

**EXCERPT FROM “THE KING OF THE NIGHT” BY JEAN DE LA HIRE:**

**Chapter III**  
***The Departure***

With regard to the essence of the extraordinary endeavors suddenly undertaken and rapidly completed in the wildest and most isolated part of Maxime d’Olban’s vast estate, secrecy had been carefully maintained.

To be sure, the regional newspapers had been actively curious; the Parisian press had been immediately alerted by its local correspondents, and had sent reporters—but the principal workshops had been strictly watched and the people who were party to the secret were not numerous. The journalists and the public, in consequence, knew no more than the workers and manual laborers did. That could, in the final analysis, be summarized thus:

*Monsieur d’Olban is constructing a machine to venture into the stratosphere, as many scientists have done before him. He has an illustrious collaborator in the person of Monsieur Saint-Clair, a.k.a. the Nyctalope, who will be the pilot of the apparatus when it takes off from the ground toward the zenith.*

The newspapers of France and the world, of course, wrote about it at much greater length, but they did not say any more than that.

Nevertheless, Messieurs d’Olban and Saint-Clair had no intention of keeping the secret forever. On the contrary, they wanted the scientific community first, and then the general public, to be fully and accurately informed.

That is why, on August 27, 20 scientists and journalists, almost all resident in Paris, received by registered mail an invitation to go to the Château des Pins on August 29. Hospitality was assured until August 31. On the 29th, an “informative lecture” would be given to them by Monsieur d’Olban; the next day, they would witness “the departure of Monsieur Saint-Clair and others for an unprecedented voyage.” The letter of invitation gave no further details, but it contained all the necessary directions for the guests to get to the Château des Pins easily, without error or delay, via Le Mans and Longpré (Sarthe).

There was, therefore, an influx of guests at the château on the afternoon of August 29. All the friends who had attended the final council meeting on August 30 were there, of course. Madame Gervais, the housekeeper, had a great deal to do, all the more so because the domestic staff of the château had had to be augmented by the recruitment of two head waiters, four valets and four chambermaids, hired in Le Mans, Tours and even Paris. The Prefect of Le Mans had lent them his own cook.

Véronique, of course, had nothing to do with all that. On her uncle’s orders, she was resting, having nothing else to do except to pack, with the aid of her own chambermaid, the garments and other small objects that, in accordance with Saint-Clair’s advice, she would take to Rhea. It was light luggage, for the interplanetary voyagers could not clutter up the *Olb.-I* with their personal baggage.

Specially-designed and expertly-fabricated clothing, uniform although not all of the same height and girth, formed part of what Monsieur Fageat had loaded into the “vehicle” under the accounting denomination of “general provisions.” Included therein was enough to eat and drink for a long time; clothing for the most various temperatures; gifts to offer as gestures of peace; and weapons in case of armed hostility. Saint-Clair had drawn up the list of all that, all of which had to be bought or manufactured to order, and the list had been the subject of much examination, calculation and discussion between the Nyctalope, Monsieur d’Olban, Soca and Vitto.

The August 29 lecture filled the entire audience with admiring astonishment. Monsieur d’Olban simply told the story of the discovery and fabrication of the new metal Z-4, performed a demonstration of the attraction of the planet Rhea upon that metal, listed the decisions made and the works accomplished, and, finally, gave a clear explanation of the logical hypotheses whose formulation science permitted regarding the possibilities of the interplanetary voyage and a sojourn on Rhea by human beings.

Hardly anyone at the château and in the workshops got any sleep on the night of August 29.

On the final day, the morning was devoted to visits by small groups to the interplanetary vehicle, the *Olb.-I*, and the admiring astonishment of all the visitors only increased. What commentaries! What doubts! What certainties! What apprehensions and hopes!

Finally, at 4 p.m. on August 30, it was the moment for farewells—intimate to begin with, between family and friends, in Monsieur d’Olbans; book-lined drawing room. Véronique, who was inwardly exultant with joy, had the strength to discipline her emotion, holding back the tears that sprang up in her eyes. The Nyctalope and the scientist embraced one another. On the part of His Excellency Gno Mitang the farewells were a trifle more ceremonious; Ariste Fageat’s were cordial; those of the exuberant Soca and Vitto warm, and even cheerful.

Afterwards, in the main courtyard of the château, the seven interplanetary voyagers—for, with Saint-Clair’s permission, the two Corsicans had recruited Jean Margot a highly-experienced, skillful, ingenious and a trifle mischievous young mechanic, also endowed with courage and a cool head, who had come from Paris when the work began and whose work all the bosses had been able to judge—shook hundreds of hands, responding with as many emotional smiles.

Then a kind of procession formed, which set off on that beautiful summer afternoon through the shady woods, toward the henceforth-famous Gorse Hill, where a huge crowd had assembled, kept in order and at an adequate distance by several brigades of gendarmes mobilized for that purpose by the prefect of Le Mans.

The *Olb.-I* was a parallelepiped 20 meters long by five broad, with double walls of aluminum. Its front, or anterior face, had a third lining made entirely of Z-4; 40 exterior panels formed of lead sheets wedged between two asbestos plates, movable electronically and also by means of a system of manual controls, covered that front and were able to uncover it in proportion to the quantity of attractive Rhean force that the interplanetary voyagers judged it appropriate to utilize.

The rear, or posterior face, was entirely given over to a projector of unprecedented power. As for the interior of the *Olb.-I*, between the fore and aft machine-rooms there was a living-space 15 meters in length, with four private cabins, crew-quarters with four bunks, a watch- and work-room that was also a dining-room, a kitchen-cum-parlor, and, finally, the indispensable commodities. From one end to the other, under a floor with six trap-doors, ran a succession of eight storage compartments, containing clothing, provisions, various tools, items of exchange, useful materials, weapons and ammunition: everything that seven human beings would need to live for a year, subject to rationing—on condition, of course, that Rhea furnished the liquid element: drinkable water. The astronomers had been unanimous in affirming that there were rainclouds in the atmospheric layer surrounding the newly-discovered planet.

Thus, even if the pessimistic hypothesis of the total absence on Rhea of matter comestible by humans were to be realized, the Terrans were certain of having sufficient nourishment until the date, scientifically calculated and determined, of their possible return to Earth.

It was at 5:30 p.m. on that August 30, that—all the farewells having been concluded, in the midst of immense general emotion—the interplanetary voyagers sealed themselves into the *Olb.-I*.

Véronique d’Olbans was the first to climb the mobile staircase; Gno Mitang followed her; then Vitto, Soca and Jean Margot, and finally Ariste Fageat and Leo Saint-Clair.

After a final salute with his right hand, the Nyctalope drew the double aluminum door toward him and the lock immediately sealed it hermetically. The mobile staircase folded up automatically and was enclosed underneath the doorway in the rectangular compartment designed to accommodate it.

Henceforth, the seven Terrans would be separated from the terrestrial world for at least a year.

For several days they had been so thoroughly prepared for that separation, and had lived that supreme moment in advance so often, that all the emotion of the farewells had died away in each of them at the moment when they passed from the last step into the vehicle that was about to transport them through the thousands of leagues of the stratosphere—which is to say, the empty space that separated the terrestrial atmosphere from the Rhean atmosphere.

In the vehicle, each of them had an allotted place for the departure: Véronique and Vitto in the kitchen and the watch- and work-room that was also the dining room; Saint-Clair and Gno Mitang in the forward machine-room, Soca being their assistant mechanic; Fageat and Margot in the compartmentalized store-rooms, whose trap-doors were open—for it was important to observe the

compartment of everything, everywhere within the vehicle, for at least the first half-hour of the voyage—which, according to Maxime d’Olban’s calculations, ought to have a duration of approximately five hundred hours at a mean velocity of 60 kilometers a minute.

The first word pronounced aboard the *Olb.-I* was uttered by Saint-Clair:

“Ready?”

He had his hand on the lever controlling the electrical mechanism of the obstructive panels. The lever turned through the graduated 40-degree arc of a circle; every degree corresponded to one of the 40 panels that covered, then would uncover and eventually recover the forward sections of the *Olb.-I*, each composed of a continuous surface of Z-4. The Nyctalope and the astronomer had calculated that, for the take-off of the heavy vehicle and its departure into space, it would be sufficient to open 20 of the 40 panels.

A short distance away from Saint-Clair, Gno Mitang was monitoring the control apparatus; the latter would reveal either the efficient operation of the various mechanisms activated or any possible perturbation. In reply to Saint-Clair’s query, the Japanese replied:

“Ready.”

It was a violently emotional moment! There was a silence, during which everyone was attentive. Hearts beat rapidly; faces were pale. On the threshold of the partition separating the machine-room from the central compartment, Véronique and Vitto were standing; in the cabin itself, Fageat and Margot were only showing the upper parts of their body, for they were half-hidden in the depths of the hold. As for Soca, the mechanic, he was standing two paces behind his two bosses, ready to leap into action in the event of receiving a necessarily-brief order that would have to be carried out instantly.

Suddenly, the Nyctalope said:

“We’re off.”

And his right hand rapidly pulled the lever, in such a way as to bring the odd-numbered obstructive panels—one to 39—into play.

There was no perceptible sound, and scarcely any shock, for the *Olb.-I* had been placed on a long 100-meter slipway, carefully greased, in such a way that no friction, however brutal it might be, could produce any. They could not see anything outside because, for the sake of prudence—no one knew what reaction might take place with matter in such novel conjectures—the portholes, numbering 20, that had been set at intervals along the vehicle, to the right and left, were closed.

Convinced that the departure had taken place, Saint-Clair said then:

“Going to maximum velocity.”

With the same gesture as before, he moved the lever, this time applying the heel to the electrical contacts bearing the even numbers, from two to 40.

While the seven voyagers remained silent and motionless, one, two, three and the four minutes went by, marked by the large chronometer visible from everywhere in the control-room.

Then, in his delicate and extraordinarily calm voice, Gno Mitang said, with a slight smile primarily perceptible in his eyes:

“If all’s going well, we’re 300 kilometers from Gorse Hill.”

“Yes,” said Saint-Clair. Turning to Soca, he added, with a slight smile: “Open the portholes.”

“On both sides?” the Corsican queried.

“Yes.”

Soca started on the right, unscrewing the locking system of the aluminum portholes; soon, six crystal lenses, three to the right and three to the left, were uncovered. Those lenses, immensely thick, could support enormous pressures and the most violent shocks.

Moved by the same impulse, Saint-Clair, Gno Mitang, Soca, Véronique, Vitto, Fageat and Margot ran to the portholes. Avidly, they looked outside. They saw nothing but darkness, peppered with stars; that was perfectly natural, for the terrestrial atmosphere in only 64 kilometers thick, and the *Olb.-I* had already emerged from it.

On the other hand, they had neither the sensation nor the impression of any movement; they could have believed—and it required an effort of thought not to believe it—that they were in a vehicle that was completely motionless; no movement betrayed its progress through space. The displacement, rapid as it was, could not produce any sensible effect on the organism while the mass of air in which the human body is located was displaced with it. No inhabitant of the Earth perceives the velocity of

the globe, which is traveling through space, with its layer of air, at 90,000 kilometers an hour. Movement in those conditions still seems to be immobility.

All the voyagers knew that, for they had been well instructed as to the special conditions in which their voyage would be accomplished. Nevertheless, they could not help feeling a certain astonishment. One does not realize immediately that one is traveling at a fantastic speed when one feels that one is motionless and sees everything motionless around one.

Finally, the silence and stillness were broken. Saint-Clair said:

“Open the forward portholes, Soca.”

In fact, accommodated within the mass of the Z-4 that formed the front of the *Olb.-I* were two portholes. They were not covered by movable lead panels but strong aluminum shields. By means of an admirably-designed mechanism, the external shield opened when the internal shield was opened. The crystal windows of these portholes were even thicker than those of the lateral portholes. One of them—the one on the right—was a magnifying lens analogous to the lenses of the most powerful telescopes, with the consequence that, because the *Olb.-I* was flying directly toward Rhea, the travelers could see the planet as it appeared to the naked eye through the porthole on the left without any diminution of distance, but through the porthole on the right they could see the planet greatly magnified, enabling them to determine the details of its structure in advance.

Then the seven voyagers, grouped at the forward porthole on the left, had the impression that they were traveling through space—and impression produced by the sight of Rhea, visibly increasing in size from one second to the next.

And after that, nothing happened—nothing at all.

It might be difficult to imagine that the most extraordinary voyage that humans had ever undertaken would be devoid of any incident, and even, strictly speaking, anything picturesque.

Launched further and further away from the Earth toward Rhea by virtue of the attraction exerted by that planet on the *Olb.-I*, the enormous vehicle progressed through space in a straight line, without any noise or shock. The woman and the men that it was transporting could not see anything through the lateral portholes any other scenery than the infinity of starry space. Moreover, the displacement was so rapid that the stars always seemed to be the same. Through the porthole, however, one could see Rhea gradually increasing in size, with the consequence that it was the only spectacle to which the seven occupants of the *Olb.-I* sought out with a passionate avidity. They all assembled in the control room, and they passed alternately from the porthole on the left to the one on the right, the first normal, the second magnifying. In the latter, the planet appeared increasingly similar to what one might imagine that the Earth would be if it were seen from hundreds of leagues away: mountains, plains, seas—or, rather, extents that must be liquid mass similar to our seas and oceans.

“What’s curious,” Véronique said, suddenly, “is the color. Everything on Rhea is yellow, an increasingly bright yellow—the color of buttercups, for example.”

“Indeed,” said Gno Mitang.

For the next quarter of an hour, no words were pronounced. Everyone’s thoughts were simultaneously perplexed and tumultuous. They did not know what to say because there was too much to say. A thousand hypotheses were seething in their minds. Saint-Clair, however, whose practicality was never abolished no matter how extravagant the circumstances were, turned his back on the forward portholes, looking from left to right at Véronique and his companions and said, with a smile:

“I believe, Véronique, that it would be a good idea to have a meal; I’m hungry.”

“That’s true,” said the young woman, laughing. “I wasn’t thinking about that any longer.”

She ran toward the central compartment, which served simultaneously as a work-room, a meeting-room and a dining-room. She and Vitto had already laid the table immediately after departure; food brought from Monsieur d’Olban’s château made up a cold meal. That evening, they drank the champagne that Saint-Clair, a connoisseur of good wines, had selected specially. The seats were stools, both light and solid. They each took their places, three on one side, three on the other and Véronique at the end of the table. Vitto and Soca got up from time to time to serve. And that was the first meal that the voyagers had in the spacious and comfortable vehicle, which was carrying them through the stratosphere at a velocity of a kilometer a second, 60 kilometers a minute, 3600 kilometers an hour.

The atmosphere in the vehicle was maintained by an apparatus that produced oxygen and absorbed carbon dioxide; another electrical apparatus maintained a constant temperature of eighteen

degrees. If the voyage had to be prolonged for several days more, the air apparatus would not be sufficient to regenerate the atmosphere constantly; it would be necessary to bring another apparatus into play, more powerful, more productive and more absorptive, which was being kept in reserve in case the atmosphere of Rhea was not completely suited to human lungs and it proved quite impossible to adapt themselves to it.

The diners had a keen appetite, although they had lunched well at the Château d'Olban, because their vital machinery had been singularly excited, without their being conscious of it. They were exceptionally cheerful; the most innocent words made them laugh, and even Fageat, the somber and taciturn Ariste Fageat, became a merry companion. Gno Mitang, who was watching him carefully, did not catch a glimpse of the slightest expression that was in any way suspicious.

Thus they arrived at the moment when 12 silvery chimes were sounded by the large chronometer in the control-room.

"Midnight!" exclaimed Véronique. And without any other motive she burst out laughing. She got up, went into the control-room and went to stand before the magnifying lens.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "We're going to crash."

But Saint-Clair, who had immediately followed her, placed his hand gently on her shoulder and said:

"No—that's the effect of the telescopic lens. Come to the other porthole."

Gno Mitang, Fageat, Vitto, Soca and Margot were behind them, and they all contemplated Rhea, sometimes with the naked eyes and sometimes through the magnifying lens.

Gradually, however, fatigue crept up on them, and in the end, they could not resist it. Saint-Clair declared that he would remain on watch for two hours, and would then wake up Gno Mitang, who, in his turn, would wake Soca, who would be replaced by Vitto. The watch rota having thus been established for the next eight hours, everyone went either to their cabin or their couchette. And with the Nyctalope alone staying up, the *Olb.-I* continued to hurtle toward the planet, which was now dark, almost invisible, for it was no longer receiving the direct rays of the Sun, hidden from it behind the Earth.

**Chapter I**  
*Claude Marécourt’s Experiment*

By the summer of 2014 CE, as man counts time on Earth, Rhea was approaching the Kuiper belt. Already in the sky, one could see the Oort Cloud spreading its white mantle across the horizon.

In the Great Northern Desert, life was sparse and difficult. There was no rain and, therefore, not enough food to support much fauna. Other than the few insects with strange, reddish carapaces, which chirruped randomly, no one could have called this place “home.” Yet, in the midst of this arid desolation stood a large, low-roofed, camouflaged building—nothing more than concrete walls slapped together to protect its inhabitants from the ravaging winds which continually battered the desert. Its purpose was merely functional: it was a base of some kind, not designed for permanent habitation.

A sophisticated, spherical airship hovered just above it. Below, on the roof of one of the buildings, three men dressed in drab, grey overalls, their eyes protected by dark goggles, were supervising the loading of several boxes into the hull of the ship via a tractor beam.

After the boxes were loaded, one of the men spoke into a communication device attached to his wrist:

“Survey Team 1 to *Oxus*, do you copy?” he asked.

“I hear you, ST-1,” answered a man’s voice. “What’s up?”

“These are all the samples from our survey of this region, Monsieur De Soto,” said the first man. “Everything checks out fine.”

“Good. Koynos will be pleased. So far, everything’s gone very smoothly. Keep up the good work, ST-1. *Oxus* over and out.”

The airship gained altitude, then made a sharp turn and zoomed away towards the north.

Inside the east wing of the desert base was a vast laboratory, cluttered with scientific devices and bathed in orange light. There, Claude Marécourt was working on the prototype of a new matter-to-anti-matter converter powered by *heliose*, that strange mineral found only on Rhea.

Claude had been the youngest experimental physicist to ever have been hired by CERN in Geneva. Then, soon afterward—only three years prior—he had been invited to meet a man named Koynos in an expensive restaurant in Nyon. Curious, Claude had accepted the invitation.

Koynos was a tall, pale, muscular man with blonde hair and blue eyes. He seemed strangely ageless, and could have been anywhere between the ages of 30 and 50. He had been direct, not waiting for coffee and liqueur before discussing the reason for his invitation.

“I represent an organization of scientists and explorers known as the *New Fifteen*,” he had told Claude. “I’m looking for a physicist like you.”

“I already have a job,” Claude had replied.

“On Earth, yes,” had said Koynos, smiling. “The job I’m offering to you is located much further away...”

Thus young Claude Marécourt had learned of the existence of the wandering planetoid known as Rhea, which had been first visited in 1935 by that prodigious French adventurer Leo Saint-Clair, sometimes known as the Nyctalope.

“Although I never met Monsieur Saint-Clair myself,” commented Claude, “I know he once rescued my grandfather during World War II...<sup>1</sup> How can he still be alive? He must be incredibly old...”

Koynos had only smiled mysteriously, and gone on to explain that the Nyctalope had once had his heart replaced by a synthetic organ that had possibly granted him an extended lifespan beyond that of ordinary mortals. But no one seemed exactly sure of the reasons for his seeming agelessness. There

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Nyctalope Steps In*.

were conflicting stories. In any event, Leo Saint-Clair had secretly returned to Rhea during the darkest days of World War II, when he had feared the world might fall beneath the Nazi heel, in order to establish a small but permanent and peaceful human settlement.

It was to Rhea that Koynos proposed to take Claude.

“But Rhea must be almost out of the Solar System by now,” had objected Claude. “How can we possibly go there? We don’t have that kind of technology...”

“On the contrary, we do—I mean, the New Fifteen have a craft capable of reaching Rhea in just under a year.”

“But no human science can...”

“Did I say it was based on *human* science?” Koynos had replied.

That, of course, had clinched the deal. A young genius like Claude Marécourt could hardly pass up the opportunity to travel to the outer regions of the Solar System and explore a strange, new world.

After Claude had joined the New Fifteen, who were headquartered nearby in the Swiss Alps, Koynos had told the young scientist that they theorized that Rhea was an artificial world, a giant spacecraft built by a mysterious race whose descendents had devolved into the gorilla-like Nocturnals and the bat-like Diurnals that Leo Saint-Clair had met during his first journey.

The goal of the New Fifteen was to uncover its secrets, and, for that, they needed the help of an anti-matter specialist like Claude Marécourt.

Eighteen months later, the New Fifteen’s ship, a complex, spherical contraption christened the *Oxus* by Koynos, reached Rhea.

The crew was comprised of the fifteen leaders of the organization—Claude had been given the number Nine; Koynos was, of course, Number One. They had been extremely careful, so they were not detected by Olbansville, the Nyctalope’s human settlement located in the Southern hemisphere near the Equator, named after the French scientist who had designed the first ship to travel to Rhea in 1935.

Their mission, as defined by Koynos, was to survey the planet and discover its scientific mysteries, especially the secret of its propulsion, atmospheric field and the radiant energies which kept the planetoid alternatively bathed in day and night in an 18-hour day circadian pattern.

Half of the crew, led by Frederic de Soto (Number Two), had gone out to explore Rhea in powerful, tank-like vehicles, while the other, supervised by Dr. Eva Steilman (Number Five), worked on scientific missions. Koynos, too, had gone out, for his own purposes—no one knew exactly where.

During the journey, Claude had often wondered who Koynos really was, and what his ultimate goals were. That he was human, there was no doubt in his mind—but he also seemed more than human, different from the rest of the crew, who were, in every respect, ordinary geniuses, if one could say such a thing. Piercing together various bits of water-cooler gossip, the young physicist had gathered that everyone on board, like himself, was somehow connected to the mysterious Nyctalope who had saved his grandfather’s life. But why?—he still had no idea.

Koynos and his secrets remained as obscure eighteen months later, as they had been the first time Claude had met the man in Nyon.

Inside his laboratory in the desert base, Claude was putting the finishing touches to his converter.

“I’ve got to remember that this is an entirely new design,” the young physicist muttered. “I hope the crystal lattice will hold up under the stress. If something was to go wrong... No, better to not even think about that...”

Entirely focused on his work, Claude failed to notice a tiny red insect which had been fluttering around the room, and which had just landed on the physicist’s sleeve. From there, the insect jumped onto the converter.

Had Claude been able to examine it with one of his instruments, he would have discovered that the creature was not entirely natural, but was made up of several bionic parts.

As Claude pulled a particle projector down from the ceiling, the fake insect crawled inside the converter through a small opening. Once inside, the strange beast unfolded and began to transform into a sinister-looking device, which clamped itself onto the lattice’s central connector.

“I’ll plug in the particle projector and give it a dry run,” said Claude, starting the device.

A beam radiated from it and hit the lens of the converter, which immediately began emitting a strange sound, then exploded with a silent flash of white light.

As the converter began to melt and turn into a spiky, gooey black mass, a small energy bubble created by the explosion raced from the machine to the floor through a series of cables. All of this was unseen by Claude, who was not hurt, but still blinded by the explosion.

Had the young physicist been able to follow the tiny energy bubble, he would have seen it race from circuit to circuit, run through memory chips and power lines, deeper and deeper inside the complex network of technical wonders that was the secret core of the wondrous artificial world, Rhea.

The bubble finally reached a small, golden sphere at the center of a huge shaft, connected on four sides by complex, mechanical arms.

It triggered a series of short circuits as it traveled along one of the arms, which, upon its contact, also transformed into the same black, thorny substance as Claude's converter.

Finally, when the bubble hit the gold sphere, it cracked—but did not shatter.

Then, there was silence at the heart of Rhea.

Meanwhile, much farther away in the desert, a tank-like vehicle was rushing towards a destination known only to its driver. Inside, at the commands, sitting in a large, pod-chair, was Koynos himself, clad in soft leather, wearing an aviator's helmet. His blue eyes were attentively watching a series of instruments mounted in front of him, while his pale, elongated hands, were gripping the steering-wheel.

Suddenly, a voice came cracking out of a loudspeaker:

"De Soto to Koynos. Come in, Number One! It's an emergency!"

Koynos flicked a switch.

"Koynos here. I hear you, Frederic."

Aboard the *Oxus*, Frederic de Soto emitted a sigh of relief. He, too, knew nothing of Koynos' true purposes, but he was all too aware that the fate of their expedition depended on their mysterious leader.

De Soto, a brilliant engineer who had made his fortune in South America, had initially joined the New Fifteen, motivated by the vague desire to meet and possibly harm Leo Saint-Clair, whose family had been feuding with his for centuries. Unlike Claude Marécourt, he knew what few people in the world were aware of: that the Nyctalope was still alive and well, having barely aged since he had destroyed his great-grandfather Dominique de Soto a.k.a. Gorillard, in 1930. But that was ancient business. Frederic had soon forgotten his plans for revenge, and thrown himself whole-heartedly into the Rhea mission.

"Koynos, at last!" he said, barely hiding his concern. "I was afraid you wouldn't answer."

"Secrecy is vital to our mission, Number Two," replied Koynos. "Why are you breaking radio silence and risking detection by Olbansville?"

"It's that business with the new converter. I'm afraid it's turned out badly."

"What happened?"

"There was a particle explosion at the base."

Koynos experienced a shock. This was entirely unforeseen and could change everything.

"What caused it?" he asked.

"It seems that Number Nine, I mean, Claude Marécourt, was involved. If you remember, I advised against recruiting someone so young and inexperienced..."

"And I disagreed," said Koynos sharply. De Soto's tendency to always throw blame on others was a constant irritant to him. "What measures have you taken?"

"We've tried to cloak the explosion, but it's bound to have been detected by the scientists at Olbansville."

Koynos' fist hit the armrest.

"Damn! The Nyctalope is going to learn we've infiltrated his private little world before we've had time to complete our survey. Find out exactly what happened and report to me asap, Number Two. Koynos over and out."

In his anger, Koynos had blurted a crucial fact that had not escaped Frederic de Soto's notice.

"*The Nyctalope is returning to Rhea?!?*"