

MISSING: ONE WINDOW

ONE VERY SPECIAL 'window'—the point of egress from an alien dimension—ceased to be and with its disappearance there vanished the means of return to our own *spatima* continuum, our own universe of space and time and matter.

Perry Rhodan learns whether a man can drown in an 'ocean of time'.

And the crew of the spaceship *Sherbourne*—does coincidence, chance, a lucky accident or fate determine the outcome of their adventure in the Other Dimension?

The lens-field generator and the dread Druufs are all part of the package of those who, like you when you read this breadth taking episode, sense—

A TOUCH OF ETERNITY

1/ OPERATION: OTHER WORLD

THE MYSTERIOUS CURTAIN. Of time. It swept inexorably over Tats-Tor and like a giant invisible vacuum sucked up all organic life, leaving in its wake an empty world: cities intact but uninhabited by any form of life. The men and women who had breathed, lived, loved and striven there to realize their individual destinies, were missing from the planet. They were not dead or destroyed but they no longer existed in the normal scheme of things: they existed now in another time dimension.

The star Morag was 7132 light-years from Earth. For a period of 5 millenniums its 2nd planet, Tats-Tor, had been colonized and settled by Arkonides. They made their living as exporters of valuable raw materials and through general commerce with the peoples of the Arkonide Empire, which was governed by a gigantic positronic Brain.

Perry Rhodan had a very special reason for landing on Tats-Tor: to organize a Time Expedition under the leadership of Lt. Marcel Rous. Here it was that the expedition had disappeared into an enigmatic... nothingness.

That had been in January, more than 7 months ago—January in the year 2041.

So now on the 16th of July, Perry Rhodan was returning to Tats-Tor for the 3rd time. As the depopulated planet began to emerge on the viewscreens of the mighty spaceship *Drusus*, its commander's thoughts returned to his first 2 visits to this distant world. Unfortunately they had been

fruitless and barren of hope for the members of the ill-fated expedition.

13 January 2041: for 10 days there had not been the slightest trace of the time expedition. Lt. Rous and his 5 companions had penetrated the circular field window produced by his energy lens generator and had just entered the alien time dimension when the frontal overlap of the 2 planes of existence had rolled over Tats-Tor and lapped up all life there like a ravenous giant. Contrary to expectations, Marcel Rous did not return.

Rhodan landed on Tats-Tor in the super battleship *Drusus*, a spherical spaceship measuring a mile in diameter. After some searching he found the deserted *Gazelle*, in which the energy lens generator had been installed.

With the help of this ingeniously constructed apparatus it was possible to penetrate the other time-plane at the moment of overlap without losing one's own time relationship. The critically different time-ratio of the other plane had not the slightest effect on a person coming through the energy lens.

The normal universe was being traversed by an alien time-plane. At every location where a direct interface of intercepting planes occurred, any organic life disappeared. The most monstrous menace ever known was threatening all life in the Milky Way.

It was with very mixed feelings that Rhodan, Reginald Bell and a few of the Mutant corps approached the *Gazelle* where it stood lonely and deserted in the middle of the desert. Other than themselves there was no life left on this world, not even the smallest insect that crawled, the lowliest worm. The time curtain had swept everything with it except lifeless matter and plants. Oddly, there was a definite indication that a difference between fauna and flora was recognized by the natural laws of the other time dimension.

Reginald Bell cleared his throat unobtrusively and attempted to conceal his anxiety. Under no circumstances must the others know that he was fearful or apprehensive.

However his voice was slightly strained when he spoke: "They have—uh—disappeared since 10 days ago. If they went into that other time plane through the energy ring, then why haven't they come back?"

Rhodan glanced askance at him briefly while continuing calmly. "We came here to find an answer to that question, Bell. I have a feeling that there could be a hundred answers—but it's going to be our job to discover the right one. Well, there's the *Gazelle*." He pointed to the long-range reconnaissance flier, a disc that was 100 feet in diameter and 60 feet high. It was still about 200 yards away. "In its control room are the controls for the energy-ring generator. We'll soon find out what's the matter with it."

"What can be wrong with it?" grumbled Bell in a welter of uncertainties.

Rhodan didn't look at him when he replied: "There's actually nothing that can't go out of commission..."

Bell fell into a stubborn silence the rest of the way.

The outer lock was open and they were able to enter the small spaceship without hindrance. Slightly more than a half mile away towered the mighty shape of the *Drusus*. At the slightest sign of danger the giant's guns would open fire.

But nothing occurred as Perry Rhodan and his companions passed through the airlock of the *Gazelle* and moved onward to the control room. It didn't take long to find a very graphic answer to their question but

it was by no means a satisfactory one.

The cooled droplets of melted metal on the smooth deck of the control room said enough but Rhodan was never satisfied with halfway answers. He attempted personally to get the equipment into operation but he soon had to realize how futile his efforts were.

The energy-ring generator of the Gazelle was knocked out, completely ruined for all time. The coils were burned through and the conductors were melted. Under the circumstances the thought of repairing it was hopeless.

"At least now we know the actual facts," murmured Bell.

Rhodan nodded. "A small consolation, I'm afraid, because it's not any help to the members of our vanished time-expedition. How are we going to get them out of their time prison?"

"We build another generator," suggested one of the mutants.

"Quite right," Rhodan agreed. "There's no other alternative. But in that case we've got to return to the Earth. Only the research centre in Terrania has the means to complete such a project. Let's hope that in the meantime Rous and his crew don't lose their courage or hope."

Bell stared pensively at the blank viewscreen of the Gazelle. "If they just don't lose too much time in the process..."

Rhodan shook his head. "Or we, either," he said and without further ado left the small spaceship. He knew that they couldn't accomplish anything more here without losing valuable hours and days.

And so it was that Perry Rhodan returned a 2nd time a few weeks later and landed on Tats-Tor, this time with a very large and powerful energy-ring generator on board.

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They required an entire day to erect the equipment on the desert next to the Gazelle. The technicians who had come along from the Earth were very confident that their newest creation would function. Rhodan and Bell hoped they were right.

And also Pucky, of course, who had been permitted to come along this time. The mouse-beaver waddled gravely along behind the 2 men, his ears sticking straight up and his broad beaver's tail lending him both guidance and support. In his brown hound-dog eyes was a faint glimmer of despair but the intelligent animal maintained an outward appearance that led none to suspect his inner feelings.

Moreover, Pucky was really much more than a mere animal. As a member of the Mutant Corps he was endowed with at least 3 parapsychological faculties and no one was quite sure whether other gifts of this nature were not slumbering within him also. At any rate, he was a telepath, a psychokinesist and a teleporter all in one package, besides being able to speak a number of languages with perfect fluency. And he possessed an IQ level that many humans might have envied.

Pucky walked in an upright position, measuring about 3 feet in height. He was a cross between mouse and beaver but comported himself in a completely human manner, although for the most part he chose to skip the matter of clothing. His rust-brown furry pelt seemed to be fully adequate for his needs.

Rhodan came to a halt when he reached the technicians, who had set up their equipment directly alongside the deserted Gazelle. The projectors were turned in the same direction that the ruined generator had been pointing toward. Barring anything unforeseen, an activation of the machine should now produce the circular ring of light which would form a doorway into the other time dimension.

"Are you ready?" Rhodan inquired of the head engineer as he indicated the complicated apparatus. "When can we make the first try?"

"As soon as we hook up the main conduits to the power generators on board the *Drusus*, sir. The energy-ring generator requires a lot of energy for building up its time-field."

Rhodan nodded and turned around. "I'm going through myself. Pucky and the mutants will accompany me. Bell will stay behind and take over the command in case anything goes wrong..."

"Wrong...?" inquired Pucky in his sharp, squeaky voice. "What could go wrong?"

"Whatever, Pucky—we have to take the risk," Rhodan explained calmly. "That's what Lt. Rous did and he's vanished; but at least we know the reason why. Without a generator there isn't any way back. But this equipment here isn't going to break down. Our technicians will see to that. So we'll be able to return at any time." He turned once more to the scientists. "When will you be all set?"

"In 1 hour, sir."

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The sun Morag had only moved a short distance and now stood high in the sky. The desert of Tats-Tor lay deserted and dead under its scorching rays, giving mute testimony to the lifelessness of a world swept by the curtain of alien time.

Rhodan adjusted the impulse beamer in his belt and took a last look at his companions before starting the dangerous journey. Beside him Pucky seemed to tremble with impatience but Rhodan sensed his small friend's inner apprehension before the unknown. However brave and spirited the little mouse-beaver might be, the alien time dimension was something he couldn't quite grasp in its concept—and so he was instinctively afraid of it.

"We will stay together," said Rhodan while placing his right hand on Pucky's shoulder. "As soon as we have climbed through the forcefield window I want you to put out your telepathic tendrils so that we can trace Lt. Rous as quickly as possible. John Marshall will handle the radio. I'll keep a lookout for any possible surprises from the unknown enemy but we already know that events occurring behind that time curtain take about 72,000 times longer to happen. So in that sense we really won't have to fear any enemy action." He gave a sign to the technicians. "We are ready, gentlemen."

Bell stood to one side and strove to maintain an air of indifference. Within him raged a veritable storm of

feelings, however. Naturally he was glad he didn't have to go along on the expedition. He had no fear of flesh and blood enemies but to penetrate into an alien, unknown environment was a hazardous venture which required more than raw courage alone.

Nevertheless he would have liked to go along. The call of adventure was always irresistible.

Then on the other hand...

He did not finish his counter-argument because the telepathic mouse-beaver suddenly turned to him. "You don't know what you want, do you, Fatso?" Of course Bell wasn't fat in the least, being at the most what might be referred to as thickset, but Pucky loved a bit of exaggeration when it came to ribbing his bosom pal. "First you're glad that somebody else is going to pull the castanets out of that other time plane and then you're stewing over not being along when we singe our paws. If you're a good boy, I'll bring you back a clock from the other side. Since it is 72,000 times slower than yours, you can gauge yourself to it when you're off duty."

Before Bell could find the appropriate words for a retort the head engineer turned on the power switch. With a muffled hum the magnetic fields built up which were to warp an opening in the time barrier. This opening, or window, would reveal itself in the form of a faintly shimmering ring of light.

But then the expected effect failed to materialize. In spite of the fact that the solidly anchored apparatus vibrated energetically and the fields increased their humming sound, the light-ring refused to appear.

The engineer shook his head in bewilderment as he watched the wavering needles on his meter panel. Rhodan stepped closer to him and shouted above the noise of the field generator. "What's happening? Is the field building up or not...?"

"It's building," confirmed the engineer in puzzlement without taking his eyes from the meters. "I can't see anything wrong. Everything is operating exactly as it was designed to do and actually the light-ring should be visible by now. I don't understand..."

In fact, nobody understood it for a good 6 months after that. At first the disappointment was almost a crushing blow. They kept looking for an error in the ring-field generator itself until somebody in the research centre in Terrania was sharp enough to think of looking elsewhere for the missing factor.

Namely, in the governing circumstances on Tats-Tor!

It had been a hard blow for Rhodan in the meantime to have to assume with an overwhelming certainty that Lt. Rous' time-expedition was lost for good.

But 3 months following the foregoing events chief physicist Erb of the electronics department stepped into his office far above the streets of Terrania.

Rhodan had just concluded a conversation with the Administrator of Venus and cut off the connection. The viewscreen faded out. Not particularly interested in this visit, he offered the physicist a chair across from him. He was expecting this to be another routine report.

"What can I do for you?" he said by way of opening the conversation but actually his thoughts were elsewhere. The settlers on Venus were asking for more administrative freedom and he didn't see why it should be denied them. In addition, there was the fact that...

"I believe," said Erb, "that I finally know why the energy-ring generator didn't function that time on Tats-Tor."

With an involuntary start, Rhodan forgot Venus and leaned forward, focussing his attention on the physicist. "Tats-Tor! The lost expedition...! I've given up all hope of ever being able to help Rous. Erb, don't stir up false hopes in me." He waved a hand as though to brush his own remark away. "That's nonsense, of course. Don't mind me, Erb. It's better that I listen to you, instead. Tell me what you've found out. The smallest detail is important if it can be of help to our people."

The physicist, an exceptionally congenial man with premature grey hair, smiled in some embarrassment. There was a look of something like helplessness in his eyes but Rhodan knew his people. It was an impression that could be deceptive. Erb was one of the most capable professionals in the field of electronic engineering and electro-physics. "Actually it wasn't I who found the answer, it was Gustav 6."

"Gustav 6?"

"Yes, that's what we call the positronic brain in our department. Naturally it doesn't have the capacity of the big computers on the ships or the one on Venus but it has given us very good service. So I submitted all of our information to Gustav 6 that I could dig up concerning the problem of the other time-plane, much of which I'll confess has been only blind guesswork. After putting a series of inquiries to him, the answers emerged and crystallized. Our spot-checks and samplings of the data proved their validity. There doesn't seem to be any possibility of error, sir."

For Rhodan, all other problems of the Solar Empire were forgotten. After 3 months of relative peace and quiet the spectre loomed before him again—the dread apparition of the other time-plane, sweeping slowly through the normal universe and bringing disaster and destruction wherever the interface of dimensions occurred.

"Continue, Erb. What answers did you find?"

The physicist's smile faded, to be replaced by an unusually stern expression. His eyes met Rhodan's in unabashed concentration. "At first I wanted to know whether or not the energy-ring generator we had constructed was in perfect working order, since it had let us down so miserably on Tats-Tor. The computer confirmed absolutely that we had not made any errors and that the machine was flawlessly put together. According to that, it also had to operate without a flaw. But it still didn't function! Therefore, the mistake had to lie somewhere else than in the machine itself."

Rhodan only nodded, refraining from an interruption even when the physicist made a slight pause. After a few moments, Erb continued: "So naturally I did look elsewhere, admittedly with Gustav's help. The results still gave us a probability factor of 97% that an error didn't even exist."

"None at all?" muttered Rhodan in some amazement. "Just what do you mean?"

"Well of course a kind of error was involved but only of a very theoretical nature, sir. It was a mistake on our part to assume that the relationships *before* an overlapping of time dimensions were the same as *after* such an occurrence."

Rhodan gazed steadily at Erb. There was a slight quiver at the corners of his eyes. "Go over that again, will you, please?"

Erb obliged him and then waited expectantly. Had Rhodan already arrived at the same conclusion during

recent days? It was only logical in view of their mutual train of thoughts.

Rhodan spoke slowly and carefully. "So you would say that we have to build a ring-field generator that would fit the altered relationships? In other words, a generator that would even be effective long after a time-front has swept over any given world. . ."

Erb nodded in agreement. "Yes, that is the problem! And Gustav 6 has specifically calculated that a transfer into the other time-plane is only possible when a dimensional interface has already occurred. That is, either during or after an overlap. However, if a considerable time has passed following an overlap, a penetration into the other time will not be possible with our present generator. Further: prior to a time-plane interface, it's totally impossible to enter the other continuum."

"I see. . ." Rhodan brooded over this a moment, then looked up again. "And you believe that it's possible to build the kind of generator that will do the job?"

"Yes, I believe so, sir. It's merely a matter of making certain changes in the intersecting magnetic fields which generate the time window. Basically it's all quite simple but if you asked me to explain it to you I'd have to admit defeat. You understand, of course, how I mean that. . ."

"Quite!" Rhodan smiled and leaned back. "How long will you need to build the new generator—or can you make use of the present equipment?"

"I don't consider that to be practicable, sir. The alterations may appear to be simple in their nature but actually they're not. That is, a redesign of the existing generator would be more complicated than to make a complete new model. So if there's just one request I might make. . ."

"Don't worry about your needs, Erb. They're granted already. You have full authority and a blank check for finances. Just remember that we're not only concerned here with the lives of the 6 men who went into the other time-plane but also with the goal of finding a weapon against this uncanny menace. Overlappings of the 2 planes of existence are happening throughout the universe. What would happen if by chance the Earth were also to be trapped in such a danger zone?"

Erb paled at the thought. Then he stood up and said firmly: "You may depend on me, sir. By tomorrow I'll be able to present you with the plans. The actual construction, of course, will require a few months yet but it will be successful."

"A few months?" echoed Rhodan. "That's a pretty long time."

The physicist held firm to the time schedule but gave the reasons why the work could not be accelerated. It was in that moment that the idea came to Rhodan that was to affect the destiny of the Milky Way.

"Erb, there's just one last question: does the size of the ring-field generator have anything to do with its safety of operation? What I mean is: a larger generator creates a larger energy-ring—we're agreed on that—but what I want to know is, will its functional safety be influenced or can you guarantee that safety for a larger generator?"

"Sir, the size has no bearing on its proper operation."

"Excellent! Then see to it that the circular aperture in the time-wall has a diameter in excess of 300 feet."

Erb stared at Rhodan, thunderstruck. "300 feet—! But that's enormous, sir! Up till now there's been no

energy-ring larger than a few yards at the most

"Is it technically possible or isn't it?"

"Oh it's possible, certainly. It's just a matter of increasing and strengthening the design proportionately. But I'm afraid that the weight of the new machine would be so great that its transportation and installation on Tats-Tor—"

"Hold on!" interrupted Rhodan; then he smiled suddenly again. "Just so that we won't misunderstand each other: the new generator doesn't have to be built up entirely from scratch. I want it to be a permanent part of the *Drusus* itself—as a new integral part of the ship, always to be ready for action at any place or time and thus perpetually portable. Is it possible under such circumstances?"

"It is possible, sir, that in such case I would only need 2 or 3 months. You will get such a generator that it can project an energy-ring from the *Drusus* big enough for a cruiser to go through it into the other dimension, at any time desired."

"That," said Rhodan calmly, "is exactly what I have in mind."

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Rhodan was still looking at the planets in the middle of the viewscreen. His thoughts returned to the present. Dead ahead lay Tats-Tor, the world that had been depopulated by the aliens from another time. If there were any relationship between space and time, then Lt. Rous and his crew should still be there.

In the heart of the *Drusus* lay the giant mass of the new energy-ring generator. Its controls had been extended into the observation cupola. From that position one would be able to look directly into the circular aperture to be generated, which would measure 600 feet in diameter. Below in the hangar lay the light cruiser *Sherbourne*, ready for launching. Since its diameter was 300 feet, there would thus be a 150-foot safety factor between the hull and the edge of the forcefield window.

Erb had been backed by the research staff in Terrania when he had guaranteed that the new generator would make it possible to break through into the other time-plane.

The *Drusus* continued to decelerate and landed an hour later on Tats-Tor next to the still-waiting *Gazelle*. The retractable struts extended outward and sank deeply into the sandy ground of the desert before encountering bedrock strong enough to support the ship. But the antigrav fields still had to be kept in operation because the tremendous weight of the ship would otherwise have even penetrated the rocks toward the very crust of the planet.

Rhodan left the Control Central and went to the observation dome. Erb, Bell, Marshall and Baldur Sikerman, first officer of the *Drusus*, were waiting for him there. Pucky sat quietly and discreetly in a corner, so unobtrusive for the moment that he might as well have not even been there. John Marshall, head of the Mutant Corps, interrupted his conversation with Sikerman and turned to Rhodan expectantly.

"Everything is set," announced Rhodan with a hint of tension in his voice. For months he had looked forward to this moment and had pushed every doubt aside concerning the achievement of his purpose;

but now, a few minutes before the start of the expedition, submerged apprehensions returned to him.

This was not a mere thrust into space, which had long since lost its terrors for man; it was instead a thrust into time. And even Rhodan had to admit that time was a relatively unknown factor in his experience. Not only unknown but also dangerous.

Lt.-Col. Sikerman sprang to attention. "The *Sherbourne* is ready for launching, sir," he announced. "The crew is already on board, all men accounted for."

"Including all available mutants," added Marshall. "Except for myself and Pucky."

Rhodan nodded. "Bell will take over command of the *Drusus* and keep the radio receivers open at all times. That includes hypercom! Of course I don't think that a radio communication will be possible through the time-wall but we won't pass up any chances of making contact. And one thing more..." Rhodan turned directly to Bell and looked him in the eye. "Nobody knows how much time may pass in our own dimension of time while we are with the *Sherbourne* in the other plane. So it is very essential that the *Drusus* remain here—no matter if it takes weeks or even months. Is that perfectly clear, Bell?"

"It's clear enough, Perry," Bell answered in an unusually subdued tone. "We'll wait, whatever happens. The energy-ring generator will remain in continuous operation."

"Practically speaking," interjected Erb, "what you have now is more of a warp-field generator because the light and energy spectra are curved quite sharply. Moreover, you know that a penetration into the other time-plane isn't possible if an interface with our own continuum doesn't happen to be present. That's just a fine distinction but I thought it was important enough to mention it to you."

Rhodan smiled at Erb. "Dr. Erb, if you are as precise and knowledgeable in everything else concerning this operation, we'll have no further apprehensions about entrusting ourselves to your creation."

"That's not what I'd be worried about," returned the physicist calmly. "You can rely on the new WF generator completely, sir. But the time ratio between our side and the alien plane—that is my total concern! Up until now we've held the time factor to the only constant that we had. But now we know that even time itself isn't constant."

"I concur with you," replied Rhodan seriously. "And we all know that I can't afford any time slippage. But we have to take these risks if we don't want to be swept away one day by the other time dimension." He looked at his watch. "I think we'll begin the experiment in 5 minutes." He looked outside at the dead surface of the planet. To the right stood the deserted Gazelle in which Lt. Rous had come here more than 7 months before. The projectors of the warp-field generator were aimed at a spot that lay ahead to the left of it. It was so situated that one could also see it from the *Sherbourne*, which stood ready for flight in the hangar. The outer lock doors were already wide open so that the light cruiser could leave the gigantic mothership at any time. "Let's go."

"Best of luck, Perry," muttered Bell in a rather husky tone. "You can depend on us."

"You will come back," said Erb simply and then turned to the controls of his equipment, upon which the fate of everyone depended.

"Thank you," replied Rhodan and signalled to Sikerman, Marshall and Pucky. Then he left the observation room with a firm step and went out into the corridor. Marshall followed him, then Sikerman.

Pucky slipped slowly off the couch where he had been sitting, waddled quietly over to Bell and took hold of his hand. "Let's hope it won't be long before we see each other again," he said with some emotion, at the same time nodding to Erb. "I don't know if the carrots in the other time-world are as good as they are on the *Drusus* but you can take it from me that carrots aren't the only good things that will make the return trip worth striving for. You're also included."

For once Bell took him seriously and refrained from ribbing him. "Watch over the Chief, Pucky!" he advised and he gently patted his little friend's furry shoulder. "Always stick with him and protect him. I've never seen him as reluctant to go on a mission, as he seems to be this time. Actually nobody should pay any attention to spooky hunches..."

"Then don't!" said the mouse-beaver while shaking hands with Erb. "Here's hoping your warp-box does its job, pop!"

Pucky was freely informal regardless of name or rank but nobody ever took offence because after all the mouse-beaver enjoyed very special privileges.

"It'll soon be rattling," replied Erb in the same spirit and he placed a hand on the control console of the WFG. "I'd advise you to get yourself on board the *Sherbourne*. I'm turning on the field coils in exactly 2 minutes."

"I'll be there before Rhodan," Pucky assured him. He concentrated a moment—and made his jump. In other words, he suddenly became invisible and materialized in the same moment down in the hangar, where he almost scared the wits out of a young cadet who was just on his way to the launch lock.

At this same time, Rhodan and Sikerman stepped into the hangar. Marshall, the telepath, followed behind them.

The hangar was a tremendous room because it always housed a spherical cruiser that was 300 feet in diameter. Actually no regulation launch lock was used here, through which a ship could leave the *Drusus* in a matter of minutes. Instead, the opening was created by simply folding back whole bulkhead sections, which caused a portion of the hull itself to disappear. Outside lay the shimmering desert of the dead planet.

Simultaneously there existed out there in the desert another world which was invisible, concealed behind a barrier of time. It was a world in which all life proceeded at a rate that was some 72000 times slower than normal. This much was known about it but not much more.

Without wasting words, Rhodan entered the *Sherbourne* and took over the co-pilot's seat. Directly in front of him on the viewscreen lay the desert of Tats-Tor and the sky above it. There the circular window of light would have to appear, through which they were to penetrate into the other dimension...

Sikerman sat down next to Rhodan. His seemingly clumsy hands went possessively to the controls before him. His bullish face was without expression but Rhodan could sense the keyed-up state of his pilot's thoughts.

Pucky did not go to the quarters which had been reserved for the mutants. Instead he also walked into the Command Central, where he got up onto a couch and sat there with his back to the wall while his intelligent eyes took in everything that Rhodan and Sikerman were doing. All his nerves and senses were at a high pitch of alertness and his forces of concentration had switched over to 'emergency' status. So if it became necessary he could make use of his incredible psi faculties at any second.

The preliminary starting signal sounded throughout the *Sherbourne*. The outer hatches closed automatically and bolted the airlocks hermetically, thus sealing everyone inside from the outer world. Now the crew was protected from the vacuum of outer space but was this also a protection against time itself...?

The second signal sounded.

Rhodan watched Sikerman's veined, sinewy hands at the console board; then his gaze wandered to the viewscreen. Out there nothing had changed. The deserted *Gazelle* lay motionlessly in the desert. The sky was bright and cloudless.

With his right hand, Rhodan switched on both the telecom and the radio receiver, connecting himself with the Control Centre of the *Drusus*. By this means his own crew on board the *Sherbourne* could also hear what was going on. No one was to be left in uncertainty if something unforeseen should occur.

"Bell, we're ready for takeoff. How does it look to you there?"

Bell's face appeared on the viewscreen. "Just 60 seconds more, Perry! Wait until you see the circle of light."

"Of course! But what do you think?"

Bell grimaced uncomfortably. "Don't ask me that."

"What can happen to us if we come back quickly?" countered Rhodan. "As long as Erb keeps the generator running, we can come back any time we want. As soon as we've located Rous..."

"And how long might that be...?"

Rhodan didn't answer. As he looked at his watch, Bell said: "10 seconds to go yet. We'll soon see if this thing works!"

"It will!" came Erb's determined voice from the background. He was not visible on the viewscreen.

The 10 seconds seemed to be endless.

"Now Erb is turning it on!" announced Bell.

Rhodan moved his eyes from the smaller screen to the larger one. The sky over the desert was still bright and cloudless but already in certain areas a weak shimmering effect was noticeable, as though the magic of an unseen sorceress were beginning to materialize a myriad of dancing mirrors in the air. After more of these apparitions appeared, they began to take on the pattern of a circle—a circle of light that measured slightly more than 600 feet in diameter.

The final starting signal shrilled through the confines of the *Sherbourne*.

It failed to divert Rhodan's attention.

The light-circle increased in brightness and became more definable. Within another 20 seconds it was complete, without any gaps. Perfectly visible and gleaming brightly it towered against the clear sky. But

the sky inside of the circle had changed.

Rhodan noticed it just now. The sky within the energy-ring had become reddish. Dark clouds hung motionlessly in this red-tinged sky—clouds that had not been there before. They were the clouds of the other time-plane!

"Ready!" Rhodan nodded to Sikerman. "Take off at top atmospheric acceleration—in 10 seconds!"

Sikerman responded in a completely automatic manner and everybody on board the *Sherbourne* knew what he had to do. The lower rim of the light apparition was 60 feet above the desert of Tats-Tor. Without an air vehicle it could not be reached.

10 seconds after Rhodan's command, the *Sherbourne* shot forth from the gigantic body of the *Drusus* and hurtled through the atmosphere of Tats-Tor. The ship increased its velocity as it glided low over the sandy ground and raced toward the glimmering warp-field that separated one universe from another.

Bell and Erb watched while the *Sherbourne* plunged into the window of light—and then disappeared abruptly.

In the same second the radio signals from the light cruiser were silenced. Rhodan's face disappeared from the viewscreen as though struck from it by an invisible blow. In *this* world there no longer existed a Perry Rhodan... nor a Mutant Corps... nor a *Sherbourne* .

And in the other world...?

Bell stared at the empty screen with his jaws locked tightly together.

The long wait began...

2/ ONE POSSIBILITY!

They were still living on the high rocky plateau by the caves of the Druuf. During the past 8 days the sun's motion had hardly been noticeable but the bolt of lightning that had been frozen in the sky by the slowness of time had finally faded out. It had hung there unchanged for more than 40 hours between the clouds and the ground.

Lt. Rous and his 5 companions kept waiting impatiently for the small light window to appear again down below on the plain, which would make possible their return into the normal universe. But they had waited in vain.

The discovery of the K-7 and its crew, which had been lost for months, was a ray of hope. Of course it was no ray of hope that only a few minutes had passed for the commander of the auxiliary craft during what had been a period of a quarter of a year in the normal universe for Rous before coming here.

The 180-foot sphere still stood on the plateau in the shadow of the cliffs. Up above hung a cloud of vapour over the mountaintop which heralded the imminent outbreak of volcanic action but by their

reckoning the eruption couldn't occur for several normal years yet. Other than themselves, nothing lived on this world, which Rous had named the Crystal World. At least there was no visible life because everything here moved 72000 times slower than normal. Everything was subject to the laws of this other time-plane. Everything!

The only thing that distinguished them from this seeming lifelessness was their own time ratio. It had only been with the help of antigravity fields and by passing the relative light-speed of the local time dimension, which was about 2.5 miles per second, that they had been able to bring objects or life forms here into their own ratio of time.

The physicist Fritz Steiner and the biologist Ivan Ragov stood off a little to one side on the edge of the plateau. Hypnotist André Noir was with them. On the stony ground between them crouched a curious creature whose movements were normal from their own standpoint. It was one of the Druufs which had been brought up to the human time-ratio in order to be studied. With Noir's help a kind of communication had been established. Noir would generate in the alien creature's brain a thought picture or mental image which would then indicate to the creature what the men wanted to know. The conversation was a bit one-sided but the accomplishment in itself was surprising enough.

Meanwhile, Fred Harras was operating the hypercom transmitter from the K-7, which had also been brought into normal time. He kept the distress signal going constantly in the forlorn hope that somebody, somewhere, would hear it.

And meanwhile the meteorologist, Josua, had again taken up guard duty in the area where the Gazelle was assumed to be located—in the other time dimension. It was here that they had entered this world and if there were ever to be an exit from it, it would have to appear in this place. The small light window had disappeared 8 days ago. That is, 8 days of Earth time. Because in this world the local time-rate would require easily 200 years to equal an Earth day, if the calculations were correct.

"I've asked him why his companions attacked us," Noir was saying, somewhat pensively. "If I interpret his answering signals right, he's denying the whole thing. He had nothing to do with the attacks."

"He's lying!" snorted Steiner, observing the strange creature that crouched between them.

It stood about 5 feet high and looked something like a giant caterpillar with stubby wings. Close below the insect-like head were 2 rather delicate grasping appendages, whereas the other limbs could be considered as a means of locomotion.

"Naturally," Steiner concluded, "he's afraid well hold him responsible for the attack."

"But perhaps he is speaking the truth," suggested Ragov as he looked beyond the Druuf. "Premature judgments have caused a lot of injustices."

"There aren't any other intelligent beings on this world." Steiner stuck to his thesis and if Noir hadn't stepped into the argument the whole heated debate between the 2 scientists would have started up again.

"Please, gentlemen! Rash judgment is just as damaging as failing to recognize the gravity of a situation. It is true, of course, that these super caterpillars are the only intelligent form of life we've found on this Crystal World but that fact by no means precludes the possibility that other forms exist here. Frankly I find the idea of being attacked merely by these creatures to be a bit strange—especially considering the use of controlled time decelerators that enabled them to make us become visible to their eyes. However it may be, one thing is certain: that is that we are no longer safe here, even though everything moves

72000 times slower than we do."

Lt. Rous came striding across the plateau and joined them. He wore a deep frown of concern while only granting the Druuf a sceptical side-glance. "We finally assembled the hypercom receiver too," he said. "So far Harras hasn't gotten any answer to his signals. So it seems certain that nobody but ourselves exists in this alien time-plane."

"Why don't the Druufs pick up our calls?" Steiner wanted to know.

Rous shrugged. "I thought you might have found the answer by now. Haven't the prisoners given you any information yet? Maybe they use another kind of radio equipment or communication principle."

"This fellow here is stubborn," grumbled Steiner indignantly. "He maintains that the attack came from another source."

Noir straightened up slowly. "Do you know what, Lieutenant?" he said as he folded his arms on his chest. "I feel exactly the same as Ragov does, that we're on the wrong track. These beings that we refer to as the Druufs—are not the Druufs at all."

Rous raised his brows questioningly. Steiner snorted scornfully, while Ragov nodded in agreement.

Noir continued. "The real intelligences of this time-plane look different. I can't be certain of it but this caterpillar here finally understands what I'm trying to say to it. From its reactions I can conclude with a fair degree of certainty that it's as surprised as we are about the attack. And equally disturbed. Lieutenant, I'm afraid we're wasting our time. We're making the same mistake that alien space travellers would be making if they landed on the Earth and tried to interrogate dogs and cows concerning the political situation on the planet."

"Hm-m-m..." murmured Rous and began to regard the caterpillar with a somewhat heightened interest. "So what you're saying is, we are threatened by something 'over there'?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, sir. And even if time goes slower for the unknown enemy, nevertheless events eventually *do* take place! I'm convinced they've already regrouped themselves for a new attack against us. Don't forget: 1 of their seconds is 20 hours to us!"

"Since we've been in this place then, to their time perception hardly more than 10 seconds have passed," said Rous thinking out loud. "If we also remember that there's already been an attack we have to realize how fast the intelligences of this world can react. Maybe our time-conversion arithmetic isn't entirely precise but there's no doubt that it's approximately correct. So I think on that basis we can expect another attack soon. What can we do to defend ourselves?"

"We are faster than they are," said Steiner. "We'll dodge them."

"The relative speed of sound in this time-plane amounts to about 1 foot per minute," Rous reminded him, "but we know that if they use a protective energy field they can achieve their own light-speed even within the atmosphere—and that's 2.5 miles per second, which is pretty fast even for us. So eluding anything at that speed isn't exactly playing games. One of these times the enemy may surprise us."

Before anybody could give a reply Rous' radio receiver buzzed on his armband. The tiny apparatuses kept everyone in touch with each other. He touched a button and spoke into the mini-mike: "Who's that?"

"Josua!" The African's voice came from about 60 miles away. "The light window—it's back again! But..."

It came to Rous like a thunderbolt. For a brief instant everything swam before his eyes and his hands groped for support. "What?" he called, flabbergasted. "The energy-ring is there again?"

"Yes—but it's bigger! At least 200 yards in diameter!"

Rous turned to Steiner, Ragov and Noir. "Quick! Back to the K-7 on the double! Into your Arkonide suits! We're flying to Josua at once!" Then he spoke again into the tiny microphone. "We're coming right away, Josua! Keep on reporting and I'll keep the receiver open!"

Rous' mind raced. It was out of the question to try using the K-7 because it had not yet been converted back to normal time. With its present unimaginable mass it was subject to the natural laws of the alien time-plane and thus was as good as immovable.

There was no alternative but to bring the crew separately to the life saving light-ring with the help of the Arkonide battle-suits. However, in order to insure that the energy-ring generator would continue to function...

Rous' thought train came to a jarring halt.

What had Josua said?

200 yards in diameter...?

Only now did Rous begin to comprehend that something of colossal import had occurred. This certainly wasn't the old generator that was creating an exit opening for them but an entirely new one. The old light window had only been a few yards in diameter. Bewildered but with hopes soaring, he stumbled after Steiner, Ragov and Noir, who were running toward the K-7. He didn't notice that the giant caterpillar followed him with a smooth, gliding movement.

Moreover he was distracted by Josua. The other's voice was not coming in with much volume but it nevertheless emerged clearly enough from the mini-speaker in Rous' armband radio:

"...incredible...! A spherical ship—it can't be anything else—it's ploughing through the window! It's coming to a halt—altitude around 1000 feet!"

Rous almost collapsed.

A spherical ship!

That could only be Rhodan! He was overwhelmed with joy. Rhodan had not left them in the lurch!

As fast as he could, he raced to the nearby rocks where Harras had assembled his radio station. The technician had already been picking up Josua's transmissions. The latter's face was on the screen when Rous arrived.

"Normal transmission!" Rous shouted to him. "Call Rhodan! Simultaneous reception!"

Meanwhile, Steiner and Ragov reached the K-7 and alerted the unsuspecting crew. Seconds later everything was a turmoil.

Noir relaxed somewhat. He knew that it wasn't a matter of seconds now. Why should he rush just because everybody else was? Without pushing himself he went to the cages where they kept the Druufs. Altogether there were 5 specimens which were no longer in their own time ratio and now lived at the same biological rate as the humans. And of course their movements were correspondingly as fast.

Druufs...?

All of a sudden Noir was sure that these caterpillars were not the actual rulers of this alien dimension. Their overall reactions pointed to this fact unmistakably. Their comportment did not resemble that of intelligent beings who were the lords of a universe. These creatures here acted and carried on like a subordinate species. Servants or slaves, perhaps, but not rulers.

Rous sprang to aid Harras as the receiver began to operate. The loudspeaker interrupted its monotonous hum and then everybody on the plateau heard the blaring voice which at this moment seemed to be the voice of salvation.

"This is light cruiser *Sherbourne* —Commander Perry Rhodan! We've received your signals. Track our bearings now and beam in—keep on transmitting to us!"

With a shout of joy, Harras hugged Lt. Rous and slapped him on the shoulder. More than a week of uncanny experiences and frustrating waiting was over with. Soon they would no longer be prisoners of time but would be able to return to their own normal universe.

Rous turned to Steiner as the latter came running up from the K-7.

"What happens now, Lieutenant?" asked the physicist. "Do we have to put on the suits or should we wait till they find us? Maybe we should make our position known to them or give them a signal..."

"Harras is on it already with the transmitter," Rous assured him. "You'd better get busy with Noir and Ragov, collecting the prisoners. We'll take them with us. Our telepaths will soon worm the secret out of them as to who the attackers were. We have to leave the K-7 behind. When Rhodan gets here we won't have any time to lose!"

Steiner started to laugh. Rous figured it was nothing more than a reaction of sudden relief, a release from the terrible tensions of the past week in which they had been time prisoners.

"Not lose any time!" Steiner blurted out in an uncontrolled fit of amusement. "*Whichtime* and *whose* time, Lieutenant?"

Rous gave a slight smile and refrained from answering. The truth was, he wasn't sure he could answer the question...

* * * *

At the same second that the *Sherbourne* broke through the barrier gate into the other time-plane, Rhodan knew that he had lost communication with the *Drusus*. Bell's face had blanked out on the screen as though it had never been there. The radio signals went dead. The sky itself changed. It became red with a tinge of violet.

Immediately Rhodan heard garbled words in English. With a quick movement he adjusted the receiver dial and was able to make out the distress signal of the lost expedition. He breathed a sigh of relief. Lt. Rous and his men were still alive after all!

He answered quickly in order to establish communications. Then when the signal-tracer indicated the direction, the *Sherbourne* continued its journey.

During these first exciting moments, Pucky sat on the couch and used his ESP in a search for stray thought-waves. Since distance was no obstacle it was not surprising that he was soon making announcements in his high-pitched voice. "Everything's OK with Lt. Rous, considering the situation, I guess—and that goes for the other members of the expedition. I also can't see that the K-7 crew has suffered any damages, and besides—"

Rhodan had only been listening with half an ear but suddenly something struck home. He interrupted Pucky abruptly: "What's that you say? The crew of the K-7? What do you mean? The K-7 was lost more than a year ago."

Pucky straightened up, losing some of his languid composure. "Lt. Rous has found the K-7 and its crew and a method was discovered by Ragov or Steiner that made it possible to bring them from the alien time-rate to the normal time-rate. As far as I've been able to read in their minds, 7 months ago when they were brought out of the alien time-rate their first encounter with the Timeless Ones had happened almost 4 months prior—and yet for them the elapsed time was 2 minutes."

Sikerman muttered without enthusiasm: "I'm afraid we're in no position to define the laws that govern the corresponding time-rate differentials. Maybe we are already subject to some decisive real time slippages."

"Don't anticipate trouble like that!" complained Rhodan almost beseechingly. "Take a course from your new bearings and land in the area where Lt. Rous is located. Pucky, you keep scanning the thoughts of our castaways so that we'll have as much of their story behind us as we can by the time we get there—it saves time and that's our main objective now. I'm afraid we're not going to have a second to lose—if we don't want Bell out there to die of impatience from waiting for us!"

They understood immediately what he meant and knew how serious he was when he said it. If only 2 minutes were equivalent to more than 3 months on the outside, what would happen now if they were to spend a matter of hours in this dimension? But they already knew that there was no yardstick for measuring the time lapse here; only experience could give the answer.

Come what might, however, they were here.

Rhodan looked below at the rigid plain and the crystalline glitter of the rivers with their waves frozen in time. Ahead on the horizon it must be raining but hours and days would pass before the raindrops reached the ground, so slowly were they falling. By a rough estimate, maybe half a foot per hour.

Col. Sikerman's voice penetrated the brooding silence. "The instruments show a heavy loading of the energy screens. What can that be?"

With a swift glance Rhodan scanned the meters. Each indicator's reading remained firmly in his almost photographic mind, which was the reason he was able to find an answer in a very few seconds. "Air resistance, Sikerman! Everything here is subject to the natural laws governing this alien time-plane and that includes the atmosphere. In a relative sense we're ploughing through the air at maybe 10,000 times the speed of sound. Without a defence screen we'd be incandescent, maybe melting by now. Anyway, you can slow your speed, Colonel. We ought to be there soon."

The tracer signals became stronger. Then, moments later, Rhodan discovered the K-7, which rested motionlessly on a high plateau. Tiny figures ran back and forth—the members of the lost Time Expedition and also the crew of the auxiliary flier that had previously disappeared on Mirsal.

Moments later, Lt. Rous and Rhodan stood facing each other. "I'm happy to have found you, Lieutenant. However, we don't have any time to lose. Save your report for later. I learned the essentials through Pucky and my telepath, Marshall, so I'm fairly well informed. Order the crew of the K-7 to board the *Sherbourne*. What's with the prisoners? They look like caterpillars."

"We named them Druufs because their cries sounded at first like a muffled druuf when they were stretched out by their own time-rate. At first we assumed they were the leading intelligences of this alien time-plane but in the meantime Noir has come up with another theory: he thinks they're either the slaves or the servants of the actual rulers here."

"So the Druufs aren't really the Druufs," observed Rhodan with a fleeting smile. "I only hope that one day we'll get to know the real Druufs." He did not suspect how close that day was.

"At any moment we can expect an attack from their side," Rous stated pointedly. "The Druufs have had enough time to prepare for it since we struck back at them a few days ago and destroyed their time-delay equipment."

"Time-delay...?" queried Rhodan softly.

"Yes, because you know in their eyes we are invisible," Rous explained quickly. "Our movements are so fast that they can't be perceived by them. So they mounted 10 cameras in a small aircraft of some kind and were able to detect us. They ran the film or vidtapes super fast and then slowed them down in stages. In the 10th camera they were able to see us as we really are. A pretty smart idea, you'll have to admit."

"We could reverse that process and do the same thing but it would be more difficult from a time standpoint," replied Rhodan with a thoughtful smile. "Are you saying that by using one of their time-delay setups they may be able to launch another attack?"

"I'm sure of it," Rous confirmed.

Suddenly there was a distraction by a crowd and hubbub centring around the Druuf cages. Somebody shouted something but neither Rous nor Rhodan could make it out.

"See to it that we can take off in 10 minutes," said Rhodan. "I don't want to lose any more time than that."

As Rous moved away, Rhodan turned his attention again to the cages which were also to go on board the *Sherbourne*. Actually he should have realized that Pucky would make good use of his remaining time

in the alien dimension, even though he had not been given any specific order to do so.

The mouse-beaver had discovered the captive caterpillar creatures immediately and had established a telepathic contact with them. Of course it wasn't possible for him to convey his actual thoughts and wishes to the Druufs but he could clearly and plainly read what the creatures were thinking.

And what they thought was very informative indeed.

Pucky crouched in front of the cage and listened—until the men came to take the cages into the *Sherbourne*.

"You shouldn't lock them up," said Pucky indignantly as he hopped about excitedly. "They are harmless and aren't dangerous in any way. The rulers of this strange dimension have misused them. The rulers are not the ones you're calling the Druufs."

There was some astonished reaction to this. Ragov joined Pucky and was engaged in several minutes of whispered conversation with him. What he learned served to confirm his own suspicions. The caterpillars were merely a race of workers under the Druufs.

Pucky was pacified when Ragov assured him that the caterpillars would be treated properly. Until the *Sherbourne* took off there were still a good 5 minutes in which the mouse-beaver intended to make further good use of his time. He teleported himself to the nearby cliffs to investigate the caves there.

Everywhere he came upon the motionless caterpillar creatures who in contrast to the prisoners were still in their original time-ratio and naturally did not move. That is, although they were moving they did so at a rate that was 72,000 times slower than Pucky's movements. To the unaided eye they were as lifeless as granite because the inertial factor of skin and flesh had been magnified 72,000 times and made them practically indestructible.

And there was also something else behind the curious natural laws in this particular place where the 2 time-planes intersected.

Pucky was soon to find this out.

The mouse-beaver stood thoughtfully in front of a group of the relatively motionless caterpillars and listened to the long drawn-out "d-r-u-u-f" of their time-elapsed cries. Here the speed of sound was only about 0.2 inch per second—at least all sound that originated in the other continuum. It was evident that such a time-delay would also have its acoustical effects.

Pucky reasoned that even the time-frozen caterpillars must think. So why not find out what was going on in their small, primitive brains? They were not in captivity here. Perhaps they would reveal something that the others had not...

Pucky opened his 'receptors' and suddenly staggered. He almost lost his balance. By all the sun systems of the Coal Sack!—what was this?

Instead of intercepting an orderly and comprehensible series of thoughts, inside his brain Pucky 'heard' a weird and unrecognizable jumble of long drawn-out impulses that sounded like distorted electronic music. In a more acoustical sense, it was as though he had put his ear to a beehive. It was impossible for him to differentiate the individual thought trains and sort them out.

He screened himself off, thus isolating the telepathic portion of his mutant brain. He glanced around for quick orientation and then teleported himself to the place where Rhodan was located. He materialized close beside him.

"Well?" asked Rhodan calmly. He was used to the mouse-beaver's precipitate appearances out of nowhere. "You ought to be thinking about getting yourself on board. We're taking off in just a few minutes."

Pucky excitedly told him about his experience with the caterpillars. It was one of those rare times when he could find no explanation for a phenomenon. "After all, I was able to read the thoughts of the other Druufs—uh—caterpillars, I mean. Why not this time? They also have to think, don't they?"

Rhodan failed to suppress a faint smile. "Naturally they think, Pucky, just like all the others. But they think on another time-plane. Their thoughts are slower. What you picked up was their thought impulses, alright—but slowed down 72000 times."

The mouse-beaver made no answer. The full impact of Rhodan's words struck him suddenly: there could never be any communication between humans and Druufs! Unless one were converted to their own ratio of time...

Pucky hopped away toward the *Sherbourne*.

Rhodan pushed for a quick departure. He alone could perceive the consequences of a further delay. If he were not deceived by his deductions, then hours and perhaps even days must have already passed for Bell outside in the *Drusus*.

Rhodan was the last to go up the slanting gangway to the entrance lock. He took one last look at the K-7. The ship would have to remain here because it was practically impossible to bring it back now into their own time sphere.

Sikerman was already hunched over the flight controls and was nervously awaiting the command to take off. Pucky had gone to the area where Ragov and Noir were taking care of the captured caterpillars. The creatures from the other dimension were beginning to fill him with a consuming interest. With Noir's help there was no more problem in establishing a definite communication with them.

The conversation could begin.

Rhodan nodded to Sikerman as the green light flashed, signifying that all outer locks were closed and the ship was in readiness to start.

"Take it slow this time. No high-speed acceleration. You have your course. We'll make a short stop at the halfway mark to pick up Josua the meteorologist who's been flying to meet us. Then—on to the light window!"

The ensuing 20 minutes passed with unusual swiftness. Josua was taken on board and the flight continued. In the control room Rhodan stared incessantly at the wide forward viewscreen and did not miss a detail of the passing landscape below. Behind him stood Lt. Rous, correcting the course whenever it was necessary. For after all there was no one who knew the stretch between the volcano and the light window better than he.

On the distant horizon behind them, perhaps 60 miles away, was a dark, opaque wall. It rose upward

into the sky but became notably weaker there and more translucent. Rous explained to Rhodan that this wall consisted of pure energy—or actually time converted to matter as the result of some unknown side effect of the warp-field generator.

Time converted to matter! Rhodan shuddered as the meaning of these words sank in. Time that had turned into matter. Incredible! And yet it must be so!

The *Sherbourne* passed over the place where the smaller time wall had been before and where Rous and his crew had stood helplessly until both the light window and the obstacle had disappeared.

Finally the ship came out over the broad plain. In its centre was a glassy spot that was still glowing with heat.

"That's where the Druufs hit the surface with one of their deadly energy beams," explained Rous gravely. "About a week ago. The rock down there is still molten."

But Rhodan paid attention neither to Rous' words nor to the glowing spot below. His searching eyes and ever-alert senses had detected a fleeting movement in the direction of their flight. There, where the flaming energy-ring marked the intersecting point of the 2 dimensions. The light window was still there. The return path into their own time-world was not barred from them, so they could leave this alien universe behind them.

And yet they could not!

Emerging from the void, about 20 long torpedo-shaped giant ships came racing toward the light-ring and opened up with a raging salvo of energy guns against the glowing apparition. The alien ships were moving at a rate of 1.3 miles per second, which in their own time sphere corresponded to about half the speed of light.

The curtain of fire before and around the hole in the time wall became heavier. At a glance Rhodan realized that it was completely impossible to break through the blockade. Their own defence screens would unquestionably collapse under the bombardment.

There was only one possibility: no Earthly law was applicable here...

3/ "ENTIRELY IMPOSSIBLE!"

"Ready!" said the Druuf. "Switch on!"

Shadows glided through the corridors and rooms of the giant ship which orbited the sun system at a great distance. It hurtled along at the speed of light, without connecting the time compensator. The effect that the Druuf had been waiting for quickly materialized. The aliens who had penetrated their dimension were now visible.

"The system is turned on!" came the answer across many light-hours from the flagship of the battlefleet which was lying in wait for the enemy within the atmosphere of the planet. "Guide us!"

This was necessary because the aliens were visible only on the viewscreens of the giant ship, which was flying at speol. The smaller battleships continued to be blind—and had to rely on orders from the main ship, which was guiding their attack.

The Druuf leaned over the screens. Down there on the almost overpopulated world was a great activity of life and movement. A planet of the other time-plane had just been swept over and millions of alien creatures had been taken over. The caterpillars would take it upon themselves to give them food and house them in their shelters. Communication would not be an obstacle because now the aliens lived at no faster a pace than they, having adjusted their time ratios accordingly.

Except for those who had penetrated this time-plane by means of a technical apparatus which enabled them to retain their own time rate. These latter moved so swiftly that they remained invisible. They represented a danger because it was a goal of the Druufs to make the 2, time-plane ratios compatible or self-compensating

A spherical ship was to be seen on the viewscreen. It had been swept through the barrier a few minutes before. But then the new aliens had come and had taken back some of the others into their own time. These must die.

The picture-relay station went into operation.

"Weapons in fire readiness?" inquired the Druuf.

"Ready and standing by!" came the answer from the flagship.

"Increase your speed—about $\frac{1}{2}$ speol. That's even too fast for the aliens to dodge the attack. I will guide you."

But before the battlefleet could carry out the order, something unusual happened: Down below, close to the place where the 6 aliens had penetrated a few minutes before, a strange luminescence came into being. It was a ring of light with tremendous dimensions. The Druuf recognized the phenomenon. It originated from the apparatus which enabled the other people to penetrate into this time-plane.

Were they getting reinforcements now?

The flaming ring became complete. Almost simultaneously a dark spherical shape appeared in its centre. It plunged out of emptiness into the Druuf world and soon slowed its hurtling pace. Calmly and methodically it headed toward the mountains where the somewhat smaller ship waited.

There was a distorted garble of impulses in the radio receiver. The Druuf gave a command to his fleet. "Wait!"

The black ships of the Druufs waited.

After a full half-second came the order: "Attack! I will guide you!"

For the Druuf himself perhaps 10 minutes had passed. In his viewscreen the strangers moved at a natural-seeming rate of speed. Time went faster for the Druuf than for the ones on the ships of the fighting fleet, who were not travelling at the speed of fight.

"Move in at ½ speed!"

The controls of the ships responded to the remote guidance signals. At half the speed of light the 20 sleek cruisers hurtled toward the surface of the planet and opened fire.

To be followed immediately by new commands...

* * * *

Lt. Rous shrugged helplessly. "I'm sorry, sir, that I can't come up with an explanation for it. Even Steiner can't figure it out. If all our calculations are correct, then no more than 10 seconds can have passed for the Druufs since our arrival here a week or so ago. It's impossible for them to have developed a new method of seeing us within those 10 seconds."

"Nevertheless, they have!" said Rhodan severely. And he added gravely: "Also their responses are within 1000th of a second. It seems impossible but the proof is before us. We have to get to the bottom of this or we're finished."

While he spoke, he did not take his eyes from the viewscreen.

The alien ships—unusually long and slender shapes of black metal, equally pointed both fore and aft—had approached the light window and blanketed it with a sustained fire from their energy guns. They lay in a full-scale barrage ring which was a blockade against either exit or entry, so that the arrival of any possible reinforcements into this time-plane was an impossibility.

"Can't we attack the black ships?"

Rhodan nodded. "Naturally we could do that but I'm just not certain as to how our defence screens would react to energy beams that only travel at 2.5 miles per second. Do you have any idea?"

Rous shook his head.

Steiner was slightly in the rear of the control room but he said: "I can see what you're driving at, sir. Their energy beams are subject to the laws of the other time-sphere. So their power of destruction should be correspondingly greater. Hm-m-m." He hesitated "But can't it just as easily be less?"

"Would you like to test it out?" suggested Rhodan.

Steiner didn't answer.

Rhodan sighed. "It's a fact that the Druufs can see us and not 5 minutes later, mind you, but at least 5 seconds later. They've made some advances. It beats me for the moment. Sikerman, please ask Khrest and Atlan to come into the Command Central."

The *Sherbourne* was about 12 miles away from the light window. Sikerman's hands were on the controls. At present the enemy fire was blocking them from making a retreat but in the instant that any finger of energy should swing their way he could hurl the ship into the sky. There would be perhaps 10

seconds for such an action.

Khrest was the first to enter the Command Central. His tall, commanding figure with the white hair, red albino eyes and well-shaped sensitive hands made him stand out as an Arkonide. He smiled reservedly at Rhodan and the others present, after which he sat down in one of the seats.

Atlan the Immortal did not look like an Arkonide. He had lived incognito for 10,000 years on Earth among humans and had acquired some of their customs and mannerisms. His long-standing habit of disguise had left its mark on him and had erased a number of former Arkonide characteristics. He also smiled but it was a somewhat derisive and superior smile that would have irritated Rhodan under other circumstances.

Not today, however. As calmly as possible, he said: "It was not my intention to take you along on this expedition but you asked to take part in it. Now however I'm glad you did because we're faced with a situation that doesn't seem to have a way out." In a few words he depicted to them what had happened in the meantime. Khrest and Atlan listened without interrupting. Their faces reflected anxiety and even Atlan's smile was gone.

"So now what you're saying is that even you can go no further, Barbarian?" inquired the latter, still sarcastic in spite of the story. "And we the decadent Arkonides are supposed to help you? That's a bit absurd, isn't it?"

"Absolutely not, Arkonide," retorted Rhodan. "I have never asserted that you or Khrest were decadent. On the contrary, I regard you as being the most capable representatives of your race. But what's the point of arguing among ourselves? It's better for us to put our heads together to find a way of returning to our own sphere of time. Where we are now is neither the past, present nor future. It's—something else again."

Atlan nodded. "I agree with you, Perry. This is something else. But we came here, which means that we should be able to succeed in going back."

"Not through that blockade around the light window!"

Atlan nodded again. "Let's find an explanation first as to why the Druufs are suddenly capable of such a fast reaction, even though they are alleged to live and move at a rate that is 72000 times slower than our own rate. What, therefore, has happened?"

"If we knew that..." began Lt. Rous but he was silenced by a wave of the hand from Atlan.

"We shall know it, if we reflect on it logically. And the first thing that comes to mind is the caterpillar creatures we have on board. They have lost their own relative time-rate and have adjusted themselves to ours. Why shouldn't it also be possible for the Druufs to do the same?"

"That's exactly my line of thinking," murmured Rhodan, disregarding Atlan's grin. "So continue!"

"It's quite simple. Today we still don't know exactly what would happen if we were to reach the speed of light because we haven't had an occasion yet to try it. At our so-called relative light velocity we simply go into a transition, which means an automatic takeover by the time-compensator. No one has yet attempted to reach the natural speed of light without using this apparatus. That is, aside from Lt. Rous and his crew. And even that transpired in a certain relative sense. Anyway you must admit that in this there may be an answer."

Rhodan nodded but refrained from answering the Immortal. He waited quietly to see whether or not Atlan would confirm his own hunch.

"So what probably happened when the Druufs also got the idea to fly at the speed of light? Did their time concepts also shift? Did they also start living as fast as we do? And if so, with what consequences? Will they also have to die sooner because they are living out their lives at a faster rate? These are speculations that we can get into later. The important thing is for us to shed some light on these phenomena—and I think we just did."

"That's it!" exclaimed Steiner, amazed, and he stared at Atlan perplexedly as the latter glanced at him with a grin. Rous and Sikerman also nodded their confirmation.

Khrest remained calm and collected but in his unblinking eyes gleamed pride in his Arkonide origin. No, the Arkonides were not yet damned to ultimate extinction. They could still think logically and arrive at effective decisions.

At least Atlan!

Finally, Rhodan spoke. "It's reassuring to have discovered such a relatively simple explanation, even though it was only necessary to demonstrate its correctness." He glanced at the viewscreen. "3 of the black ships have ceased firing. They are climbing at a relatively slow speed and are turning their bows in our direction. I believe we are to be presented with an opportunity to determine the time differential between us and the Druufs—that is, to see how closely they have approached our ratio. At the same time it will also represent their reaction time."

Atlan had sat down beside Khrest. The 2 Arkonides engaged in a low-voiced conversation. Rhodan could tell they were discussing the possibilities of getting around the Druufs.

"Hold the *Sherbourne* ready for takeoff," ordered Rhodan as he watched the viewscreen again. The 3 alien ships had risen to a considerable altitude, with their bows aimed at the *Sherbourne*. It was now quite evident that they planned an attack. "Follow my commands closely, Colonel. We have to know how much time they need for reacting to a changed situation."

After all, this would be a unique opportunity to determine their reaction time. During the first attack against Lt. Rous they had still required 5 minutes. In the meantime they could have shortened this decidedly.

Up above, the 3 ships suddenly revealed their lightnings. Rhodan detected the exact second in which the beams hit the defence screens of the *Sherbourne*. Before he had not even been able to see them.

The meters soared. The deep-throated humming in the heart of the powerful ship increased suddenly.

"Off!" shouted Rhodan.

Sikerman reacted with a lightning swiftness. With an actual leap, the *Sherbourne* shot upward and raced above into the stratosphere of the Crystal World. They soon exceeded the 1.25 mile-per-second range and left the pursuing energy beams behind them. But the 3 ships did not give up. They followed swiftly.

1.875 miles per second—that was 75% of the relative light-speed here. It was a complete mystery to Rhodan how the Druufs could see them.

If indeed Atlan's theory were correct...

But how could it be? The 3 ships behind them were travelling at a rate of 1.25 miles per second. In their own time reference that was just about ½ speol.

Rhodan gave up trying to probe the riddle any further. Of course he could not suspect that a giant ship of the Druufs was light-hours away from the Crystal World in outer space and travelling at the true velocity of light—true in relation to their own time-plane—and that it was in communication with the black fleet units through a relay station.

"The screens have held up," said Atlan from his corners, this time dryly, while momentarily interrupting his conversation with Khrest. "I would tend to doubt, however, that they could withstand the combined fire from 17 bow shots all at once."

"In that case we're in agreement, Arkonide," replied Rhodan with equal calm. "And we're not about to let it come to a test, either. I'm only wondering how long we can keep up this game of hide-and-seek with the Druufs."

"Game?" said Pucky suddenly. "Do the Druufs play hide-and-seek?"

Rhodan drew in a long and audible breath as he turned to the mouse-beaver. "So there'll be no misunderstanding," he said emphatically, "nobody has said that the Druufs are playing. I know that you'd even gamble your life if it were a matter of games but now is not the time or the place for it." He stopped suddenly and regarded the mouse-beaver with a growing new attentiveness. "Hm-m... At least 'playing' may not be the right designation." He paused again to consider something. Then he said, "Go get Ras Tschubai and bring him here."

Pucky twittered something unintelligible but slipped off the couch obediently and waddled to the door. Just before he got to it, however, he changed his mind, coming to a stop and concentrating sharply. He disappeared in a swirl of shimmering air. In other words, he had decided to take the weight off his feet and to teleport instead.

Atlan was not a telepath. "What have you in mind for Ras Tschubai?" he asked.

Rhodan did not take his eyes from the viewscreen. Far below him the surface of the Crystal World glided past—in fact the planet had already become a huge ball, which the *Sherbourne* was circling at a speed of 75% the local constant of light. This left them reasonably safe from any surprise attacks.

"Ras Tschubai is a teleporter, just like Pucky. I want to send both of them into a Druuf ship."

Even Atlan was nonplussed by this plan. For quite a few moments he remained silent before asking: "Why?"

Rhodan smiled faintly as he replied: "Let's just say I've been itching with curiosity to know what the real Druufs look like..."

* * * *

Biologist Ivan Ragov was concerned neither with the appearance of the Druufs nor with any possible attack of their fleet against the *Sherbourne*. He was busy looking into the psychic and mental side of the captured caterpillars, a task in which he was aided by Noir and John Marshall. With their assistance it had even become possible to establish a first-rate communication system.

Noir was a hypnotist. It was a simple matter for him to create a mental image in the captives' brains which represented exactly what anyone wanted to tell them or ask them. The caterpillars thought an answer, which was then picked up by the telepath John Marshall.

It was very easy to accomplish.

Ragov shook his head in amazement. "Noir, ask them if they know their lords and masters and how they receive their orders."

Noir concentrated and made the corresponding mental image. Marshall listened for an answer. As it came finally, he also shook his head in surprise.

"They have never seen the Druufs in their lives, Ragov. They maintain that commands are given out by radio or through robots."

"The dear little beasties," muttered Ragov distractedly, still shaking his head. "So they have never seen the Druufs and yet they live together in the same time-plane. Astounding. Perhaps the Druufs are very shy."

After awhile Marshall observed: "No, the caterpillars indicate that the Druufs are by no means shy. They must have an entirely different reason for not showing themselves. I can't find out any more."

Ragov continued to observe the 5 captives for a few more moments, then turned his attention to one of the other cages in which 3 motionless caterpillars still held their originally assumed positions. They were specimens which had been brought on board the *Sherbourne* by means of the antigrav field. They had been left intentionally in their original time-plane so that they could be studied after bringing them to the Earth. Steiner had suggested that there might be a surprise in store for anyone taking the creatures on a transition through hyperspace.

One of the caterpillars was standing erect and was in the process of lifting its right forearm. During the past 2 hours the delicate member had risen all of 4 inches.

The other 2 were in a prone position. One might have assumed that they were sleeping, which was probably the case.

Ragov returned his gaze to the one that was standing.

The right forearm had risen another 2 inches—not in 1 hour but in only 3 minutes...

* * * *

Ras Tschubai was African. He possessed a sturdy physique and like the other mutants had become relatively immortal through the biological cell shower treatment on the artificial planet Wanderer. This beneficial condition lasted each time at least a good 60 years.

His special faculty was teleportation.

Together with Pucky he appeared a few minutes later in the Command Central and reported to Rhodan, ready for his mission.

The *Sherbourne* continued to circle the Crystal World, which had been so named because of its seemingly crystallized life. The 3 black ships of the Druufs followed at a slightly slower pace, attempting in vain to overtake the faster spherical ship. Occasional individual shots fell short of their more agile target.

Rhodan assigned Sikerman the task of making sure that the distance between them did not decrease under 62 miles. At such a distance no shot could strike true, especially when one considered that in this other time dimension the assigned distance represented 25 light-seconds.

Rhodan turned to Ras Tschubai and Pucky. "Have a look there in the stern viewscreen. Those are the 3 Druuf ships. Their distance at present is 62 miles. I want you to make the teleport jump together and don't become separated. I want to know what the Druufs look like. Pucky will attempt to establish telepathic communication with them while Ras will provide cover. If anybody attacks you, you may defend yourselves. It could be that the Druufs over in those ships live at our own rate of speed, so watch out!"

"And if they are not telepaths?" suggested the mouse-beaver.

"Then come back here and pick up Noir."

Ras Tschubai took his raygun out of his belt and pulled back the safety catch. He did not intend to take any risks if he could help it.

Pucky was not carrying any weapon but he asked: "How would it be if we planted a nice little bomb on board those asparagus ships?"

Rhodan suppressed a grin of amusement. "Not so fast, little fellow. We still don't know what the intentions of the Druufs happen to be. Maybe they merely feel they are being threatened and are acting in their own defence. It's not the act but the motive that determines the character of an individual."

"Fu Man Chan speak wise words," said Pucky facetiously with a deep bow. His brown eyes twinkled pleasantly. "It is to be hoped that the Druufs may share your view."

"I'll expect your return soon," said Rhodan. "Here's luck!"

Pucky went over to Ras Tschubai and took his hand in both of his paws. They nodded to each other, concentrated simultaneously—and disappeared.

Rhodan stared at the empty spot for awhile and then turned back to Sikerman once more. "Keep the same course you've been following and don't change it except in an emergency. Maintain present speed."

He was very anxious to know what the 2 teleporters would have to report.

* * * *

As Pucky felt himself rematerialise, his first awareness was of the African's hand in his. The simultaneous jump had come off without a hitch and they hadn't been separated.

The lighting around them was very dim. Under their feet the deck was coated with a flexible material, similar to plastic carpeting. The walls glimmered with a vague light that seemed to issue from the substance of their composition. The ceiling was black. From somewhere below came the vibration of unfamiliar machines.

Otherwise, everything was quiet.

"Do you hear something—besides the machinery?" asked Pucky.

The African shook his head negatively but a moment later whispered: "And you? Maybe thought impulses?"

After awhile Pucky shook his head. "Only a jumble of fragments that don't mean anything—like listening to the caterpillars who were petrified in time. But it's so far away—I can tell that by the intensity. Wait a see! OK—so I'm a camel!"

"I thought you were a mouse-beaver."

Pucky was thinking of his long-distance capabilities but was not in the mood for stringing out the joke. "All I was doing was picking up thoughts from the *Sherbourne* and from the Crystal World below. Here on board this ship there is nobody with any thought process going on—or maybe they are using thought-screen equipment. I can't trace anybody..."

Ras was about to answer but suddenly stopped, listening. Pucky also heard the sound.

A soft padding of feet seemed to be close by, coming in their direction. The footsteps sounded strangely irregular, sliding and scraping and out of sequence.

"Somebody's coming!" whispered Ras tensely. He strained to see ahead but the passage which he could only now make out had a turn in it. The footsteps were just beyond this turn but were approaching steadily.

The African grasped Pucky's arm. "Don't you think we'd better—?"

"Vanish? I wouldn't think of it! We stay here! Well, of course I wouldn't object to a hiding place because I'd like to have a safe and quiet look at the Druuf. Let's go over there..."

A few yards farther they found a wall niche. Apparently it served as a storage place for various articles of equipment. At the moment, however, it served Pucky and Ras perfectly in that it concealed the 2

teleporters from the approaching Druuf.

Now it came around the curve.

Meanwhile the 2 of them had accustomed themselves to the dim illumination and they no longer found it difficult to clearly observe their surroundings. On the walls close to the lighting sources were strange shapes, the purpose of which it was impossible to guess. Pucky realized at least that they were not supposed to be pictures. They were more like pieces of plastic art, even though that couldn't actually be the case. Various doors led off into unknown inner chambers.

A shadow came around the curve.

The Druuf was no more than a yard high. Its form was roughly spherical, as far as could be seen, and it possessed a number of limbs with which it achieved its forward motion. Thin feelers or antennas stood up vertically on top of it and waved gently back and forth.

The Druuf came closer and further details came to light.

Ras looked in vain for its eyes, mouth and ears. The creature did not have a face.

In general its body was asymmetrical. It was neither round nor square, neither tall nor fat. It had the look of a big drop of molten metal that had suddenly hardened.

Almost inaudibly Ras whispered: "It's moving slowly but it does move! So it must be living in our own time-plane."

Pucky nodded without having anything to say. He watched in fascination as the Druuf glided toward them. That was it—gliding was the correct word for this type of locomotion. The legs—or limbs—continued to move incessantly. Whatever the position the Druuf might be in, 2 or 3 of the short legs always touched the deck. So actually there was no position in which it could not move. Like a distorted sea urchin!

Such was the appearance of the Druuf. But why the antennas? Was it a telepath?

Pucky tried again to penetrate the thoughts of the weird creature, which by now was no more than a half dozen feet away. It was just as useless as the first time. Pucky's probing thought impulses came up against a wall. They were even reflected back completely.

Actually Ras was right. The Druuf continued to move slowly, probably at the cost of some adaptation. But maybe these were the natural movements of an intelligence that had lots of time on its hands.

When Pucky thought of 'time' he shuddered and suddenly remembered his assignment. He had to establish communication with the Druuf.

But why with this one particularly? Maybe it would be smarter to observe him for awhile yet before announcing oneself. Also this one might merely be a subordinate crewmember. If Pucky was going to make any contacts around here it would have to be with the commander of the black cruiser.

As Ras touched him, he returned the pressure of his hand.

Silent and unmoving, they waited until the Druuf had gone far enough to disappear around the next

corner.

Ras breathed a sigh of relief. "What kind of creatures are they?" he whispered, bewildered. "Are they insects or mammals?" What do you think? Were you able to determine anything?"

"They can certainly think, or else they wouldn't be able to wage war," replied Pucky somewhat sarcastically. "But frankly I wasn't able to pick up a single thought ripple. Did you see its legs? They're so arranged that the Druuf always lands on its feet—and I mean in any position. When it walks, they all move." He paused briefly. "Almost automatically," he added.

Ras missed the point. Anticipating the mouse-beaver's thoughts, he said: "Well, let's get to the control room. I'm anxious to see how they react when they see us."

"With the shapes they've got they'll think that we are monsters," surmised Pucky, not illogically. "Let's hope we don't scare them out of their wits."

"If they see you first—" Ras started to say but then he thought better of it. It was safer to remain silent.

Pucky let out a slight, disdainful hiss. "I'd suggest that we teleport to their Control Central, if we only knew where it is."

This was a problem in itself. Teleporters can only reach their target area when they can either see it directly or at least mentally picture it. So it must either be thoroughly described to them or they must have been there, themselves, previously.

But none of these conditions obtained at present.

Pucky shrugged. "Let's just walk. Maybe we'll be in luck. If anybody shows up we can duck into a niche because there seem to be plenty of them. And besides, the Druufs are much too slow to represent any great danger."

Around the 2nd turn in the passage they came in sight of the Druuf again. Its audible footsteps were misleading in that it actually moved faster than supposed. Each step brought it at least 4 inches farther along and there was another step taken every 2 or 3 seconds.

They waited until the Druuf had glided through a doorway and disappeared. The process required almost 2 minutes.

"They're still a bit behind the time," whispered Pucky, without realizing how right he was—even though it was in quite another sense of the word.

Now that the way was clear, they made better headway. They met no more Druufs on the way and thus were able to find the Command Central without further difficulty. The ship did not have the familiar spherical shape but was long instead and of relatively small diameter, so that the control room could only be in the bow.

The passage ended before a door.

Later, Ras Tschubai couldn't remember why he and Pucky knew that the smooth wall was a door. There was no indication of this fact. It had no latch or doorknob or any recess where a person could place his hand.

Just a smooth wall—nothing more.

Pucky began to use his psi faculties and made a psychokinetic survey of the barrier. "It has an electronic lock," he finally announced in a whisper. "It only opens in response to some electrical signal. So the Druufs must haul around little transmitters with them which they use when they want to go through one of these doorways. Remarkable."

"Can you open it?" asked Ras anxiously.

"At least I can give it a try," answered Pucky consolingly and he concentrated on his task. Meanwhile, Ras kept a lookout. He still carried the heavy impulse gun, which no matter could withstand when its full energy was aimed at it.

Behind the wall—or door—a sound was heard. Something made a soft click. And then the panel slid to one side. Behind was a large room filled with a maze of instruments and unfamiliar-looking apparatuses and equipment cabinets. This, without a doubt, was the Command Central of the black ship.

The first thing that attracted Ras was a tremendous flat oval-shaped viewscreen that was set into the forward bulkhead right in the bow. On it the *Sherbourne* was to be seen, apparently motionless and waiting but actually racing ahead of them at 1.86 miles per second.

In front of the screen were 3 of the Druufs who had apparently not heard the opening of the door. At least they took no action to hinder the 2 intruders. Beside them were ponderous-looking metal cases and cabinets containing alien mechanisms, machinery and other apparatuses.

In a right-hand corner of the room glowed a 2nd and smaller viewscreen. When Ras saw it, it startled him although he didn't have the slightest idea of what it was he was looking at.

2 circles of light were on the screen which had a common centre point. They would gradually become misaligned, one from the other, and then they would resume a concentric position together. One circle was green and the other red. It was obvious that somebody was busy trying to maintain the alignment so that both circles would become superimposed, one upon the other, precisely around the centre point.

What sense the whole thing made was not clear to Ras but he suspected that it was a device for maintaining the presently ordered course. His suspicion was correct although he didn't know it.

The Druuf in the centre of the trio slowly turned around.

Pucky still attempted to establish a telepathic communication with the alien entity but he did not succeed. Not the slightest mental reaction was detectable. It seemed to Pucky as though the Druufs were nothing but soulless, automatically functioning creatures.

So he tried the acoustical method. "Why are you chasing us?" asked Pucky, using the Arkonide language which was known everywhere in the universe. "We do not wish to have *groshk* —war."

By now the centre Druuf had finally turned completely around. It was evident that it had not quite fully reached the time-plane of the Terranians. Nevertheless he came dangerously close to it.

Pucky and Ras could perceive that the upper walking limbs in the creature's body had retracted and in their places appeared arms, on the ends of which was a great variety of instruments. Small tongs,

screwdrivers, even fingers and suction cups. The Druufs must have reached the evolutionary class of universal intelligences.

Nevertheless they still lacked faces.

It was still a complete mystery to Pucky and Ras as to how they could hear, see or speak—if indeed they were able to do any of them.

One of the creature's arms drew inward slowly and about a half minute later a round, dark opening emerged from the spherical body. The Druuf emitted no thought-waves so it wasn't possible for Pucky to learn the alien being's intentions. He was as unprepared as Ras when the 2 of them were fired upon.

Without the slightest warning a green beam of energy shot from the muzzle of the weapon and passed between Ras and Pucky to strike the wall, where it seemed to fan out in an explosion of dying sparks that finally glided downward to the deck.

"You two-faced no-face!" hissed Pucky, diving under the beam for cover. A block of metal offered him a sufficient haven for the moment. Simultaneously his telekinetic force-streams grasped the Druuf and forced it to roll back slightly. Now the energy beam shot vertically to the ceiling of the control room, causing it to melt.

Ras had also gone for cover and he didn't hesitate to use his own weapon. He aimed at the belligerent Druuf across a machine block, pressed the trigger and didn't release it until the alien thing ceased its attack in a holocaust of molten metal. So far nobody had ever survived such a bath of ravaging energy.

Nor did the Druuf.

Something hit the deck with a metallic clang. Pucky raised his head cautiously over the rim of his protective cover and sought to discover the cause of the unusual noise. What he saw was so amazing that for a critical moment he forgot about the other 2 Druufs in the Control Central. Their attacker had fallen apart.

A wide crack gaped open in the round figure, exposing its interior. Gleaming silvery conductors, burned here and there and also discoloured in many places, made up a jumble of windings and coils which reminded Pucky of a highly advanced electronic brain. Partially destroyed metal modules and containers still popped out of their mountings and rolled or fell to the deck with a clatter, where they lay motionless. With a dull explosion a vacuum tube or what looked like one burst apart. A bluish jet of flame jumped upward from it, only to subside and become extinguished. Suddenly there was a stink of burned rubber and ozone in the air.

Ras gave out a startled groan: "Robots! The Druufs are nothing but robots!"

Pucky continued to stare at the incomprehensible thing. "It's true enough that they're robots," he confirmed but added: "Still, that doesn't prove that these tin-plated basketballs are the Druufs."

Ras was about to answer but interrupted himself. "Look out!" he roared, at the same time raising his impulse weapon and firing ahead at random.

The 2 other spherical robots must have become aware of their companion's demise in the meantime. They reacted accordingly and began to attack. Ras Tschubai's warning came not a second too soon. Pucky ducked behind his hiding place and sought to make a telekinetic attack against the enemy but

because of the slower reaction time of the Druufs—or robots—Ras had an advantage over them and managed without Pucky's help. He took care of the 2 robots with 2 quick shots.

The Command Central was a scene of wreckage. There wasn't very much that remained undamaged. The 2 colour rings drifted out of the screen and Ras discerned at the same time that the *Sherbourne* was slipping off the large oval screen.

The Druuf ship lost its course. The surface of the Crystal World became visible and seemed to rush toward them with increasing velocity.

"We have to get out of here!" yelled Ras as he prepared to make a telejump.

Pucky saw that there was no other alternative. They hadn't missed anything else on this ship and it wasn't possible to linger any longer on board without gambling their lives.

"Let's blast off!" he said regretfully while showing his incisor tooth, for once, however, without intending it to be a grin. "But we'll still have a look later at those other 2 scows, now that we know what's up. For the moment, anyway—to the *Sherbourne*!"

And they dematerialised.

2 minutes later the Druuf vessel ploughed its way into the surface of the Crystal World with a tremendous explosion.

Lt. Rous stood beside Rhodan in the Command Central of the *Sherbourne* and observed the spectacle through narrowed eyes. "That can't be!" he murmured in bewilderment and turned slightly pale. "It's simply not possible!"

"What?" asked Rhodan tersely. Although the inference was dawning on him, he voiced the question.

"It's entirely impossible for the whole planet, the whole time-plane, to have adapted its temporal frame *tous!* Can you figure any other reason why that detonation down there appears natural to our eyes? Look for yourself—the mushroom cloud is rising swiftly into the upper atmosphere. And *Idon't* mean slowly or imperceptibly! Before, you know, even raindrops were falling at the rate of only fractions of an inch per second. But now...?"

Rhodan nodded slowly. "Do you want another reason for it?" He stood there as motionlessly as a statue with his lips tightly compressed. "There isn't any other time-plane, Lt. Rous—at least not any more!"

But he knew in the back of his mind that there was another, though he dared not recognize the fact for the moment.

For it meant the end of all hope.

4/ PUCKYS PERIL; RHODAN'S THREAT

Ivan Ragov shook his head disconcertedly and looked at John Marshall as if the latter had suggested that he jump out of the ship. Noir constrained himself while biding his time. He searched for a reasonable explanation for the fact that the formerly motionless caterpillars were beginning to adapt to the human time-plane.

"There can be no doubt that we are bringing them up to our ratio—and without having to travel at light speed. I can't explain it but the facts are clear before us. The limbs of the caterpillars are already moving at half normal speed and if the change continues at the same rate, within a half hour their movements will be as fast as ours."

"We can be happy," said Noir, "that it isn't the reverse process."

Ragov narrowed his eyes. "Would we be able to determine which way it was going?" he asked tensely.

"What?" Noir appeared not to comprehend his meaning.

"I mean," continued Ragov, "would we be able to tell if the reverse of the process were in effect? Where is the neutrally established reference point to which we may address ourselves?"

Now Noir saw his point, as did Marshall.

"But you aren't really trying to suggest, Ragov—"

Marshall was not able to finish the sentence because he was interrupted at that moment by the intercom buzzer. Rhodan's face appeared on the small screen.

"All officers and leading scientists are requested to attend a discussion in the wardroom. We will begin in 10 minutes."

The screen darkened.

Marshall looked at Ragov. "Well?" He had already perceived the thoughts and suppositions of the Russian. "What do you say to that? It looks as though some others are thinking the same thing."

Ragov nodded. "In 10 minutes we'll know." He took a last look at the captive caterpillars which were coming out of their time stasis at an ever-faster rate, then left the room without another word.

John Marshall followed him slowly.

* * * *

"...thus resulting in the following observations, gentlemen, which lead to an unmistakable conclusion. But this you will see for yourselves."

Rhodan made a short pause and looked into the faces of his men. The *Sherbourne*'s officers stood between technicians and mutants. Their faces were grave since they realized that Rhodan wouldn't call a briefing while they were being chased by the 2 black ships unless he had a good reason.

"Ragov was the first one to discover that the movements of the captured caterpillars were adapting themselves to our rate of time. These movements became accelerated gradually and have already come to within half our normal rate. Further, we had already been forced to recognize the fact that apparently the Druufs were able to see us and follow us in spite of the fact that our movements were 72,000 times faster than theirs. Until now we've been racking our brains trying to figure out how they could do it; but now that question doesn't seem to be so important. When Pucky and Ras were on board the Druuf ship they only found robots there, which also functioned only slightly slower than we in our own time-plane. So there you have another time-rate approximation. However the first definitive disclosure of what's happening has come from the crash of the other ship and its destruction. Even if we may assume that individual Druufs are able to approach our time-plane with the help of some unknown factor or device, it would nevertheless be absurd to suppose that an entire planet is adapting itself to our ratio, as the ship's explosion appeared to indicate."

He paused again, this time for effect. But most of the listeners didn't dare face the only logical conclusion because it was too fantastic—and too terrible.

But Rhodan was not fond of leaving his friends in the dark. He flipped on the connection with the Command Central. "Sikerman, channel the observation video in here to the wardroom. I'll use the large intercom screen."

He waited until the large screen brightened and revealed the slowly passing surface of the Crystal World. Actually the surface was not rolling away under the *Sherbourne* as imperceptibly as it had done before. The planet's increased rotational motion was now apparent.

"We have not increased our pace," said Rhodan calmly. "Our flight shows an apparent increase of speed but it's due to the time-plane approximation. Col. Sikerman, cut in the magnification now and slow your speed enough so that surface details will be visible. You'll still have to watch your distance from the pursuing Druuf ships, however."

The screen's image blurred momentarily. Then deserts and mountains came into view, moving more slowly across the fluorescent screen. This gave way to a scene that was so surprising that a wave of whisperings ran through the group of watchers.

Previously the Crystal World's slow rate of existence had caused all motion to be imperceptible. All living creatures had appeared to be rigid and lifeless.

Until now.

There on the screen were hundreds of the caterpillars, crawling or walking about and carrying on their affairs as though they had never existed at a slower rate. There was now not the slightest time difference to be detected.

The onlookers even recognized several inhabitants of Tats-Tor who had lost their own time-rate and had disappeared as a result of the interfacing of the time dimensions. They lived down there on the Crystal World at the same rate of motion and consciousness as the caterpillars—which now included those on board the *Sherbourne* .

A groan was heard—probably from someone who now comprehended the meaning and purpose of Rhodan's demonstration.

Ivan Ragov spoke up. "I began to suspect this change when I was investigating the caterpillars in their cages and noticed that their movements were becoming quite perceptible. It is not their plane of time that is adapting to ours but rather our own that has lost its former real-time ratio. We have slowed down. In actuality we are living at a rate here that is 72,000 times slower than that of the people on Earth or the crew of the *Drusus*. Each second in this state He broke and put his face in his hands.

Rhodan went to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "That's nothing but a pure hypothesis, Ragov. Nobody knows really what the time-lapse is and we should take pains not to jump to any premature conclusions. At any rate we now know that we are in the other time-plane in the full sense of the word and we can't dodge the fact that we'll be lost if we don't return to our own universe as quickly as possible. But that's a long way from saying that the men on the *Drusus* are growing 20 hours older with each passing second here. The relationship between the 2 planes of existence is flexible and not calculable. We don't know the natural laws existing between them which are the basis of the differentials in effect."

Khrest, who had been speaking in undertones with Atlan, now came forward. "Is there an explanation for the phenomenon?" he asked.

Rhodan shook his head. "That was the next question, Khrest. Unfortunately, for the time being I have to answer no. Do you have an explanation—or Atlan?"

"We have one," said Khrest while suppressing an expression of pride. "However, we can't guarantee that it's correct. An event of this nature has never happened during the past 10,000 years. It's completely unique—but so are our technical methods—and the warp-field generator is a case in point. Of course we know that it made it possible for us to penetrate the other time-plane but who would venture to say what effect it may itself be exerting on the function of time here? Nobody! For hours now we've been under the influence of the warp-generator's energy field, which surrounds the entire planet. Also, we have repeatedly flown through the time wall structure, or the time bubble that surrounds the generator like a dark dome. It isn't possible to break through that wall at ground level but we succeeded in getting through it at higher elevations where it is weaker. Do we know what effect that may have on our own time-lapse rate?"

He was met with silence. Even Rhodan didn't answer. He began to suspect that Khrest might have solved the puzzle, even though it wasn't much help to anybody right now. Everybody knew that they were the prisoners of another time... a time-sphere which when embedded in the normal universe gradually broke it up and over-flooded it.

Rhodan asked himself secretly if in the long run such a phenomenon constituted such a terrible misfortune but then he forced himself back to the hard and unrelenting present.

"We shall now attack the Druufs," he said, and he saw in the hopeful faces of his officers and friends that no one had thought of any other possibility.

Actually, *was* there any other...?

* * * *

The 2 pursuing torpedo ships had come closer. Rhodan again reduced his own velocity and gave the order to Pucky and Ras to make an immediate attack. The African took his raygun along. He knew what conditions to expect on board the Druuf ship and was fairly confident he could make it crash in a hurry. The spherical robots were relatively harmless and easy to overcome.

On the other hand, Pucky again declined to take a weapon with him. He was also convinced he could take care of the enemy.

Seconds before their teleport jump, something of grave import occurred at another location...

* * * *

"Master, they are becoming visible."

The announcement came from the Druufs' fleet commander whose ships were deployed around the light-ring in an effort to prevent the strangers from returning to their own time-plane. The Druuf who had been addressed as "Master" reacted in surprise.

"Visible? How are we supposed to take that? What do you mean?"

"They're still faster than we are—about twice as fast. But now we can see them without reference to your viewscreen."

"How do I appear to you?" asked the Druuf tensely.

"Normal and in the same relative time-rate."

The Druuf breathed a sigh of relief. "Then it is the aliens who have been absorbed into our own time-plane," he confirmed. "We have won. Keep the light-ring under bombardment so that they can't get away. Now we will catch them alive in order to learn how they came into our sphere without losing their own time-rate initially. Take up their pursuit. I'll shut off my equipment and go to normal ratio."

"3 of my ships have been chasing the strangers. One of them has crashed."

The Druuf pondered over this information. Then he said: "If the aliens will not cease their resistance, I shall bring the large ship into the attack. We shall continue in contact with each other."

With a jerk of his massive limbs, he drew back on the flight lever. The velocity of the giant ship decreased rapidly. Slowly it approached the surface of the Crystal World...

* * * *

Pucky landed with a jolt on the hard metal deck of the corridor. He stood unmoving in order to listen but

the ‘thump-drag-thump’ patter of robot feet was absent this time. They must not have noted his arrival. On the other hand he could be wrong: they might be lying in ambush somewhere already and waiting to jump on him.

It really didn’t happen very often that Pucky felt fear. Actually it wasn’t fear that suddenly came over him so much as it was an uncanny awareness of being alone. He wasn’t especially reassured by the knowledge that he could teleport to safety at any moment.

Somewhere down in the body of the metal ship, machinery was pounding and throbbing. Nobody could venture to guess what kind of propulsion system the Druufs had developed. Still it was to be assumed that they had attained to the speed of light and surpassed it; without that technical prerequisite there could be no interstellar space travel.

Pucky began to waddle softly along the passageway, ready in an instant to teleport to safety. His assignment was to incapacitate the ship, nothing more. In all probability there was no living creature other than himself on board, which made his task the simpler. But just the same...

One of the doors was standing open. It led into a large room which had the customary portholes in the walls instead of viewscreens. Pucky recognized the passing landscape of the Crystal World which was now no longer crystallized. Life down below had awakened from its relative paralysis. Not the slightest trace of difference was detectable now between his own motions and theirs.

The *Sherbourne*, flying farther ahead, could be made out clearly. The Druuf ship also slowed its flight so that both units could push onward at the same velocity. So the Druufs were holding off; they were not attacking any more.

Outside in the corridor he heard a humming sound, then something dragging or sliding. He made a single leap to one side and got behind the door. Was there someone on board after all—somebody who was not a robot?

A massive figure filled the doorframe and Pucky saw out of the corner of an eye that this apparition couldn’t possibly be one of the animated beach ball robots. This was something else.

He ducked back farther in order not to be seen immediately. It was not particularly bright in the room; the Druuf appeared to come from a world that circled an ancient sun. But aside from all that, what did it have to do with the robots?

The massive figure rolled into the room. Pucky knew that a robot did not necessarily have to walk or stroll in order to move itself forward. This one rolled on small wheels that had been installed under its torso or trunk. This trunk was almost rectangular in shape, having 4 limbs on each side and 2 more before and behind. It did not possess a head but in its place were 2 waving antennas with gold spheres at their tips which emitted a bluish glow. Pucky thought he felt something like a mild electric current that flowed through his body and caused a tingling sensation. Although this in itself was no direct danger, it undoubtedly gave warning of it.

The thing was a robot despite the fact that its actual function was not apparent at the moment. Now Pucky wasn’t so much in a hurry any more to make the ship crash. The robot interested him. How would it react when it became aware of him, Pucky?

Right now the thing was not aware of his presence.

The colossus rolled into the room and came to a stop in its centre. There it remained stationery and played its antennas back and forth. Were these its sense organs by means of which it saw and heard? On what basis did they work?

Pucky attempted to pick up some information from it by telepathic means but the results were as negative as they had been with the tinplated Humpty Dumpties. So then he tried it by means of psychokinesis.

His invisible mental currents reached for the unknown horror and held it tightly. Pucky could clearly sense that the robot was aware of the alien constraining force and that it was trying to move. But Pucky did not yield. At the same time he came out of hiding and padded slowly around the monster, ever ready to take flight but striving to find out where the thing's front side might be.

It was not an easy thing to determine. A person is always tempted to look for a face no matter how strange another life form or creature may be. Even machines generally have some kind of a 'face' but this robot didn't happen to have one.

The 12 arms of the thing gave no indication of their purpose. On the ends of the tentacles were little spherically shaped protrusions which could continuously change their shape with ease. Sometimes they looked like hands, sometimes like grasping tongs, then again like little spheres with stumpy outgrowths. Apparently the 'hands' were composed of a flexible material whose form and shape could be changed according to any desired purpose. This was an advanced technique that even the Arkonides didn't know about.

Pucky attempted to influence or even restrict the incessant forming and changing of these surfaces but wasn't entirely successful. Consequently he was also not able to prevent the sudden extrusion of a curious object on the end of the next arm in front of him, the purpose of which was not immediately clear to him.

It had a faint resemblance to a 4-pronged fork, the points of which were aimed at Pucky. The instrument did not look exactly like a weapon but it wasn't a plaything, either. Pucky dodged slightly to one side while holding the robot's arm tightly in his mutant's grasp. But even his telekinetic faculties were incapable of influencing the sequence of events within the monster because he didn't know how its mechanism functioned. So it was that the sudden electrical shock came somewhat as a surprise.

Pucky felt the fiery discharge race through his nervous system and strike at his brain. The resulting paralysis instantly froze his parapsychic capabilities. The robot was free. It turned around, softly humming, and rolled over to the motionless mouse-beaver.

Pucky couldn't move. With a flash of horror the only thing he knew was that he had made the inexcusable mistake of underestimating an enemy.

Then he saw the 12 arms reach out and grasp him and he felt the hard pressure of imprisoning clamps.

* * * *

Ras Tschubai was considerably more fortunate in his undertaking.

When he materialized he was rewarded for having concentrated on the Command Central of the Druuf ship. He stood directly behind the 3 spherical robots and was in a position to destroy them with a single shot from his impulse beamer before they could move or become aware of his presence. Before Ras proceeded to systematically destroy the control room, he decided to make a tour through the ship.

Accordingly, he went carefully about his work but did not discover anything new. The various machines and installations remained a riddle to him because in spite of his hypno-schooling he was no accomplished scientist.

He was inspecting a room where the walls were covered with turning tape reels and was trying to figure out their purpose when he heard footsteps approaching. One of the now familiar spherical robots came into the chamber. It manipulated a number of control switches and spent awhile checking various connections, then turned about and went out again without having noticed Ras.

As he penetrated more deeply into the inside of the ship, the rumbling of the propulsion and power machinery became heavier and more intense. Then, after a short teleport jump, he stood in the midst of the vibrating machinery in the engine room.

He leaped quickly behind a tremendous, silvery-gleaming metal structure and looked carefully about. At first he thought that the great room was deserted and operated by remote controls but then he realized his error. Gliding almost soundlessly on some kind of rollers, huge shadows moved among the generators and the giant switch panels, adjusting levers here and there and hurrying onward.

Ras recognized them at first glance as being work robots. Their hands were multiple and varied in shape and application, enabling them to service and operate the machines. They possessed such a wide assortment of grasping equipment that it was not necessary for them to pull their arms into their body structure before shoving another arm out, as was the case with the smaller robots. There was, however, not the slightest trace of any of the actual Druufs—whoever and whatever they might be.

Ras continued to crouch in his hiding place. Before proceeding with his destructive work he wanted to observe as much as possible. Any and all information was vital and could possibly be a matter of life or death.

It occurred to him that his video-transmitter equipment would work here, now that the matching of the 2 time-planes had been completed. He turned it on with the touch of a button switch and spoke into it softly: "This is Ras Tschubai. Come in, please!"

The answer came only seconds later. It was Rhodan himself. "This is the *Sherbourne*. What's going on?"

"I'm presently located in the Druuf ship's engine room. Just robots around, not a single living creature here. I'll hold my pickup camera in a position so that you can see everything."

"Wait just 10 seconds," ordered Rhodan. "Let me cut in the photographic pickup so that we'll have a record of this later. Our technicians will need time for studying the alien machines."

Ras waited; then he turned on his camera. It was located under the tiny apparatus that he carried on a bracelet-like armband and wasn't any larger than a pocket watch. Very slowly, he swung his arm around for the camera to cover the scene.

While so doing, he gave a short, running commentary: "These are still another kind of robots. It almost seems as though the Druufs have separately designed work machines for every purpose. The spherical ones are the officers because they seem to be very versatile. Also they carry weapons. I don't yet know, sir, what the Druufs look like. There's not the slightest clue here. Maybe Pucky is having more luck."

"We don't have communication with Pucky. He does not answer our calls. Even telepathic contacts have failed, so far."

Ras didn't answer. He raised up a bit in an attempt to aim the micro-camera into the most distant corner of the room. In so doing he made a small noise which was almost inaudible because of the machinery.

Or was it?

The normal movements of the nearest robot suddenly ceased. Its arm sank downward slowly. Then it rolled toward the African's hiding place.

"They've spotted me!" Ras whispered urgently. "I'd better start blasting..."

"No, wait!" Rhodan commanded sharply. "Teleport into some other room and return to the machine room later. We still need some more photographs. Leave your transmitter running. It won't be necessary to run a trace on it."

Ras didn't have time to answer. The robot had rolled very close to his position and was reaching out with 4 of its arms as though to grasp an invisible enemy.

And it did grasp—but only emptiness...

Ras materialized inside a hall that was 2 levels up. The ceiling of the room was curiously dome-shaped. It was composed of some sort of milky white material across which a number of blurry streaks of colour darted back and forth. Even while Ras watched them, the lines and streaks began to take on form.

They evolved into a clearly discernible picture.

In his brain he sensed a gentle pressure, to which he yielded involuntarily. Although he wasn't a telepath, he seemed suddenly to be able to read thoughts, because he was aware of a voice in his consciousness which spoke clearly and understandably to him:

What you see before you, stranger, was reality.

Almost simultaneously, Rhodan asked: "What's happening, Ras? Where are you now? Our picture here is blurred. Focus your camera..."

Ras whispered: "Someone has spoken to me, sir. Inside my brain—telepathically. What shall I do?"

Rhodan did not answer immediately. Then his instructions came through: "Be careful! It may be a trap. I'm not going to bother you now because I don't want to distract you. Keep on transmitting."

The transmitting did not divert his attention. It was as though he had nothing more to do with the whole procedure. The voice inside his mind repeated its first and only sentence. Above him the picture became plainer. A planet whirled swiftly on its axis and orbited visibly around a yellow white sun. The whole thing gave Ras the impression that he was floating light-hours away from the planet, out in space, and as

though he were watching pictures in fast motion.

Then the image on the ceiling became larger and clearer. The point of view rushed toward the planet, which appeared to turn on its axis once every second. It required perhaps 5 or 6 minutes to complete an orbit about the sun.

The planet became larger. Ras could make out continents and seas. Their shape was strangely familiar.

Then the African experienced a sudden shock of recognition.

The planet was the Earth!

Ras Tschubai stared in horror. The Druufs knew of the Earth! They knew where Rhodan came from!

The Earth's motions were accelerated 72,000 times. He, Ras Tschubai, was looking at it from the point of view of the Druufs. As to the time ratio, he himself had virtually become a Druuf. He as well as all the others who had come with Rhodan.

And then he noticed something.

At first he thought it might be an optical illusion but then—with each second of the Earth's rotation—he became aware that he was seeing correctly. While following the planetary movements, his eyes could clearly make out the continents—Africa, America, with the Atlantic Ocean between them.

And there in the middle of the Atlantic was a smaller continent which no longer existed on the face of the Earth.

Atlantis!

Simultaneously he heard the alien voice again in his brain.

That which you see, stranger, was a reality. It existed long ago but by your own reckoning you would call it but the fraction of a year.

Atlantis—only a few months ago...?

Tensely, Ras stared at the whirling planet and the flitting image of Atlantis which was visible each time around for only the fraction of a second.

Each second was a day!

But each day signified 200 orbits of the sun—more than 6 generations.

Ras felt an attack of giddiness coming on.

When—in their own time—had the Druufs taken these pictures? 10,000 years ago when the 2 time-planes intersected for the first time.

Suddenly he realized what the fate of the expedition would be unless a miracle happened. If they only stayed a week in the time-sphere of the Druufs, more than 1000 years would pass in their own universe! There would be no more Solar Empire, no mighty realm of the Arkonides—and no Perry Rhodan.

All would be gone and forgotten.

In a sudden wave of despair, Ras Tschubai aimed his raygun upward and sent the destroying finger of energy directly into the centre of the image of the swiftly circling Earth. The picture dimmed and died.

In the circular hall, anywhere from 10 to 20 doors must have opened simultaneously. Colossal rectangular figures stepped forth, which would have been quite familiar to Pucky. Their antennas aimed at Ras and the gold spheres on their ends began to brighten with a bluish fire...

But Ras was quick enough.

Just before the paralysing shockwaves reached him, he teleported back into the machine room. He stood squarely in the centre of the room and opened fire on the switchboards, the rows of instruments and all the maintenance robots present there.

Molten metal dropped to the deck. As insulators broke down into a smear of wreckage, blinding streaks of lightning jumped from one machine to the other. From somewhere came the sound of a detonation. Ras lost his balance and would have fallen if he had not supported himself against the shell of a generator.

The ship nosed downward and raced toward the surface of the planet.

"Don't lose any time!" shouted Rhodan. "You're going to crash!"

Ras nodded grimly. "I know," he answered. He took one last look at the surrounding chaos and then concentrated for a jump.

He caught a glimpse of an oval door opening in the background and 2 or 3 rectangular robots pressing through. He just caught a trace of the first shockwaves from their unknown weapons but the counter-attack came too late. They could no longer break his concentration.

He jumped.

The black ship hurtled irresistibly toward the rocky ground, where its sharp bow bored deep into the mountain, only to be torn to pieces a second later by a flaming explosion.

Ras Tschubai materialized close to Rhodan in the Command Central of the *Sherbourne*.

He was about to heave a sigh of relief but held it when he saw Rhodan's face. "Returned from assignment, sir," he announced matter-of-factly and he sought to determine by Khrest's and Sikerman's expressions what had happened.

Rhodan nodded to him. "Pucky's ship has veered from its course. It's increasing speed and heading for a point that's outside the local solar system. Pucky has not answered us." He looked at Ras. "What could have happened?"

Ras thought instinctively of the rectangular robots with their paralysing shockwaves. Maybe the mouse-beaver had allowed himself to be taken by surprise. It wasn't like him to do that but perhaps he had underestimated the danger and relied too heavily on his amazing faculties.

"The Druufs have fighting robots that don't use conventional weapons, sir. They produce shockwaves of

some unknown force. Perhaps..."

"Highly probable!" interrupted Rhodan swiftly, as he surmised what Ras was about to say. "They've caught Pucky." He turned to Sikerman. "Follow that ship. We have to find out where they intend to take Pucky."

Ras fought against his fears. "Don't think I should try..."

"No!" retorted Rhodan, refusing to let him go. "If Pucky is dead, your trip would be too late anyway. If he's still alive then he'll know how to help himself. In any case we'll remain in the vessel's vicinity so that he can make a jump—as soon as he's able to. And besides, this may finally put us onto the trail of the actual Druufs."

John Marshall stood off a bit to one side, close to Atlan. Until now he had remained silent. But suddenly he cried out, straining to listen to something inside his mind. Then he announced: "That was Pucky—just a short impulse. It was as if he had awakened out of a sleep and then lost consciousness again. It wasn't a clear thought message. It was simply—fear! Horrible fear!" Marshall looked worriedly at Rhodan. "I wouldn't want to be in Pucky's skin just now!"

"Nor I," admitted Rhodan.

His gaze wavered uncertainly for a moment, then steadied. He looked at the viewscreen. The black ship of the Druufs had become smaller but the *Sherbourne* was already picking up speed. The Crystal World dropped away beneath them and also became smaller. "Nothing is going to happen to our little friend out there. If the Druufs are actually capable of reading our thoughts, they are going to think twice before laying a hand on him or seriously harming him—because then they will also have to realize that I'll not rest or cease until I've swept their entire time-plane out of the universe—even if I go out with it!"

Ras remained silent. Everyone was speechless.

They sensed how deadly serious Rhodan was in his threat.

5/ CHRONO-CATASTROPHE

The Druuf in the giant ship said: "Repeat that report!"

"We have caught one of the aliens, Master. He looks different than the others. Perhaps he is a servant. We don't know how he was able to get into our ship."

The Druuf waited a few long moments before he gave his command: "Bring the prisoner to my ship. Quickly!"

He switched off the connection, then remained unmoving in his seat for several minutes. After which he proceeded to make all necessary preparations for receiving the prisoner.

* * * *

Pucky did not lose consciousness.

He could see and hear and he could sense the crippling effect of the shock weapon as he felt the pain shoot through his nervous system. He could not defend himself.

He was unable to move as he saw the robot come nearer. The golden spheres on its antennas still spewed out their blue flames, which rushed toward him and held him fast. Even though Pucky could not concentrate enough to make a teleport jump he was still fully aware of his situation and was able to analyse it.

He had fallen into the hands of the Druufs, those unknown beings who had absorbed them all into their time-plane. Perhaps he would soon be facing the first Druuf that anybody in the universe had ever looked upon but he would have to pay a high price for it. Maybe even his life.

Most of all, Pucky was angry at himself for his carelessness. Like all high intelligences he was of course conceited. That this should happen to him of all people—or mouse-beavers, anyway—was a bitter blow to his pride. Now he was in the trap and all his miraculous faculties were useless to him. That part of his brain which he had used for teleporting seemed to be numb and it was impossible for him to activate it. In the psychokinetic department he was now as helpless as a newborn baby. And where telepathy was concerned he lacked the opportunity to try it out on anybody because robots just weren't cut out for that sort of thing.

The rectangular monster stood directly in front of him now. All its arms and tentacles hung loosely down its metal body and only the antennas were still busy spewing out their bluish sparks of energy. They were sufficient to keep Pucky incapacitated.

And yet he fancied that he jerked slightly in reaction when a giant shadow loomed in the doorway and a 2nd robot came into the room. It was an exact copy of the first colossus. They both raised an arm and placed their 'bands' together.

Was this a kind of contact connection and communication system?

It must be so. Pucky's secret hope of freeing himself from the spell he was under was not fulfilled. He tried in vain to overcome the nerve paralysis and to activate his mutant brain. But the pains increased immediately to such an extent that he quickly desisted in his efforts.

He at least tried to turn his eyes enough to see the portholes. To his amazement the *Sherbourne* had disappeared. At one side he could see the yellow-white sun in the midst of space. Before the sun had been red because of the Doppler effect but now even that had normalized itself.

The ship must have altered its course. As far as Pucky could determine, it was hurtling out into space toward an unknown destination. From moment to moment, a blind teleport jump was becoming more dangerous. A jump into the outer vacuum of the void would be risky because if he didn't dematerialise instantly he would be lost. Circumstances permitting, maybe only a second would be enough to orient himself—but it might also be just enough to kill him.

The surface of the Crystal World turned briefly past his field of vision in one of the portholes. There he saw a mushroom-shaped cloud rising which could only have been caused by an atomic explosion.

Pucky breathed a sigh of relief. At least he could still breathe—which was a good thing, because neither he nor Ras were wearing a spacesuit.

In fact it just now came to his attention that there was a breathable atmosphere in the Druuf ships, even though there were only robots on board. And what kind of sense did that make, after all?

But why waste brainpower on things that couldn't be answered?

So Ras had been successful. There below on the Crystal Planet the 2nd ship had detonated. The mushroom cloud couldn't have been caused by anything else.

If Pucky had been able to he might have heaved a sigh of envy. But his relief was greater than any such egotistical emotion at the moment. The Druufs had lost another ship and by now Rhodan must already know that his little friend Pucky had fallen into the hands of the enemy.

The void of space beyond the ports was not entirely black. A veil of thousands of stars lay across the absolute darkness of Infinity and imparted a silvery shimmer of seeming timelessness to it.

But the silvery shimmer was suddenly interrupted. Pucky saw it out of the corner of an eye: a black shadow appeared among the stars, revealing an oval outline. It approached swiftly. It was impossible for Pucky to estimate the length of the shadow but he guessed that it must be at least more than half a mile from end to end.

A ship?

Did the Druufs have such large ships as this? They were probably the ruling intelligences of the alien time-plane and had no doubt known space travel for thousands of years already...

No, that wasn't right. According to Earth time-reckoning it might be but from the Druuf point of view...

Pucky suddenly caught his breath. He became aware of the fact that the Druuf spaceships must have been shooting through the galaxy even a million years ago—without ever seeing anybody.

A fight jar ran through the ship as it bumped against the giant. A loud clanging sound pervaded the room as clamps went around the body of the torpedo-shaped ship and the 2 vessels joined together.

The robots terminated their soundless conversation. The new arrival turned and left the room again.

The portholes closed suddenly without any additional lighting being turned on in the room. In the semi-darkness Pucky could hardly make out any details. The robot's dark silhouette loomed up against the dimly glowing wall but even if Pucky could not have seen it the darting blue lightning from the ball ends of its antennas could not be overlooked.

And then, very suddenly, the blue lightning were extinguished.

At first Pucky was oblivious to this because he was so relieved by the abrupt cessation of the pains in his nervous system, to which he had almost become accustomed. It was as though his brain had been enclosed by a steel kettle, the walls of which miraculously melted away and left him free.

It was only then that Pucky understood what had happened: The robot had released him from its power because it was confident of being able to handle its catch. Here, docked firmly together with the Druuf flagship, it was impossible for the prisoner to escape.

Pucky's first impulse was to teleport away. But then he couldn't resist one parting gesture. He would rather put himself in danger again than to leave the scene of his mortification without the satisfaction of revenge.

The robot did not know what was happening to it when all 12 of its tentacles and both antennas were bent backwards, gripped by an invisible force that came out of nowhere. In its interior, electronic equipment obeyed command impulses as it strove to resist the invisible enemy but its efforts achieved an opposite effect.

The first fuses burned out; then a spark hissed behind the metal skin and melted important connections. A 2nd short-circuit caused the colossus to tremble. From the bent antennas streamed bluish rays of energy but they wandered haphazardly to the ceiling and exploded there. Pucky felt no effect.

The monster made a final effort to defend itself against the attack, which it could only assume was being delivered by the small prisoner, but that was the end.

Pucky sprang back, startled, as the final fuse burned through with a loud report. The great robot swayed and then fell helplessly to the deck as though it had lost its sense of balance. Somewhere in its innards there was a rattling and tinkling as if someone were throwing a jar of screws and bolts around. On the thing's breastplate or backplate appeared a glowing red spot and Pucky began to realize that it was high time to become scarce.

He concentrated on the rocky surface of the Crystal Planet, dematerialised and jumped.

But he didn't get far.

His rematerialisation was a violent one and it did not occur in the place he had planned for it to happen.

Pucky felt pains shooting through him as he began to regain his vision. He seemed to be falling into a bottomless abyss but he could breathe. Before he got himself set for another jump, a thought suddenly came into his brain. It was not his own thought but rather an alien impulse that was impressed upon him. It must be the thought command of a Druuf.

You are in no danger, alien, if you surrender to me.

Pucky felt a wave of panic rising in him. He was afraid to encounter a Druuf. He had changed his mind. He didn't want to see any Druuf. He wanted to go back to the *Sherbourne* —to Rhodan and his other friends.

He envisioned Rhodan's face before him while desperately closing his eyes and activating the appropriate area of his brain for teleportation.

He jumped blindly into the unknown in order to get away from the Druuf.

The shaft or abyss he had been falling into disappeared.

There was light around him.

When he opened his eyes again, he stood in a green meadow under a blue sky. The grass came up to his haunches and the air was mild and fragrant as only the air of Earth could be.

2 yards away stood Perry Rhodan, who seemed to be looking upward at the drifting clouds with a dreamy expression on his face.

Pucky didn't understand what it was all about but just the sight of Rhodan made him forget everything. He didn't know how he had come here but there was Rhodan. It was impossible for him to mistake him for someone else.

"Perry!" exclaimed Pucky in a shrill voice and waddled over to his big friend. "Perry, I'm so happy that I was able to escape. Are you mad at me because I...?"

Rhodan did not move. He acted as though he had not perceived the mouse-beaver's words. He continued to look into the sky as though he was searching there for something.

Pucky was astonished. However they had come here or whatever trick had been played on them by the other dimension, the main fact remained that they were out of danger.

"Perry!" The mouse-beaver instinctively toned down his shrill voice. "All I did was to make a jump and..."

While speaking, he had straightened up to reach out his hand to Rhodan. But Pucky's hand went right through Rhodan. It found nothing—where the hand of a friend should have been...

* * * *

Without taking his eyes from the forward viewscreen, Col. Sikerman adjusted his controls. "The black ship is slowing down, sir. Shall I...?"

"Keep your distance, Sikerman. Before we attack we have to know whether or not it's alone."

They soon observed that it was *not* alone.

The silhouette of a tremendous elongated ship emerged into visibility on the viewscreen. It was a good 3,000 feet in length and seemed to be floating in space. The nature of its propulsion system was not apparent. There were no portholes in its black hull. Like a life, less but sinister shadow the giant waited there in the void for the smaller ship, which slowly approached it and was finally grasped by long magnetic clamps.

"The mothership of the Druufs!" Rhodan spoke softly as though he feared that those on board the black ship would hear him. "That's what it has to be! I wonder if they've spotted us."

Col. Sikerman shrugged. "Most likely they have, sir. But maybe they're not worried about an attack since they have a hostage: Pucky."

Rhodan turned to Marshall. "Still nothing, John? Don't you get anything from Pucky at all?"

"Only now and then but they're foggy and incomplete. Their intensity wavers considerably. Sometimes the impulses come through stronger, then they are weak again so that I can hardly pick them up. Unfortunately they still don't make any sense."

"At any rate Pucky is still alive and on board the smaller ship," said Rhodan. He hesitated a moment and then spoke to Ras. "Tschubai, you're going to have to make a jump pretty soon. I don't see any other way of getting Pucky out of there."

"We can attack," suggested Sikerman. "With our weapons..."

"...we'd do a nice job of frying Pucky for good," concluded Rhodan realistically. "No, this time there's nothing much can be done with mere brute force. Only the mutants can give us an edge."

Atlan approached and placed his hand on Rhodan's shoulder. "When your little friend is back safe, we'd better make a serious attempt to get back into our own time-plane. I'm deeply concerned, Barbarian..."

"That, my friend, makes 2 of us," admitted Rhodan but he stood there motionlessly as though he feared the Immortal would remove his hand. "We have stayed here far too long already. But I still don't know how we can break through the energy curtain. The risk is too great."

"The risk of staying here longer and losing all the time in the universe is considerably greater." Atlan shook his head. "During just the few seconds it would take for a crash breakthrough it couldn't possibly wreck the *Sherbourne*."

"And the Druufs, Atlan? We wanted to know what they looked like and who they are. Are we never to find that out?"

"We'll find it out—maybe very soon, when Pucky is back with us again."

Rhodan turned his attention once more to the viewscreen and was about to say something when John Marshall cried out in astonishment. "Pucky! I'm getting him! His thoughts are coming through real strong now! He's able to get away but he's holding back. A rectangular robot and with antennas that terminate in golden spheres..."

"That's the same kind of robot that I ran into," interjected Ras swiftly.

But Marshall was not to be diverted. "He wants to knock out the robot before he comes back. He doesn't know where we are. He doesn't seem to receive my thoughts. Maybe he's too busy to pick them up because he's making an attack..."

Everyone listened breathlessly to the words of the telepath as he depicted the fight between the mouse-beaver and the robot—as far as he could extract the details from Pucky's racing thoughts. There wasn't too much of it but at last he could report success.

"Wiped out! Pucky did it! Now he's concentrating on a jump. He's thinking of you, sir! Now—he's jumped..." Marshall paused for a moment and looked about in the Command Central as though expecting to see Pucky. "He's gone, I can't pick up any more of his thoughts. But Pucky jumped!"

Rhodan's eyes narrowed suddenly. His glance swept first to Khrest, then Atlan, to finally return to Marshall. "He has jumped...?"

"I've lost all contact, sir. He *must* have jumped—or he is dead."

Rhodan's face became hard, as though hewn out of stone. For long moments it was completely silent in the semicircular room. No one said a word.

Then Rhodan turned to Sikerman. "Course full ahead to the 2 Druuf vessels. We attack!" He stepped over to the intercom and pressed a switch. "This is a top alert! All battle stations stand by! Capt. Aurin—fire ready with the tele-transmitter!"

He was using his most effective weapon first.

The tele-transmitter originated on the planet Wanderer, the synthetic world of the Immortal, a mysterious being of pure energy who had granted Rhodan a prolongation of life. The transmitter was capable of teleporting material objects, from one second to the next, to any desired distance. When the corresponding forcefields cut across the giant ship out there it would simply disappear, just as if it had never been there. Somewhere at a distance of 1,000 or 10,000 light-years it would materialize in the 4th dimensional universe and be lost in time and space.

It only took the *Sherbourne* 10 seconds to slacken its pace and go into attack position. The defence screens built up rapidly in order to fend off any enemy energy beams.

The intercom speaker crackled and then Aurin's voice was heard: "Transmitter aimed at target. We await the firing order, sir!"

"Wait!" replied Rhodan.

He lay in wait for the first action from the Druufs... which wasn't long in coming.

The magnetic clamps unfastened themselves from the stern of the smaller ship and set it free. They retracted swiftly into the hull. A shimmering wall of energy built itself up between the Druuf ships and the *Sherbourne*. The dark shadows of the 2 enemy vessels seemed to hover inside an almost invisible bubble.

Such energy defence screens had no influence on the effects of the tele-transmitter; it could also teleport the screen itself through the 5th dimension if it were necessary.

But the Druufs did not seem to be disposed to surrender themselves to an unknown fate without a battle. In the bow of the large ship, dark hatches slid to one side. Then the spiral barrel of an electronic cannon crept forward out of a recess and its muzzle aimed itself at the *Sherbourne*.

In the background Khrest released the air from his lungs with an audible sigh. His tension had eased, as he perceived the intent of the enemy—the uncertainty had been worse than the actuality.

"There—!" Atlan called out involuntarily as the brilliant bolt of lightning shot forth and struck the *Sherbourne*'s screen. The energy shot sprayed out like a fan and was dispersed.

Rhodan nodded grimly. "And I had wanted so very much to see what a Druuf looked like. It's a shame!" He bent forward slightly without taking his eyes from the screen. "Aurin! Fire—10 seconds duration—on

the smaller ship. Maybe that'll make the giant more reasonable."

Actually not much was to be seen happening during the following 10 seconds. At first it appeared that the shell of energy around the 2 enemy vessels intensified its shimmering effect. Then the shell broke in 2 only to reform again. But this time only around the larger ship. The smaller one hung there for a moment without protection, somehow deserted by its giant brother—then it simply disappeared without a trace.

But not without some very remarkable side effects.

The tele-transmitter had been developed in the normal universe and thus obeyed the normal laws of time and space. Even the *Sherbourne*'s lapse into the alien plane of time could not alter that fact. The small black Druuf vessel was torn out of the 4th dimension with unimaginable force and hurled into the spaceless and timeless 5th dimension. In the 5th dimension of the alien time-plane! The force and velocity with which this event occurred was 72,000 times faster than any normal material teleportation. The effect was like that of a high-speed object striking water. Time itself in the alien plane took on the characteristic of solid matter under the impact of the lightning transition.

The teleported ship practically crashed against a wall of time that had acquired mass and substance.

It blew into atoms but at the same time caused a fracture in the time wall. Without Rhodan or any of his companions on the *Sherbourne* realizing it, they were all thrown back some distance into the past. From a purely superficial standpoint this was not noticeable to the observers because the visible effects were limited to the immediate vicinity of the impact.

Yet this temporal catastrophe served to save Rhodan from a very tragic surprise because if it had not occurred he would have lost many years of actual time—years in which perhaps the Solar Empire might have crumbled and died.

Thus it was that all he saw for a moment was a shimmering hole at the place where the black ship had been. Even while he was registering this in his brain and was searching for an explanation of the phenomenon, the hole closed up again; everything was as before.

"We're rid of that one," said Col. Sikerman, unimpressed. "And now.

"Capt. Aurin!" Rhodan called into the intercom. "Stand by with the transmitter but fire only on my expressed order."

"Understood!" came the unemotional answer.

"Our defence screens won't take much more of that Druuf fire," warned Sikerman worriedly. "If we don't attack..."

"Let's sweat it out a bit longer," interrupted Rhodan. "After all, the Druufs have seen with their own eyes what kind of a weapon we have. They should act accordingly."

"If they have any eyes at all," said Atlan..."

Pucky stared fearfully at his hand that had passed through Rhodan. Then he came to realize that his hand was made of matter and thus had to be real. If anything around here wasn't real, it had to be Rhodan.

His eyes wandered to Rhodan's ghost, for the apparition could be nothing else. But the earth under his feet, the grass—all of that was present, after all, otherwise he'd not be standing. . .

Pucky didn't have a chance to develop further conjectures. An invisible hand came out of nowhere, grasped him and hurled him downward into the darkness of a timeless Infinity. He felt himself dematerialise as though he had concentrated on a teleport jump.

But it happened involuntarily.

Pucky could not have ventured to guess how long this condition persisted, if indeed it were possible to measure such a situation in terms of time standards. Suddenly he was again able to sense and feel—and it was a comfortable warmth that now surrounded him.

Warmth meant life and materialization.

And a functioning set of brains!

He opened his eyes for orientation and if need be to jump, no matter where. But even before he could recognize anything he heard an astonished shout of relief: "There he is—Pucky!"

Simultaneously streams of thought inundated him with a wave of joy and sympathy.

"Yes, there he is," said Rhodan also, and for a moment he forgot the great ship of the Druuf. "Pucky, you sure thunged (Contraction of thumb-hung, from hung by the thumbs? —21st century slang for 'ran us through the wringer') us! Why didn't you jump right away as soon as you realized you'd only be taking revenge on a robot?"

In obvious cogitation, the mouse-beaver studied the faces of those who were present in the Command Central. It seemed difficult for him to remember the event. He finally looked at the viewscreen. "How long has it been," he asked, "since the small ship has been gone?"

Rhodan waved off a remark by Marshall and interjected: "Just a few minutes, Pucky. I presume that you've been on board the large Druuf ship in the meantime. What did you find there?"

The mouse-beaver slowly shook his head. For a second he looked into the timeless eyes of Atlan as though he were searching there for an answer to his secret questions. Then he announced: "It was just 10 seconds ago that I attempted a jump here from the small ship—but in between I materialized someplace else. On the Earth."

Rhodan suppressed an exclamation of bewilderment as he saw the astonished looks of the others. In Pucky's assertion were 2 impossibilities at the same time. They had to be proved or disproved.

"Pucky, you couldn't have jumped only 10 seconds ago because it's already been 3 minutes since we atomized that ship with the tele-transmitter. So you must have made a mistake in your timing." Rhodan drew a deep breath. "And that you were on Earth in the meantime can only be a hallucination—or

what...?"

In the mouse-beaver's brown eyes flickered a shadow of fear before the unexplainable and uncanny that could yield no answer. Almost pleadingly he clasped his little arms to his chest. "Perry, I jumped 10 seconds before I arrived here and I was also on the Earth. I saw the blue sky, I smelled the familiar air—and I saw *you!*"

Rhodan recoiled slightly. With a quick glance he reassured himself that Col. Sikerman wasn't letting the black ship of the Druufs out of his eyes and was ready at any moment to react instantly. "You saw *me*?"

Pucky nodded. "You stood in a broad meadow with high grass and blooming flowers. There were no clouds in the sky. I materialized close to you, not 2 yards away. I called to you but you didn't hear me. Without any sign of recognition you remained standing there while I approached you. I wanted to shake hands. And then..."

Pucky's voice trailed off with a pitiable sound of genuine anguish. The recollection of the weird experience was about to overwhelm the mouse-beaver who was normally plucky and shrewd but when Khrest came to him and placed a hand on his shoulder he pulled himself together again. "Perry, my hand went through you. I didn't contact you but just your ghost or something. Oh no, it wasn't any dream!" He looked down at himself and suddenly stooped to brush his feet with his fingers. "The pollen from the flowers is still there."

Rhodan glanced uncomprehendingly at Khrest and Atlan. "How is it possible? Maybe a hallucination?"

Atlan came closer. He nodded confidentially to Pucky and then turned to Rhodan. "No, Barbarian, it was not a hallucination. There are things that we still cannot comprehend because they are beyond the capacity of our understanding. But we should at least attempt to find a logical explanation. So we will presuppose that Pucky has not deluded himself—with the exception of the duration of his jump. In that area there *has* to be a deception because we knocked out the ship that Pucky was on 3 minutes prior to his appearance here. So Pucky was underway for a total of 3 minutes, even though he believes he only took 10 seconds for his jump."

"Keep going, old friend," invited Rhodan as the Arkonide made a slight pause. "Don't leave us up in the air."

Atlan dampened their expectations. "I'll have to disappoint you. I don't know much more than that. During his teleportation, Pucky was in some kind of time-field. He concentrated on you, Rhodan. One thing is certain: At the moment Pucky jumped, you were not here in this spot but—on the Earth."

"That's crazy!" said Rhodan, shaking his head.

But Atlan persisted. "Let us grant that Pucky sprang into some kind of an energy barrier that the Druufs had placed around their ship. Who says that it was even an energy barrier—or still is? Can it not also be a time barrier? Pucky jumped into it and was transplanted either into the past or the future. Yet his brain had to obey the command to bring him to Rhodan. However, you were still on Earth—or back there again as the case may be. So Pucky transferred to the Earth. That's the only explanation I can find for the phenomenon."

Khrest nodded slowly and went back to his seat.

But Rhodan still wasn't satisfied. "And why was I a ghost? Didn't you hear Pucky say that his hand

simply passed through me?"

Atlan nodded, not particularly impressed by the problem. "We don't know the effects or consequences of a time trip. However I can well imagine that a meeting between 2 people would not necessarily be on a material basis if they were separated by past, present or future. In other words: Pucky saw a Rhodan as he once was or as he will only be in the future. And you, Rhodan, were not aware of him at all."

"Fantastic!" murmured Rhodan, although he was now convinced that Atlan might have a point in his argument. "So you're saying that Pucky dipped into the future for 10 seconds?"

"Or into the past," confirmed Atlan with a touch of his unfathomable and mysterious personality. "Of course I'm not able to explain why he didn't stay there. After the 10 seconds he came back into the present. Otherwise he couldn't be on board the *Sherbourne*."

"Then if that's so," interjected Khrest, "Pucky must have succeeded in breaking through both time-planes. He must have lived for 10 seconds at the real-time rate of the normal universe and then by returning he again lapsed into the alien time-plane's time-rate. So the whole thing is a bit shaky, to say the least."

"The whole thing is pure madness!" said Marshall, breaking into the ensuing silence. "It goes against all natural laws and understanding. A person would have to be crazy to believe—"

"On the contrary," Atlan interrupted him calmly. "It would be quite insanenot to believe in such possibilities because then a man would deny himself the chance of fathoming the ultimate mysteries of the Universe."

This time, there were no further contradictions.

* * * *

When the telepathic contact broke off, the Druuf knew that the prisoner had escaped. Almost at the same moment he noted on the viewscreen that his unknown opponent was going into an attack position.

"Activate the time barrier!" he commanded.

At the same time he had the magnetic clamps pulled in and released the smaller ship. The bow cannon was extended and it fired off its ineffective shot at the enemy.

And then—in the transition from one second to the next—the smaller fighting ship of the Druuf disappeared. It seemed as though it had gone into a hypertransit.

His connection with the 17 ships surrounding the light-ring was still intact and clear. The Druuf utilized the ensuing pause to inform himself of the general status of things. So far nobody from the other plane had attempted to come to the alien's assistance.

"Maintain energy curtain! Repulse all attacks! Stay together! The enemy can only destroy our ships on an individual basis."

That was pure supposition, nothing else. For what did they know so far about their opponent? How had he been able to break through the time wall? And to what purpose?

The Druuf brooded silently and sought to answer his own questions. He arrived at nothing except a decision to make one last try at overcoming the unknown enemy.

The Kruukhs lived on an isolated planet at the edge of the universe and had no actual civilization of their own but they had served the Druufs for thousands of years.

This was understandable in view of their unusual characteristics.

* * * *

Atlan was standing by Rhodan when the shimmering energy screen—or time curtain—suddenly vanished from around the Druuf ship. At the same time the barrel of the energy weapon pulled back into the black ship; the bow hatch closed again. It looked as if the Druufs were giving up the attack.

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Rhodan uncertainly.

They stared at the viewscreen and searched for an answer. Far beneath them the Crystal Planet turned slowly on its axis. Life on its surface had awakened and there was no longer any difference to be noted between the 2 time-planes.

Under other circumstances Rhodan would have taken interest in the caterpillar civilization and might have taken a hand in the task of setting free the Arkonides and other races of people who had been swept away from their own worlds by the moving time front, but now that he was also a prisoner of this alien dimension he considered it more important to think first of his own safety and return.

With their respective propulsion systems inactive, the *Sherbourne* and the large Druuf ship hovered at a meagre distance from one another and orbited about the Crystal Planet.

Atlan raised his arm to point. "A lock is opening." And after a slight pause he added: "But that's no weapon port."

Col. Sikerman looked questioningly at Rhodan. His right hand was on the command switches for the defence weapons. Capt. Rodes Aurin was standing by in command of the Fire Control Centre.

Rhodan shook his head almost imperceptibly. Just like all the rest, he stared at the viewscreen which clearly showed the open lock of the Druuf ship. For the first time humans were to be given a glimpse of the inside of the black giant.

Nothing much could be made out.

Probably it was only some kind of airlock which allowed entry and exit to and from the ship.

Were the Druufs about to...?

A dark shadow became visible. It was not much higher than about 3 feet, perhaps half as broad and thick. Sikerman instantly switched on the magnification and they saw that it was some creature or entity enclosed in a spacesuit. Exhibiting both arms and legs, it now stepped to the outer edge of the lock. There it remained and waited. The men on board the *Sherbourne* had the feeling that they were being watched.

"What is it, anyway?" asked Rhodan, not expecting an answer.

Almost simultaneously, Pucky and John Marshall said: "It's thinking!"

Both telepaths were able to detect the initially weak impulses quite plainly, even though they didn't know how to make sense out of them. The sentient being must be thinking in completely alien and unknown thought channels.

"Do you think it's a Druuf?"

Marshall shrugged. "I don't know—but actually I would have imagined the Druufs to be different."

"It's wrong to even try to conceptualize in that sense," said Rhodan in a slight tone of rebuke. "Now everybody on your toes! That defence screen over there is gone now. It means that we'll be receiving a visitor. Sikerman, shut our screen off too."

The Colonel looked at him in startled amazement. "But—if a sudden attack follows, sir...? Any energy weapon can wipe us out then."

"Do what I tell you, Sikerman! At the moment we are in no danger. We're receiving a visitor. Look for yourself. That fellow's already left his ship and is floating across to us."

They all saw it.

The figure in the spacesuit had deftly pushed itself from the threshold of the airlock and was slowly approaching the *Sherbourne*. Almost at the same time the energy screen of the Terranian ship snapped off. The distance between the 2 opposed vessels was at the most 1500 feet.

"He's measured the distance well," said Atlan, breaking into the waiting silence. "He'll make it even without any further corrections. Aren't you going to greet him at the airlock, Barbarian?"

Without taking his eyes from the screen, Rhodan said, "I'll stay in the Command Central. Pucky will go."

"Pucky?"

"Yes, Pucky. If I'm not mistaken, this alien ambassador may have something in common with him. Certainly the smaller stature and the telepathic capability, in any event. Well, Pucky? Are you going?"

The mouse-beaver waddled to the door. "Naturally I'm going. Where do you want me to bring the visitor?"

"Bring him here. But be careful! We don't know who he is or what intentions have brought him to us. Try to learn more from his thoughts. And at the slightest sign of a betrayal..."

"I understand," growled Pucky and he disappeared outside in the corridor.

Marshall looked at the door after it had closed. "I should have gone with him, Chief."

Rhodan shook his head. "Whoever the visitor may be, we should not frighten him. Pucky is small and looks relatively harmless—that is, from our point of view. We are about twice as big as the alien, which is a handicap for him. He'll be in for a surprise soon enough when he confronts us here."

"Well then I can at least try to keep a thought contact with Pucky," suggested Marshall. He did not intend to ignore his bad premonitions.

Rhodan had no objections.

Now the alien was seen more clearly on the viewscreen, or at least his spacesuit. Then he glided laterally from the field of vision and was lost to the sight of the viewers.

Meanwhile, Pucky had teleported to the lock. There he slipped into his own custom-made spacesuit and closed the inner door of the airlock. Then he evacuated the air from the chamber and opened the outer lock.

The visitor was still 50 yards away and was approaching the lock with a remarkable accuracy, just as though he had previous knowledge of its location. Naturally this could have been coincidence but Pucky didn't believe much in coincidences.

I come in peace. The thought came clearly into his alerted brain. *If you are able to receive thoughts, then you will know that I seek peace. Can you understand me?*

Before Pucky made up his mind to answer, he thought it over. He still had enough time for cautious cogitation. He probed for Marshall and found mental contact. With lightning swiftness the questions and answers went back and forth while Pucky kept his screens up in the direction of the alien so that the latter would not be able to eavesdrop on the telepathic conversation.

Finally he dropped the screen and asked: Who are you?—thereby revealing that he was a telepath. During his telepathic contact with Marshall, the latter had conferred with Rhodan and Rhodan had suggested that Pucky might as well reveal the secret. What was the use of hiding it when a whole corps of gifted mutants was at their disposal?

I am Kruukh

, returned the clearly detectable answer. *The Masters have sent me to you.*

So this wasn't a Druuf either, observed Pucky with relief. They had sent somebody else. The mouse-beaver didn't know why but he feared the actual Druufs, whoever they were. It was an instinctive timidity that he could not explain.

We are waiting for you, Kruukh.

The alien landed with a light jolt on the hull of the *Sherbourne* and then stepped into the airlock. He seemed a stranger to fear or misgivings of any kind.

You are the Commander of this ship?

No, just one of his servants,
returned Pucky cautiously.

Now he had an opportunity to study the visitor while he closed the outer hatch and let the air stream in. He wanted to get out of the heavy suit as soon as possible—and maybe this would induce the alien to unmask himself in a similar manner. There was not much to be seen through the dully-shimmering faceplate. Nevertheless Pucky thought he recognized a face behind it.

Is our air breathable to you? he asked.

Yes, on our home world we have the same kind of atmosphere.

Pucky peeled out of the suit and hung it on its proper hook. At the same time he allowed the inner door to swing open.

The visitor followed his example.

It was a strange creature that stood before the mouse-beaver a few minutes later but his appearance was not likely to inspire fear or alarm.

At first glance Pucky wasn't sure what he could compare the Kruukh to, because there was no direct parallel with any inhabitant of the Earth. The upper portion resembled a giant lobster. On a pair of long, movable stalks sat the black periscope eyes, which now regarded the mouse-beaver curiously. Apparently the thing didn't have a nose or a mouth, or else they were in another place that wasn't visible yet. 4 delicately prehensile arms with 3-fingered hands were evenly arranged on all sides. The remarkable creature could thus reach in any direction without having to change his position.

His lower body was heavily armoured with an exoskeletal shell which was rounded off in the back. 2 rather short and awkwardly functioning limbs below must have been his feet, on which he moved ahead slowly. The visitor was as devoid of clothing as was Pucky. No weapon was to be seen.

I am Kruukh,
came the mental introduction again. *I am to speak with the commander.*

He did not think the words, 'to speak' but the meaning of his thought impulse was clear. He wanted to bring a message to Perry Rhodan from his ruler.

Follow me, replied Pucky and led the way. In secret he wished that he had eyes on the back of his head.

John Marshall had covered the arrival meanwhile. He had been able to follow the 'conversation' between Pucky and the alien with ease and so was informed in advance.

Sikerman's hand still rested on the activating switch of the energy screen. At the slightest sign of danger he would connect it. Then the *Sherbourne* would be isolated.

The door opened. Pucky moved into the Command Central and made way for the alien intermediary as he announced in his squeaky voice: "May I present—Kruukh, the envoy of the Druufs."

The bumble-crab—as Pucky had secretly dubbed him pattered into the room on his short legs. He looked over the persons who were present, one after another with his stalker eyes, before he finally came to a halt in front of Rhodan and made a slight bow. His thought impulses now became amplified and so

intense that even the non-telepaths could detect them and understand them. In this regard, Kruukh must have been unusually gifted.

You are the commander of this ship and the master of the aliens from the other time-plane? he asked but actually it was a confirmation. *My lord whom you call the 'Druuf' sends you the message that any resistance is senseless. You have lost your own real time-rate like all other beings in your universe who were swept by our dimension. There is no way back any more. You must surrender.*

Rhodan regarded the unusual, creature with narrowed eyes. Something about him was somehow unpleasant or offensive but he was not able to say what it was. He also knew how wrong it was to judge an alien intelligence by its exterior features. He cast a quick glance at Atlan, the immortal with the extra sense perception.

Atlan stood there motionlessly and looked attentively at Kruukh. There was a positive glimmer of displeasure in his timeless eyes. This was what confirmed Rhodan's own suspicions. Even Atlan was wary but the latter made no effort to hide the fact from the telepathically gifted creature.

"Welcome on board, Kruukh," said Rhodan out loud so that the non-telepaths could also understand him. "We are of course surprised at the demand made by your ruler. Why should we give ourselves into the hands of the Druufs without a struggle when we don't even know what they look like? Besides, it is by no means decided whether or not we have to remain in this sphere of time. If the Druufs are honourably disposed toward us, why don't they at least permit us to make the attempt to go back through the light-ring which was our means of entry?"

Kruukh stared directly at Rhodan. *I know nothing of the motives of my master. I only carry out his orders. As a proof of the fact that you do not wish any more conflict, the commander of this ship is to come with me so that he can demonstrate his submission to the Druuf. This is the extent of my report and my demands.*

"That's quite an order," growled Atlan from the background and he shot a warning glance at Rhodan. His tense attitude indicated that he expected a hostile move on the part of the bumble-crab at any moment. But even he had no idea of what form the hostility might take.

Rhodan said aloud to Marshall: "Bring André Noir, Ralf Marten and Fellmer Lloyd in here. We want to know where we stand with Kruukh." When Marshall left the room, he continued: "We are going to check the validity of your statements, Kruukh. Then you may go to the Druuf and bring him our answer."

The bumble-crab did not reply. Instead he did something that was only noticed by the telepath Pucky. He screened his brain completely and then activated a hitherto unused portion of it. Whereupon he opened his attack.

By the time that Marshall and the 3 requested mutants entered the Command Central, it was all over. And at first glance nobody was suspicious of anything.

"Wuriu Sengu is at his station," announced Marshall. Sengu was the Japanese reconnaissance scout who could look through solid matter and was thus able to observe everything that went on in the Command Central. "I've brought the other 3 with me."

"We are going to pull the *Sherbourne* alongside the Druuf ship and go on board," said Rhodan in a strangely toneless voice. "The Druufs only want what's best for us."

Immediately Marshall was alerted to the emergency. Rhodan could not have changed his opinion so swiftly. That was entirely out of the question. Marshall glanced quickly at Khrest and Atlan. The immortal stood a bit rigidly beside the other Arkonide. His arms hung loosely at his sides. The usual gleam of wakeful life was missing in the timeless eyes. Just like Rhodan and Khrest, Atlan had become a puppet.

The mental hypnotist, André Noir, was aware of calamity because he felt instinctively that somebody was at work employing the same powers that he himself was gifted with: psychic influence with a delayed action—a form of post-suggestion.

These 4 must be subjected to the same treatment, thought Kruukh and then he committed a fatal error. He had not counted on anyone being able to read his thoughts when they were not specifically directed at them.

Naturally John Marshall had read Kruukh's thoughts, so without being obvious he said: "Noir, you're on!"

In so doing he did not reveal even to a telepath what he meant. Noir was a mental hypnotist, which had gained him his membership in the Mutant Corps. When anyone requested him to put his talent to work, it was not necessary to give, special emphasis to which talent they were referring to. And if Marshall spoke openly like this he had his reasons for it.

The full force of the hypnotic impulses struck the unprepared bumble-crab, broke through his natural resistance and took possession of his brain. Before Kruukh had any idea the tables had been turned, he was completely under Noir's control.

"It's done!" said the hypno calmly. "What do I do with him now?"

Marshall thought swiftly. Without Rhodan he couldn't and wouldn't make any decisions. First of all, Rhodan and the others had to be released from the constraint that the uncanny visitor had placed upon their conscious minds.

"Cut him off for 5 minutes so that he can't do any more damage. Then free Rhodan."

2 minutes later Kruukh stood next to Marshall, completely apathetic and harmless, not knowing what was going on around him. His brain remained passive and had ceased its thought processes. Noir was able to proceed without interference to work on those who were under hypnotic influence and return to them their own volition.

Rhodan's face revealed an expression of astonishment as the hypno drew away from him. It was unusual that he was able to remember what had happened to him, The attack could not have been very intensive.

"I couldn't prevent it because it happened so fast," he reported. "Neither Pucky nor I noticed what the intention of this unpleasant visitor was. In itself it was a pretty smart manoeuvre to hypnotize us. We would have fallen into the Druuf's trap as pretty as you please, like good and obedient puppets. How lucky we are that we have better hypnos here. Thank you, Noir."

"You can thank Marshall," replied the hypno modestly. "He saw something was wrong immediately." Noir turned again to his prisoner. "What should I do with him now?"

"Give him the order to remain completely neutral for a week. We will take him with us as a hostage. And now we'll show the Druuf that we've seen through his little trick. Maybe he'll think up something better

next time."

Noir subjected Kruukh to hypnotic treatment and then led the listless prisoner out of the Command Central. The *Sherbourne* was equipped with suitable rooms for the detention of undesirable guests. Beyond that it may be said in passing that Ivan Ragov soon relieved the hypno of his responsibility. The scientist was extremely interested in the bumble-crab.

Rhodan nodded to Sikerman. "Defence screens on! Use the impulse cannons. Fire on the Druuf ship! Aurin—put the tele-transmitter in standby readiness. This is a major attack!"

Not 3 seconds later the giant black Druuf ship was engulfed in a flaming bath of energy. Here and there heat-buckling hull plates could be seen but the *Sherbourne* could not inflict much damage because the Druuf commander reacted with lightning swiftness. The bolts of energy were soon bouncing off the shimmering protective screen, while the places that had been hit quickly cooled down.

"TTM!" ordered Rhodan tensely. "Fire!"

No one could have ventured to say whether or not the tele-transmitter had really functioned so unbelievably fast or whether the Druuf ship had coincidentally gone into hypertransition at that moment. At any rate the colossus disappeared at the precise second in which Capt. Aurin opened fire.

The area in space where it had been was empty.

Without taking his eyes from the viewscreen, Rhodan said: "Set a course for the light-ring, Sikerman! We're going to try to crash through!"

Atlan started almost imperceptibly. "Are you going to ignore the curtain of fire, Barbarian? Isn't that a bit reckless?"

Rhodan shook his head. "I've had a chance to figure out that every second of delay is even more reckless. If we stay here we're lost. It's less of a risk to make the attempt to get back into our own time-plane. If it's up for grabs, what have we got to lose? Nothing, Atlan! Not a thing!"

"Course established, sir," said Sikerman. His tone was uncertain yet decisive. "Velocity?"

"Let her fly. We'll pick up the pieces later..."

7/ NEXT TIME MAY BE DIFFERENT

Emerging out of space at relative light-speed, the *Sherbourne* raced toward the dimly glowing light-ring which was clearly visible above the plain. The covering bombardment of energy beams from the small black ships had not faded out yet but only 5 or 6 enemy units kept up a continuous fire, aimed at the hole in the other universe.

The shimmering ring appeared to rush toward them. The fingers of energy from the Druufs reached for them—but were too slow.

And then the *Sherbourne* was through the opening.

Behind them the dark skies paled and once more became blue and clear. The sandy desert of Tats-Tor seemed to hurtle past them while Sikerman threw in the retro-thrusters.

There was a voice on the loudspeaker. Bell's voice! "...didn't expect you back so soon! What's all the spit and thunder? Should we switch off...?"

Rhodan reached for the telecom microphone. "This is Rhodan! Cut off the warp-field generator immediately!"

The answer returned in 10 seconds: "It's shut down! So now let us in on what happened..."

Rhodan sighed with relief and sank down into his seat. It was as if a heavy stone had been lifted from his shoulders. Atlan came up to him from behind.

"Shouldn't we ask Bell how much time has passed here?" he said. "Only then can we relax..."

But even before Rhodan could answer him, Bell's voice was heard again on the loudspeaker: "How come you made such a quick retreat? You weren't even 2 minutes among the Druufs..."

Rhodan almost jumped out of his seat. He looked at Atlan. "Well?" he muttered shakily. "What do you say now?"

The immortal shrugged. "What am I supposed to say? The opposite has happened from what we expected."

"Pucky!" said Rhodan, interrupting Atlan with a forced composure. "Don't you have the funny feeling that your time-differential with the Druufs had something to do with it?"

The mouse-beaver shook his head and made no reply.

Meanwhile Sikerman had slowed his flight so that he could bring back the *Sherbourne* in a wide curve. He put the ship down close to the giant sphere of the *Drusus*.

Then Khrest spoke up: "And we also have our own time-ratio again."

A glance at the viewscreens confirmed the statement. Outside they saw a man emerge from the airlock of the *Drusus* and descend the conveyor ramp at a normal rate of movement. He came toward them.

It was Bell.

5 minutes later he was on board shaking hands with Rhodan and the others.

"Well, so you didn't pull it off—or did you?"

"We were a number of *hours* over there, buddy," Rhodan hastened to make clear. "Don't ask me to explain the time differential because I haven't any answers."

"But I do," said Atlan, to everyone's surprise. "It's quite simple. We've already touched on the subject, I believe. The tele-transmitter must have something to do with it. It slammed the Druuf ship against the time-wall and jarred us back into the past at the same time—a number of years, in fact. That's the only way it could have been possible for the differences between the 2 time-planes to match so closely—even though it was pure coincidence. We were lucky, that's all."

At that moment the intercom buzzed.

It was Ivan Ragov. "My caterpillars, sir! They have become motionless again! They don't move any more! Also this fellow, Kruukh—he's like a block of stone. What should I do?"

"Nothing," Rhodan told him and cut the connection. He looked at everyone gravely. "So all that should be enough to convince us that there can never be an understanding between us and the Druufs. It isn't that we or they don't wish it but that neither of us can bridge the gap. Nature is against it."

"A miracle might happen," said Khrest softly.

Atlan nodded in agreement. "Yes, Khrest is right. There's still too little that we know about the other time-plane but we've found a road to the Druufs. Our first attempt failed. We didn't make the contact we wanted. But the next time it may be different. I wouldn't give up hope, Barbarian. Have humans ever actually done that?"

Rhodan studied Atlan for some time and then slowly shook his head. "No, Atlan, that they have never done. You're right. For a moment I forgot that we are human beings. We never give up, no matter how difficult the problems may be. Someday we will meet the Druufs again—and then we will demand a few explanations from them."

Bell broke in impatiently: "Why not have a try at it right now? So far we've only lost a couple of minutes. The day is still young..."

But Rhodan placed a hand on his shoulder. "Good old Bell—just a couple of minutes, you say. Only by a freak accident does it happen to be minutes. It could just as well have been a couple of centuries. I'll think it over a thousand times or so before I'll even dare to make another jump through the time-wall. We're going back to Earth."

And there it remained. After docking the *Sherbourne* inside, there was nothing more on board the *Drusus* to remind them of the adventure on the Crystal Planet.

Nothing other than a few motionless caterpillars, frozen in the positions they had been trapped in at the moment of break-through of the time wall. The caterpillars... and a statuesque creature named Kruukh.

* * * *

Several months later Perry Rhodan stood on the outskirts of Terrania shortly after sunrise in a place that over half a century before had been desert. Now isolated trees grew here and deep grass.

The Peacelord was fond of coming to this spot whenever he could in order to admire the sunrise. Not far distant was the tomb of Ernst Ellert, the astounding man whose mind had been capable of reaching into the future. But one day, from the realm of Chronos, his mind had not returned. His astral projection must be wandering somewhere in the maze of the futurity, searching for his body. The body that now lay preserved from the ravages of time, waiting for the return of its owner's entity.

One day, perhaps, Ernst Ellert would revive.

Suddenly Rhodan sensed that he was not alone. The sky gave an indication that in a day or so it might rain but for the moment it was clear weather and flowers were blooming in the deep green grass. A light breeze gently scattered the flowers' pollen, proliferating the new growth of spring.

The feeling that he was not alone in this solitude of Nature lasted only 10 seconds, than vanished as swiftly and inexplicably as it had come. A cold shudder passed swiftly through his tall frame, the next moment was dispelled by the warming rays of the sun.

He turned to reluctantly leave this sanctuary of serenity. Duty called in Terrania.

He stopped short.

Close to the spot where he had been standing he discerned small, unmistakable tracks in the dry earth. He recognized them at once: they belonged to Pucky! Yet 10 seconds before they had not been there!

Pucky's paw prints? Here on Earth... when he was presently residing among the colonists on Venus?

Impossible!

Unless—!

Rhodan's brain made an intuitive lightning leap to those uncertain minutes and hours on the Crystal World which had long been submerged in a timeless sea.

And suddenly he knew that the circle had closed, the enigmatic anachronism had completed its Moebius trip.

He walked onward to his waiting car and one hour later when he took up his daily work in Terrania no one observing him would have suspected that just 60 minutes before Perry Rhodan had once again been grazed by a touch of eternity and a memory that had long since been a part of the past.

Or was there also such a thing as a memory of the future...?

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

A TOUCH OF ETERNITY

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

CHELLISH.

A mysterious messenger from Earth.

His mission—one given him in great confidentiality by Perry Rhodan himself.

A role he is to play on distant Grautier, the new home of the 8000 Exiles from Earth.

A world of grey beasts . . . semi-intelligent monkeys . . . and the weird Blue Dwarfs with the astonishing parapsychological powers as well as paramechanical.

And then, dropping from the skies of this untamed and largely unknown New World, come—the Whistlers!

Interplanetary invaders!

The Grautierians have need indeed of—

THE GUARDIANS

By

Kurt Mahr