



6

THE MUTANT CORPS

W.W.Shols

PERRY RHODAN PEACELORD OF THE UNIVERSE

Through hypno schooling, Perry Rhodan had learned the scientific knowledge of the star-roving Arkonides, and now his task was to construct a huge starship to open communication between Earth and the might Arkonide Empire.

But the nations of Earth, in their fear, destroyed the remains of the lone Arkonide research ship on the moon - setting off an alarm to summon retaliation from the war bases of the stellar empire.

As the massive space-fleet of the galactic dread-noughts headed for Earth, its mission to turn the planet into a radioactive wasteland, only Perry Rhodan had a chance of stopping the onslaught. But for how long could the tiny planet of Earth continue to hold off the enormous war-forces of the mighty star empire?

MISSION: DESTROY EARTH!

Never before had the future of mankind been in such dire peril. An overwhelming space-fleet of galactic dreadnoughts was headed for Earth, its mission to turn the planet into a radioactive wasteland.

Only Perry Rhodan, with his combination of human ingenuity and Arkonide technology, had even the slightest chance of stopping the onslaught.

And even if he might succeed in repelling the first attack, how long could the tiny planet of Earth continue to hold off the enormous war-forces of the mighty star empire?

The PERRY RHODAN series and characters were
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CHAPTER ONE

“Perry!” boomed the voice of Reginald Bell in the low ceiling room. Then he pushed the stop button and turned expectantly toward the door. Soon Perry Rhodan entered the cabin.

“Stop yelling like that, Reg!” he reprimanded his ebullient friend. Rhodan’s face showed no trace of the excitement he really felt. Only his eyes gave away how eager he was to hear the news. “I hope you have something vitally important to tell me.”

Reginald Bell turned again to the tape recorder and depressed the REWIND button for about three seconds. “I received a message from Geneva for you. It came just a few minute ago.”

Rhodan stepped closer. “Did you get results already? I thought it would take the big powers at least a day. to come to an agreement about us. If they got through so fast, they probably broke off negotiations without any result. Come on, Reg, let me hear it! What is it?”

“Just listen to that taped message and enjoy every second of your triumph!”

Reg started the tape and then settled comfortably in his chair.

“This is the secretary’s office of the Federated World Powers. We are calling Mr. Perry Rhodan to inform him of the results of our conference. This communiqué? will be broadcast at the same time over all stations for general publication.

“The representatives of the NATO states, the Eastern Bloc and the Asiatic Federation have conferred today about the international legal status of the so-called Third Power.

“The events of the past few days, especially those which, happened outside Earth’s gravisphere, have given rise to serious concern in all parts of our world. The undoubtedly hostile approach of a spaceship of an unknown extraterrestrial race constitutes a case of clear and present danger for all mankind. On the basis of thorough discussions by the delegates of the NATO, the Eastern Bloc and the Asiatic Federation, we concede to the Third Power that only thanks to their successful intervention, a total destruction of the hostile intruder’s spacecraft on the moon has been brought about. Therefore, the participants in this conference deem it advisable to recognize that a certain loyalty was demonstrated by the

Third Power toward the common interests of all men. We have therefore decided, to recognize officially the Third Power as a sovereign government whose domain will extend within the limits of its present location in the Gobi Desert.

“Mr. Perry Rhodan is herewith requested to confirm receipt of this communiqué? and to make suggestions for the establishment of diplomatic relations.”

Bell stopped the tape and waited for Rhodan’s reaction to the good news.

“We have made it, Reg!” he said almost humbly. “It seems that the nations are slowly coming to understand that their enemy is to be found somewhere out there in the universe, and not here on Earth from the Third Power.

“But these gentlemen in their high posts can just forget about our establishing extensive diplomatic relations. They would like to exchange with us a couple of dozen ambassadors. But we are a special case in world diplomacy. They have become used to this by now to some extent. And they will have to do so even more in the future. Take down this answer, Reg, will you?”

“Why not speak directly to them, Perry?”

“I have my reasons for that.”

Reg simply shrugged. “All right, then. Go ahead.”

“Tell them that I am very pleased to have received such a positive report and that I appreciate the insight that was displayed during the Geneva negotiations. But I will have to wait to take up diplomatic relations, since we are suffering from an acute lack of space in our tiny domain, which does not justify the presence of diplomatic representatives. However, contacts of any other nature will be welcome at any time.”

“Thanks for this message, Perry!” Bell countered in desperation. “I’ll have to rack my brain to express it in diplomatic language.”

“You will have to answer at once, my dear friend! There is no time to waste in long deliberations. The big power blocs have demonstrated with today’s meeting that a new wind is blowing. We must keep up with this new speed.”

“Right, boss. Is there anything else you want from me?”

“Yes. You can request the Peking delegation in Geneva. to make some proposals about selling us the land on which our sovereign state is situated. I definitely don’t intend to lease this parcel of land from them. The Third Power must own its own land.”

“How large do you imagine our new state is?”

“The site of the space sphere is to be at the center of our domain, which should have a radius of at least thirty miles.”

With these words Rhodan turned and left the room. As important as these dealings with the other governments of the world were for all concerned, there were still more vital matters he had to attend to immediately.

He stepped outside. Far in the background of their tiny base was the building

housing the gigantic positronic computer that had been transferred to this spot from the Arkonide vessel. This was the supercomputer whose microphysical reactions could determine the future history of mankind the brain that would guide Rhodan in the decisions he would have to make.

Rhodan sped over to the computer building within seconds with the help of his special Arkonide suit. He entered the hall and walked directly to the machine that had been a present of the two Arkonides.

Rhodan knew that he was facing a problem of a greater magnitude than any human being had ever faced before. The problem he would feed into the computer today would surpass in significance any previous questions. This time the survival of the whole human race depended on it.

Rhodan busied himself at the control panel. A low hum, hardly audible, came from the machine. The brain had been activated. The brain was not subject to any mental influence, and it worked 100 percent according to the laws of logic. It was totally immune to influence by the significance of any problem it was asked to solve. It did not know any of the value judgments that were applied, at least unconsciously, by a human being. The brain was concerned only with the meaning and content of the matter fed into it. It calculated the probable solutions for the outcome of a football game or a political election with the same matter of course approach as the outcome of a worldwide war. If later events did not coincide with the answer given, the deviation was due solely to an incorrect way of asking the question. Therefore, everything depended now on how Rhodan formulated his questions.

First he made use of the imposing machine during his preparations in formulating the questions he would ask. This took several hours.

The memory part of the machine functioned in three ways: It presented the results with the help of its interpretation cells as the final product in pictures, spoken words and printed signals. At the same time all these answers were conserved as permanent records. The typed answer tape was wound on a reel automatically and marked with appropriate cues to its content. Sound and image were put on a parallel tape, where they were recorded and synchronized by electronic impulses.

Rhodan's preliminary examination provided an incredible result.

There were more than 22 billion possibilities from which mankind had to choose some sensible path for the future. But in no way was it simply a question of one solution being right and all the others wrong. The scale ranging from advantage to disadvantage ran across the screen in a wide spectrum. After more than a hundred further selective processes, there remained on the positive side more than a thousand possibilities. Rhodan had to search for additional limiting questions to narrow the field to the vital last question.

Many hours went by. His physical exertion was minimal; yet he perspired

profusely under the immense mental strain of the experiments he was conducting.

Late that evening that he received the answer to the threat of a new invasion. The answer came almost as a byproduct. He repeated the experiment five times before he could finally accept the solution with all its implications. ...the invasion is already taking place...!

Rhodan called Bell via radio.

“How’s it going with Peking, Reg?”

“They are hard to deal with. They’re wasting my time with lots of petty details.”

“Let’s discuss this purchase of land for our territory at a later time. Something much more urgent has come up in the meantime. Leave your station at once and go aboard the space sphere. Instruct Manoli and our three friends from the secret defence services to join you there right away. The ship must be ready to start within the next ten minutes. No one is to leave the ship, even if I should turn up late. Give the alarm for the whole base.”

The crew managed to get the Arkonide ship ready within ten minutes. Yet Rhodan did not arrive on board until midnight. He joined his crew in the command center.

“Reg, you will be the pilot. Start immediately! I must have a talk with Tako.”

Rhodan switched on the screen and called Tako Kakuta In the main command station of the base. Tako’s face appeared on the video screen.

“Yes, Mr. Rhodan, what Is it?”

“We are about to leave the base. Observe our start and when the right moment comes, lift the energy screen for a few seconds to let us pass through.”

“Okay.”

The Arkonide auxiliary vessel shot straight up toward the sky and disappeared from Tako’s view like a quicksilver will-o-the-wisp.

Reginald Bell turned toward Rhodan, while his hands carried out the necessary flight manoeuvres with automatic precision.

“Won’t you finally tell us what all this is supposed to mean, Perry? Eric and the others are already doubting my sanity because I rushed them over here and then had them wait for hours.”

“I have talked with the ‘brain’ since this afternoon and have asked it vital questions. This is what took so long. We will need a guide through this maze if we are ever to find our way amongst the labyrinth of problems the future has in store for us.”

“And have you found what you were looking for?”

“Yes, I did, Reg.”

For a few seconds Rhodan seemed to be lost in thought. Then he looked straight at Bell. “We must search Earth’s gravisphere at once at least as far as the

moon's orbit. One of the answers of the brain said that the invasion has already started."

Manoli was the first to overcome the shock they all felt at Rhodan's news. "Do you mean by the same extraterrestrial we beat back and whose ship we destroyed on the moon just a few days ago?"

"We all know perfectly well that that battle was nothing but a preliminary skirmish. Thora's explanations have turned out to be correct. The faster than light transmitter of the destroyed Arkonide spaceship on the moon has mobilized the enemies of both our civilizations and has lured alien intelligence into our corner of the galaxy. Such a race as the Fantan people, bent on annihilation, will not be satisfied with half measures and individual actions. I have fed the information regarding our situation into the brain. The answer of the machine was that the invasion has already started. Will you please go now to your stations. You know what needs to be done!"

Whatever had not yet become routine in the running of the ship became so on this flight. The automatic scanner reported in regular intervals, "No foreign bodies can be located."

Rhodan regularly checked the stations manned by Bell, Eric Manoli, Captain Klein, Li Tschai-tung and Peter Kosnow.

At a distance of about 240,000 miles from the center of the Earth, Rhodan ordered the ship to enter an orbital path. He did not, however, let the sphere float without any power drive like a satellite. This would have resulted in an orbital period of almost five weeks. Instead, he had the sphere's drive thrusting at an angle to the orbital path, which cancelled out the centrifugal force caused by the tremendous speed.

"That's fine!" murmured Rhodan as the gigantic crescent of the moon fell behind them.

"The computer is said to be infallible, isn't it?" asked Manoli suddenly as Rhodan stopped near his station. "Where, then, is our enemy if the invasion has already begun? As far as I know there is no field that can absorb the spy-rays of our spaceship."

"Only man is fallible," confessed Perry Rhodan. "If the invasion is not really taking place, I must have asked the question the wrong way. In this case I almost hope I have made a mistake."

"You have made one indeed," came Thora's voice over the loudspeaker. "You might just as well come back to Earth, Perry Rhodan. I have followed your endeavours here in my cabin, and I have observed what the scanners reported. There is no alien spaceship out here! You would be better advised to devote your energies to more urgent tasks on Earth!"

"Thank you for this advice. Is Khrest with you?"

"He is resting in his cabin. Both of us had decided not to participate actively in

this mission.”

The same moment Khrest spoke up via the intercom system. “I have listened in, Rhodan. Although I share Thora’s opinion that there is no enemy craft out here in this part of the Earth’s gravisphere, I do not agree that your question to the brain must of necessity have been wrong. The brain stated that the invasion has already started; it did not inform you, though, at what time the expected landing of the invaders would take place. It is quite possible that the enemy forces are still at a distance of many light-years from here. They might reach Earth only within the next few days. I have no objections to this patrol flight and I consider it a very good precautionary measure on your part. You should repeat it in regular intervals, if I might make this suggestion, Rhodan.”

“You certainly may, Khrest! Many thanks.”

“Shall I proceed with the landing?” inquired Bell.

“Circle once around Earth over both poles. And in the meantime you can tell me what you have been able to accomplish in your talks with Peking.”

“Well the Asiatic Federation believes that that desolate stretch of desert around the Goshun salt lake, exactly 102 degrees eastern longitude and 38 degrees northern latitude, is the most valuable piece of real estate anyone has ever imagined in his wildest dreams!”

“Have they quoted you a price already?”

“Why do you think I am so upset about these gentlemen? They are asking seven billion dollars! They do agree, though, on our request for a diameter of sixty miles across our territory.”

“Did you tell them that we don’t have that kind of money? One billion would have been more than enough!”

These bloodsuckers are sitting on their high horse, and they won’t give in a penny. It would be sheer waste of time to try to get them to come down in their price. They outright refuse to do so. We will just have to see how we can get that sum, Perry.

“Seven billion ...” said Rhodan. “We need half of that sum alone for our assembly plants inside the energy dome. But we don’t have that much money even for our important industrial needs.”

Bell chuckled. “The mightiest government on Earth is also the smallest and the poorest. Quite a paradox, isn’t it?”

“You are digressing, Reg. Kakuta has found a few productive suppliers of industrial goods for us. But they can’t supply us with the money we need. We have only several ridiculously small bank accounts in some countries around the globe. What we need is a financial wizard.”

“And even he would first want to find out about his salary from us. Whichever way we turn, Perry, we can’t escape the fact that you must have the money before you can buy land, factories and materials and hire people. We must establish

credit first of all.”

“Don’t we have any credit?” interjected Manoli, “Don’t you know the old saying of our bankers-whoever has power has credit too?”

“That bit of ‘wisdom’ implies the misuse of powers,” explained Rhodan. “It reminds me of armed robbery.”

“There are spiritual weapons. None of us would approve if we were to threaten them with our superior means of physical destruction,” commented Bell.

“But to acquire superior mental ammunition brings us back to what I said before-we need a sharp mind, a financial genius.”

“We certainly show here no lack of superior minds,” remarked Bell.

“Would you like the job of Secretary of the Treasury of the Third Power? Could you guarantee that you will influence the financial world market within half a year so that the Third Power will completely dominate it?”

“I am an astronaut, astronavigator, and electronic engineer. I have studied astromedicine and geology. I have undergone the same hypnotraining of the Arkonides as you did. I consider myself to be way above the average intellect. But as for money-I have never been particularly lucky at it.”

“So you decline my offer of that high financial post in our government?”

“I definitely do. I have no ambitions along that line, Perry.”

“There will be plenty of opportunity to prove your superior mind in other ways,” Rhodan reassured him. “Just wait until we have landed. Then all of us here will meet together with Tako Kakuta. I have something special in mind for him to do.”

The space sphere shot down almost vertically toward the Gobi Desert. The protective energy screen was opened for a brief time to let them pass through. As the mighty vessel touched down a faint pinkish glow appeared on the eastern horizon.

Eight men were assembled around the big table-Rhodan, Bell, Manoli, Haggard, Kakuta, Klein, Li Tschai-tung and Peter -Kosnow.

All listened attentively as Rhodan addressed them “Friends! I hardly need lose any time discussing our present situation. We are in possession of power and diplomatic recognition. On the other hand, we are quite destitute despite the beginnings of an industry of our own. In addition to that we are threatened any hour now with the onset of an enemy invasion from outer space. I have you together here to tell you that you will be called upon to accomplish the utmost in the near future. I will have to demand from you a total commitment. Our job requires not only an enormous potential capacity of energy, but also speed and perfect reaction.

“You Reg, will go to Peking with Tako Kakuta and conclude the negotiations for the purchase of our territory. You have already discussed how we shall pay the

purchase price, namely, in monthly instalments of 500 million dollars, so that we will complete payments in fourteen months.”

“For the rest of you I would like to outline roughly a plan to speed up our industrial production and increase our output.”

“But before we discuss any further details of this plan, would you please read this newspaper article. Then, let me know whether you recall any additional data of the incident described here. Finally, present me with your ideas how we may make use of this affair for our own purposes.”

CHAPTER TWO

The London night air was filled with heavy fog. A bone chilling humidity rose from the waters of the Thames, crept into the clothes of men and made them shiver.

Late that night, a shabbily dressed man crossed the Vauxhall Bridge, then walked along the left riverbank along Grosvenor Road. He had turned up his collar and pulled his hat down over his ears, as if he intended to hide his face.

Behind the gas works the man turned to the right, crossed St. George Square toward Lupus Street and then turned into Alderney Street.

He stopped before a heavy teak door and rang the bell.

An elderly heavysset lady opened it after a while and inquired what he wanted.

“I want to see Mr. Barry, please.”

“I am sorry, sir. I can’t possibly disturb him at this late hour. Mr. Barry is just ready to retire, and you see that I myself-”

“That you, too, were ready to go to bed. I am sorry to have disturbed you, but it’s a different story with Mr. Barry. He won’t think any more about going to sleep as soon as he sees me.”

“Who should I announce, sir?”

“Don’t bother announcing me. I know my way. Thanks a lot.”

“How dare you!” exclaimed the outraged woman, as the man pushed ruthlessly through the scarcely opened door. Now the bright hall light showed up his rather questionable appearance. “Who are you? I can’t let you come in!”

“Thank you very much, madam, and please don’t bother yourself any more.”

Hiram Barry was still sitting at his writing desk, not at all about to retire for the night. The light of his desk lamp illuminated the writing pad, and the rest of the room was in darkness.

“Didn’t you want to go to bed, Milly?” said Barry as he heard the door open behind him.

“Milly is going to bed,” declared the visitor.

The sound of his deep voice made Barry turn around, startled. Only a shadow was visible in the darkness, but the voice had given the intruder away. This voice was unforgettable for Hiram Barry.

“Adams,” he moaned.

“Homer G. Adams,” completed the visitor. “I hope that I did not come at an inopportune time.”

“No, of course not, Adams. My house is open any time of the day for you. You know that certainly.”

“The things that I do know are far back in the past. But I do remember them, and that is the important thing. Don’t you agree, Barry?”

“You always had a very bright mind, Adams. You could have made a lot of money with your memory alone. I have always admired you and, of course, also envied you a little bit.”

“And don’t forget the hatred, Barry. I will accept admiration, and I don’t mind even those that envy me, for vanity feeds on the envy of others. But hatred is a dangerous thing, as you can see in my example. I do not like people to hate me.”

“What do you want, Adams? Don’t talk about hatred that goes back so far. I don’t hate you now.”

“Of course you don’t hate me any more. One can forget such things in fourteen years. I don’t need to kill you any more, for your hatred has turned to fear, and with that I will gladly let you go on living. Perhaps this will pay back some of the debt you owe me. It’s a terrible thing to have to live with fear.”

“Did you come here to tell me that? Have you been thinking of hatred during all these fourteen years? I can’t imagine that, for you would have perished thinking of nothing but hatred, and besides, wasn’t it twenty years, if I’m not mistaken?”

“I was sentenced to twenty years, but after fourteen year they felt I had served enough time. I was let off because of good conduct. You should know *that*.”

“Yes.” Barry nodded. He had regained his composure somehow in the meantime. “May I offer you a drink?”

“If I could be quite sure that there isn’t any poison in it.”

“I wouldn’t be that stupid, Adams. Please have a drink. I still recall how fond you used to be of whiskey. And now, tell me everything. I would like to know how matters stand between the two of us fourteen years later.”

“Our relationship is no longer important. There is nothing to discuss about this, and neither is there anything interesting to report from my years in prison. I won’t keep you long now, if we come to a quick agreement.”

“What should we agree upon?”

“I need a suit. A good, new, fashionable suit.”

“Is that all you want? Here’s fifty pounds for that.”

“The money will be in addition to all that, Barry. First suit and then some pocket money. You might remember an account at the Midland Bank, way back. It amounted, 16,000 pounds. Not a big sum, I know. It was always my fate never to possess money of my own, apart from this small old age pension-the 16,000 pounds. I’m sure some additional interest has accumulated in the meantime.”

“I don’t know what you are referring to, Adams. How should I know anything about your accounts with the Midland Bank?”

“I’m referring to that account which we kept in your name. You might remember that the transaction with Servey, Ltd., showed some profit that could not be shown in your books.”

“You mystify me, Adams.”

“I can’t see why you shouldn’t understand that. Have you ever wondered why you escaped a prison sentence at that time? Have you ever asked yourself why Homer G. Adams refused to make a statement that, although it would not have exonerated him, would nevertheless have helped to have Hiram Barry sentenced for a long stretch of time? Do you seriously believe that I wanted to protect you so that you could spend my money? No, sir. The reason I let you escape was so that you could *protect* my money, and today I have returned to get my money back-including interest. If you deduct the cost for the suit, the amount should be about 24,000 pounds. In case you have speculated with my money, it might have even increased to two million pounds, but that doesn’t interest me at all. All I need is, the 24,000 pounds, and you can keep whatever you have earned with my capital in the meantime. I don’t think that I am praising myself, Barry, if I say that I have treated you quite generously. You should rather have expected a much harsher reaction.”

Barry hesitated with his answer. His fingers were grasping the edge of the table. “You know very well, Adams, that 24,000 pounds is a great deal of money, especially for someone like me. I have never lived in as grand a style as you did.”

“It is, of course, anyone’s privilege to live in the, style he wants. You are a small crook, and no one has ever hindered you from becoming a big one. Besides, you seem to confuse two different things. If I ever swindled somebody out of twelve million pounds, I did it only with money that belonged to somebody else. My big deal that went into the billions had no personal avarice as a motive. I did it, let us say, because I like that kind of a game. I place great importance, Barry, on being considered an amateur and an idealist. I want to be recognized in the eyes of the world as a selfless servant for great things.”

“Still to this day?” asked Barry.

Homer G, Adams nodded slowly. “Still today. Don’t you believe for a moment that I will retire from the scene while I am still in the best years. of my life. I Shall return. I had a great deal of time to think, Barry, and I have heard quite a few things. But that would not really interest you too much. Give me the suit and the money, and then I will no longer bother you.”

Hiram Barry seemed to have come to a decision. “Come up to my bedroom with me, Adams. You’ll have half an hour to inspect my closets and look at my clothes.”

Adams did not need half an hour to do that. It took him exactly three minutes to make up his mind.

"I'll take this one," he said. "You are hardly any taller than I am, and therefore, the jacket should fit me all right. I'll have to turn up the trouser cuffs a couple of inches, but nobody would notice that in the darkness, and tomorrow I will take the suit to a tailor. Where can I change clothes?"

"Over there is the bathroom."

"Thanks a lot, Barry. I see we understand each other. In the meantime, will you be good enough to write a check for me?"

Ten minutes later Adams returned to the library. A check had I been made out for the sum of 24,000 pounds, and it bore Barry's flourishing signature, which could hardly be falsified.

"Would you need any cash, Adams?" Barry inquired politely. "You'll probably want to go to some hotel."

"Thanks a lot. You are very charming, my friend, but any prisoner is given a certain sum of cash upon his release from prison. In this respect our government shows itself to be rather generous. Therefore, you don't need to give me more than is due to me. Homer G. Adams has remained the old skinflint that he was many years ago, but he still has his pride and will not accept alms from anyone. Well so long, Barry. It was such a pleasure to see you again after all these long years and to have such an interesting chat with you."

After Adams had left, Hiram Barry dialled the telephone number of the Midland Bank. He instructed the night clerk to deliver a certain message to the bank manager the very first thing the next morning. Then he dialled another number and announced himself, strangely enough, with a girl's name.

"What is that supposed to be, that you me so late at night, lad? I was swamped with business deals all day long, and I had much too much to drink. Please call back again tomorrow, but not before dinner time."

"Just a minute. You will sober up as soon as you have listened to me for a moment."

"Oh, stop that nonsense. I don't fall for such things."

"For heaven's sake, will you listen to me! You are in serious trouble if you put down that receiver now. I'll be over at your house in half an hour and break down your door and get you out of bed."

"What has happened?"

"I just had to write a check for 24,000 pounds, drawn against my account at the Midland Bank."

"Wait a minute! Have you lost your mind? Or did somebody break in and hold a gun on you? But whatever it is, my dear boy, call the bank at once and have them stop that check, and then you call up the police right away."

"I've already informed the bank, but I left quite a different message than you

might think. I instructed them to transfer money from my other accounts, because this account has only 14,000 pounds in it right now.”

The man at the other end of the line had sobered up completely by now. “Will you finally tell me what is going on? Did the devil in person come and get that check from you?”

“You are almost right. It was Homer G. Adams who was released from prison today.”

The man at the other end of the line was struck dumb. Only after a few seconds did he manage to groan, “Adams has been released? Then for heaven’s sake, don’t talk with the police.”

“Of course I won’t talk with the police-only with you. That is your end of the business, and in case you don’t remember the hours exactly, the bank will be open tomorrow morning at nine o’clock.”

The first client to show up at the Midland Bank was Homer C. Adams.

He did not seem to notice the nervously jerking face of the bank teller. Adams stared at the ceiling of the large room with a very bored expression and seemed to be counting the many light bulbs that adorned the beautiful chandelier. Adams was a man of great patience. That his eyes were nevertheless closely examining everything that went on around him could not be noticed by even a very critical observer.

Yet the little man with the big head was inwardly quite worried whether there was enough money in that bank account-Barry could have closed it out a long time ago. After all, it was in Barry’s name.

After a few minutes, the teller returned.

“I’m sorry, sir. There seem to be insufficient funds in this account. We cannot pay you the full amount of this check.

“How much is the shortage?”

“About a hundred pounds, sir.”

“Is that all? For that little sum you make such a fuss?”

“We have to keep our accounts balanced, sir ” stammered the man behind the window.

“If you want to keep your accounts balanced, you could have given the owner of this account credit for a hundred pounds, couldn’t you?”

“Yes, sir, we do that in general, but in this particular case we were instructed to close out this account after paying out the total amount that was in it.”

“That’s all right then. I’ll be satisfied with whatever sum you have in that account, provided you don’t make me wait more than five minutes.”

After Adams got the money he left the area as fast as he could. He took the Underground to Picadilly Circus, where he got out and went shopping on Regent Street for all the things he needed. He had dinner at the airport in Croydon. To the waiter who was serving at his table, he appeared to be a very nervous and

distrustful person. "Tell me, waiter, how long will it take? I must catch that jet to Tokyo."

"Your plane leaves at 1345, sir. You still have more than an hour and a half till then. You will have no difficulty whatsoever finishing your meal. We serve very promptly here."

Homer G. Adams did not seem quite convinced of that. He turned to a gentleman at the next table and called out with a loud voice, "Pardon me, sir. Are you taking the jet to Tokyo too? I mean the jet that leaves at 1345."

The man examined him and replied, "Sorry, I'm leaving at 1320, but not for east Asia."

"Excuse me," mumbled Adams.

Homer G. Adams ate his meal as quickly as he could. He kept looking at the big clock on the wall of the restaurant while swallowing every bite almost without chewing it. He asked for his bill as soon as the waiter served his dessert. He left the table while he was still chewing the last bite, paid the cashier and then walked over to the luggage counter.

"Pardon me, sir, but could you please check if my luggage is already aboard the plane?" He showed the clerk his luggage check.

"The jet to Tokyo," said the clerk. "The luggage is being put aboard this very moment."

"But are you quite positive that my suitcases are there too?"

The clerk took a deep breath and obviously had difficulty keeping his temper. "Of course your luggage is being put aboard, sir. You have the receipt. We are very reliable people, and it is not at all necessary to double check."

"I beg your pardon. If you say so."

Adams pretended to be satisfied, but in reality he was still deeply worried about another matter. He went to the gate and learned that the passengers were not yet permitted to pass to the airplane. Then he hurried to the exit at the north side of the airport and called a taxi.

"Take me to Epsom, please. Go as fast as you possibly can."

The driver raced at breakneck speed and received a generous tip at the end of the trip. Homer G. Adams then hailed another taxi and asked to be taken to Dorking. There he hailed a third taxi and directed the driver to return to Croydon Airport. As he got into the cab it was 1335.

"Can you make it to the airport in ten minutes?"

"Impossible, sir."

"Try to do your best," encouraged Adams in a kind but urgent voice.

"But it is really not possible, sir. I know this area inside out. We will need at least thirteen minutes to get there if everything goes right."

"Okay, but drive as fast as you can. A jet is leaving for Tokyo at 1345. If we manage to see that plane leave, you'll get an extra tip of ten pounds."

“Do you want to catch that plane?”

“No. All I want is to see it leave the airport.”

The driver did his utmost, and he was lucky not to run into much traffic. The taxi arrived at the north exit of the airport at exactly 1347.

Adams raced into the hall and observed the Tokyo jet disappearing in the midday sky. His face showed an expression of great satisfaction, quite in contrast with the gentle man next to him, who expressed his anger loudly. It was obvious that he had just missed the plane. Adams felt moved to address the man.

“Don’t be so upset about this, sir. I, too, have missed the jet, but I know a way out of this misfortune.”

“Who are you?”

“A fellow sufferer. I’m expected in Tokyo tonight, and I hope I can still meet my friends there at the time we arranged.”

“Do you have a private jet?” asked the stranger, showing more interest.

“No. I don’t have a private jet but I know that another flight is leaving for Sydney, Australia, in twenty-five minutes. The plane will stop over in Zanzibar, and there we can catch another plane to Tokyo, coming from Cape Town, South Africa.”

“Well, beggars can’t be choosers. Many thanks, sir. This way we will still get to Tokyo before noon.”

In Zanzibar they had a stopover of almost an hour. They went to the airport restaurant. Adams had found out that his companion’s name was John Marshall and that he was twenty-six years old. Marshall had said nothing about his profession, and Adams was not interested in finding out, since at this moment he could not guess the significance of his meeting with this young man.

But the mutual game of hide and seek came shortly to an end. Adams bought a newspaper from a little boy. The paper came fresh from the presses and contained the very latest news.

On the second page Adams found a headline that did not surprise him much. After all, this occurrence had played a big role in his calculations, and he had been quite convinced that it had a high degree of probability. This news was extremely important for him and for John Marshall, too.

“Would you like to know what happened to the Tokyo jet we missed in London?”

“Well what happened to it?”

“The jet exploded near Kiev and fell into the Black Sea.”

“Are you serious?”

“Well, you can read it here, black. on white.” Adams handed the newspaper to his companion, who quickly glanced at the report.

“Well, we can consider ourselves lucky that we missed that plane,” said

Marshall.

“Yes, certainly. Life is much more important than the few material things we own. Nevertheless, I hope you were not carrying anything of value in your luggage.”

John Marshall smiled enigmatically. “Nothing of importance, Mr. Adams. All that matters to me can be carried in this small bag, which I never let go. The clothing that I have lost in my suitcases can be easily replaced. I am not, too worried that my luggage seems to have been destroyed, but I sincerely hope for your own sake that things are the same way with you, sir.”

Adams felt Marshall’s searching gaze resting on him and he did not know what to make of it. Marshall was tall, young and healthy. His face bore a frank expression and bespoke undeniable honesty, but his eyes appeared far more mature than his chronological age would have led one to believe.

Since Homer G. Adam’s trip was for top secret purposes, he took refuge in obvious silence. He did not answer Marshall’s question but brought the conversation back to insignificant small talk, since he did not want to appear too rude.

Above the Indian Ocean the situation changed completely.

“You have a great deal of money with you, don’t you, Mr. Adams?” said Marshall suddenly after a long period of silence.

“What makes you think so?”

“Because you are looking at your bag at regular intervals with the same attentiveness that I do. People don’t usually turn their head to look up at the luggage rack that often if they have just a few sandwiches and a newspaper in their suitcase.”

“That is most interesting. You seem to be interested in psychological studies, Marshall.”

“That’s right. I’ve been interested in psychology for a long time, but you are avoiding my question.”

“If you are interested only in theoretical psychological problems, it could hardly be much of your concern whether I *really* carry a large sum of money with me.”

“I only asked in your own interest, Mr. Adams. Provided you have a lot of money here with you, you should carry your suspicions much farther than you have so far. Then just looking at our bag won’t be enough.”

“As long as my luggage is up there on the rack, that is enough for me to know. That tells me that my money is still there. Or would you, being a psychologist, suggest a different logical conclusion to my thoughts?”

“Your little suitcase is new. It still carries the label from a store on Regent Street. I would bet you anything that you bought it only this morning.”

“Absolutely right,” said Adams, perplexed. “But what is that supposed to

mean?"

John Marshall leaned over to him and whispered softly, "It is possible that someone else has purchased the same type of bag. If that bag, then, were in the luggage rack above us, your logical conclusion would not amount to much."

Adams just shrugged. He thought of the gun in his pocket, which he, could use if Marshall tried to pull some dirty trick-which would hardly be feasible here, where there were eighty eye-witnesses present. "Okay," he said finally. "Obviously you would like to see a lot of money in one little suitcase. All right, I'll do you that favour."

He stood up, took a bag down from the luggage rack, sat down again and opened the little suitcase. That same instant, he had the same sensation he had had many years ago when he saw his big deal slip through his fingers.

He closed his eyes and counted to ten silently. That was old habit that helped him to remain calm. in critical situations. When he looked up again he was once again the old, sober genius of the stock market who never lost his nerve.

"How come you knew my money had been stolen, Marshall? I demand that you speak up now without further ado and that you leave out your rather doubtful psychological tricks."

"I believe it hardly matters any more how I knew this. You should rather ask who has the money now."

"And do you know where it is?"

"I have a pretty good idea, but I'd rather discuss this in quiet and peace with you. Would you like to accompany me to the lounge section? We can look then for a nice spot in a corner where we will not be disturbed."

They left. While they were on their way to the lounge, Adams stated "I'd like to inform the chief pilot of the theft."

He returned in a short while. "Everything is in order - as far, at least, as my report of the theft is concerned. I hope that you can tell me more about it. The inquiries from the police can start only after we have landed. Perhaps they will close off the airport and not permit the passengers to leave, but that is not enough for me. I would prefer if we could take care of this matter ourselves, rather than wait for the police. We should try to find the thieves while we are still in flight. Who would you think is the guilty party?"

"I don't know, but I would suspect at least six to eight of our passengers here."

"You, think they are here on board, or do you think that my bag was exchanged earlier, perhaps in Zanzibar? No-I looked into the case in the airport restaurant. Then everything was still in order. Therefore, the thief must be here on the plane. The only time the bag could have been exchanged was while we were boarding the plane. We were standing in line and advanced very slowly through the gate. It is possible that I put my bag down on the ground from time to time."

"I am inclined to agree. I share your thoughts there, but I really cannot tell who

the guilty party is. We would have to suspect somebody who was close by while we were boarding the plane. I have closely examined these people several times already, but none of them has the same bag as you do.”

“Very strange, indeed. Now you know so little, and yet a little while ago you were so amazingly correct in your suspicions.”

“Another question,” Marshall said. “The amount you are missing might be quite large for the average person. Would this money be irreplaceable for you?”

“I don’t quite get what you mean,” replied Adams hesitatingly. Again he felt distrust for John Marshall. “Your formulations are often quite amazing, Mr. Marshall. On the other hand, I cannot imagine that the man who stole my money would behave as conspicuously as you do.”

Suddenly the door from the passenger compartment flew open and several men came in noisily. Two of the men slammed the door and then bolted it, as if several other passengers wanted to get in too.

Almost all guests in the lounge section jumped up, completing the sudden confusion. There was so much noise and shouting that no one could hear until one of the men shouted loudly for everyone to be quiet. He emphasized his demand with a pistol.

“Everyone sit down!” commanded the stranger. “I have few questions to ask you, gentlemen. Who of you carries weapon? Please let me know immediately.”

The first person to raise his hand was John Marshall. Several others followed suit, including, finally, Homer G. Adams. Altogether, seven people carried arms.

Someone asked what the meaning of all this was.

“Silence!” thundered the voice again. “We are in a very critical situation now. Several passengers have overwhelmed the ship’s crew and have taken over. Some of these men have entered the passenger section to disarm all travellers. Our greatest concern now is to guard this door so that nobody can enter the lounge section. We want to hear suggestions how we can restore law and order on this plane.”

“You can’t lock that door,” protested one lady. “My husband and my children are back there in the passenger section.”

Several other passengers made similar protests, but they were in the minority, and their demands were ignored.

“We can’t make any concessions now to individual wishes from you, gentlemen. We must ask you to exert self-control and to think of the danger we are in at this moment.”

“It would be good,” came a voice from the background, “if we did not overestimate the danger. Whoever resists these bandits might get the short end of the stick, but I don’t think these criminals really want to threaten our lives.” All they are interested in is our possessions. Therefore, I suggest we capitulate at once, for this is the only way to save our lives for sure.”

“Coward!” someone called indignantly.

Another expressed suspicion. “You’re probably one of these gangsters.”

“It would be advisable if only one person spoke at a time,” demanded John Marshall. “I believe that I can give you some enlightenment on what has happened here, but only if you, make sure that the entrance to the passenger room is closely guarded.”

Several armed men pushed toward the door and reassured him that they would, be in charge of keeping that door firmly closed.

“Go on! Let us hear your explanation,” urged the first speaker.

John Marshall said, “I’d like to say at the beginning that I do not know all this with absolute certainty, but I know enough for sure to suspect that this danger should by no means be minimized. The gangsters are undoubtedly out after our valuables, and in particular, they want to get at a sum of more than 23,000 pounds. They have already stolen this money.”

“Why then all this hullabaloo? Do you think they will leave rest of us in peace?”

“Most likely. They are probably hardly interested in your money-perhaps just in your wives jewellery. But the greatest danger for us lies in the fact that the gangsters might make an attempt on the life of the man whose money they have stolen, for these criminals seem to. believe that their only guarantee to really keep that money Is to kill that man.”

“And who is that person?”

“That doesn’t matter here.”

But Adams got out of his seat and bowed slightly to the group of excited passengers. “I am this man. Please forgive me if I have caused you such inconvenience by my mere presence on this plane, but in the final analysis I am an innocent victim of circumstances”

Adams felt Marshall’s hand on his shoulder and sat down quietly in his seat. It would be better now if John Marshall carried on the discussion.

“Very soon we will be forced to proceed to action, ladies and gentleman,” Marshall said. “Therefore, will you please avoid any unnecessary questions now. The danger is the same for all of us here, as uninteresting as most of you are to these bandits. They have their eye on Mr. Adams, and in order to render him harmless, they will undoubtedly fly this plane to some other destination. That might be some deserted coast along the ocean, the middle of the Indian jungle, or even, perhaps, the highlands of Tibet. But taking all this into consideration, you will understand now that we *must* undertake something for our defence. As long as we are still airborne, there is no immediate danger but this can change very rapidly.”

So far none of the gangsters had tried to break down the door between the

passenger section and the lounge section.

In the “unoccupied” section of the plane there was still another small group of the crew—two cooks, a waiter and three stewardesses.

Marshall walked over to them. “You probably have a phone that connects you with the command center. May I use this phone, please?”

The small group of the crew seemed obviously impressed by his polite approach and led Marshall to the telephone. The waiter pushed the button for him.

Someone answered the phone at the other end, but that was as far as politeness went.

“What do you want to make peace offers, or what?”

“You guessed right, sir. What other reason would I have to talk to you?”

“I have money. And one of the passengers here has a lot of it.”

“Thanks a lot for that hint. We’ll get the rest of the money sometime during this day. You won’t have to worry about that until we are about to land.”

“But the money is not here on board, sir. It would make no sense to talk so long here on the phone with you. There are too many people listening in. Will you please give me safe passage to the pilot’s section and back again?”

“If you leave your gun behind, you can come here.” Marshall had some difficulties to overcome with the other passengers. Some considered his willingness to negotiate utter nonsense, since he was powerless to do anything in any case. Others expressed open suspicion that he was one of the gangsters, but finally they let him go.

The gangsters received Marshall in the passenger section and brought him to the front. While he walked through the passenger room, he sized up their numerical strength. There were at least ten people who belonged to the gang, which impressed him very much.

The man in the pilot’s seat was a well-dressed civilian. With the help of two assistants, he had taken over navigation. He seemed to be quite expert at his job.

“Johnny, take my place as long as I’m talking with this guy here. Well, are you the man that phoned me a little while ago?” he asked Marshall.

Without waiting for an invitation Marshall sat down next to him. “I want to state briefly the way I judge the situation. Then you can make up your mind if I am right or not.”

“All right, shoot, little prophet.”

“You, are after Mr. Adams. You already possess his money. Now you need his life in order to be safe for the future. Since you can’t kill, him and still land in Tokyo, according to the flight schedule, you plan to land somewhere in south Asia. Then you intend to disappear without being recognized. In this connection, I am very much concerned about the fate of the rest of the passengers, while this hardly seems to worry you. Have I made myself clear so far?”

“Just go on. That wasn’t all you had to tell me.”

“Yes, that’s all to begin with, for my offer makes sense only if my analysis of the situation is correct so far.”

“You wanted to get some money for us. Do you know where Adams is still hiding some more? That money is coming from him-isn’t that what you mean?”

“Of course. it’s a matter of more than 40,000 pounds that he has deposited in a bank in Montreal. I’ll sacrifice Adams, with the rest of his money-apart, of course, from some expense that you’ll have to pay to me-but you will guarantee the safety of the rest of the passengers. Is that a deal?”

“How much will your expenses amount to?” asked the boss. Since Marshall had quoted the sum of 40,000 pounds, he suddenly became polite.

“Two thousand pounds. I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

“That’s fair enough. Now, how do we get at that money. in Montreal?”

“You’ll have to pretend to negotiate with Adams. We’ll have to think up some way to allay his suspicions, for in the final solution he is paying his own ransom. I am convinced that he has some code for cabled remittances of money. Using that code, you can swing the deal without any great loss of time. I’ll take care of that sir. He’s known me only since this noon, when we met in Croydon, but I have managed to gain his confidence. But now, how about the second part of our bargain? Where are you going to land?”

Marshall was completely concentrating on what the other person was thinking.

“We have a very suitable place somewhere near Rangoon,” said the boss, while his thoughts were secretly occupied with an entirely different geographical location. “We can enter negotiations from Rangoon with London and the rest of your people will have good connections to get another flight from Rangoon to, Tokyo.”

“Could you tell me what your secret landing site looks like? I am interested in details, because I want to make quite sure.”

The boss was thinking of India, and in particular of a region between the Kardamom Mountains and the city of Madura. Characteristic of this region was the transition from a dense jungle into a wide, open Savannah grassland.

“This secret airport is an old airport for horizontal thrust engines, but it is quite suitable for our purposes. And we won’t run any great risk of being found out. How is it then? Will you talk with Adams?”

“Of course, sir. The best thing will be if I talk to him right away.”

“Okay. Go now. Let’s consider that we are in a condition of truce.”

John Marshall returned to the lounge section. “We will land near Rangoon,” he explained to the people. “From there we’ll have good connections to Japan or to Korea. The only condition the bandits made was that we remain aboard the plane long enough to give them a good head start. This is the extent of concessions I could get them to make to us.”

“You accomplished a good deal if that is true, but not much if we consider that

we have no guarantees whatsoever for their promises.”

Marshall tried to calm the speaker. “Beggars can’t be choosers, sir. If you can obtain better conditions from them why don’t you go and ask them personally?”

Most of the passengers were on Marshall’s side and praised his courage.

While the general conversation became more and more animated and while one of the stewardesses announced that they were just flying over the northern Maldives, John Marshall disappeared into one of the washrooms. There he took a small, unusual looking radio transmitter out of his pocket.

“Marshall calling, Marshall calling. I’m calling the Third Power. Please answer. John Marshall calling. Perry Rhodan please answer.”

Inside the blockaded zone of the central Gobi Desert, howled and bells were ringing shrilly.

Reginald Bell’s voice boomed over the outdoor loudspeakers of the low lying barracks. “Emergency. Emergency. The emergency squad and all vital personnel please report immediately to the central compound.”

Perry Rhodan, who had just intended to return to the robot brain to have some further detailed calculations made, turned and raced back the 200 yards to the command center. There he arrived at the same time as Kakuta, Captain Klein and Lieutenant Kosnow.

“We have our Secretary of the Treasury, declared Bell, ”but he is being held by some bandits inside a big jet that will land in a few minutes at the southernmost tip of west India. Most likely they will kill him at that time. Marshall has just sent this report to me.“

“Everybody to the space sphere,” ordered Rhodan. “At once!”

Outside he ran into Thora.

“Your fellowmen have another of their alarms,” she noted with apparent lack of emotion.

“We need. the space sphere, Thora. I hope that neither you nor Khrest planned to use it right now.”

“You can have the space sphere, Perry. Evidently this is once again a case of Earth shaking events confronting you.”

There was no time for Rhodan to react angrily to her sarcastic remark. He ran on, for the cue words “Secretary of the Treasury” had been sufficient to make clear the significance of the moment.

He had mentally calculated the distance from the Gobi Desert to the tenth degree of latitude, and he had realized at once that he would arrive there too late if he used his special Arkonide suit for transportation. His only hope of crossing the almost 2,500 miles within a few minutes lay with the spaceship.

Exactly eighty-five seconds after the alarm had sounded, the gigantic sphere left the ground. Reginald Bell was reclining in his seat. He had decided not to make use of the automatic guidance system.

“Peter,” he called to Kosnow. “Turn the map to west India. The jet with the bandits will land about ninety miles west of Madura. We must fly toward the jet, a bit toward the south. As soon as we sight it, nothing can go wrong any more. The last time we heard from Marshall the jet was just above the Maldiv Islands.”

“Okay,” Perry Rhodan said calmly. “We’ll make it with this miracle craft. Don’t worry.”

The Arkonides’ sphere flew at an altitude of about eighty miles. Far below, the planet was rotating as if it had been set in motion by a titanic fist. They could see the highlands of Tibet, the Himalayas, Nepal and the Ganges River. For a couple of minutes they were crossing the ocean above the Gulf of Bengal between Jaipur and Madras. Then Reginald Bell sighted the jet. The men gathered eagerly around the video screen.

“You see this glimmering line there? That must be it. They are on a straight course. Altitude approximately 30,000 feet.”

“Let’s hope they don’t recognize us,” said Kosnow.

“Impossible,” grinned Bell. “We’re using our invisible cloak.”

Even if the people down there looked up straight to the sky above them, they would not be able to make out the slightest suspicious spot. Shall I descend now?”

“Yes,” replied Rhodan. “Approach within a mile and a half of them. We’ll probably have to land immediately after the jet. I would not like to give these bandits too much time to use countermeasures.”

“What could they do against our superior force of arms?”

“There are many hostages on board,” Rhodan reminded him. “Under these circumstances our technical superiority will not be of much help to us.”

CHAPTER THREE

“What is all this nonsense about 40,000 pounds?” shouted the indignant Homer G. Adams. “I don’t have that kind of money. That is a wild pipe dream of yours, and even if I had that sum, I would hardly-”

“I know that you don’t have that kind of money,” Marshall tried to calm him. “But you don’t have to tell that to those gangsters. All that matters now is to keep stalling the boss until help from the outside arrives. We must pretend that you possess that amount, and in particular, you must act as if you were ready, willing and able to pay that sum in exchange for your life.”

“Until help from the outside arrives?” inquired Adams. “Do you really have that kind of relations that, you can speak of such a hope in all seriousness?”

John Marshall grinned mysteriously. “You can think about that for a while. We have exactly three minutes left before we touch down, and then most probably the boss of the gangsters will call you to let him know what you have decided.”

Adams looked at his watch and then over to the small screen above the entrance to the ship’s galley.

“It’s more than 1,200 miles to Rangoon. I think you calculated wrong, Marshall.”

“Not at all. We’re going to land not far from Madura.”

There was no time for further questions; the boss had started the landing manoeuvres. The jet descended rapidly, almost like a stone, and all passengers struggled to hold on tight wherever they could. Suddenly there was a hard bump, and the ship came to rest on the ground.

On the screen they could discern a wildly overgrown savannah and in the background the wall of a thick jungle.

Marshall phoned again. When he returned, he declared, “You are to come along with me, Mr. Adams, All the others must wait until we have concluded our final negotiations. Please, gentlemen keep calm and as disciplined as you have until now. There is no reason to doubt the favourable outcome of this discussion with, the gangsters.”

Adams had to use the elevator to reach the front of the jet. The ship now stood vertically, while all the passenger quarters of the plane had turned ninety degrees in theft gimbals.

“I want to point out to you,” Marshall protested as he entered the command center, “that you have not stood by our agreement so far. Or do you know so little about geography that you can’t distinguish between west India and east India?”

“We have changed our minds, Marshall but this does not change anything regarding our agreement. Madura is not any worse than Rangoon.”

“But Madura is at least a hundred miles away from here. How do you expect to get our passengers there within a short time?”

“Just let me worry about that. I am much more interested in what Mr. Adams’ attitude is to my proposals.”

“Your propositions are, mildly stated, outright blackmail,” stated Homer G. Adams angrily. “I have been Informed by our friend here what you are demanding from me, and I admit that my life is more valuable to me than any money that I might possess, but I will not pay the ransom until I have obtained valid guarantees for my personal safety from you. Let me know how you plan to proceed.”

“It’s all very simple. You make out a check for me. I will send it with a messenger to Madura where I have good connections to a Calicut bank, and then I’ll wait to see if the check will clear and if everything is in order. As soon as I have obtained the sum we have agreed upon, I’ll let you go, as well, as the rest of the passengers.”

“That doesn’t sound very tempting to me. First of all it will take much too long, since we will probably lose two, full days when you send a messenger to Madura. Second, the mutual guarantees are too one sided, as far as I am concerned. I have no proof whatever that you will release me as soon as you have the money in your possession. Therefore, please think of a better solution and try to be objective about it.”

“You obviously misjudge your situation, Mr. Adams,” declared the boss cynically. “The advantage is on my side, and I have no intention of giving up my advantage just because you insist on objectivity.”

Marshall, whose expression suddenly increased in optimism, interjected, “If anyone is discussing advantageous positions now, it should be *we* and not *you* who can do so. Boss, I suggest that you look at the screen. It might show you a few lovely views of the countryside around us and maybe a few additional surprises.”

All the people in the room looked simultaneously at video screen and saw the two, odd looking figures that came tumbling down from the sky toward the ground.

“These people are not dressed in divers’ suits.” added Marshall with satisfaction. “But they are wearing a rather neat technical gadget of a far superior civilization. It is your bad luck, boss, that the men out there are my allies, coming to my assistance. What do you say we give up this fruitless hide and seek game

and discuss the real situation? I suggest that you put down your weapons on this table, raise your arms, and then tell us where you have been hiding the regular crew of is plane, so that this jet can still arrive in Tokyo today.”

The answer was a burst of insane laughter. On the face of the leader of the bandits, surprise, disbelief, fear and rage played at the same time.

“You are stark, staring mad and mad imagining things, Marshall. You can’t bluff me, just let these two odd looking characters take a little walk out there. All they probably want to know is why we landed here and not where we were supposed to. I can hardly imagine that, they are coming to your rescue. Let’s get back to the more important things we were discussing before.”

“I must admit, boss, that your carelessness is rather frightening. In your place I would have tried to get rid of such unlimited guests long before now.”

“I can’t figure you out, Marshall. Sometimes I get the impression that you are trying to join our band. Okay, then, let’s shoot. Jim, you take care of that.”

Jim rose and reached for a, machine gun. He opened a small window and then pulled the trigger, aiming at the, two strange men approaching the plain. He kept shooting until the magazine was empty. Then he turned around, wild amazement in his eyes.

“They’re still there, boss, and I could bet that at least every third shot was a hit. Does anyone have another magazine?”

“Save yourself that trouble,” said a man’s voice with a Japanese accent. Only John Marshall seemed to have expected the sudden appearance of Tako Kakuta. The other men turned around and stared with utter confusion at the young Japanese.

“Wh-Who is that?” stuttered the boss. He was so beside himself that it took very little to break any resistance he might have left. The psychoradiator that Tako Kakuta held in his hand was really unnecessary.

“I’m coming as a friend, gentlemen. Put down your weapons over here and then step back against the wall. You are perfectly safe. Nothing will happen to you.”

A few seconds later the six disarmed bandits were standing along the wall. They did not resist when Tako put handcuffs on them.

A short while later the rest of the gangster band was overpowered, and the crew of the jet was set free.

John Marshall exchanged a few words with the commanding officer of the jet and wished him a good trip to Tokyo. Everyone was overjoyed that this adventure taken such a fortunate turn, and they invited Marshall and Tako to a party and asked endless questions.

“I’m sorry to have to disappoint you, ladies and gentlemen, for both Mr. Adams and I will leave the plane here. It is not within my province to give a full explanation of the events of the past hours. Just be happy that you all escaped safe

and sound from the hands of these gangsters and that no one was injured in any way.”

“I am very much in your debt,” said Homer G. Adams to Marshall as he saw the jet disappear above in the clouds. “But of course, I would like to be given some of the explanation you refused to give to the passengers.”

“Do you really need any additional explanation?”

“Why not? Do you think I am a telepathy?”

“That’s something well have to find out. In any case, you have been the most successful stock market speculator and financial broker of all time. These things do not happen just by themselves. A supergenius usually possesses a sixth sense. Of course you are endowed with some supernatural talent.”

“Do you believe such nonsense? Do you believe in supernatural powers?” inquired Adams.

“No,” said Marshall, “for we must separate science from religion. In the one case we know something, and in the other case we only *believe* something. And parapsychology is a science.”

“I’m always glad to learn,” Adams commented, with raised eyebrows. “So far I have been, an expert only in money matters.”

“This means that you had a good grasp of the psychology of the masses. From psychology to parapsychology is but even if this step leads beyond a wall. You were amazed, for instance, at the sudden appearance of my friend Kakuta. As soon as you look at it with a knowledge of parapsychological matters, you will no longer be surprised at this phenomenon.”

“Are you then a parapsychologist?” inquired Adams. He turned to the Japanese. “I must admit that your sudden appearance surprised me even more than that of the gangsters, but I’m sure that in the final analysis we can find a natural explanation for this, too.”

“Of course.” The Japanese smiled “It you consider teleportation to be a natural phenomenon, to that extent you are right.”

“Tele-what?”

“I am the child of a Japanese couple who were exposed to strong radioactivity after the first American atom bomb at the end of World War II. This caused a mutation of genes, and as a result of that, I became a mutant.”

Homer G. Adams fell silent, and the last trace of irony disappeared from his smile. Finally he said, “If I understand you right, you can change your body into pure energy without the help of an technical means and then rematerialize at any other spot you choose. Did I understand you correctly?”

Tako Kakuta nodded in agreement. “You are right. This is in essence what I can do. The place where I can materialise is subject to rather narrow limits. I might be able to increase the distance slowly if I keep on experimenting.”

“That is fantastic, Mr. Kakuta. You, with your phenomenal capacities-” Adams broke off in the middle of his sentence. An important insight, seemed to have enlightened him suddenly.

“Go on talking,” Marshall urged him. “Kakuta is a very grateful person and is open to any good advice.”

“Just a moment, please,” Adams demanded “What was the matter a while ago with our machine gunner? Where did the two men in the strange looking suits disappear to? And why was it not possible to kill them with his machine gun?”

“You’re asking a, lot of questions all at once. Jim’s machine gun fire was ineffective because bullets were absorbed by an energy screen. Nothing has happened to the two men. They have returned to our spaceship, to bring it here. We intend to get out of here as quickly as possible. If I talk with our captain, I’m sure he’ll bring you to Tokyo.”

“What am I supposed to do in Tokyo, Marshall. I could have continued my flight from there, and then I would have had to change planes once more in Peking. Am I not much closer to my destination here?”

“Here in the savannah at the foot of the Kardamom, mountain range?”

“Why aren’t we completely frank with each other, Marshall? You had your plans for me ever since we met in London. Isn’t it so?”

“That’s right. When did you realize this?”

“My brain must have suffered. quite a lot during the last fourteen years, but now I can see quite clearly that you are no less stupid than I am. We had both the same goals, but still neither of us knew of the other’s intentions.”

“That’s where you are wrong. I knew about it, all right.”

“You knew about my plans? Since when?”

“Ever since you left prison. We were very much interested in you, Mr. Adams. You will understand everything as soon as Mr. Rhodan has informed you of all the details about our unfavourable financial situation.”

“And why did you think of me, of all people?”

“You were the first person we should have thought of you are undoubtedly the greatest financial genius of all time. It is our good fortune that they let you go on living after that sensational trial. Several newspaper reports from the year 1957 came to our attention, and we have studied them, as well as your past, most thoroughly. Rhodan decided to obtain an amnesty for you and to keep an eye on your activities and direct them in such a manner that you would soon find your way to us.”

“Just a minute. I was pardoned because of good conduct!”

“You may call it that if you want to. In any case, agents have speeded up the decision of the Minister of the interior through Arkonide technical means. We have a psycho-apparatus that influences a persons willingness to make decisions by applying high frequencies. You saw this instrument in action when Kakuta disarmed the gangsters.”

“That’s all very fine,” objected Adams with the last threads of a healthy distrustful attitude. “You have introduced me to a genuine teleporter in the person of Mr. Kakuta. You have demonstrated within a few minutes the most incredible technical facts; but there is still your assertion that you already knew of my plans when I was leaving the prison. It is true that I have read all kinds of newspaper reports dealing with Perry Rhodan during the last week. I have come to admire him, and the desire grew in me to serve this man, if only the opportunity ever arose. But let me tell you that I have not spoken to any living human soul about my intentions.”

“But you have thought of them, and that was sufficient for me....”

Once again Adams seemed at a loss for words. The smiling Japanese helped him. “John Marshall is our second ‘para.’ That explains everything, Mr. Adams. He is a telepath. He knows what is in your mind as long as you think very intently of something.”

“This is more than I can take. I’m no youngster any more. You should be a bit more considerate. This is absolutely overwhelming for me.”

“If you enter Perry Rhodan’s services, you will have to get used to quite a few apparently incredible things. It has been our experience so far that people come to accept these things very quickly. Ah, here are our friends. Let me have your briefcase, please, Mr. Adams.”

That’s out of the question. I’m not old enough to need a porter for a few pounds of paper money. By the way, there is one thing that you neglected to explain to me, although in the meantime I found the solution on my own. Didn’t the gangster boss tell you that his destination was Rangoon? But nevertheless you knew that he was going to land here. Did you find that out by way of telepathy too?”

“That’s right. I was merely bluffing when I was apparently so willing to negotiate with them. All I needed was a brief conversation with the man to determine his real intentions. As soon as I learned that he planned to land west of Madura, all I had to do was inform our friends in the Gobi Desert. They then took care of all the rest.”

In the meantime Marshall Adams and Kakuta were on their way to the Arkonide space sphere. They landed, and the men could make out the figure of Rhodan waiting for them. When they were hardly 500 feet from the ship, Perry Rhodan met them. For the first time, the master of the Third Power and his Secretary of the Treasury faced each other.

“Welcome, Mr. Adams. I’m happy that you have found your way to us.”

“It was a very complicated path, Mr. Rhodan but I was very happy to come to you. I can’t stand the lazy life. That was what was most difficult for me to bear during the fourteen years of my confinement. You seem to have some financial worries, Isn’t it so?”

CHAPTER FOUR

New York.

Walking north from the corner of Broadway and Fifth Avenue one passes a twenty-two story Office building constructed in the early thirties. Its facade is almost completely obstructed by the colourful neon signs of at least a dozen of its tenants. No passersby would even give this ugly array a glance, unless he had some special reason to. It is just like any number of unattractive business buildings in Manhattan.

However, some of the office personnel in the neighbouring similarly ugly looking building noticed one sunny Monday morning that a crew of workers had busied themselves on the outside wall between the seventh and ninth stories. The neon signs for a toothpaste, a hair tonic and an automobile tire were hauled down within a few hours. In their place a huge flashing neon sign was installed that very same evening with just three giant yellow letters, outlined in bright blue: G.C.C. The speed with which the installation of the sign proceeded seemed remarkable and led the attentive observers to make some conclusions about the business mentality of the firm whose huge initials boldly adorned the drab building facade.

What these three giant letters G.C.C. stood for, could be learned the next day from a full page ad in *The New York Times* in which the General Cosmic Co. announced that it had opened its doors for business. They described themselves as consultants and efficiency experts and offered expert advice to any interested parties regardless of field of business. New sensational manufacturing processes and additional machinery were offered at prices that were really sensationally low, considering the fantastic potential increase in profit.

Homer G. Adams, business manager of the new firm, three young ladies as office help. He was acting of the firm's proprietor, Benjamin Wilder. He welcomed his help with a pep talk.

"...the proprietor of our firm has placed me in full charge of these offices. We are a new enterprise without any tradition or predecessors. With your support I hope to gain worldwide recognition for the letters 'G.C.C.' I demand promptness and utmost reliability from you. Whatever special knowledge is required for this type of work you will acquire in, a short time, if you apply yourselves. It is to

your advantage to be just as young as our firm. We will all grow together, and you have splendid chances for advancement.”

“You have here all kinds of business machines for your office work. For the more complicated tasks involving calculation and statistics you see here this tiny electronic instrument. I will shortly instruct you in how it works. Finally, I naturally insist that you make our clients feel welcome in this office. Thank you.”

The office hours were from nine to five. At nine-fifteen sharp the first caller arrived. It was a florist’s delivery boy with a beautiful bouquet of twenty-four red gladiolus. The attached card. was signed by Benjamin Wilder, the proprietor of G.C.C. Homer G. Adams smiled pleasantly and made some charming remark to his secretary, Miss Lawrence, about the thoughtfulness of their absent boss. The delivery boy received a generous tip.

As he was leaving he held open the entrance door to a new arrival, who, was almost as wide as he was high. He introduced. himself as Abraham Weiss to the receptionist, who ushered him in to Homer G. Adam’s office.

“Good morning, Mr. Adams. I have read your ad in the *New York Times*....”

“Won’t you have a seat, Mr. Weiss!”

Weiss fell heavily, back into the wide chair next to Adams’s desk and spoke again. “I read your ad, and I decided to find out a bit more about what you have to offer. It seems that you promise quite a lot, you must admit!”

“It all depends on what kind of terms you are used to. What specifically brings you to us?”

“Well, I don’t quite know how to begin. My visit here is mainly to obtain information. You know what I mean, of course. I have a fine business, and my motto is live and let live. But I am always curious about any potential improvements, any kind of progress. Could be I might miss some important chance otherwise. That is why I have come to see you.”

“Yes, of course. Anyone who fails to take advantage of what G.C.C. has to offer is definitely missing out on a tremendous opportunity.”

“That’s a wonderful slogan, Mr. Adams. You are so right!”

Although Adams was rather irritated by the way his visitor seemed to beat around the bush, he inquired politely, “How can we be of service to you, Mr. Weiss?”

“Well, my dear Mr. Adams, I have, some interests in Colorado. Something that might interest you, too. Do you understand anything about power stations?”

“You mean nuclear power plants?”

“No, hydraulic power. Electricity from a dammed up river. Does that sound too conservative for you?”

“Not at all. So you are constructing a hydraulic power plant?”

“Yes, at the upper Arkansas River, not far from Cripple Creek. But we are not yet, constructing it. My firm would be most interested in obtaining that contract,

though.”

“You are looking for ways of cutting your costs, so you may compete in bidding for the contract. Is that it, Mr. Weiss?”

“Not exactly, Mr. Adams. We have already submitted our bid, and I might add that I think we have excellent chances for beating out the other competitors. After all, we are leaders in our field. But just as a matter of principle I would like to know if you have anything up your sleeve that could put us into an even more advantageous position. I just want to get acquainted with you as a future contact. I would like to know what G.C.C. could eventually do for us. On the other hand, I am sure you must be eager to make new contacts, seeing that you are brand new in this field. Any business connections should be valuable to you, particularly with such a reputable house as ours.”

Homer G. Adams felt he could do very well without such gratuitous advice. But he did not let on, especially since he had learned by experience that the braggarts of Mr. Weiss’s type were those who needed help most.

“You expressed my own thoughts, Mr. Weiss,” he said with a smile, and offered him a cigar. “Please help yourself. I am sure you will enjoy my own private brand.”

He waited until his visitor had lit his cigar and was puffing contentedly before he continued, “It would be nonsense to deny that we are trying to get established and therefore appreciate any connections. I am particularly pleased to welcome someone of your stature as my very first customer. But let’s go on talking about your project. I admit that hydroelectric power plants are rather on the conservative side, but they are still not out of date. Nuclear Power is an important competitor, but in the last analysis it is all a question of finances. Which is cheaper? And there I would have some tempting suggestions to make to you.”

Adams had been observing his visitor intently while he made his long speech. And he had noticed a suspicious twitching in the man’s fleshy face. Abraham Weiss slowly abandoned his attitude of feigned indifference, for he definitely wanted more than just to get acquainted with Homer G. Adams.

“Pardon my asking a personal question, Mr. Adams. Judging by the way you talk you must be, quite an expert in this special field.”

“The construction of power plants is just one of the many fields in which we have specialized knowledge. That is our strong point. You see, people who make claims in newspaper ads, as we did, must be able to back them up with facts. Otherwise, our firm would be doomed right from the start.”

“But to come back to your special project, Mr. Weiss. According to my information you have every reason to be concerned about your competitors who made their bids on the basis of nuclear power. The construction of power plants, especially in mountainous areas, is so expensive these days that your chances are none too good. On the other hand, the upkeep of hydraulic power stations is still

cheaper today than that of atomic plants. You will win out on your bid if you can manage to build your hydraulic works for approximately the same price as your nuclear competitors.”

Abraham Weiss was all eyes and ears. “You are very well informed indeed. But let’s go further. ”You have stated the problem I face. Now let me hear what suggestions you have for a solution!“

Homer G. Adams smiled sweetly. “Such advice is usually not given without charge. Since you are my first visitor and potential client, however, I will throw this much for free. But In case you should accept my solution, you would need more than just advice. You would also need my machines. First of all I want you to quote me the overall price for the hydroelectric works at Cripple Creek. Then break it down and tell me the cost of the necessary earth movements and getting the terrain ready for construction. Then I will give you my counterproposals.”

The fat man sucked on his cigar, obviously deliberating whether he dared quote any actual figures. Then he explained,, “I can quote you only proportionate figures. Not real costs. I am not authorized to do so. You see my point, I am sure.”

“Why, certainly. just give me, for example, what proportion of the total cost the earth construction work would comprise.”

“Well, let’s assume the total cost amounts to 1.3 billion dollars Then the foundation plus the earthwork would be about 550 million dollars.”

“Fine. That gives me enough of an idea, Mr. Weiss. Now let me propose this, to you-you purchase my machines which will lessen the cost of the earth construction work by about ninety percent. That means you can save almost half a billion dollars of the total construction price. Nobody can compete with you on such a basis!“

Abraham Weiss knocked the ashes off his cigar in his excitement and almost burned a hole in his trousers. Then he took a deep breath and forced a smile on his lips. “You certainly have a sense of humour, Mr. Adams. But right now I am more concerned with reality than with such wonderful pipe dreams.”

“You are wrong if you think I am joking. I am quite serious, Mr. Weiss. I do, have the machines I was talking about. My firm will be most happy to give you a practical demonstration of them at any time. All you need is to let me know when it will be convenient for you. Provided, of course that we have first agreed on term for the deal. For unless you are seriously interested in what we have to offer we cannot afford such costly demonstrations of our machinery.”

Mr. Weiss rose, evidently quite impressed by Adams’s words. Adams felt that Weiss must be at turning point in his business career and that the wily hardheaded businessman must be thinking very hard how to proceed at this point.

Finally Weiss said, “You indicate how I can cut by 500 million dollars. But on the other hand I would have to add the purchase price for your machines. How do

we stand?"

"You need not worry at all about the purchase price of our machinery in your calculations of the Arkansas River power plant. These machines will be a permanent investment. You can count on twenty to thirty similar construction projects in the future once you own such far superior equipment."

"I see. But please, there must be some price I will have to pay for these machines."

"The price is purely imaginary. That means it exceed the value of fifty such power plants, if you had to pay cash. Please, let me finish! I don't intend to sell my machinery. Instead, I propose becoming a partner in your firm, Mr. Weiss. This way both of us will be helped."

Abraham Weiss did not take, kindly to such a suggestion. "So you are speculating on being my partner?"

"I am not speculating, I am proposing it. That's far more serious, Mr. Weiss. Call a special meeting of your board of directors and tell them to increase your share capital by fifty-one percent. These fifty-one percent will be my price."

Mr. Weiss nervously grabbed his hat and backed toward the door.

"I hope that is not your final offer, Mr. Adams. I could never get my firm to accept these conditions."

"Then I regret having wasted your precious time. My offer is firm. I am not interested in, any financial dealings, unless we can obtain what I quoted-fifty-one percent of your stock, Mr. Weiss. Just give it some thought."

The builder of hydroelectric works bowed slightly and then disappeared through the door leading into the outer office.

The next caller's name was Andre Gillette. His dark hair and wiry figure spoke of his Latin parentage. Miss Lawrence informed her boss that Mr. Gillette had been waiting for forty-five minute, which led Adams to believe that he, too, must be in a desperate situation..

"Good morning, Mr. Adams," he said politely.

"Hello. How are you, Mr. Gillette? Won't you, have a seat here? Cigarette?"

"Thank you, no. I don't smoke."

"You are very fortunate, Mr. Gillette."

"Maybe in this respect, but not in others. Or else I would not have come here."

"You need help? Any technical improvements? Some good advice?"

"All three of them is what I need. And as quickly as possible. I want to get right to the point, Mr. Adams. As soon as you decide that you are not the right man for me, please let me know. The worst thing I possibly do at this point would be to waste any time."

"Please, start talking! I'll be frank with you".

"I represent the Minneapolis Mining Company. Besides mining we are also interested in constructing big tunnels. You probably know that we are working on

the highway between Salt Lake City and San Francisco. Coming from the east we must pierce the Sierra Nevadas for a stretch of about forty-five miles. We have finished excavating a tunnel for about seven miles. But on the opposite side, coming from the west, our competitors have been working faster. They completed a stretch twice as long as we did. There is no doubt that we are going to lose out in this competition.”

“I can’t share your pessimism! After all isn’t it usual to make arrangements with the government about the deadline you have to meet, regardless of what your competitor might accomplish? Why be upset about that?”

“Let me explain that to you, if you are interested in that kind of thing. By the way, are you familiar with conditions in the mining business?”

“I might say that we pride ourselves in our special knowledge in that particular field. just go on with your explanations. I am most anxious to hear them.”

“Well then, our agreements with the government were concluded for only part and not for the whole project. Each section of the tunnel is treated, separately. That means each firm is allocated the next job proportionately to the amount of work they are capable of producing in, a given time. Therefore, the government would place only one fourth of the next order with us, seeing that we can turn out only half as much work as our competitors, Provided, of course, that we can’t manage to speed up our output somehow in the immediate future. On the, other hand, we have made all our calculations based on the assumption that we would receive exactly half of the job.”

“I am sure you will realize that we must make certain dispositions way ahead of time in an enterprise of this nature. We made certain commitments with suppliers of materials and machinery a year ago, and these suppliers will far exceed our needs if we continue working at the same speed. We are financing materials that we will never be able to use. We are paying for that exactly what our profit was supposed to be. And if you add the labour costs for 7,000 workers, we will be completely in the red. This loss will cause us to go into bankruptcy within a few months time. I am telling you this, Mr. Adams, trusting that you will treat this as a confidential matter. You assured me of utter secrecy in your ad.”

“You can depend on us, Mr. Gillette. I am very interested in your problem-almost as if it were already our own, I might add. As I see things, you must bore a large enough hole through this mountain to accommodate a modern freeway. As it happens, I have just taken out the patent for some machinery that could do the trick. What is the size of the tunnel?”

“Twenty feet high and sixty feet wide.”

“Excuse me for a moment, please” said Adams, and began to scribble some quiet figures on a piece of paper. Two minutes later his calculations were finished.

“With my special machinery you will be able to advance with your excavation

work by a mile and a half daily-provided that you withdraw your own machinery and workers from the area, as long as we use our own patented tools.”

Andre Gillette did not protest the way his predecessor, Abraham Weiss, had done, but he seemed quite indignant. “I am in no mood for silly jokes, Mr. Adams. I am fighting for my firm’s survival. This is no laughing matter for me. Don’t you have anything more realistic to suggest?”

“I was not joking at all, Mr. Gillette. I am ready to give you a quick demonstration of our working methods. Our machines work on the principle of converting matter into pure energy. Of course, not in a spontaneous process as known in the chain reaction of an atom bomb. We control the reaction. We store the energy that is set free during this conversion and sell it later on at a high profit. I am not surprised that you are sceptical. But the General Cosmic Co.’s speciality is radical improvement of current production methods. I strongly urge you to observe how our instrument works. We will give you a sample with one cubic yard of earth. Then after having watched this demonstration you can make up your mind.”

“Fine. I hope you will be able to convince us! If what you say is really so it would revolutionize the whole tunnel construction market, and we could make a real killing in it. I can see fantastic possibilities shaping up for my firm. What is your price for the use of your machinery?”

“Fifty-one percent participation in the Minneapolis Mining Co.”

Andre Gillette reacted very similarly to Mr. Weiss. He shot out of his seat and stared horrified at Adams, as if he feared for his sanity.

“But that is ridiculous, Mr. Adams! Do you have any idea what kind of firm I represent we are an enterprise of the first magnitude, and you simply propose to put it into your pocket!”

“My offer is worth more than fifty-one percent of what Minneapolis Mining Co. is worth. You just got through telling me what the fate of your firm would be in another six months, if you continue on your own. But if you decide to accept my offer that would change your moribund enterprise into the world’s leader in the construction of tunnels. You should consider me a most unselfish person, if I will be satisfied with only fifty-one percent participation.”

Andre Gillette could not hide his trembling hands any longer. “I think I had better leave now, Mr. Adams.”

“Please do, I am very pleased to have met you Mr. Gillette. If you have any more business, worries, don’t forget to call on me again.”

Miss Lawrence announced seven more callers, but none of them represented the grand style of enterprise that would have interested Adams. He got rid of them within a few minutes. He had more urgent matters to attend to.

He placed a long overdue call “Hello, Klein! What do you have to report about your interview?”

“Mission accomplished! just two hours, ago I happened to run across a reporter from *The New York Times*. We had a couple of drinks together. My anonymity was as if by accident, the way I had planned, and that fellow had to recognize me, of course. You should have seen his expression! He informed me that I was none other than Captain Klein who, had deserted from the U.S. Secret Service, and that the F.B.I. was hot on my trail. I told him that if he was that clever he also ought to know who my new bosses were. And he stated rather naively that this was a generally known fact. Then I proposed to him a compromise solution-if he would refrain from revealing my identity and therefore give up the chance for a sensational news item, I would offer him something in exchange, a veritable bombshell. I told him everything about the unknown invaders from space and particularly stressed the point that the world was facing an invasion any moment now. My source of information seemed reliable enough for him. And if he can convince his editor in chief of that bit of news, everyone will be able to read all about it in today’s papery

“Fine! Now it is 11:38 A.M. Go over to the stock exchange now and keep in touch with me. If you should have any, doubts then contact me immediately. Dr. Haggard and Dr. Manoli are already at the stock exchange. But make sure not to give away that you know each other. As far as the public is concerned, you are opponents.”

Business had been quite calm this morning at the stock exchange. Looking back on the hectic events of the past weeks, this seemed rather welcome. After the, sudden establishment of the Third Power in the Gobi Desert the securities market had taken a deep dive. When a third world war appeared imminent, the question was no longer of an economic crisis, but of total collapse. Then various manifestations of Arkonide, strength had followed. The political power blocs of the East and the West had forgotten their differences and had formed a world union among all the nations of Earth. The invasion threatening mankind from extraterrestrial enemies had been repulsed by Perry Rhodan. Now the situation in general had improved, and things were looking up again. There, was again a rising mood of confidence and hope, which was mirrored in the risen barometer of mankind’s state of mind, a high in the stock market.

Now things had returned to normal again, and the hectic weeks were about to be forgotten. It was 11:38 now. By noon the situation underwent a drastic change.

A few minutes earlier Dr. Haggard had offered some oil shares thirty points lower than the market price and had sold them at once. The brokers had simply shaken their heads in surprise and comforted themselves with the thought that some inexperienced amateur was trying to play the market with a remarkable lack of judgment. But when the noon editions of the newspaper came out, the brokers

were sure that Haggard must have a sixth sense, for he had saved his money in time.

The panic the brokers experienced on hearing the news of the invasion was not so much fear for their own safety as concern for their money. The din in the hall was tremendous for several minutes, until Mr. Oliver could manage to command their attention via the loudspeaker system.

“Gentlemen, please don’t over react to a mere newspaper report. There is no official confirmation of this rumour. The board will immediately check out the veracity of this article.”

He had hardly finished before a gentleman stormed into the hall, shouting loudly that radio Peking had broadcast the same news simultaneously, independently of *The New York Times*.

“Seventy for General Electric!” a voice suddenly shouted. Dead silence fell on the huge room. But then the storm broke loose and quickly grew to hurricane strength. General Electric had opened that morning at 145!

While Mr. Oliver and his ushers, supported by police were trying desperately to restore order in the big hall, unofficial business deals were being concluded in the corridors. The pessimists were selling frantically while the optimists felt they could make a killing. It took half an hour before Mr. Oliver could control the frenetic buying and selling. There were rumours of closing the stock exchange, but many protested against it.

The G.C.C. agents were still holding back. According to their instructions they should wait before starting to buy, even in the present favourable situation. Only when activity of selling and buying had come to a standstill did Mr. Haggard make a moderate attempt. He caused Standard Oil to drop thirty-five points, and soon pandemonium reigned again. Haggard withdrew quickly and let the others work, until there were more people wanting to buy than to sell. At 12:55 Opiat, Ltd., shares suddenly began to rise.

Homer G. Adams, who had been in constant touch with the events at the stock exchange, spoke a brief order into his microphone. “You have bought Opiat, Manoli. Make a conspicuous private deal with Captain Klein. Go down forty points! After all everything remains in the same family, nothing can happen to us.”

By 12:57 Opiat, Ltd., had lost seventy-five percent of its opening value. The majority of the other securities shortly followed suit. Toward closing time just as things seemed to have calmed down again, despite the heavy losses the market had sustained, Homer G. Adams dropped his biggest bombshell.

A special radio communiqué announced that an unknown spaceship had lifted a whole fishing fleet several miles up into the air somewhere in the Timor Sea off the northwest coast of Australia. Then all the ships had been dropped again into the water. The newscaster ended his Special announcement with these words:

“... assumptions that these actions emanated from the Third Power must be rejected. After diplomatic negotiations the Third Power must be considered absolutely loyal to the interests of all mankind.

“After the alien spaceship had dropped the fishing fleet back into the ocean, where approximately 400 men lost their lives, the spacecraft was observed to descend again rapidly to almost ground level and open its hatches or air locks, from which several thousands of grotesque looking creatures jumped into the water. They swam around for several minutes and then disappeared under the surface of the ocean.

“There can be no doubt that we are dealing here with strange nonhumanoid creatures whose natural habitat seems to be the ocean. It remains uncertain but most likely that the invasion of the ocean will be followed by an invasion of the land masses. United Nations headquarters has issued its first communiqué that proper steps will be taken against the invaders.”

No one was thinking of closing the exchange now! Everyone was frantically trying to sell, at whatever loss. Even the most hardboiled brokers lost their nerve and sold at any price they could get. Within fifteen minutes huge concerns and trusts changed hands. Nobody seemed to wonder that there were still some people risking their money to acquire such worthless enterprises, when the end of the world was coming closer and closer.

The stock market closed. It had experienced the biggest crash in history. The whole world market appeared to have come to a total standstill.

Homer G. Adams sat in his office at G.C.C. in complete silence. He had long since cut off his connection with his middlemen at the stock exchange. He did not want to run the risk of anyone's listening in. He was now enjoying the calm after the storm. He was thinking and waiting.

Toward four o'clock in the afternoon his phone rang. It was Mr. Weiss.

“Hello, Mr. Weiss. How are you?”

“What is your opinion about the situation, Mr. Adams?”

“It's nothing but a joke. Tomorrow everything will have blown over.”

“Well I must say, you are the last optimist in the world.”

“That's what I would like to be-the last optimist, the one who laughs last. But I am sure I am not alone. There must be more of my kind. Why are you calling, Mr. Weiss? You wouldn't be interested in my offer?”

“Does the offer still stand?”

“Why, of course. Life goes on, as far as I am concerned .”

“Very well, then. I'd like to get together with you tomorrow. I could charter a plane.”

“That won't be necessary. We can take mine. It isn't any slower than the fastest plane you could get anywhere in the world.”

“Okay, Mr. Adams. Thank you. I'll see you then tomorrow at-”

“Hold it. Have you thought about my terms for our deal?”

“Yes, Mr. Adams. Fifty-one percent for you, as you suggested.”

They arranged a meeting for six A.M. the following day.

The only thing that surprised Homer G. Adams about the next business discussion was that he had expected to speak with Mr. Andre Gillette on the phone. Instead the wiry little man called in person at his office.

“Mr. Adams, we have been seriously considering your offer. The Minneapolis Mining Co. agrees to your proposals. We would like you to demonstrate your machines tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow afternoon, Mr. Gillette. I already have an appointment for the morning in the Midwest. But after lunch I will be able to fly over to Sacramento. Will that suit you?”

“Excellent. This will leave us enough time to clean out the tunnel, so that you can carry out your demonstration without any danger.”

“Fine. And you know our terms. I would like to show you the draft of our contract, since you are here, in the office already. Then you will need only to sign it tomorrow we will have it ready for you by then.”

Gillette read the agreement attentively. Then he declared, “I agree to all points, except for the percentage of your participation in our enterprise. My partners have authorized me to present this counter offer to you. They feel it would be too great a disadvantage for us if you had the majority. Therefore they suggest forty-five percent.”

Adams’s face displayed a sweet, fatherly smile, “You act as you did in the good old days, Mr. Gillette. Does it really matter now who controls the majority? Haven’t you lost your shirt in today’s market crash like everyone else?”

“Not at all, Mr. Adams. You know that our stock has dropped by more than fifty percent. But I am sure that you must still think highly of our company, especially since shares have fallen far more heavily than ours. You still get a splendid deal by entering our firm, even if you don’t control the majority.”

“I was, called the last optimist an Earth barely half an ago. Now I, realize that I am not alone in this respect.”

The short dark haired man bowed elegantly and replied, “We understand each other, Mr. Adams. If the Minneapolis Mining co. can bore tunnels through mountains, then she will become the leading firm for the construction of air raid shelters within the next three days. After that catastrophe in the Timor Sea Down Under, the only money that anyone is willing to spend will be for building underground bunkers. You see how well we are aware of our potentialities in that case. And you will profit from this emergency the same way we will. Of course, it is quite possible that there is a real basis to the current general mood of expecting the end of the world. But if that should be the case, we would have lost everything anyhow. We just prepare for the eventuality that life must go on and why

shouldn't we? Mankind has always managed to muddle along and will continue to do so as long as any human being is alive."

Homer G. Adams seemed impressed by such a high opinion of humanity's potential for survival, "All right, then. I'll have the contracts typed out and will bring them along with me when we meet tomorrow. G.C.C. will be satisfied under the circumstances with forty-five percent. We will get along with each other."

Two days had gone by.

The demonstrations of the work capacity of General Cosmic Co.'s machinery had been completed successfully, and the contracts had been signed. Homer G. Adams had flown to the central Gobi Desert base of the Third Power to report on his activities of the last few days. Even Thora and Khrest, who normally preferred not to participate in intraterrestrial affairs, came to listen to Adam's report.

"What is the state of mind of the people on the outside?" inquired Rhodan.

Homer G. Adams lowered his huge head for a moment and then looked around at his friends. "The events of the past days seem to be a repetition of previous experiences that I have gone through. But at that time I was put behind bars for it. This time around, I realize that my actions can be justified. But I want to emphasize that I do not feel responsible for the suicides committed. If they can't get over the loss of material possessions, well, it's their own affair. Besides, I believe that most suicides were caused by the fear of the threatened invasion."

Adams looked over at Reginald Bell while Rhodan said, "Whichever way you look at it, we can't deny having caused mankind a great deal of anxiety. All in this room here know, however, that our action is justifiable for the invasion is a real threat, not just an imaginary one. The alien invader fleet might arrive any day, any hour. The horrible film that Bell projected over the Timor Sea with the fantastic Arkonide instruments might possibly have been a preview of what lies in store for all of us on Earth. We have the duty to protect the human race from such dangers, for we alone are powerful enough to do so. This, on the other hand, leads to our obligation to our industrial potential, which again is possible only if we exert sufficient influence over the world's economy. A constitution that is supposed to unite and protect a planet must necessarily also control its economic potential. Last week, when you went to New York we had only modest financial assets. What is the situation now, Mr. Adams?"

"Mr. Bell's Arkonide spectacle over the Timor Sea has tipped the scales for us. We have already laid some solid groundwork, though. We managed to bring utter confusion to the New York Stock Exchange, the same as Mr. Kakuta in Tokyo, Mr. Marshall in Cape Town, Mr. Li Tschai-tung in London, and Mr. Kosnow in Berlin. With a comparatively ridiculous sum of a few million dollars we have bought up whole industries and attained majority in four major concerns. Naturally, it won't be possible to give repeat performances of this financial coup,

for the world does not fall twice for the same trick. Besides, such tactics would be irresponsible. We don't want to destroy the world economy. Yesterday's manoeuvre can happen only once every thirty years. It takes a long period of recovery after any major bank crash. If a second should follow too soon, we might face a total collapse of the world economy. We want to avoid that at all costs, because we, too, would suffer by it. We don't want to be buried under the ruins of a destroyed economic system. Believe me, gentlemen, I have a great deal of experience in this field. We have gone as far as possible but we have reached the limits now. Is there anyone here who does not agree with me?"

Homer G. Adams's glance swept the round of the assembled group. His question was directed to all of them, but every-one knew that it was really meant for Rhodan alone. "Your success has borne out our prophecy, Mr. Adams." Declared Perry Rhodan. "You will remember my initial scepticism. I would have settled for less than you produced. The way things stand now, I must express my sincere gratitude and admiration for what you accomplished for the Third Power. In addition, you have arranged some advantageous business deals with our Arkonide machinery. Still, it seems advisable now to proceed a bit more cautiously."

"Why, of course. We will always take into consideration Khrest's veto power. And you, Mr. Rhodan, always have final say in what the public is permitted to learn of the secrets of the Arkonide technology. The energy matter converter that I put at the disposal of the Minneapolis Mining Co. and Mr. Weiss of the Steel and Concrete, Inc., is already an obsolete model by Arkonide standards. But they were most helpful to us in our present situation. Both firms, in which you hold the majority under the fictitious name of Benjamin Wilder as proprietor of G.C.C., have already outpaced any competitors in their special fields; they will be the leaders in the economic revival that will follow the current financial crash. I cannot foresee any financial difficulties ahead. For us, we can pay off immediately the seven billion dollars to the Peking government for the purchase of our territory. We will no longer need to make the payments in several instalments the way we had planned. It is now all cash on the line. In addition to that we will have at our disposal another four billion dollars within the next six weeks or so, which we will use for our assembly plant inside our domain."

Rhodan seemed pleased with Adams's report "We have accomplished a lot these past few days," he commented. "There is still a great deal more to be done. We now have the financial means that we so urgently needed. Whatever else we require will be provided through Mr. Adams financial wizardry. Although we can't count on another bonanza as the last stock market crash, we will find ways to acquire interests in big industrial concerns, with the help of the superior Arkonide machinery, exactly the way we did with Mr. Weiss's and Mr. Gillette's firms."

“But this is really the least of my worries. It will be months or even years before we can build up an efficient industrial program inside the realm of the Third Power. On the other hand, we are facing burning problems that must be dealt with at once. The Fantan invasion might occur any day now. Reg’s most convincing trick film could become the reality of tomorrow. Then, however, the hostile invaders won’t simply disappear into the waters of the ocean, never to be seen again!

“Another immediate problem is our lack of human resources for the Third Power. The Arkonide robots will not be able to provide all the help we must have in the near future. We need collaborators, living beings and not machines, who will watch out for our interests all over the globe. I will issue further instructions in this regard later on in the day. But for the moment, let me say this-whoever brings a new citizen to the domain of the Third Power will have to be one hundred percent sure of his worth and usefulness for us. Considering our limited space, we can accommodate only a limited number of these collaborators in our new state. Since we are forced to make tremendous demands on each of the new people, we can accept only the cream of the crop of mankind to join here in our endeavours. We must search for persons with new faculties!”

“You mean we must find mutants, positive mutants,” commented Bell.

Rhodan replied with a silent nod. He did not speak of the vision that Bell’s words had conjured up in his mind. Instead he posed a seemingly unconnected question to Adams. “Say, Adams, what is the cube of 2,369.7?”

The short man looked perplexed and then picked up slide rule.

“Not that way!” Interjected Rhodan. “Calculate in your head.”

“That will take a little while...”

“Well then, forget it! The result is 13,306,998,429.873. By the way, I am puzzled about one thing you mentioned earlier in our conversation. You talked about our having acquired the majority in the firms of Steel and Concrete, Inc., as well as the Minneapolis Mining Co. But in the beginning you stated that only Mr. Weiss would accept the fifty-one percent clause while Mr. Gillette concluded the bargain with you at only forty-five percent.”

“Oh, that’s quite simple,” explained Adams. “We had previously purchased seven percent of the Minneapolis Mining shares on the stock market. Of course, Gillette had no idea of that when he came to me to seal the deal.”

Perry Rhodan waited until the general laughter had abated before he continued, “Wonderful! Congratulations on your accomplishments! But now let us discuss the details of our next enterprise-roundup of the mutant corps!”

CHAPTER FIVE

Colonel Kaats had sent some alarming news from New York to the Greenland base of Allan D. Mercant, who was overwhelmed with pressing work and had therefore only reluctantly flown to see the colonel. Mercant blew his top when Kaats's urgent affair turned out to, be nothing but a report of the disappearance of the mutant Anne Sloane. She had been ordered to work in east Asia, where her special telekinetic abilities were needed by the Secret Service of the Western Bloc. Now no trace of her could be found.

"You make me fly here, almost 3,000 miles to New York, just to tell me that, Kaats?"

"I had to talk with you, Mercant. Isn't that sufficient? Isn't a secret agent important enough, if we are dealing with an irreplaceable mutant?"

"You mean to say if that agent happens to work for the inner defence and federal criminal police, Kaats," corrected Mercant angrily. "Let me tell you something, Kaats! Just don't bother about Anne Sloane for one full month. If she is supposed to find out something for us, then we must allow sufficient time for her to do the job. She might be a para, all right, but she is still very immature and knows little of what it's all about in this life. I had advised her to proceed cautiously rather than act rashly. After all she is just an amateur at this game. And now, Kaats, I hope you don't mind if I leave you in a hurry. I am drowning in work at the Greenland base."

"Come on, first have a drink with me!" Kaats insisted amiably. "I can't let you leave in such a horrible mood."

Mercant had his glass of whiskey. "You know, Kaats, the only thing that made my flight to New York worthwhile is the excellent whiskey here. But please, avoid such false alarms in the future! I hate such waste of my precious time!"

Mercant was still angry as his jet descended to land at the airstrip at Umanak Fjord. The most infuriating thing about this whole trip to the United States was his own lack of secrecy. He should never have shared his private opinion about Anne Sloane with Colonel Kaats. Anne was a delicate young girl and totally unfit for secret service work. True enough, he had urged her himself to accept the job, but now he had definitely changed his mind.

In a short while he made his way to the bungalow on which the name of the fictitious firm UMANAK FUR COMPANY could be read in huge letters. It was not an outright lie, for the secret service center really did deal occasionally in fun for more efficient camouflage of its real activities.

Mercant descended in the elevator down to the fifteenth floor. There he transferred to another elevator, since no direct connection existed between ground level and the main quarters, of the secret service, for security reasons. Down below, at a depth of nearly two miles, lay Mercant's realm. The guards at the doors and in the hallways saluted smartly at his approach. Hardly ten persons of all the five hundred people working at the base had been initiated into the secret installations of this underground maze. These ten were the only ones permitted to move freely without presenting their identification papers.

Mercant had to cross three rooms before he reached his own office. There he sank with a sigh into a deep armchair and settled down comfortably.

Then he rang for his orderly. Almost immediately Sergeant O'Healy responded to his summons.

"Anything special happen while I was away, Sergeant?"

"No, sir!"

"Thank you. What is the time?"

"Seventeen minutes past eleven, sir."

Mercant was satisfied. He had made sure that it was just sixteen minutes past eleven. "What time of the day is it?"

"Morning, sir."

That meant it was night, and with these wrong answers the true identity of Sergeant O'Healy had been sufficiently established.

"All right, Sergeant. Tell Captain Zimmerman that I'd like to see him!"

"Captain Zimmerman is not on the base at the moment, sir. He is on a routine patrol flight."

"Hmm. Does he still believe that our enemies are going to creep up on us across Greenland's icy desert, while the agents of other secret services keep bumping into each other right here on the base?"

"I wouldn't know what Captain Zimmerman believes, sir."

"Well, I am going to find that out for myself. I want him to report here in my office within ten minutes. Call him on the radio!"

"Yes, sir."

O'Healy disappeared but came back shortly. "I spoke with Captain Zimmerman and relayed your message to him. Captain Zimmerman said that he might be a bit delayed. He just made a strange discovery and wants to investigate it further before reporting back to you."

"What kind of a discovery is that?" asked Mercant in a brusque tone.

"He could not tell. Evidently he did not know himself what he had

encountered.”

Mercant dismissed the sergeant. Then he pulled out the bottom drawer of his writing desk and switched on, the built in radio transmitter. O’Healy’s report had been too skimpy; therefore, Mercant preferred to get in touch directly with Captain Zimmerman.

“Calling Captain Zimmerman! Come in, Captain Zimmerman! Mercant calling Captain Zimmerman!”

Mercant waited in vain for a reply for almost ten seconds. Then he heard Zimmerman’s voice. He had obvious difficulty speaking. He started with a low moan. “Hello, this is Captain Zimmerman, sir. I must have blacked, out for a moment. My head is swimming, and I am seeing spots in front of my eyes.”

“What has happened, Captain Zimmerman?”

“I don’t know myself. I am returning to base at once, sir.”

“What is your location? I am sending another plane to escort you back here.”

“That won’t be necessary, sir. I’ll make it with the help of the autopilot.”

“Are you sure? Call if you need any help, will you?”

“Certainly, sir. Thank you.”

Mercant switched off and then called the airfield. Captain Zimmerman seems to be in difficulties. Let me know his present location. You have his flight plan, don’t you?”

A short time later Mercant was informed that Zimmerman was just flying over the northern coast near Proeven and was flying south by southwest. Apparently he had regained full control over his machine.

Captain Zimmerman made an uneventful landing, then went directly down to Mercant’s private office.

“I am sorry to be late, sir,” he said. “I must have run into, some unusual turbulence, which apparently caused a rapid drop of the plane. Anyhow, the unexpected acceleration seems to have made my head snap back suddenly and bumped it against the ceiling of the cabin. I must have lost consciousness for a few moments.”

“Let me see your head!”

Mercant inspected the wound. “That doesn’t look too good Captain. You will have to get medical attention for it right away. But before you leave, tell me about the mysterious discovery you mentioned to Sergeant O’Healy.”

As Mercant made these comments, he was almost overwhelmed by shock. Looking at the wound, he had stepped immediately behind Zimmerman. There he picked up a rather feeble thought impression with the help of his telepathic powers. This thought frightened him thoroughly. Fortunately, Mercant was endowed with outstanding presence of mind. Any man who had worked up his way to the leading figure in the International Intelligence Agency within a few short years must be blessed with very fast reactions.

He had just begun to suggest that Zimmerman seek medical attention, when he became aware of the deadly thought. He managed to complete, his remarks without any apparent interruption.

“What discovery, sir? Oh, that was just a joke!”

“You mean to say you were taking the liberty of playing jokes on me?” asked Mercant sharply. He was still standing behind the captain, who was seated in a chair. Mercant did not have the slightest intention of abandoning this advantageous position.

“That joke was intended for Sergeant O’Healy. I had no idea that he would report this to you.”

“Very odd, Zimmerman, what strange notions you suddenly develop about our regulations here on the base. On the one hand you go out on patrol flights for the protection of our center, and on the other hand you indulge in silly jokes. This seems rather incompatible to me. Well then, tell me what you saw out there.”

“Nothing, Sir.”

“Remain seated, Captain!” commanded Mercant as Zimmerman began to stand up.

Mercant was fighting to achieve utmost concentration. Several weeks ago he had read in the newspapers about an Australian bank teller who had foiled some bank robbers thanks to his telepathic powers. For quite some time Mercant had noticed similar abilities in himself. He had finally realized what it meant that he was capable of reading someone else’s mind, so to speak, during critical moments. He would have given anything now to be a genuine telepath! He was nothing but a clumsy, amateur in this field. He was unable to comprehend clearly the other person’s thought. He could not discern word by word, but only get general impression of thoughts.

How was it possible to avoid misunderstandings? Why should Zimmerman be thinking of killing him? There was murder on Zimmerman’s mind, though, quite unmistakably. This murderous desire was concentrated on the Chief of the International Intelligence Agency. That meant him-Allan D. Mercant! He had become absolutely sure of this now.

Mercant glanced over Zimmerman’s shoulder and saw his gun in the holster. For a split second he pondered taking possession of it by a surprise move, but he quickly dismissed the idea. Zimmerman, his mind preoccupied with the intention of killing Mercant, was already concentrating on his weapon and would beat the physically inferior Mercant to it. Mercant had to get to his own gun now-the one in the-bottom drawer of his desk just next to the radio transmitter.

If both were equally armed, Mercant would have the advantage, for the captain had not the least inkling that his intended victim was forewarned. To bring about this situation would involve a great risk for about five to six seconds, since Mercant had to leave his sheltered place behind Zimmerman to reach his writing

desk. Mercant's ruse was the skilful use of words, which made his adversary curious and caused him to hesitate in anticipation.

"Wait a minute, Captain Zimmerman. I listened in to your radio conversation with Sergeant O'Healy and taped it. Something was said there that puzzled me, and you might supply an explanation. I was not under the impression that you were merely joking. Or how would you explain the following matter?..."

"What do you mean by that?"

Mercant started his dangerous walk around the writing desk. Zimmerman turned with his swivel chair, following Mercant with his eyes. Finally both men sat facing each other, the huge desk between them. Curiosity had won out in Zimmerman. He did not shoot; he waited.

Mercant opened the desk drawer and switched on the tape recorder. At the same time he grasped his gun. At once he felt safe again. He turned the tape recorder off.

Zimmerman flared up. "Why did you stop? Why don't you play the tape? No secrecy all of a sudden, sir!"

"Patience patience, Zimmerman! just a question before I start playing that tape-what advantage do you expect if you kill me?"

This question brought about the end of their conversation. Zimmerman was too startled by the unexpected turn in their talk to maintain total control over his body. The would-be assassin knew he had been found out, but he still wanted to execute his plan.

He tore his gun from the holster, but before he could aim and shoot, he had lost valuable time. Mercant's weapon had been pointed at Zimmerman through the knee opening in his desk. Mercant simply pulled the trigger while the assailant was still trying to get into position.

The captain collapsed like an empty sack. He was dead before he could cock his pistol.

An unprecedented event in the history of the Greenland base of the International Intelligence Agency followed-Sergeant O'Healy stormed into Mercant's private office without having been summoned! He was wildly waving his gun, but he stopped in his tracks when he saw the unharmed colonel sitting in his chair. Wild eyed, he stared at the dead man in the chair in front of the desk.

"Sir, what has happened here?"

"I shot Captain Zimmerman, Give the general alarm! I'll give the orders myself for sealing off the buildings."

O'Healy saluted and disappeared. Shortly thereafter the sirens began howling on all floors of the underground installation.

Mercant went to the intercom and spoke over the public address system. "Mercant speaking. Calling all personnel. We are in a state of emergency from this moment on! Officer of the Guard, Lieutenant Houseman-blockade all exits!

Special surveillance of all elevator shafts. All other personnel to go immediately to their work stations or private quarters. Members of foreign delegations please assemble in the transfer hotel on the top floor. Await further instructions there. Explanations will follow later. Colonel Cretcher and Dr. Curtis are to report at once to my office. Thank you.”

The colonel and the physician arrived almost simultaneously at Mercant’s private office. Dr. Curtis stepped over to Zimmerman’s body.

“Please, Dr. Curtis, examine him at once. and tell me if he is dead.”

“Do you need any confirmation for that, Mr. Mercant?”

“Yes, for the sake of formality.”

“Killing a person is not a matter of formality, sir,” protested Cretcher. “Why did you shoot him?”

“To prevent him from shooting me first.”

“You mean to say that Captain Zimmerman attacked you? Pardon me, sir, for being so blunt. Do you have any eyewitnesses that can confirm you acted in self-defence?”

“You will forgive me for being equally frank, Cretcher. You have no business accusing me here. I called you to help me clear up many problems that pose themselves in this situation. I know very little about the scene that just took place here in this room. All I can tell you is that he wanted to kill me and I prevented him from doing so by shooting him. These are the facts. But I must learn the reasons that led one of our most trustworthy people to such an attack on my person. Zimmerman’s action seems so absurd that we must consider the possibility of a plot. That is why I have declared a state of emergency. We must proceed swiftly in case there should be any accomplices of Zimmerman’s on the base who have been plotting against myself and our headquarters.”

Mercant turned to the doctor. “You have noted that Zimmerman is I dead, Dr. Curtis. There is no doubt what led to his demise. Nevertheless, I would like you to examine Zimmerman’s head. I have noticed there a very conspicuous wound. The captain gave me a rather odd reason how he obtained it.”

Curtis examined the wound and stated, “Somebody must have struck a violent blow against Zimmerman’s skull from above. But how is this possible? You told me yourself that you shot him.”

“How do you mean that?”

“You shot him dead-you did not strike him dead!”

“How old is his head wound, Doctor?”

“Approximately half an hour.”

“But half an hour ago Captain Zimmerman was still outside the base flying on patrol. There are plenty of witnesses for that.”

“I can’t understand all this,” the doctor said. “Didn’t Zimmerman show any signs of weakness? No, all signs point to it that the blow to his head was fatal. He

was killed when something or someone struck him on the skull.”

“You must be mistaken. Zimmerman was very much alive when he came to my office. But be that as it may, I am very much intrigued by your diagnosis. I would be interested in finding out how and where the captain was killed for the first time and how he managed to live on despite his fatal wound. Let’s inspect his airplane. Would you please accompany me upstairs to the airfield!”

The machine was a four seater, so Mercant, Curtis and Cretcher could sit down in it without being cramped.

“Here is the pilot’s seat,” said the chief, and sat down in it. “The captain claimed that he had encountered some turbulence and had descended rapidly when he hit an air pocket. This caused excessive acceleration, which snapped his head backward. Now, gentlemen, could you explain to me where he might have hit his head?”

The answer was obvious. Zimmerman had lied. Seat number three had been behind him. He would have had to stand up to hit his head against the cabin ceiling.

“Besides, we should see some bloodstains on the ceiling,” said Cretcher.

Mercant inquired from the officer on duty, “Which plane did Captain Zimmerman fly today on his patrol mission?”

“This one, sir.”

“Thank you.” Then Mercant addressed his two companions. Make yourselves comfortable in your seats, gentlemen. We will retrace Captain Zimmerman’s patrol flight“

Mercant started the engine and flew along the coastline in a northerly direction.

“Captain Zimmerman acted rather unusual during his mission,” remarked the chief. “When I ordered him to return to base he spoke of some strange discovery he had just made. He wanted to investigate it still further. Then he did not reply for quite some time and then claimed to have lost consciousness for a while. The whole affair must have occurred north of Proeven.”

Mercant descended to 2,500 feet after having flown over Proeven. He asked his companions to participate in optical observation of the terrain.

The weather was clear, and there was no wind. If Zimmerman had noticed something, then it must still be visible barely an hour later. Cretcher called out suddenly, “Down there! Do you see it? There are some landing tracks ... that must have been made by Zimmerman’s machine ... and then next to them this round spot! What on Earth can that be?”

Mercant turned around and flew once more over the site. He descended to 300 feet. They could clearly distinguish now that the round spot was really a hemisphere something like an igloo but completely black. They could recognize the landing tracks very distinctly. There was no doubt that Zimmerman’s plane had made them.

They landed close to the black “igloo.” Mercant stepped out and reached it first. He touched it. “Odd! It’s made of metal. Who would construct such a funny looking thing in the middle of nowhere here in the Arctic? And it doesn’t even have any entrance or windows. I can’t find any welded seams, either. What do you think of that Cretcher?”

“It looks like nothing I have ever encountered. Almost unearthly!”

Mercant knocked on the unknown material that he had called metal. There was a hollow sound.

Mercant knocked on it once more.

“Step back, gentlemen! I can’t locate any door or any other opening, but we will get inside it somehow. I want to know for sure what we are dealing with.”

The men stepped back and opened a concentrated barrage on the igloo with their machine guns. But the bullets could not even dent the metal of the strange structure.

“Wait a-moment. I’ll get some explosives from the plane.”

Their efforts were crowned with success. The force of the explosion lifted the hemisphere up, which caused it to topple over. Underneath it they saw a small crater that the detonation had hollowed out in the snow ... and a torn body. This body was naked and hairy but of an undefined nature. Curtis picked up a limb that might have been an arm but unlike any arm they had ever seen on any living being on Earth.

“Six joints,” murmured Dr. Curtis with fascination. “This creature must have come from another world. Unfortunately it, is dead, and we cannot reconstruct its original shape. But it is certain that this is what Captain Zimmerman encountered when he landed here on his patrol flight. What are you going to do now, sir?”

“Just gather up all the pieces, and well take them along with us. I’m afraid that Rhodan doesn’t know anything of this monster! He will be interested in it all the more. I have an idea that this is the start of the invasion that has frightened mankind for days and weeks with nightmarish dreams!”

CHAPTER SIX

Nagasaki, Japan.

More than 40,000 spectators had gathered at the Kashiri stadium to watch the final game of the Japanese Football League. The air was oppressive and filled with the tense mood of the crowd, eagerly awaiting the outcome of the game.

Two men were sitting in Section F of the huge arena. In their pockets was hidden some complicated machinery. Although they were separated by more than 150 feet, the two remained in constant communication with each other. The brainwave location finders functioned smoothly and almost noiselessly. The instruments slight hum was completely drowned out by 40,000 roaring voices.

Tako Kakuta and Reginald Bell were not really interested in what was going on down on the field. They merely pretended interest by visually following the football, since they did not want to arouse suspicion. All their thoughts were concentrated on their real mission-hunting for mutants to swell the ranks of Rhodan's small troop of faithful.

Their miniature radios were masterpieces of precision tooling. The transmitters were constructed of two tiny plastic foils, lying on top of each other. In the space between them were arranged all the technical elements. They wore the senders attached to the inside of their shirt collars, which also hid the highly sensitive throat microphones capable of picking up the slightest whisper. The men had hidden the receivers in their ears, where, they took up as much space as a small cotton ball.

Suddenly Bell received a message from Kakuta. "Abnormal brainwave pattern. Most remarkable superimposed waves at 33,000 angstroms. What do you make of it?"

"Incredibly high value, Tako. Even considering the excitement of this football match, such a high frequency is totally outside the normal range. Do you have the coordinates for the man's seat?"

"I have them marked down."

"All right. Wait until I have him, located too."

Reginald Bell was working with one hand in his pocket. The direction finder's antenna swept along the rows of spectators in their seats of Section F. Since Bell knew the value of the abnormality he was searching for, it was almost child's play

for him. He receiver settled automatically as soon as it hit the target it was looking for.

“These are my coordinates, Tako. According to the seating plan it is 135 degrees, seven minutes, thirty seconds.”

“Thanks! My readings are forty-six degrees, twelve minutes exactly. Please calculate the exact location of the man’s seat.”

Both Tako and Bell were busy calculating for a moment. Then they compared their results. The seat was number 844 injection F.

“That’s perfect!” said Bell. “I am going now to the main entrance. It’s another twenty-five minutes till half-time.”

“Very good,” replied Tako. “Take care of the robot commando.”

The plan of action had been worked out in detail and to perfection. With the help of Arkonide instruments they had determined from some distance away where their mutant target was. But to be on the safe side Tako wanted to have a quick look at his compatriot from close by.

He approached his seat in an inconspicuous manner and snapped a picture of the pleasant faced twenty-five year old fellow. Then Tako made his way up the stairs. There near the entrance he met Reginald Bell.

“Everything went fine. Here is a photo of the young man. Are the robots ready for action?”

Bell nodded briefly and then put the picture into his pocket. Both waited for the end of the game, when the people would be leaving their seats. Then the two mutant hunters would close in on their prey.

Tako and Bell stationed themselves at opposite ends of row 34. The young man from seat 844 walked toward the, right, where Bell would have to intercept him. But the suspected mutant was in the company of two friends. Rhodan’s emissaries would have to exercise some patience.

Outside the stadium the robot car was parked amid thousands of other automobiles. The robot’s direction finder was already set for the young mutant Japanese, who was getting into his car quite some distance away. His two friends were riding with him. The traffic was too thick to get anywhere near the trio’s car. Bell and Tako had to rely entirely on their brainwave direction finder to maintain contact with their intended catch.

Bell and Tako communicated via their miniature radios. Kakuta managed to push his way toward Bell but did not quite reach him.

“Do you see that dark red car over there? That’s the one!”

“Impossible to get to it. And the robots are parked too far to the, back of the lot Take your car, Bell. That’s best solution now.”

“But those guys will have disappeared before I even can get my car started!”

“Just a moment! Make a right turn-that’s a shortcut to the freeway. This way you can overtake the dark. red car. Keep close to it; don’t lose it from your sight!”

“And how about you, Tako?”

“I’ll take a taxi.”

“But that’s nonsense! You will lose too much time that way!”

Tako smiled. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll make up for the lost time. Just keep in touch with me!”

Several hundred yards behind him followed the robot car, which remained inconspicuous because of its polarized glass panes, which prevented anyone from seeing what was inside.

Tako seemed to have got the worst of the bargain. His taxicab was hemmed in by the traffic and could advance only very slowly. Tako kept urging, the cab driver on, but the cab was solidly caught in the traffic jam.

After fifteen minutes of snail paced progress Tako realized that something had to be done; he would have to act very quickly.

“They have just stopped their car,” reported Bell via radio. “I just drove past them. They probably want to go to a restaurant. There is one at the corner of the next big intersection.”

“I know the place,” confirmed Tako. “Turn around. We will meet in the restaurant. Relay instructions to the robot car to keep an eye on the dark red automobile and to park somewhere near it.”

Tako was aware that it would take him at least another fifteen minutes by taxi to reach the corner where the others had stopped. He decided to act. No longer did he urge the taxi driver to hurry up but quietly placed the amount of his fare plus a generous tip on the back seat. Then he concentrated on teleporting himself into the washroom of the restaurant.

The cab driver probably wondered for the rest of his life where his passenger had gone. But what really mattered to him was that he had not been cheated out of his fare.

Kakuta’s body passed into a state of pure energy and then rematerialized at the destination he had been concentrating on. He arrived at the restroom the same instant that the man from seat 844 was entering the restaurant with his friends. It was not difficult for Tako to get a table close to that occupied by the trio. And when Reginald Bell finally made his way into the dining room, the greater part of their difficulties had been overcome.

“We got him!” said Bell jubilantly. “Let’s drink to that!” They enjoyed their drink. Waiting was not an unpleasant task under the circumstances. The rest of their plan would be carried out by their robots.

Three hours later the three friends left, and each went his own way to return to their nearby homes. The mutant lived around the corner from the restaurant. The plate at his front door carried the name TAMA YOKIDA.

Later in the evening someone rang his doorbell. Tama Yokida answered the door, not expecting anything unusual, but his suspicions were aroused by a

strange hissing sound. That was the last conscious thought he had, for he had already breathed in a large dose of a fast acting anesthetic gas spray. Two shadowy figures of plastic and metal carried him swiftly to a car parked in front, which sped away into the dark night.

While the robot commandos were abducting the mutant Tama Yokida in a style devoid of any personal element, Reginald Bell and Tako Kakuta were already out tracing down further suitable candidates for the Third Power, For the finale of their action in Japan they had purchased two expensive tickets for the Metropole Opera House and had arrived at their loge seats for the evening performance.

When the first intermission came around they had already detected three persons in the audience with abnormal brainwave patterns. Security permitted them to deal with only one subject at a time. Therefore, they chose as their target the person showing the strongest deviation from the norm of human brainwave patterns.

The suspected mutant in the audience was a single girl by the name of Ishi Matsu. A gentleman friend accompanied her home. He had hardly left her at her front door before the robot commando rang the bell. Thinking her escort had returned for some reason, she opened the door. She was carried off shortly before midnight.

In the meantime Bell and Kakuta were sitting in their hotel room, having a few drinks and discussing the results of their campaign.

“Twelve mutants. Rhodan will be very pleased. He asked for only ten. Let’s quickly check the list again. André Noir, son of a French couple residing in Japan; Ralf Marten, son of a German father and a Japanese mother. The rest of group all Japanese citizens. Ishi Matsu the only woman among them. The men: Wuriu Sengu, Son Okura, Tanaka Seiko, Doitsu Ataka, Kitai Ishibashi, Nomo Yatuhin, Tama Yokida.”

“That makes ten altogether.”

“Of course. In addition to these we have Fellmer Lloyd, who is our proof that mutations are not solely due to atom bomb explosions. The same as with Ras Tschubai, whom we found in Africa. That makes a round dozen.”

“Are you superstitious?” asked Tako suddenly.

“Why?”

“I am still thinking of our thirteenth mutant. We have another two days to go....” With these words Tako pointed to a newspaper clipping on the table.

“Oh, that story about the German from Munich. I don’t believe there is any truth to that report,” countered Bell.

“Shouldn’t we reserve our judgment until we have personally checked into the matter? Of course, it’s an old trick to draw attention to yourself by making all kind of prophecies for the, future and having some eager reporter write an article about it in the papers. But appearances indicate that Ellert tried his best to avoid

any publicity for his predictions. One of his friends supplied the information to one of the local newspapers. *Teletemporation* ... I can see all kinds of new possibilities for us with Ellert's special gift. I am greatly intrigued by this so far hypothetical aberration. But if it should turn out to be true ... ! And besides, he would be the only one we would not have to kidnap. It seems he is trying to join Rhodan in the Gobi Desert base."

"Well we should certainly help him to get there, if he wants to!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

As the rays of the rising sun were reflected by the mirrorlike surface of the Goshun Salt in the Gobi Desert, no one could have known what tremendous events the young day held in store for all mankind. Originally Rhodan had intended to inspect the progress being made in the construction of their finishing plants. The first prefab parts had just arrived from Pittsburgh, and the work robots had erected the huge assembly sheds within the past three days.

Perry Rhodan stepped from his personal bungalow, which stood not far from the two spaceships. His attention was drawn to a strange scene. He quickly changed his original plans and observed a group of four people who came toward him, calling and waving. He stood there waiting for them to come closer. He could distinguish now a female figure among the group. She seemed to follow the men rather reluctantly.

Anne Sloane was near collapse. Clumsily, she took a photo out of her purse and held it out to Perry Rhodan. "Hello, Mr. Rhodan. I wanted ... I wanted ..."

Rhodan looked at the picture, which showed the crew of the old *Stardust I*. "Where did you get that photo?"

"From my husband. He did not return. He was the only one who did come back from the moon with you. I wanted to, talk to you about this. You were Clark's friend..."

"Clark's friend? Are you Mrs. Fletcher?"

Anne Sloane, who was capable of telekinesis but otherwise lacked any necessary quality for a secret agent, particularly a strong will, nodded in affirmation with the last of her strength.

"She is lying!" stated John Marshall loud and clear.

Anne Sloane stared, at the telepath with horror in her eyes. She no longer made any effort at continuing her pretence. Tears filled her eyes. "How do you know that I am lying?"

"Because I know your name is not Mrs. Fletcher but Anne Sloane, who has never been married. You were sent here by Allan D. Mercant and Colonel Kaats to spy on us. They selected you because a normal human being could never have passed through our energy screen around the base. You are a telekinetic mutant, aren't you?"

Anne Sloane could not bear to hear the truth about herself, and she began to cry bitterly.

“Help her, please!” commanded, Rhodan. “Take her to my office!”

Anne Sloane was not bothered with any more questions until she had recovered from the shock of having been found out so rapidly. Rhodan had ordered a cup of coffee to be brought to her, a gesture that increased her inexplicable feeling of having found security at last.

Marshall whispered something into Rhodan’s ear and Perry turned to the girl.

“Lieutenant Colonel Mercant recognized your special talents and sent you to us, didn’t he?”

“You know he did. If I visualize what that young man, who never before laid eyes on me, has told about me, then I know that even the smartest secret agent wouldn’t have the ghost of a chance with you. But how can that be? Colonel Kaats has always tried to make me believe that you have a few tricks up your sleeve but that your miserable little group doesn’t amount to much otherwise.”

“We are a small group as far as numbers go. That’s true. But We are far from being miserable, Miss Sloane! The young man who made such an impression on you a little while ago is an excellent telepath. By the, way, he just whispered to me that you never had a strong intention to spy on us when you came here. But you had a great desire just to come here and join us.”

“That sounds like a silly excuse on my part, I’m afraid.”

“It certainly appears that way, Miss Sloane. But we know that it is the truth. We can read your thoughts; we know exactly what you are thinking.”

Anne closed her eyes. The feeling of having found a safe harbour left her Even without being a telepath, Rhodan could understand what seemed to upset her.

“I am familiar with the sensation of being exposed to the probing of a telepath. He penetrates into the last secret corner of your mind, and there is nothing left of any privacy in your life. Is that what disturbs you so?”

“Yes,” she said with a small voice. “I believed I had found here something great-freedom at last. But, now I realize I was wrong.”

Perry Rhodan smiled gently. “We will restore your belief, Miss Sloane. You will be free here, the same way I have attained such freedom.”

“How is it possible to protect yourself against his probing mind?” she wondered, gazing fearfully at John Marshall. “We will teach you to erect a barrier around your thoughts. This can be done partly by a special technique and partly by psychostudies. You can learn it within a few weeks.”

“Do you want me to stay here that long?”

“You can remain here as long as you wish. Forever, if you so desire.”

Anne’s answer was a mute smile.

To avoid any additional emotional shocks to Anne’s delicate state of mind, Rhodan had suggested that John Marshall should not be around her for the time

being. Dr. Haggard was put in charge of finding suitable quarters for her.

Perry Rhodan, master of the Third Power, set out again on his way to the factory sheds. But his mind was not on the work he had intended to do there. He was preoccupied with a new problem that had arisen, and he kept mulling it over in his mind, examining it from every possible angle. Allan D. Mercant had sent her to the base! The Chief of the International Intelligence Agency. Would this man turn out to be a disappointment after all? Rhodan already looked upon him as an important figure in his own scheme of mankind's future. He had visited him in his headquarters under the Greenland ice and had received him here in the Gobi Desert as a mediator for the Western Powers. Something like sympathy had sprung between the two of them. And now Mercant was sending a telekinetic to him as a spy ...

Rhodan was suddenly interrupted in his train of thought by an alarm signal coming from Khrest.

"Hello, Rhodan! Calling Perry Rhodan! Come at once to the Arkonide sphere! We have located new activity in the moon's orbital path."

Rhodan activated a switch on his all purpose transporter suit, which let him bridge the thousand feet to the space sphere immediately and without any effort. He landed in the air lock and ran at once to the center where Khrest was stationed.

"What have you located? Where exactly? Is that another invasion, do you think? So soon? This comes at the worst possible moment for us!"

"It is too early to say anything definite yet. We found signs of some activity up there. But it was to be expected that the Fantan people would bring up reinforcements any day now. We knew that ever since their first attempt failed."

Rhodan's decision came instantaneously. "We will investigate the situation and attack them if it seems advisable. We can't risk waiting for them to attack us here on Earth! Neither the Arkonides nor the population of this world can afford it. Will you permit me to use your ship again?"

Khrest was so much now under the spell of Rhodan's personality that he interpreted Rhodan's request as an order. A brief sign with his hand expressed his willingness to relinquish all authority to the Earthling.

Sirens sounded the alarm, mobilizing the small garrison of the Third Power. Rhodan issued commands that could be heard everywhere inside the energy dome.

"Mr. Klein and Mr. Li Tschai-tung report to me at the space sphere command center. Peter Kosnow will be in charge of radio communication. All other personnel continue working according to schedule. No change in plan for the robot force. Get ready to start!"

The Arkonide sphere rose vertically, passing through the momentarily lifted energy barrier. Immediately after lift off the spaceship developed an acceleration of fifty G's with the help of its fully synchronized antigrav, which kept those

inside from feeling any effects from the acceleration. They reached the orbital path of the moon in less than one hour. Only the hypnoschooled minds of Rhodan and Khrest could grasp the furiously fast changing position data supplied by the robot radar system. Rhodan's and Khrest's reaction time exceeded the human norm by five hundred times. Thus it was understandable when Klein begged them to slow down the flight.

Rhodan complied with this wish, for he had found out by then that the speed with which the enemy ship was following the moon in its orbital path was considerably slower than their own. Once again Rhodan applied the effect of the antigrav, but this time it had to even out the braking force. Then they were able to observe the enemy craft clear and steady on their video screen.

"But this spaceship isn't spindle shaped! These can't be, the Fantan people after all!" exclaimed Li Tschai-tung. "What do you think of this, Khrest?"

"This spaceship is oval shaped. Therefore, It cannot be of Arkonide origin. However, my race has had more enemies than friends during the past centuries. This leads me to the conclusion that according to the laws of chance we should be facing here a hostile force."

Perry Rhodan manoeuvred the space sphere into a favourable position for attack, then applied a testing ray.

"They are surrounded by an energy screen. If we knew its strength ..."

This was merely a rhetorical remark, for Rhodan was already busy evaluating the testing ray's results. "If we transform the enemy craft into pure energy, the world's population will acquire a new miniature sun in the skies. It would be specious at this, point to calculate in detail what the, meteorological consequences of such a new star on our horizon would be, but it would inevitably lead to enormous catastrophes in our weather."

"The oval shaped ship has intensified its energy screen because we have arrived in its vicinity," explained Khrest. "The enemy crew certainly knows that they are invulnerable now."

"We must employ more conventional weapons if we want, to be successful in, our attack," mused Rhodan. "Such as an explosion inside the hostile ship. I am sure that the explosive force released by ten tons of TNT would be sufficient to render the oval ship harmless."

"I can appreciate your desire, but it is impossible to execute this wish of yours unless you can come up with some additional trick."

"I have already figured out that trick," replied Rhodan dryly. "Part of it will be to begin now, feigning some frontal attacks. I want them to believe that this is the only method of attack in our strategy."

The Arkonide sphere suddenly jumped ahead and closed in on the enemy ship. The distance between the two opponents was now diminished to nine thousand miles. Rhodan set up a barrage of energy rays that produced a colourful

pyrotechnical display on the enemy's energy barrier but could not penetrate it. The fake attack had yet another unexpected result-the oval shaped craft disappeared suddenly from view, not by changing over into paraspace or by creating an invisible field through artificial curvature of space; it simply accelerated its speed by three thousand feet per second and thus disappeared as a shrinking dot in the vastness of the universe.

Everyone's reaction to this disappearing act was one of utmost surprise. Even Rhodan and Khrest could not escape being totally startled.

›Have you ever seen a spaceship with such powerful engines?"

Khrest was at a loss. "We don't know what is going on at the center of the galaxy while we are away from there. Every day might bring further technical progress. There are several races capable of such scientific achievements. And there are quite a few besides for whom oval shaped spaceships are characteristic. We need more information. I suggest we return and consult the positronic brain at the Gobi Desert base."

Perry Rhodan guided the Arkonide sphere back to Earth. The thought of having at least chased away the opponent made him hope he had gained valuable time.

They landed at the Gobi Desert base and proceeded at once toward the hall housing the positronic brain.

But this day really seemed to be hexed. Peter Kosnow called the group and asked to see Rhodan in a most urgent matter.

"What on Earth is happening now?"

"There is someone waiting for you outside the energy screen who insists on talking to you personally, sir, He arrived there half an hour ago by plane. He sent the plane back again, informing me that he would no longer have any need for it. He intends to be your guest for quite, some time to come."

"Did he say who he is?"

"He would not tell me his name. just that he is a good friend of yours, Mr. Rhodan."

"Let him through the barrier and bring him to my office. Strict surveillance, of course."

Rhodan told his companions that he would join them at the robot brain within half an hour. Then he went to his bungalow to await the unknown visitor.

Kosnow lifted the energy screen for a few seconds and sent a robot car to pick up the visitor. When the mysterious visitor was brought to him Kosnow was amazed.

"Lieutenant Colonel Mercant! Where are you coming from?"

"Straight from my headquarters in, Greenland, Kosnow. Glad to see you here!"

The Russian reacted rather reticently to this friendly greeting. "Will you follow me, please, sir. Mr. Rhodan is expecting you."

"The pleasure does not seem to be mutual" snapped Mercant.

Kosnow did not reply. He led Mercant to Rhodan's office, where a similar scene ranging from cordiality to cool restraint took place. But here Mercant felt that an explanation was due.

"... Naturally you can imagine that this is not just a pleasure trip for me. I have quite valid reasons for coming to see you here. But at our last meeting you reacted much more frankly and cordially toward me. I understand, of course, your change of attitude. But I am not hiding any tricks up my sleeve. I want to be totally sincere with you. You resent the affair with Anne Sloane; isn't that so?"

"Sure," Rhodan confirmed abruptly.

Mercant continued, "I realized that Anne Sloane could never be depended on to any great extent. At least, not for the task that Kaats had imagined. If I nevertheless entrusted the girl with that mission, you could have guessed where my sympathies lie."

"Don't tell me that your sympathies lie, with me. I am not receptive today to any flatteries."

"Please, don't take everything personally, Mr. Rhodan. I came here because of my sympathies for the Third Power. And this again is not based on personal preferences. I am deeply concerned with the fate of mankind and their future welfare. And since I am convinced that you alone are capable of fending off the invasion from outer space, I have decided to visit you here."

"You plan to stay here for a while?"

"That is up to you, Mr. Rhodan."

Rhodan had not heard such frank words for a long time. He appreciated Merchant's attitude.

"That decision will have to be made later. I will have someone take you to your quarters. Later we can discuss things more thoroughly. Will you excuse me now? I have something urgent to see to."

"I observed your landing with the Arkonide space sphere, a while ago. I don't doubt the importance of your errand. But please, do listen for just a moment to what I have to tell you. It is not a whim that made me come to see you just at this particular time."

With these words Mercant put a large briefcase on the table and opened it. Rhodan could not object any more. He saw the strange limbs that his visitor had brought along from the icy wastes of Greenland. He intuitively felt the importance of these fragments.

"What is that, Mercant?"

"That is what I would like to find out from you or from Khrest. We located a strange igloo like structure far to the north of the Umanak Fjord. When we exploded it we discovered the remains of some unknown life form. We are sure it is extraterrestrial."

At once Perry Rhodan summoned Khrest, Marshall, Haggard and Thora via

intercom to, his room. Shortly afterward the three men entered. Thora failed to answer Rhodan's call.

Brief introductions were followed by Allan D. Merchant's detailed report of the latest events in Greenland. Captain Zimmerman's fate and the corpus delicti gave rise to tremendous excitement among the men. No one any longer doubted that the world had arrived at an important turn in its future fate. Questioning glances were directed at Khrest.

"It has become superfluous to consult the positronic brain for here lies our answer. Captain Zimmerman was no turncoat or traitor, Mr. Mercant. He was a victim of these creatures."

"These aren't the Fantan people?"

"No. These creatures are far more dangerous and treacherous. The emergency signal that was automatically released at the destruction, of our exploratory space vessel on the moon has obviously drawn the attention of a large number of higher intelligences to this sector of the universe. You must resign yourselves to the fact that the position of Earth in the galaxy has finally become known. This will inevitably lead some races, motivated by curiosity, greed or destructive instincts, to investigate this solar system. First came the Fantan people and then the M.S. But the M.S. always travel in crowds, and wherever one of them is sighted you must reckon on the presence of others of their kind."

"What do you mean by the M.S.?"

"I'll try to explain this with Captain Zimmerman's example. The name of these creatures cannot be pronounced in the Arkonide language because of a total absence of vowels. We simply call them therefore the M.S., short, for Mind Snatchers. These beings are the most feared enemies of our empire. A natural, inborn capacity permits their minds to leave their own individual bodies and to take possession of any other living creature's body. That means that their ego can stay for a very long time inside some other being's body, whose mind in turn has been transferred to the vacated shell of the M.S. A simple case of involuntary mind swapping, Captain Zimmerman must have, encountered such an M.S. during his routine flight over Greenland. When he came to see you Mr. Mercant, he had already, been seized by the ego of the M.S. This creature's body was resting far to the north under the mysterious igloo like structure, where it was well protected and served as a painful prison for Zimmerman's mind."

"Absolutely horrible" shuddered Dr. Haggard. "Would you know whether this strange power is coupled with metabolical faculties?"

"You are thinking of organic imitation or reconstruction, Dr. Haggard. You wonder if the M.S. take over the host's body, including its own protoplasm. No, not at all. There is no alteration as far as the metabolism is concerned. But having one's body taken over by some foreign mind seems diabolical enough to me."

Everyone present agreed fully with Khrest opinion. Only Dr. Haggard seemed

to go one step further, and even as the additional thought occurred to him he, made an involuntary move away from Mercant. just as swiftly and without conscious deliberation he whipped out a pistol and pointed it at Allan D. Mercant.

“We are discussing the M.S., gentlemen, but aren’t we forgetting at the same time that Mercant was with Zimmerman shortly before he died?”

Khrest grasped at once what was on Haggard’s mind and made a reassuring gesture to him: “You can put your gun away, Dr. Haggard. An M.S can jump only from his own body over to that of another person. For every new exchange they must first return to their own bodies. Therefore, it was impossible that the M.S. seized Mercant’s body when Zimmerman died.”

“What happened then to the mind of the M.S.? Where is it now?”

“The M.S. died the same instant as Captain Zimmerman. Certain preparations are necessary before it can return to its own body. A kind of gathering of strength. This limitation is one of the few points where we can attack them successfully.

“Then both are dead? Zimmerman and the M.S.?”

Khrest confirmed Dr. Haggard’s assumption.

“Wouldn’t it be most probable that what happened to Zimmerman was not an isolated case?” Mercant asked Khrest.

“Most likely, Mr. Mercant. I share your suspicions. The situation might be far more serious than we realize. Zimmerman’s cue proves that the M.S. have been active on Earth for the last two to three days. Many cases of mind swapping might have occurred. I would recommend that you warn all mankind, for everyone becomes suspect from now on. Any absurd or misanthropic act should be reported at once.”

“Do you realize what that would mean?” warned Rhodan.

Khrest answered, “Panic! Widespread panic! If you should find some better solution I would suggest you adopt it, Rhodan.”

“Another question, Khrest. Is it necessary for the M.S. to be physically close to their intended victims, or can they jump from great distances?”

“They are capable of both. If their aim is difficult because their target is, among many other beings, then they usually approach it quite close before they jump. But if their prey should go for a walk alone in the middle of the Gobi Desert, they might, if need be, operate over a distance of several thousand miles - even from a spaceship hovering out in space.”

An hour later, Rhodan told Mercant and Dr. Haggard, who had remained behind in his office, “Tako has sent a message via radio. They are bringing thirteen mutants along with them.”

“Mutants?” questioned Mercant.

“Mutants for the Third Power, Mr. Mercant People like yourself. The crew to man our station. The number of inhabitants in our new state will remain severely

limited for a long time. As a result we will have to substitute quality for quantity. Only the best and most capable persons will do for citizenship and service in our domain. I am about to found the Secret Mutant Corps. A troop smaller and less conspicuous than any other but also faster, stronger and more reliable.”

“I admire you, Rhodan. Yes indeed! You have made up my mind for me. I feel that you have confidence in my abilities. May I Join your troop?”

“I was hoping for this request, Mr. Mercant!”

They sealed Mercant’s entry into the Third Power with a firm handshake.

A voice broke in on the intercom, announcing that Tako’s transport plane was about to land.

Rhodan, arrived at the landing strip as the plane touched down. Tako was the first person off the plane.

“Mission accomplished, sir! Twelve mutants with strong deviations from the norm on board. They are not in a very friendly mood, as you can imagine. Most of them want the first chance they get to have you prosecuted by an International court of for kidnapping!”

“Thank you, Tako,” replied Rhodan with a cryptic smile. “Just see to it that they get off the plane now. But what happened to the thirteenth mutant you reported earlier?”

“He will be arriving with Reginald Bell. Bell is flying him directly from Germany to the base. They should be here by this afternoon.”

“Fine! Now let’s welcome our new arrivals.”

The first meeting between Rhodan and the mutants turned out to be far less dramatic than the latter had imagined. Filled with outrage they exited from the machine, talking excitedly with each other. But their noisy indignation was soon silenced. As soon as they came close to where was Rhodan waiting for them, they stopped their chatter.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen!” Rhodan greeted them. “You will be the guests of the Third Power. I want to apologize for the unusual manner we had to use in inviting you here. But you may rest assured that none of you will be deprived of personal freedom here in any way. You will be lodged in our most comfortable quarters, without any cost to you. During your stay with us you will have the opportunity to participate for several hours daily in a very interesting hypnotraining course, designed to reveal and develop Your true mental capacities. You will be able to discover your true mental potential for yourselves You will soon find out how little you have been, informed about the extent of your own abilities. Consider this training as an entertaining but harmless game, from which you will profit. In one week I will meet you again and discuss any questions you might have. At the same time this plane will be ready to return each to his home again.”

Perry Rhodan then shook hands with each of the dozen mutants, with a friendly

word for each of them, and then left them in the care of an already well tried and trusted team consisting of Dr. Haggard, Dr. Manoli and John Marshall, the telepath.

Rhodan was waiting for his friend Bell's arrival. But this day's surprising events had not yet come to an end. While they were sitting at lunch a new warning came from Khrest.

"M.S. ship approaching again from outer space. Rotating in the same orbit as this morning. You promised to prepare some trick, Rhodan, if they ever showed up again. Now is the time!"

Perry Rhodan swallowed his last bite, jumped up and yelled into the intercom. "Don't you worry! I have something ready for them out there. This is our last hope. If this tick should fail, then all mankind might perish. This trick is going to work, because it simply has to!"

He ended by summoning Tako to the Arkonide spaceship. "Hello, Tako. Report to the space sphere immediately. We start in one minute!"

Perry Rhodan had always been a special kind of human being, and since he had undergone the Arkonide hypnotraining he had turned into a veritable genius. But little did even he guess at this moment what service he was rendering the Third power as well as himself by acting so, swiftly to put his well conceived trick in action.

The barrier, fell. The sphere lifted off vertically. The barrier closed behind them. Acceleration, 150 feet per second, repeating the old game, The ever new dream flight of man to the moon. Earth to the moon in under one hour!

Turning into, the satellite's orbital path, overcoming the only then application of the braking energy. Perry Rhodan's movements and orders were brief and to the point. There was not even a wasted breath.

They were driven by the feeling that it was either the aliens or Earth. And they were determined that Earth would be victorious.

Tako Kakuta was about to enter the small space module, not more than fifteen feet in length. He had been briefed by Rhodan in detail how to carry out his special mission. Now he was passing through the air lock, when Rhodan received a radioed message coming from the Gobi Desert base.

It was Kosnow who sent the bad news. "Calling Rhodan! I have just received an S.O.S. from Reginald Bell. He is approaching the energy dome in his airplane. He is complaining about an unbearable headache and requests immediate help. He has lost control over his engine. What shall we do? Go to his assistance?"

"Caution! M.S.!" called out Khrest.

"Connect me directly with Reg! I want to talk to him myself! ...Hello, Reg! Can you hear me?"

"Perry, help me! I can't think any more. I don't know what's the matter with

me?”

Rhodan's order to Tako: “Detach the space module at once and try teleportation within the next ten seconds!”

Rhodan's reply to Bell: “Resist Reg! Keep resisting! This is not just a headache! You are being attacked by an alien mind trying to invade your body. We are out in the moons orbit and are attacking the enemy this very moment. Can you hear me, Reg? Answer, please!”

“Perry! I can't bear it any longer! My head seems to be bursting. I-”

“Pull yourself together! You are stronger than they are. You have the Arkonide hypnoschooled mind! You possess a stronger willpower! If you give in now, you will be lost. They want to devour your ego! Hold out, Reg! just another minute now ... another half a minute! Then you will have me overcome it all...”

Rhodan made promises that he was not yet sure of being able to fulfil. All depended now on the outcome of his trick, the strategical move designed to defeat the invading M.S.

Rhodan's first attack that morning had established that pure physical or energetical force applied from the outside was ineffective. The M.S. energy screen was too powerful. But how powerful would that screen be if the M.S. believed themselves safe from attack? Everything hinged on that question.

After Tako Kakuta, the Japanese teleporter, had detached his, spaceboat from the gigantic Arkonide space sphere approached the M.S. spaceship assuming the same speed with which they were travelling, trailing after the moon. At the same time the Arkonide space sphere resumed a feigned attack with energy missile rays that were, of course, ineffective. Then they made a turn about and Pretended to withdraw toward Earth.

The first part of Rhodan's plan succeeded.

The M.S. absorbed the light bombardment and did not react by disappearing hurriedly into the depths of space. There was a valid reason for this - they were trying to take over . Reginald Bell's body. Therefore, they had to stay where they were and could not abandon their current position.

This was Tako's chance to teletransport himself.

As soon as the Arkonide ship. had left the vicinity of the M.S., the latter's state of extreme alertness was relaxed. Tako's boat was too small to be located right away.

The Japanese needed fifteen seconds to achieve exactly the same speed as the opponent's ship. There was still 4,000 miles between them.

Then he jumped...

...and landed exactly in the middle of the enemy's command center.

The initial moment of surprise was sufficient for Tako to light his bomb. Then he teleported immediately back into his space module, where he watched the ensuing explosion of the oval shaped spacecraft.

Many experienced the explosion together with Tako-the crew of the space sphere, those in the ground station in the Gobi Desert, and especially Reginald Bell, who was suddenly and miraculously relieved of any pain and discomfort. He managed a safe landing of his plane with his passenger from Germany.

One week later.

The reports of Rhodan's new victory over the hostile invaders from space spread like wildfire over the globe. Everywhere people felt a new surge of sympathy for the Third Power.

In the meantime one of the strangest training courses ever to take place in mankind's history neared its end in the Gobi Desert base. All the inhabitants of the base had assembled in a big meeting hall that had been constructed by the robot workers, There was not a trace left of the outrage that the kidnapped persons' faces had shown one week earlier.

"...and this brings me to the end of my talk, ladies and gentlemen," said Rhodan. "All of you have given me proof of your confidence in me to an extent that I had hardly hoped for. I had promised to return you to your homes again after this week's training. Of course, you will be able to go on leave at regular intervals, now that all of you without exception have decided to enter the service of the Third Power. The hypnobloc will prevent you from divulging any secrets while you are away on your vacations. Now would you all rise, please, ladies and gentlemen. Herewith you will pledge yourselves for the rest of your lives to serve in the Secret Mutant Corps of the Third power. This corps numbers now eighteen charter members. Each of you has demonstrated to my satisfaction that you have understood the historical impact of our new state seen from a cosmic point of view. You are aware of the capabilities of mankind up to this date, which were first enlarged with the maiden flight of *Stardust I*. You have experienced the sense of expectation that seized man when for the first time the gate to the universe was breached. You know that soon we will penetrate the deep secrets that no inhabitant of this planet even dared think about just a few years ago. You will become the nucleus of the elite group that will have to deal with and conquer all the future problems we are bound to encounter when we go out into space. It is up to you whether mankind's new venture turns into a nightmare or a blessing. Thank you."

The crowd soon dispersed, and Rhodan noticed with displeasure that Thora had been one of the first to leave.

"What's eating her?" he asked Khrest. "I thought I had come a bit closer to her. It's even been possible to have a sensible discussion with her lately. She even unbent enough to display some friendly emotions toward me. But ever since last

week she won't talk to me and avoids me whenever possible.”

“Ever since last week?” Khrest smiled with amusement. “Don't you remember what happened a week ago?”

“Well a lot happened that memorable day. It was the M.S. tried to invade us, Mercant came to visit, the affair with Reg...”

“You seem to forget how the day started. What was the first surprising event?”

“Miss Sloane arrived.” Suddenly Rhodan, arrived, at an insight “Do you mean to say that Thora is jealous of Anne?”

“She most certainly is!” laughed Khrest.

“Then we will forgive her all her nastiness, poor girl! A Jealous Thora is about the best thing I could wish for to finish off a perfect day!”

Khrest left, and Rhodan thought he was alone in the room. But soon he became aware of someone else's presence, and he turned to see who it was. Far back in a corner he noticed Homer G. Adams. His dwarflike figure with the huge head bent forward made the Secretary of the Treasury of the Third Power look almost timid.

“Well Adams, are you tired after your long trip from New York?”

The little man came nearer and shook his head energetically. “Such a trip from New York to the Gobi Desert is nothing really when you fly in one of your machines, Mr. Rhodan. No, I am bothered by something else I am not the type, of man to hide my light under a bushel. But a good financier is not the same as a mutant. And still you accepted me into your corps. Aren't, you making, a mistake here?”

Perry smiled. “Say, Mr. Adam, what is the cube of 2,369.7?”

“13,306,998,429.873.”

“Did you figure that out just now?”

“Of course not! But you asked me the same question a few days ago.”

“And you remembered the result?”

“Why, naturally,” said Adams as if this were a simple, everyday occurrence.

“You see,” replied Rhodan, putting his hand on Adams's shoulder, “a normal person would never remember such a figure mentioned offhand in the course of an otherwise rather animated discussion. No one who has only five senses! But you did retain this figure. You have an eidetic memory. You are therefore fully entitled to join my Mutant Corps!”