plating is normal." It took two minutes, which were not wasted. The men meanwhile put on spacesuits. This was followed by Bell's order to disembark. "Two men from each ship come along. Co-pilots remain on guard in the machines." The tower was a latticed metal structure and was erected on a flat plain which offered no shelter to the enemy. Still caution was advisable. Slowly the six men approached their target-disintegrator rifles and impulse rayguns poised to shoot. Reginald Bell led the way. His spacesuit was the combat outfit of Arkonide origin. He had his energy screen on as he advanced. The other five remained in his shadow to easily ward off a surprise attack with light hand-weapons. Nothing happened. They reached the tower. Below it at the centre a hatch was sunken into the ground. "Careful!" Bell warned again as Flynn tried to open it. "OK, Lieutenant! Keep turning but don't stick your head into the opening!" The bulkhead slid to one side hydraulically. Bell detached a spare pocket from the outside of his suit and slowly shoved it into the opening. A second later half of the object had burned away. "Aha! They've posted guards." He sounded oddly pleased by his discovery. Bell seemed to derive satisfaction from being right. "We can talk with perfect ease, gentlemen. No enemy can monitor our suit-telecom even if he were three meters away. You stay back a moment. I'm going to switch on the light-wave diverter and have another look." The others considered that moment quite critical but Bell trusted the capability of his device. At last he was invisible. And the blank stare of the combat robot proved it. "Hey, fellows, this is a surprise! There's a robbie standing six meters below me. The Traders from Orlgans' clan must have stolen him from some branch of the GCC. He's staring holes in the air and is apparently awaiting a new attack. I'll have a look if we have any other tin comrades down there." Bell pointed his gun downward and pulled the trigger. The combat robot buckled over, half dissolving. Wait! 10 seconds-30 seconds. Nothing stirred. "The air seems to be clean. Nevertheless I'm going down alone first." For six seconds Bell wondered how an ordinary mortal was to climb down this smooth, six meter deep shaft. It was doubtlessly uncomfortable, even if one took into account that gravity was only 1/3 that of

Earth's. Some knobs were mounted next to the shaft. Give them a try. He dropped a few scraps. At a particular adjustment they no longer fell, they floated. "Aha! An antigravitor. All clear, gentlemen! I'll call you as soon as you can follow!" Bell drifted downward. Arriving at the first landing, he found himself in a round room. There was nothing to be seen other than the remains of the robot. However, there were three bulkheads in the walls. They were air ducts, behind which was presumably a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere. This was confirmed by inspection. Bell chose the middle entry. He called the five men and briefed them. "Lt. Flynn, you come with me. The others wait here." The passage had a downward slope. After 100 meters it widened-ending again at three doorways. The one to the right led to a large supply hall in which five deactivated robots of terrestrial origin were standing. "The tin soldiers will be surprised when we call them back to life again. For lack of time they could not concern themselves with details, although the abundance of unfamiliar devices aroused Bell's curiosity. Freyt would have to look into these things one day. Behind the second door there was a decidedly luxurious apartment. It was very reminiscent of Terranian dwellings; only the proportions of the furniture seemed to somewhat exceed the norm. "Cyclopes might have lived here," Bell stated in an offhand manner as he turned to the third door. They were greeted by a dark vaulted room in which they immediately sensed danger. After they had taken three steps," however, a direct light automatically went on. A long hall with unlocked boxes. Some sort of infirmary. Lounges, laboratories-and people. Bell and Flynn stiffened a moment. No robots, no Traders. People. The air was good. "Helmet off!" Bell commanded, and opened his. Flynn obeyed and in the same instant their ears were exposed to the entreaties and pleas of their weakened friends. "Those scoundrels!" Bell gasped. "Those Trader scoundrels!" One of the first to be freed from his bed shackles was Dr. Berril, the ship's physician of the K-1. Some of the men among them were dead. The seventh was alive, if one wished to call it living, the effort that drove the exhausted body to struggle to rise one last time. Dr. Berril was crouching wearily on the edge of his bed. "Talk, Doc! Even if it's hard for you. You owe it to yourself and your companions. And you are the only physician here." "They captured and imprisoned us. Daily psycho-interrogations sir. We are no longer human beings. Our brains..." "Your brain is still reacting completely normally, Doc. Now you have to think of some of your companions who are worse off. Take this energy tablet and feed the others with these six tubes. Come on, I'll help you up." The Commander, Lt. Dayton, they found among the dead. Most of the men were dead; only 22 could be considered clinically alive. And Bell only had three totally occupied destroyers available. The problem caused beads of sweat to appear on his forehead. He had to act and act quickly. The thought of Orlgans made him rage inside. Where was Orlgans? Had he really left his clan brothers at Beta Albireo? Wasn't he likely to appear in the Solar System at any moment? The fate of his robot spies on Earth was actually reason enough. Bell's orders were uncompromising, almost harsh. He ordered down the men waiting in front of the bulkheads. "Doctor, you and Flynn will instruct them. Each of us has sufficient medication to render first aid. I have other things to do in the meanwhile. Bell left with no further explanation. His destination was the supply hall where the five robots were lying. He knew those tin soldiers inside and out. It was part of his special knowledge which was implanted by hypnotic training. "#1," he sarcastically murmured. "Get up! You have a visitor!" He activated him to 1/10th strength, checked the programming and discovered what he had expected. "You little deserter. I'll give you a dressing down..." But how? The inspiration came with admirable speed. -The Arkonide suit. The generator for the defensive screen developed sufficient electromagnetic obstructive power to erase an undesired robot programming. From Rhodan's experiment, Bell knew in which sector of combat robots the 'bad conscience' was installed. #1-the first attempt. It worked. The rest was mere routine. Within 20 minutes five robots were active again and programmed for obedience to the New Power. Bell briefly dispensed

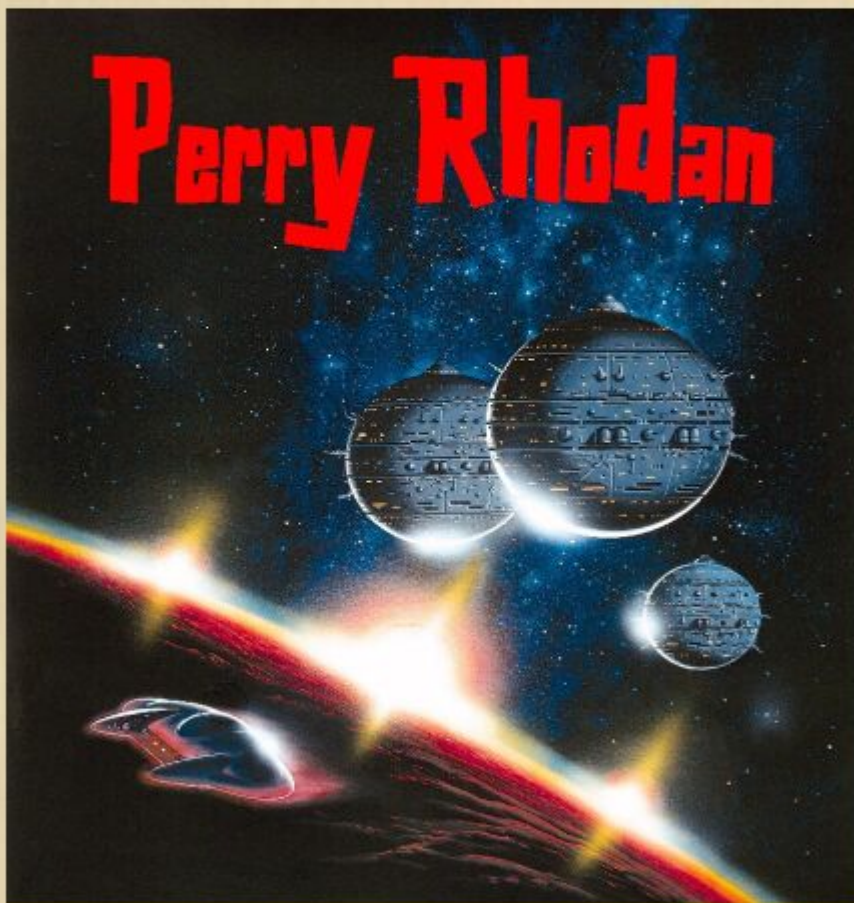
orders and explained the situation. The five robots then obediently went to their posts: #1 remained in the supply hall, #2 went to the infirmary, #3 marched to the Traders' apartment, #4 posted itself in front of the air ducts and the last one had to take up its position on the surface of Titan. Bell returned to the others, somewhat more satisfied. "Our position is temporarily secure, gentlemen. The five robots will remain loyal. I will take off alone with my destroyer and get help to you through Col. Freyt as soon as possible. It can only be a matter of one day." Bell and Flynn took leave of the men. Minutes later their destroyer shot up into Titan's skies. . . . The orders had followed Rhodan's decision. The Trader crew on the K-1 must be under the impression that they had destroyed Stardust. They were steering a peculiar course. "Have a look at this!" Eric Manoli, who stayed at Rhodan's side, said in amazement. "They are flying towards Earth as if there were still something there for them to salvage. I think Freyt has finished off the robots by now." "The last reports were satisfactory," Rhodan stated. "But still humanity has many dead and wounded to mourn in all parts of the Earth. I'll demand payment for that carnage from the first Trader I personally encounter... But wait a minute, Eric! Look at their course! It doesn't seem to be Earth they are headed for anymore." Manoli was startled. Then he said, shaking his head: "A few hours ago you spoke of intuition. Apparently your hunch about Venus wasn't so far off after all..." Indeed, the guppy had now obviously set its course for Venus. "In any case, Orlgans has learned a few things from the robot espionage that we would rather have kept to ourselves," Rhodan stated. "The sensitive spot of the New Power is not in the Gobi but the great robot computer on Venus. It's time for us to go into action." "They have a lead of more than 20 million kilometres," Manoli protested. "And the speed of light remains SPEOL whether a little guppy or Stardust is flying." "We will do something that is forbidden," Rhodan replied with a crafty smile. The 'forbidden' action was a short transition through the fifth dimension. Within a closed planetary system such manoeuvres were dangerous because they could disturb the entire static structure. But this was not the first time Rhodan had attempted it. He was experienced at it. The calculations of the 35 observers and evaluation by the ship's positronic computer took 10 minutes. Then they were ready. Stardust carried out the space jump. It simply vanished from the Saturn sector and without crossing the orbit of Jupiter, Mars and Earth from a four-dimensional perspective, it suddenly emerged in the vicinity of Venus. Sheltered by the planet, they waited for the approaching foe. 84 long minutes. Total surprise was Rhodan's ally. The warning device could have hardly sounded on the K-1 when Stardust turned into a monster hissing destruction. Twelve bombs on torpedoes travelling almost at the speed of light hit their target. All heavy disintegrator cannons fired simultaneously. The K-1 became an energy cloud. The sighs of relief had not yet faded on board Stardust when the warning system informed them of a new approach of matter. Three destroyers were racing towards them. This almost spelled doom for the battleship. "Bearings manoeuvre! Bridge to gun central! Have you spotted the target or do you need tracking help?" "Thank you, sir! We have sighted the three destroyers. Have we your permission to fire, Mr. Rhodan?" "Fire!" Once again the spectacle of sky-filling fireworks! Rhodan knew that he had not gone too far. In situations like this he always dealt with his conscience; not because his conscience was of no use but because he was aware of the boundaries and duties imposed on him. It was not a cheap excuse when he asserted that he was acting in the interest and for the welfare of all mankind. Whoever came peacefully was offered Rhodan's outstretched hand. Whoever brought death to mankind, had to be prepared for his own destruction. . . . Two destroyers were hit. The third escaped in the shadows of Venus and did not reappear. Either it had crashed or it had landed. A destroyer? Rhodan thought of Wanderer. He had to get to Wanderer! He could lose no more time on account of a destroyer in enemy service. He obtained a connection to Terrania at Command Central. Briefly he reported to Col. Freyt what had occurred. Suddenly there was a third party on the wave. "Hello,

Reggie! Why are you horning in?" "I'm in as much of a hurry as you are... Colonel, you must send a guppy to Titan immediately..." Then Bell, too, gave a brief report on his discovery. Freyt confirmed that he had heard everything and concluded with the report that the robot war on Terra could be regarded as over. "Then I can have my mutants back," Rhodan declared. "I am now headed for the P-computer, Venus, gentlemen. Send the K-2 to Titan, Colonel, and clear the matter with Bell. I will call back as soon as I have taken care of everything on Venus." Rhodan's business on Venus required almost two days by Earth time calculation. The positronic computer had already prepared the position data on Wanderer but nonetheless the recording of the exceedingly complicated information took several hours. After all, they were only approximation values amounting to the greatest probability. Finally the co-ordinates, coded by Rhodan himself, were supplied to the ship's positronic of Stardust. Shortly before take-off Rhodan requested a report on events of the past week on Venus. The stationary computer was informed about three destroyers that had landed in the jungle situated in the south. "So our escapee is not the only one hiding out here." Rhodan's findings revealed his uneasiness. New perspectives continued to appear and it seemed as if his plans were constantly being foiled. Venus was no longer a blank page in human history. More than a year earlier strong combat divisions of the then-rebelling East block had landed. After fitful battles—primarily between East block factions themselves—strong groups had formed under Gen. Tomisenkow, who supported peaceful colonization. But the issue had not been settled yet. And when Rhodan considered that the three Springers from Organs' clan that had landed might contact Tomisenkow, the possibility of new complications could by no means be ruled out. "Still we will not allow ourselves to be detained one minute longer," Perry Rhodan finally decided and issued take-off orders. Col. Freyt would have to attend to Venus, as he was again charged with conducting affairs of state in the absence of Rhodan and Bell. Beyond the dense atmosphere on Venus, Stardust took up intensive communication. Bell reported in immediately and described the successful transfer of the 22 Titan survivors. They were already in Terranian hospitals. "...and every one of our mutants is on hand, Perry. Nothing more is preventing a take-off." "OK. Then hurry! I want to take the K-2 on board in an hour at the latest and then leave. Let me talk to the Colonel again!" Freyt received detailed instructions and said goodbye. "Good flight, Mr. Rhodan! And a healthy return! Give my greetings to the colleagues in the fleet!" A meeting place was arranged with Bell between the orbits of Earth and Mars. One hour later Stardust was able to load the auxiliary craft and finally set out on the long journey to Wanderer. Shortly before reaching the transition point beyond the path of Pluto, Rhodan requested one last direct conversation with Maj. Nyssen to hear his report. McClears, the commander of Terra, reported over hypercom: "Maj. Nyssen is presently flying a harassment raid against the Traders, sir. The Solar System is engaged in a battle with three opponents. But everything has gone well so far. We just don't know how long it will continue. The Traders have received reinforcements. We still fear the intervention of even stronger Springer battleships. For the moment we can only hope for the return of Stardust." "We are doing everything in our power, McClears, but I am no prophet and I do not make empty promises. You hold out!" With military brevity McClears confirmed that he had received orders and then cut off the connection. "Prepare for the space jump!" came Rhodan's command. He had sunk back into his chair and was staring at the bow screen on which thousands of suns were gleaming in the velvety black background of the cosmos. Somewhere in that labyrinth the planet of eternal life was on the move, the planet that so aptly bore the name of Wanderer. Wanderer was Rhodan's next destination. On Wanderer the indefinable being existed, the entity without a name. It alone could help menaced mankind. "On Wanderer we will acquire the weapons that will guarantee our ultimate supremacy over the Traders," Rhodan prophesied. The End



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